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# **TWO BLOCKS FROM HEAVEN**

David M. Tan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film & Animation

School of Film and Animation  
College of Imaging Arts & Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
September 30, 2015

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*Associate Professor, Production Program Chair*



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## PREFACE

It has been quite the journey up to this point as a filmmaker and as a person. I'd like to say that filmmaking has been in my life since my conception in the womb, but I wouldn't know anything about that. All I can surmise is that there was a turning point in undergraduate university where I took a leap of faith. I had entered college on a pre-medical track and it wasn't long before I gave up someone else's expectations to pursue my interests and passions. From pre-med, I went on to study anthropology and linguistics hoping that my fascination of different people and cultures would lead somewhere. The interest was genuine, but not an ideal match vocationally. Soon after, I settled on studying a major listed as *Archaeology, Technology & Historical Structures*. I studied Greek and Roman temples, column structures, classical orders of design, Etruscan and Roman art, mythology and history. I was so fascinated by the subject that I even went abroad to Italy on an excavation hoping that the archaeology world would be like what I've seen in the movies. To my dismay, I was enlightened. It was a pleasantly gritty experience to be in a trench for long hours, but the question "What happens when we find everything or learn about everything?" kept appearing in my mind. My problem was that I liked to imagine and create.

During my archaeology phase, I had also taken many courses on filmmaking and cinema studies as electives. I remember sitting in one of my archaeology courses wanting to leave and go somewhere quiet to think and maybe pray. It was odd. I ran to the nearest library and sat in a quiet corner to clear my head. I remember saying something along the lines of "God, what do you want from me? Nothing seems to fit. Where do you want me to go?" The silence was long and I felt my stomach growing impatient. After a few moments, all that came to mind was: film. And that single word resonated so deeply that I could not stop thinking about it. I kind of knew

the risks involved in switching concentrations, entering that kind of work and what family would think, especially as college was nearing its end. In a week or so, I went out to the theatre with some friends to catch a movie. Afterwards, we lingered around talking about what we just saw. We shared the things we liked, what we disliked, talked about the little *eggs* we caught and the things we were intrigued by. We eventually transitioned to talking about our own lives and views on the world. Although, it was a familiar and common event, I had never quite noticed or become fully aware of this phenomenon until that night. It became a joy to witness people expressively delving deep in thought even though the movie wasn't even all that great. As I listened to people talk about the film all night long and even into the next day, I felt moved to pursue this. In the big picture sense, it felt like film could serve a purpose greater than digging up artifacts – at least for me. And so, I made the switch.

When I came to film school, I came with a desire to learn how to further engage people with film, while entertaining them. Prior to my thesis film, I had made films that ranged from silly comedies to films that tackled mature themes like death, suffering, relationships, family, and faith. These later films proved to be very challenging, as they required me to explore the soul and the human condition. When it came to making *Two Blocks From Heaven*, it became a project that some others and I found to be ambitious but worthy to be made. Although it posed many challenges and worries, it ultimately put me in a position that allowed a lot of growth as a filmmaker, a thinker, and as a person. A huge part of me wants to say that the project is all my doing, but I wouldn't have been able to finish without the help and support of the people in my life. Therefore, I must properly acknowledge, in no particular order, the cast, crew, friends who I consider brothers and sisters, my family, my advisory committee and my thesis advisor chair, Professor Peter Kiwitt.

Thanks to the main cast: Qin Zhou, Kaiqi Jiang, Craig Spazman, Isaac Thompson Jr., Lenore Feng, and Dylan Zhang for putting up with very difficult schedules and short notice calls. Despite some of them being first time on-screen talent, they were determined to deliver the best performances they could.

Thanks to the crew: In particular, I would like to thank my Director of Photography, Tianyi Wang, for sticking with me on many occasions, giving me input about the story, and for always keeping cool when things didn't work out. Over the past few projects, we've developed an unwritten shorthand system that reflects how much we understand each other despite coming from different worlds. I would also like to thank Dan LaTourette for such a timely entrance in to film school from our shared alma mater. Even before he came into film school and before principal production, he offered himself to help in any way he could. These two key players are two of the most trustworthy individuals I know. I also need to acknowledge and thank all of the crew who came to set on different days throughout production. There were days with a few of us and then there were days with many of us. I must thank them all for investing in the project because I could not have done it alone.

Thanks to all my friends who I consider brothers and sisters: They helped promote the film's crowd fund campaign, assisted on set, supported me in prayer, visited me as I toiled away, gave me food, treated me to meals, and most importantly took the time to ask me how I was doing. Though these people are all "non-film" people, they all understood that filmmaking involves people and that no man should be an island.

Thanks to my family who always had my back once I made the vocation switch in college. It was a scary change, knowing that the arts don't promise security. I thank them for raising me, taking me to movies at a young age and for exposing me to the world I know. I also

thank them for the daily cross-cultural experience that comes with immigrant parents. Because of this, I find myself able to connect with many types of people allowing for a wider audience to engage with.

Special thanks to my advisory committee at Rochester Institute of Technology: This includes my committee chair Peter Kiwitt and members Frank Deese and Jack Beck. Special thanks to Peter for his consistent and insistent desire for me to make the best film I possibly could. He always challenges and tests my choices like the way a blacksmith tempers his steel. His experience and creative mind always offered great input and advice. Through it all, he always reminded me that I'm directing the film and the choice is mine to make. I must thank him for worrying for the project and me. It's evidence of his character as an educator and as a person that he cares for his students. He continues to be a huge influence in how I approach storytelling.

I must also acknowledge and thank Frank Deese and Jack Beck for being great voices in the development of the story and the film. Our meetings were filled with laughs and satirical jokes, which always encouraged me because it showed that these two engaged with the content of the project on a deep level. I must thank them for being so expressive in their feedback and for always giving me a fresh look at everything.

Finally, I must acknowledge and thank the faculty at RIT in the School of Film & Animation – men and women who love their craft and who always offer their expertise; it has been an honor and a privilege.

This chapter in my journey has been both wonderfully hellish and hellishly wonderful. It was an emotional ride filled with moments of great clarity and moments of great confusion. However, throughout these past few years, every moment ultimately established a deeper foundation for the future version of my filmmaker self.

## ABSTRACT

*Two Blocks From Heaven* is a story set in the realm of human trafficking. The story follows Chen, a young Chinese prostitute in an illegal brothel above a Chinese restaurant nearby a church in the middle of an unspecified American city. Jaded, abused, and weary of this life she's been forced to live, she takes on a deal to train the new girl, Mei, in exchange for her own freedom. Upon Mei's arrival and befriending, Chen is faced with a choice: earn her freedom at the cost of Mei ending up like her or risk their safety by running away. Despite facing multiple production challenges throughout, the film was completed. This paper delves into the film's process from the conception to production to its first screening at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

## ORIGIN & DEVELOPMENT

Before *Two Blocks From Heaven*, there was a short treatment for a film I tentatively entitled *Sarah*. It was a totally different story and it was a lot shorter. *Sarah* was intended to be a minimalistic film with a twist ending. It was going to be a one-location type of film in the Thai language. For most of the film, we would think it was set in Thailand. However, the story ends with the main character, a little girl, escaping to reveal that she is actually in a strange land called New York City. At the time, I was caught in a phase where I saturated myself with a few documentaries, special speaker events and articles on human trafficking. I couldn't escape the thought of it all. There were stories of tragedy, miracle, hope and redemption – there were a lot of compelling reasons why to pursue the subject cinematically. Many have told me that they felt disturbed, but the essence of the topic was fresh and new. As I thought more about it, the more I realized that not many films had been made within that world save some films that involved it merely as a plot point. For the last three years, I was fixated on writing a short with sex trafficking at its base, despite its heaviness.

The change from *Sarah* to *Two Blocks From Heaven* happened when I had to start considering ideas for a substantial graduate thesis film. I knew I wanted to keep the characters speaking a language other than English and I wanted to keep an attempted escape. For a while, I couldn't think of anything besides *Sarah* until I recalled story I was told at home one holiday.

On a Friday night, I was lingering around my church after a group meeting and was catching up with my pastor. He had asked me about film school and I told him about the thesis film idea. Excited, he then went on to tell me about how one night as he was locking up the church building, he saw police squad cars parked in the lot. Some officers went into the building a couple doors down and in a few moments, they came out with men and some young Asian



girls. He told me it was a brothel raid. Prior to hearing of this incident, the topic had always been distant or foreign and essentially statistical – I just didn't care. But now that I was introduced to a story so close to home, I had to rebuild my film's premise: *What if there was an illegal brothel nearby a church?*

Questions like “Why didn't anyone know about it?” and “Why didn't anyone do anything?” kept surfacing and no one really had any answers. Our church stands in a small plaza that has four other churches around. How is it possible that no one noticed anything? I considered deeper and more unsettling issues. Was there anyone in the church (any church) who secretly condones the sexual abuse of another human being?

The geography in reality (which informed the film's geography) really helped question the perception of “the church” as a symbol of moral principle. As I delved deeper, I realized that perhaps “the church” is perceived that way because of the people who want it to be perceived that way. So I began to think more about people rather than institution.

After endless and circular inner-dialogues, I concluded that perhaps it doesn't matter what group someone is in or from – individual people exist on a moral spectrum and have the freedom and ability to make “good” choices or “bad” choices as defined by proprieties and ethical codes. And people, typically, are corruptible if they choose to allow themselves to be corrupted. This may be affected by a number of forces, internal and external. We all have seen and heard many instances in the news concerning supposed “moral” men of position in “the church” collapsing to the very sins they claim to denounce. And we know about how some were able to keep these sins hidden for a time. But we cannot assume that these men represent absolutely all those who are attendees and are proclaimers of the same faith. I would say that

people are making decisions of who they want to be every single moment, whether it is perceived to be good or bad. This dialogue opened up the development of characters in the film.

*Two Blocks From Heaven* eventually became a collision of worlds drawing from my social observations, Christian faith, and various researches on human trafficking and the sex trade. I wanted to artfully engage the audience in a way that would keep their attention even after the credits. It required patience to develop a story that is about a harsh reality while retaining audience palatability. I think its important that truth is presented in the most honest fashion and yet with care to whoever may receive it.

## **RESEARCH**

In terms of research, I wanted to be well informed and immersed in the subject enough to be able to create a truthful story. As research proceeded, I needed to set limits to ensure that the film has room creatively. The balance was difficult to find since the statistics, reports, accounts and testimonies already seemed so unbelievably tragic and occasionally miraculous on their own. But my goal was not to make a biographical picture. My goal was to draw from reality.

Most of the articles that I found were online and mainly were activist, awareness, and intervention organization sites (*Polaris Project, International Justice Mission, RestoreNYC, ExodusCry, Love146...etc.*) that provided information on defining trafficking and exploitation so that it may be detected and spur action. These articles occasionally discuss various tactics that traffickers and pimps may implement to subdue their victims. I found that these tactics were not only physical and sexual abuse, but also psychological. Physical abuse affects the psychological, but in conjunction with much more subtle methods, it can change the behavior makeup entirely. These psychological methods would eventually deteriorate the victim's sense of reality of herself/himself and the situation. A weakened mind, allows for more control and manipulation.

However, the hope is that maybe there are some victims who remain resilient despite the circumstance but are unable to leave because of physical bondage or some kind of attachment or obstacle that is culturally charged.

There are cases in other countries or ethnic groups where girls would not, by choice and by their family's choice, return home because shame is attached to the prostitution label. This culture of shame is typically native in most Eastern cultures. *Two Blocks From Heaven* involves Chinese people and thus it would have been appropriate to include this cultural aspect. Besides the emotional understanding of shame, it is also the root of disciplining and changing another's behavior. For some Chinese people, parents use shame to educate and discipline children. In cases like this, parents would openly disclose their children's mistakes and misbehaviors in the presence of others (sometimes strangers). It is a way for children to learn propriety in the form of negative reinforcement. The concept of shame is so established culturally that about 113 shame-related terms were produced in a Chinese culture study<sup>1</sup>. Despite the subtle nuances and differing models that exist, many Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures view shame, embarrassment, dishonor and defacement as reason enough to abandon or avoid loved ones as punishment and as education. For the so-called shamed, this heavy-laid guilt and fault coupled with a desire to appease and to avoid future punishment ultimately renders the victim in a seemingly inescapable position to obey and behave properly according to a set standard (whether known or introduced) without much question. The hope that some dare to have is that perhaps there are people who prove to be resistant in the more abusive circumstances.

A great influence to *Two Blocks*' character creation is attributed to the founders' story of the organization *Love146*. During an undercover investigation of a brothel in Southeast Asia, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ying Wong and Jeanne Tsai, "Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt," in *Handbook of Self-Conscious Emotions*, eds. J. Tracy, R. Robins & J. Tangney (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2007), 215

co-founders witnessed children who were for sale. These children were displayed behind a window and labeled with numbers. These girls stared blankly at a television. They did not display the behaviors of normal children. Rob Morris, a co-founder, noticed one particular girl labeled *146* who would not watch the TV. Instead, she looked out the window at them with what Morris describes as a “piercing gaze. There was still fight left in her eyes. There was still life left...”<sup>2</sup> Though abused and weary, she was different and had a spark of hope left. Later on, in another undercover investigation, Morris found that the girl labeled *146* was no longer there at this brothel. The assumption was that she had been sold and moved. In both *Two Blocks From Heaven* and *Sarah*, I desired to create a protagonist who, in the midst of her tragic, romance-absent reality, still possessed strength and resiliency.

## WRITING THE SCRIPT

As soon as the research for this project officially began, I had already begun to write the film. It was a tedious process making choices to include or exclude the facts while adding elements that may seem impossible, but cinematic.

There were definitely more speaking characters in earlier iterations of the film, which posed issues concerning length, logic and near-future logistics. I’ve had many meetings with my advisor Peter Kiwitt concerning the story’s logic. He is very methodical in his approach to story, which helped a lot in the creation of vital moments and the exclusion of lesser. As we were working, we sorted through different ideas and established event details that needed to be kept to move the story forward. During this phase of the project, we frequently played through scenarios to see which line of story made the most sense and had the most impact. This required me to be very open minded despite having written a full treatment previously. It was an arduous process to fashion the story.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Love146 Story,” Love146, accessed September 10, 2014, <https://love146.org/love-story/>.

I remember a point where my story had two endings: 1) The girls escaped and reached safety; 2) Another van pulls up in the alley insinuating that the brothel business continues to exist despite the protagonists escape. The film concludes at the girls' successful escape, but had I chosen to cliff hang the film with another van drop-off, the feeling would have been totally different. A good question that was asked (paraphrased): The ending depends on what you want to say. What do you want to say? As I contemplated on that question and discussed it, we knew that the world of the story was already tragic. Do I really need to emphasize the tragedy even more and leave an audience sick to their stomach about it all or should I present a glimmer of hope that tragedy can end and life can continue? I decided on the latter because from activism's perspective, hope is all that is required to strive for a better world. From a Christian faith perspective, tragedy, sin, sadness, and suffering will find its eventual end according to the book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 4.

Eventually, a story was settled on that was to my satisfaction and that made sense. There were a lot of details cut from previous iterations and a lot of rearranging events. Writing the actual script was an endless and sometimes frustrating process. Even through principal photography, it felt as though the script was in constant flux. However, the beneficial beauty of having a clear story and vision was that there was a big picture backbone. There were times where scenes had to be cut or combined due to scheduling, which meant that occasionally dialogue had to be rewritten for the logic of the characters and the location. This was partially compromise and partially for the better of the final film.

In recent, I've realized that my approach to screenwriting tends to minimize dialogue – which puts more emphasis on character's behavior and *mis-en-scène*. This may put more pressure on the talent during production, but I feel strongly about silence or quietness in dialogue

as a powerful element in cinematic storytelling. This may be attributed to having friends who don't speak up unless they have something really important that they intend to say. It also creates a tension that musicians and some public speakers are familiar with. With each breath and musical rest in a yet-to-be resolved piece, we naturally anticipate its resumption. As the "talking" fades, we naturally lean in for the next line. It produces emphasis in a way that is not screaming. I tend to enjoy this subtlety and succinctness, especially in dramas because it draws an audience closer. It leaves room for them to think and make assumptions because sometimes dialogue seems more like announcements. Silence and quietness also leaves room for actors to perform rather than recite. Silent responses with a mere facial or body expression can say a lot of how a character feels. Should we have quieter films with less spoken word counts? – not necessarily. It's a matter of intentionality and making every word count to the story.

As the writing continued, I knew one of the obstacles I'd have to face eventually is the foreign language dialogue. Ethnically, I am Chinese, but as one who grew up in the United States and had minimal language training, I could not translate my own script. Fortunately, I have many friends who natively speak Chinese. Yumeng Zhang kindly offered to translate the dialogue. The benefit of having another film student translate is that she understands the structure of the script and understands that these are people speaking with meaning behind what they say, not just lines of sentences to be recited. We met a few times to discuss the script. The most important discussion we had was about meaning. It required us to be vulnerable about our understandings of each other's cultures and upbringings. Yumeng and I reviewed page-by-page, scene-by-scene and line-by-line to explore and expand the meaning behind each part. It was important for us to gauge and understand the nuances for maximum effect. What I've learned from our conversations was that there are cultural nuances that I don't fully understand and that I wouldn't

be able to unless I was born and raised in China (even in China, there are more specific nuances that I wouldn't understand depending on which area I'd be from). For time's sake, we had to make quick decisions about the characters and their lines. I quickly realized that without linguistic fluency, attempting a foreign language was ambitious, even during production. But it was a challenge I was willing to take on to make the film more believable and immersive for the audience. To have a foreign language, specifically Chinese, be believable, the cast must speak it natively. It's more difficult to teach a non-native the subtle inflections of a speech and the nuances of culture in a short time. Therefore, the cast had to be specific.

## **CASTING**

Cast and character specificity has its advantages in production and narrative consistency, but also presents many obstacles logistically. The film's lead characters needed to be young female Chinese or Asian with the ability to read and speak Mandarin Chinese fluently. That, in itself, is already difficult to find in Rochester. Yes, there is a foreign student population, but how many are willing to act in a film about sex trafficking? I had approached many different students who were initially interested, but would turn down the role after hearing what the film is about. Making a movie always sounds like fun, but once I explain what the movie is about, I can only imagine what goes through their minds.

After a stressful time of searching, my advisor Peter Kiwitt pointed out a student in his graduate directing class, Qin Zhou. I sat in the class one evening just to secretly audition her since Peter had assigned her to act for that class. As I watched, I immediately knew that she did not enjoy acting in English and that English was difficult for her – thus, her performance was not as good as it could be. I talked to her a little after class and asked her if she'd be in my film. She was hesitant, but willing. I told her that the role she'd be playing would only be Chinese-

speaking and that single fact locked her attention and her commitment. In terms of a look for her character, I asked her to send me pictures of her with face make-up and without. Without her make-up, she has a naturally tired face (which is probably a result of late nights and school work). The more natural her clean face is, the better it is for the film. When she puts on make-up, it's a transformation. Sometimes it's hard to remember what she actually looks like without make-up. That worked perfectly for her character, Chen. Chen's character is shown to put on make-up everyday as a way to become another person when she has to work the john. It's a way for her to regulate her sanity through disassociating her identity as a human and become essentially a slave. Qin performed wonderfully and had a good sense of pace.

To fill the other roles, I had to keep looking. Casting was such a setback in the production schedule. I had tried posting a casting call on *Facebook* and *Craigslist* with the film summary and character descriptions. I received some submissions, but in three days, the post was flagged, blocked and deleted. It must have been the keywords I had mentioned that would cause someone to assume that the film I was making was much more suspicious than it appeared. Despite this, it was through Facebook and Craigslist that I was able to cast the main john, Clark and a church cleaning man, Frankie. Craig Spazman played Clark and he was probably the only actor in the cast who had any sort of prior acting experience. Through Craigslist, I found Isaac Thompson, Jr., who played Frankie and who recently wanted to start acting. What I was looking for in casting was not only could they be the role, but could we connect as a team. These two men were willing to do that with me.

For casting the character, Mei, I searched further into the student body. Some wanted to act and be in a film, but after I described the film's subject matter, they declined. The challenge of this film became more and more apparent. It would seem the subject matter was always the



determining factor for whether the film could be made or not. Fortunately, through a mutual friend, I was connected with Kaiqi Jiang who, at the time, was a Studio Art student at the University of Rochester. Since Kaiqi was a senior, she had a lot of free time to spare for the film. She was genuinely interested in the story and sought the opportunity to try acting. She had been in stage productions for Chinese culture shows and showed a slight interest in posing in photography. I needed a cast unafraid of the camera. Kaiqi was able to deliver.

The hardest roles to fill were for Madam Li and Mister Li. These two were the owners and operators of the brothel in the story. *Where am I going to find Chinese adults who want to be on camera as villains?* If I made this film in New York City, my chances of finding cast would have been much more likely. The challenge that continued to plague the film was that this is an ethnic-heavy film shot in an ethnic-light region of New York. I considered casting Canadians since I knew there was a healthy population of Chinese people in Toronto. But providing transportation and lodging was outside our target budget, which prevented me from going forward in that direction. Finally, after much searching, I discovered that Rochester has a local Chinese school. I grew up going to Chinese school at home and typically these schools celebrate Chinese culture and traditions openly and publicly through culture shows and various presentations. I must assume that there are people who are not hesitant when it comes to performance. After I contacted the current principal of the school, Dylan Zhang, he offered to help me find a couple to be in the film. Dylan became so invested in the search that he grew fond of the project enough that he offered to play the role of Mister Li. As the production schedule progressed at this gradual rate, I had to accept his offer. I trusted my abilities to direct and trusted that he has enough life experience to behave on camera. Because Dylan became part of the cast,

it was easier for him to go around asking the school. Dylan eventually found a woman to play Madam Li, Lenore Feng.

Lenore and I met up at the bookstore to talk about the film. My first impression was that she has such a sweet demeanor – the kind of demeanor that would be difficult to hate unless you were someone who is easily irritated by happy people. And that made me nervous. Half of me was getting vibes that this woman has no dimension. The other half was telling me that we're running out of time and we can't search any longer. The moment I settled was when she told me that she is a mother of two little boys. In my mind, this was perfect. Mothers typically have to wear many hats. There are moments when a mother can be sweet, gentle and kind. But there are moments when a mother can get very firm and almost ruthless. I was essentially taking a chance on this observation. She has never acted before, but she told me that she always loved to pretend. I told her that I could help her perform and that the camera and editing will help her later. She went on to tell me to send her clips from other movies so that she can get a better idea of what I'm looking for. In my mind, I was very hesitant because I was imagining something more original. But if it would help her create a reality, I was willing. I emailed her clips from Disney's *Cinderella* and told her to pay attention to the stepmother and how she behaves. What I was looking for from *Cinderella* was the stepmother's ability to be ruthless but deceptively kind. When the time came to film, Lenore's natural sweetness (toned down slightly) worked out for dimension in her performance.

## **LOCATIONS**

Like casting, securing locations for different scenes proved just as frustrating. Our major locations consisted of: 1) church and its rooms; 2) alleyway; 3) apartment room. Whenever I asked around for locations, they would ask about the film and I would respond honestly. Many

declined from helping because of the subject matter. Businesses or residences did not want to be associated with “prostitution”. It was as if the owners or managers were not listening and all they heard were the uncomfortable keywords in the summary. I would offer to pay these locations for inconvenience, but money didn’t seem to work. They were more concerned with reputation and association.

Although locations were generally difficult to lock in, finding a church to film was actually almost effortless since the church building I frequent every Sunday had very friendly staff, who were open to the project. I would visit mid-week to set up props in a vacant office and map out future shoots around the building. The church was very cooperative throughout production.

For most of my productions at RIT, I had been playing safe with not writing in exteriors due to Rochester’s unpredictable weather. But for this film, we had to go outside. It would have been a great challenge and a smart addition to production value. Our primary exterior shoots were in an alleyway. I consulted with the Rochester/Finger Lakes Film & Video Office for possible locations. They suggested Pindle Alley and Cork Street Alley. I scouted both and found Pindle to be more towards what I was looking for. I wanted a straight alley. Cork Street Alley seemed more like a loading dock area for an industrial area. Pindle Alley looked more public and connected to a city design. I remember half of Pindle Alley was used for a chase scene through “Chinatown, NYC” in *The Amazing Spider-man 2* when the film’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Unit crew was in Rochester in 2013. The film office provided me with a film permit application that I’d submit to City Hall. I chose Pindle Alley because of its non-descript appearance, its accessible backdoors via local business and its length. We were able to shoot there on two different dates. The problem we ran into was that the first date was shot near the approaching Winter season and the

second date was shot in mid-Spring semester. Fortunately, the problem became more of a logic issue. As long as the audience doesn't pay attention to the weather, we would be okay. And as long as we can invent some brilliant excuse narratively, we would be okay.

The most difficult location to find was the one that required the most time and shoot days: an apartment-type room for Chen's room. I contacted many real estate agents in the Rochester area to see if they'd be willing to help. The problem of association with the topic and the fact that filming requires silence deterred many residences from helping. After a long search, I realized that there had been a vacant room down the hall from where I lived. I contacted the facilities manager and talked to him about the film. He, personally, wanted to help, but had to confirm an approval with his supervisors. In about a week, the facilities manager handed me the keys to the apartment and told me that I have full access to the apartment without charge and with a few respect rules to not ruin the newly renovated room. He asked whether I needed anything else. I asked if he had access to roll-away beds. The facilities manager simply replied, "How many?". The next morning, I went into the vacant apartment and found two roll-away beds. I spent four days on my own shopping for set dressing and props to transform an empty, plain-color-walled, carpeted apartment into a brothel bedroom.

## ART & SET DESIGN: Chen's Room



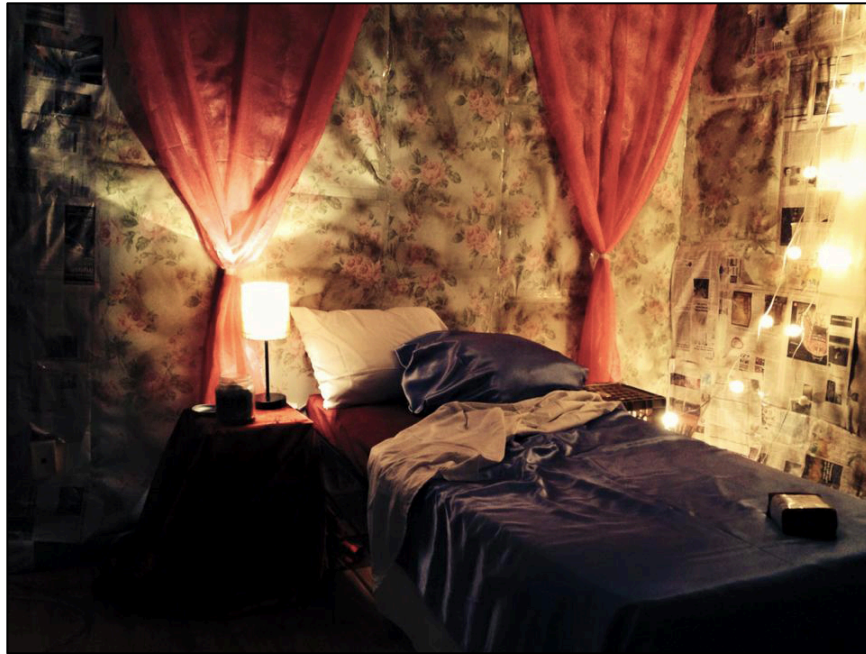
It was important that Chen's room would be decorated well because a majority of the scenes with our lead characters took place in the room. Prior to decorating the room, I researched images of brothels particularly from Asian brothels. There were some that were plain and merely looked like hotels. There were some that were filled with cheap lights, decorations, Oriental paraphernalia, silk and lace material. I took my queue from the latter and attempted to reinvent the room.

The newly renovated apartment had off-white walls and carpet. It took about four days to shop and transform the room. It would have probably taken less time with an art team, but with time constraints and rigid schedules, there was no way for it to happen. My first task was to cover the white walls. My advisor Peter Kiwitt suggested brushing dirty water on to the walls. I tried and did a quick camera test, but it didn't look complete. The walls had a particular sheen that doesn't look good on camera. I resorted to pasting newspapers and garish floral wallpaper. I then proceeded with spraying brown and black paint into a towel and wiped down the papered walls. This method took away the clean look.

I knew from the image search that there needed to be some silky and lacey material around the room, as well as decorative lights. The fabrics were merely draped over boxes and used to dress the bed. The lights were hung around in areas where they might be seen on camera to occasionally provide bokeh. Once everything that needed to be on the walls was completed, I proceeded with the floor.

The floor was freshly carpeted. This is great for the sound mixer, but if we ever had to see the ground, it would look too comfortable. There was no way that I was permitted to rip up the carpet. I considered buying planks of flooring or linoleum tiles to lay down, but it would have been very costly to the budget and time. While on my prop shopping hour, I found vinyl flooring sheets that looked like wooden flooring and it proved to be a cost-effective and visually effective (from a distance) solution. The main issue with vinyl is that it bends and bubbles and moves on the carpet floor. When it came time to film, I had to tell my cinematographer to avoid the floor as much as possible. Despite its behavior on carpet, its appearance alongside the rest of the room helped the actors enter that world.

After the major parts of the room were set, I filled the room with various smaller props that would be visually appealing on medium shots, close-ups and insert shots. These included: handcuffs, weathered glass tip jar, condoms, lubrication, cosmetic kit box, and a personal affects box. I then took some quick pictures with my phone at different parts of the day just to get an idea of what it would look like and for promotional reasons. This is an example of what the room would look like at night with the practical lights on:



There was a wall that had magazine clippings of “sexy women” from various sources. Among the collage were pictures of savory foods. I added that as a satirical joke for the cast and crew to enjoy. There were no planned shots with this wall, but if we happen to be facing it, then there would be something to look at. Another reason we didn’t have many shots with this wall is because the clippings of “sexy women” were that of actual celebrities who, by law, we should not be using their image without permission. Overall, the completed room helped sell the story’s setting. I received much feedback from the cast and crew that the set dress made them feel like they did not want to be there, which is a positive response. The lead actresses felt that the room made it easier for her to get into character.

## **DIRECTING**

This film, more than previous ones, has really been a rewarding experience in the director's chair. It was not easy, but the film has helped me grow in ways I couldn't have if I read a book on directing. The hardest obstacle to overcome as the director was making quick decisions whenever a plan didn't work out. At the start of production, I was much more stubborn and unwilling to compromise the details of scenes. But as production progressed, I saw how important it is to allow the film to change while keeping the overall vision together. Directing, to me, was probably the most fun part of it all and probably the most stressful. It's a lot of head-work, communication work, and late nights figuring out the details of the shoot day. Sometimes on set, I wished that whatever I thought could just manifest itself in front of me. Part of the challenge was working with a predominantly inexperienced cast where 75% of them had English as a second language. Communicating what I envisioned sometimes did not penetrate immediately. I took care and patience in wording and explanation to achieve their best performances.

The beauty of working with a cast like this is that whatever language they are speaking, they know it natively and can perform the subtle nuances of the language. And when they need to speak English, it's naturally broken. The advantage for scenes with the Americans were that the Chinese characters could be yapping away and the native English-speakers would actually be confused. From my point of view, their natural abilities and inabilities played well together. And because they were able to do this on their own, with some direction, delivery became organic.

There were instances where Lenore had problems with rushing the scene whenever she had lines in English. I know what it's like for a non-actor to be in front of a camera with essentially a list of words in an unfamiliar language. She would learn the lines really well, but



when action was called, she would rush. I felt like it was part of her natural personality to do so, since she is quite energetic normally. But for the sake of the film's tone, I had to slow her down many times during on set rehearsal. And I had to communicate to her the importance of understanding what is going on in the scene and the meaning behind what she was saying. This little challenge helped me learn how to communicate the subtext to individual actors. I've learned that actors appreciate the one-on-one attention so that the collaborative effort of realizing a scene can be done.

It was always a pleasure to discuss subtext because as we peeled away at the scene, our faces would light up with elongated exclamatory "Oh". At points like that, the actor and I would nod and smile in agreement and understanding.

One of my most common directions that I gave on set was "Take your time. Know what you're saying." I've come to believe that this is distinct to my directing style or at least how my style currently exists. "Take your time" doesn't make sense when you have a shoot schedule that is so tight. But to gain the best performance, I wanted the talent to really feel and understand the lines they were saying. It was imperative that the characters, particularly the main girls, speak from despair and hopelessness.

The directing experience is highly immersive, involving and requires flexibility in planning. There is a constant awareness of everything that's happening. For me, personally, I can get caught up inside my head easily when so much is involved. One of the greatest lessons that I learned during this project is to be present and ask how the actors are doing as we work through the day. It's not necessarily directing for the scene, but gauging the actors' current states can help pull or push dimension in their performances. Yes, we must get through it, but taking a moment can also boost an actors' confidence in the scene. It also helps with the trust relationship between

the director and talent. This might not work 100% all the time, but it is something that I'm going to keep in mind as I gauge whatever cast I have.

The most difficult day to direct was for the final confrontation at the church. It was a six-person scene and everyone had a speaking role. The scene is part of the end of the girls' escape. The girls finally reach the church and barge through Frankie. Madam Li and Mister Li would follow after. And eventually, Clark would appear to make the situation worse. The room we shot in was without any hiding places. The crew, lights and even the boom pole could not hide anywhere. This day was also the most hectic scheduling nightmare of them all. We had all met at a Chinese restaurant to finish another scene and hustled over to the church to film this character heavy scene. By the time we arrived at the church, the talent had to leave within the next 3 hours. The crew rushed set up. We ended up using five wireless lavalier microphones hidden in the actors' clothes and hair. When we began to roll camera, I had to learn how to sacrifice some shots that I would have liked for the shots that were most important. Three of the talent had to leave within the next hour and a half. We reworked the shot list so that it became priority based. After Dylan ("Mr. Li") and Lenore ("Madam Li") left, we had the crew stand-in and read so that Isaac ("Frankie") and the girls could react to cues. Soon after, Isaac had to leave for his afternoon shift at work. Fortunately, I have a friend who resembles Isaac closely and he had just arrived to play background for the final church sanctuary scene. I had Isaac leave his sweatshirt for my friend to wear so that his shoulder could remain in the frame. It wasn't long before Craig had to leave for work as well. The day's shoot kept losing people to work schedules, but we were able to wrap (or get what we needed) on all the cast.

The blocking for this final confrontation scene was initially confusing during the planning phase. I remember having trouble thinking about how I would work in coverage for a

six-person scene trailing off of a foot chase and how I would ensure that the blocking would be logical. I approached Peter Kiwitt early on about this and he had me roughly draw a map of the room on paper. He then used coins to represent the characters and we would figure out the blocking through moving the coins and roughly reenacting the actions in his office to see if the logic would carry. He taught me that it is easier to think of the people, not as individuals, but as groups: 1) the Li's standing by the door; 2) Frankie and the girls in the center; 3) Clark blocking the way into the church. This helped to create the blocking and shot list for the scene. It also helped to efficiently think about approaching a scene with multiple speaking characters. This final scene was probably the most difficult to direct because of the type of scene and the time constraint to set up, run rehearsal, and roll camera.

Principal production in its entirety was about 13 days. The film could have been shot in less than 10, but coordinating schedules with the talent almost seemed impossible. 75% of the talent were available during weekdays, but since our leads are full-time students, weekdays were much more difficult to schedule. The same 75% also worked on weekends. On top of scheduling talent, the locations also had to be scheduled and most times these locations would not budge in terms of when they would allow any sort of filming. There was always a worry of when we would be able to film since a lot of the scenes require the talent to be present together. There were moments where we had to use stand-ins to obtain some coverage with the available time. I remember there was a period where everyone was getting bedridden sick and a perfectly scheduled shoot day had to be postponed to another week. The following difficulty of that is that the locations would then say that they're not available for the rescheduled shoot. It was a messy struggle to direct and to keep continuity over the spread schedule of the year. Despite its seeming impossibility, we were able to get everything we needed to tell the story.

Overall, directing for this film has been a grueling trial, but much fruit has come from it. I've gained a lot of experience working with less experienced actors, actors who speak a different language, and working through various logistic nightmares. I can say that directing on this film has prepared me to approach the next project with a new set of tools.

## **CINEMATOGRAPHY**

The film was shot on the Canon 5D Mark II DSLR. The camera, at this point in time, is outdated, but it has been my working philosophy that at a certain point, the gear should serve the ideas and the story. A film without substance, but with the most up to date equipment will still be a film without substance. Otherwise, the reason for this camera choice was mostly because of its size and because of how the production schedule kept changing. I personally own a Canon DSLR – which would have been used in an emergency. DSLRs are highly portable and can fit in crawl spaces. Since I had planned some shots in a closet, the DSLR and the shooter would be able to fit comfortably. Its size also made non-actors in the film less intimidated. The DSLR's set up is not intrusive and interruptive, thus the camera is very practical in respect to this particular project.

Tianyi and I decided that using two cameras would help with the film's unusually tight production schedule. Despite the time it takes to set up shots with two cameras, it saved time from shooting coverage of repeat performances. The main disadvantage of this method is crowding the room. It was difficult to set up lights and have standby crew. It took careful planning prior to shoot day.

In terms of camera movement, it depended upon what emotion we wanted to convey. The scenes with the character Chen, the veteran prostitute, we chose more static and slow shots. This assists the portrayal of her routine, unchanging, and hopeless life. We're not moving because she can't. Most of the shots with Mei, we chose to lighten stability to show her radical change of

state. As her character progresses and accepts more of her fate, we see that her shots become more stable and static. For the slow, smooth and creeping moves, we used Kessler Crane's Pocket Dolly v2.0. It is a sturdy slider that has an operation crank for consistent "dolly" moves. For some shots, we used a Manfrotto monopod to mimic characters' point of view. This can be seen during scenes in the closet. A monopod is not stable on its own, but is stable enough to mimic a person's torso when they're sitting on the floor.

When it came to filming the runaway escape scenes, we used the Glidecam HD-2000 stabilizer. It is a balanced stabilizer that the operator can run without too much shake in the image. We used this in the alley and the apartment hallway. An unconventional technique we figured out during our shoot was that the Glidecam could be flipped upside down for lower angles and shots of the ground passing by. Since the Glidecam is already balanced, it can work just as well upside down, but the video would have to be rotated in post.

In terms of lighting, we tried to use as much natural light as possible to give it a natural feel. Naturally occurring light gives the sense that the scene is like reality – we mostly see life under natural light. The artificial light from lamps and bulbs tends to be noticeably artificial and therefore can instill a feeling of being trapped inside. There are ways to imitate and emulate natural light with artificial lights and diffusion and gels. Typically, natural light is soft, but for some scenes, we would harshen the light with artificial lamps to help set the emotion of the scene. We used ARRI and KINO lights to serve as fill and accent lights.

Lighting is an aspect that I would like to explore more. Having seen short behind-the-scenes documentaries of Terrence Malick's films, I saw how he exploits light from the sun in various environments. A lot of his shots take place nearby a window or outside (at different hours of the day). The challenge with naturally occurring light is controlling it. The sun "moves"

throughout the day and it's difficult to maintain continuity as we move down the day's shoot schedule. Despite its artistic application, I had always enjoyed the look of natural light and what it does for the talent's appearance.

The overall look of the film can be described as ironic. The shots are what people might consider pretty, but it is against a dark subject matter. This was one way that the film can engage the audience. An individual could look at the image, appreciate it, and then be reminded the tragedy that the characters are in.

## **MUSIC**

The music had a very specific vision that evolved as the production went on. It became a collaborative effort towards the final cut. During my search for music, I was able to connect with a composer for this project. When it comes to short films, my initial tendency is to think too big. Most times, short films don't reach that soaring and sweeping fanfare that epic feature films do. Perhaps this assumption is just a result of my inexperience, but nevertheless, that kind of sound would have been too big for *Two Blocks*.

Since the start of this project, I knew that music was going to be important. It was just a matter of what kind of music and feeling I was envisioning. I have a classically trained background in orchestral music and thus the instrumentations I hear in my head are typically those one would find in a symphony. But I had to really work to minimize the symphony in my head. For most of the scenes, we are confined to a small space and therefore a symphony would have been too grand. The first instrument that I can think of that can perform alone and covers all ranges of emotion is the piano. I imagined piano as a good sound to be at the forefront and to have softly drawn strings to fill in the spaces. It wasn't until I met the composer for the film that the sound I was actually looking for wasn't just strings.

I met Chris Bartels after his Twitter account for his company started following my personal Twitter. My first task after I found him was to look him up and see if he would be a viable and feasible option. Depending on the composer, they could charge a lot for their work since it is skill-specific and creatively-consuming. I listened to some sample tracks that he had posted on his website and even watched how his music works with the videos and commercials he had scored. After some research, I quickly learned his talent and how flexible he is in terms of genre and style. He has a series of albums under the moniker *Elskavon*, which is a collection of cinematic ambient tracks. Other composers had approached me after launching the film's crowd funding campaign, but they weren't able to deliver music that would serve this film in the way that I envisioned. Chris' music was just the right amount of atmosphere and theme. From what I heard in his music, he has a sensibility that moves with the emotion of story. As I looked more into his work, I realized that maybe this partnership would not be possible. He has composed, created and licensed music to ABC, CBS, MTV, CNN, USA Network, OXYGEN, GMC, KIA, FACEBOOK, DELTA, and CITIBANK. There was no way he would help out *the little guy* for free, but I so desired for him to be a part of the film. I remember stepping away from the computer for an hour to pray. And it seemed like God was saying that it's going to be okay and that I should just contact him anyways. I e-mailed him and told him that I found him on Twitter, checked out his music, and essentially pleaded in the most professional manner that he work with me and asked him how much he would charge for a 20-minute short film.

After a day or so, I got a reply. He told me that he had seen my crowd fund campaign and was interested in the subject. He said that he had always wanted to work on a project that dealt with human trafficking and informed me about how much he would charge normally, but then said that he would do it for free. I was absolutely stunned. I decided that I would pay him

anyways as deep gratitude. We scheduled an online video-conference to get to know each other personally and to talk about the project's vision. I wanted to do this "face-to-face" because I wanted to gauge his heart and see if this is someone who will look beyond himself and serve the film. The more I spoke with him, the more I felt his humility in his work. And this sparked a new relationship that I hope he and I can continue in the future. The final cut of the film features his music and it's inspiring to the end.

Besides the score, the *Two Blocks From Heaven* story called for a choir. In the beginning, I was thinking of recording a church singing the hymn "It is Well with My Soul", but it wouldn't have provided the aesthetic I was looking for despite its lyrical appropriateness for the film's close. I didn't know whom to contact in terms of choral music, but I did have a lot of talented friends from the Eastman School of Music. I decided to simply post on Facebook asking anyone who'd be willing to compose a choral piece for the film.

My friend, Orlando Diaz, messaged me immediately. I explained to him that I was looking for a 2-3 minute piece that could be cut throughout the film. Knowing the type of person Orlando is, I knew he could do it. He is an odd character in real life, but one who cares for his work and considers much in thought. I ran through a basic summary of the film and told him that I had been listening to Eric Whitacre's choral music. Whitacre's music implements a technique where singers would overlap each other to give the illusion of a long, swelling sustain. I told him that I was thinking along the lines of Whitacre's style, but I was flexible. Orlando then asked me if lyrics were okay. I responded that I expected lyrics to be there and it didn't have to be in English. About an hour later, Orlando messaged me some lyrics in Latin and said that they originated from an 11<sup>th</sup> Century Gregorian chant. He wanted to use the words and apply them to a different arrangement. The lyrics are:



*Viderunt omnes fines terrae  
Salutare Dei nostril  
Jubilare Deo, omnis terra  
Notum fecit Dominus salutare suum;  
Ante conspectum gentium  
Revelavit justitiam suam*

The last time I looked at Latin in depth was in Elementary school – therefore, I only understood some of the words. When I found an English translation, I immediately cleared Orlando to go ahead and compose. The translation is:

*All the ends of the earth have seen  
The salvation of our God  
Rejoice in the Lord, all lands  
The Lord has made known his salvation  
In the sight of the heathen  
He has revealed his righteousness*

Despite it's archaic language and vocabulary, the theme of salvation is fitting. In an initial iteration of the story, the choir music that the girls can hear from the nearby church helps to draw them out of their dark predicament. Unfortunately, due to some production issues, we couldn't emphasize that aspect as much as I wanted to.

In March 2015, Dan LaTourette and I went to Webster Thomas High School to record Orlando's piece entitled *Viderunt Omnes*. Orlando was there to help capture the essence of what he composed. His friend Kari Francis, the current chorus director and teacher, was there to help conduct. Dan and I set up a microphone on a C-Stand directed towards where the choir would be. And we set up the available Sound Devices 702 audio kit to record. There were about 18 students present to lend their voices for the film. We recorded a rehearsal take, three full choir takes, three boys-only takes, and three girls-only takes. Just in case the film called for a particular feeling, separating the genders helped to convey this. The boys were tenors and baritones, which gives a

low, heavy, burdened sound. The girls were altos and sopranos, which gives a lighter and angelic feeling. It was a fun and successful afternoon with the students. The lot of them gave up their lunch period to help out with the film. Of that, I am most appreciative. After our recording session, Orlando asked me to share with the class about the film. I asked them if they knew anything about sex trafficking. A lot of them referred to a Liam Neeson movie they had recently saw. I took a cue from there, explained further about the social issue and talked to them about their role as a choir in the film and how it would help the film's protagonists (this aspect of the vision later changed). They all gave a resounding and expressive *aww* interjection of approval. Orlando dismissed the students with a joking, "I had no idea, but it sounds powerful". As the students exited, some came to talk to me about directing as some of them were about to graduate and head to New York City for drama school. This experience had its own rewards. I learned how to excite different generations about a film and how you don't always need a professional group to record. The mere fact that these teenagers loved singing, loved movies and loved to help was sufficient motivation for them to do their best in service of the project.

Music, like dialogue, did not have to be present all throughout the film. I remember in the first-year Graduate Production course, Peter Kiwitt spoke about how music amplifies emotion. If that is the case, I wanted to approach music in a way that would be most effective. I didn't want the music to numb the audience. The music ought to be where it should be to draw the emotions necessary to understand, engage and grasp the scene fully. Occasionally, the music, particularly the choir, played a more symbolic role. There is one scene where Clark steals money and locks a door closed. The choir stops singing as soon as the door locks to show the absence or the rejection of anything heavenly. This is an example of how the presence of music and the sudden absence affects how we can perceive a character. The challenge that I found in cutting in

music is where to leave it out. There were moments in the cutting room where I felt like having music through out, but sometimes, the presence of music is so forced that an audience might become aware of their emotional manipulation. I did not want that kind of awareness. It took a lot of care and artistic decisiveness to include or exclude music.

## **POST-PRODUCTION**

This production was probably one of the most unconventional in terms of filming and editing schedules. Because the unfortunate way that the production timeline changed, the typical order of pre-production, principal and post-production had to occur simultaneously. As mentioned in previous sections concerning constant schedule changes and postponements of shoot days with cast, crew, and locations, there would subsequently be spaces of time in between. It was in these spaces that post-production editing would happen. As soon as shooting began, cutting the film began. A wise piece of time-management advice from my advisor Peter Kiwitt suggested that it would be to my benefit for this particular project to collect all necessary sounds and various assets for the film. It was also during this in-between time that I sought the composer. Since production was in an odd state of flux, there had to be this multi-tasking approach to post.

Though difficult to manage, a positive outcome of cutting while filming is that it forced me to review dailies repeatedly and to make new conclusions about what are the most vital shots to tell the story. It forced me to reevaluate the script and shot lists and to visualize better what I wanted to see in the final cut.

During the earlier stages of editing, I remember it being difficult to cut around some actions from the footage we had. For a lot of the takes, not all, the talent didn't repeat some actions. It is possible that it is the result of their inexperience, but it made it difficult make cuts.

Fortunately, as production continued and as I became clearer with directing inexperienced talent, the film became easier to cut.

Another issue I ran into during editing, which I am sure many run into, is selecting the right shot and length to convey the right emotion for the scene. There were initial tendencies to include every angle, but I soon learned how meaningless these cuts were. They tended to look like quick cuts to make sure every character is covered. What I've come to realize as I reviewed and reviewed these sequences is that they didn't give enough time for audience to process and feel. Therefore, the final cut of the film has carefully selected cuts and shot lengths.

Throughout the editing process, there was an important and insightful discussion concerning how the film ought to start. In earlier iterations of the story, the film would open at a gas station to reveal our second lead character Mei and then move to inside the Chen's bedroom. However, as production and discussions continued with Peter Kiwitt, the gas station scene moved to after introducing Chen. The decision came from the fact that I wanted to focus on Chen as the primary main character and that Mei would play more of a catalyst for Chen's actions. Another decision we had to discuss was what the order would be for the driving-through-the-tunnel shot, sleeping Mei's close-up, and Mei's book close-up after the gas station scene. Peter Kiwitt and I toyed with the order, but it really depended on what was the most important to emphasize. After some time, I decided that the tunnel shot would occur before the gas station as a titled transition after introducing Chen in her bedroom. When the van is ready to leave the gas station, I chose to see the close-up of Mei's book resting on her chest and then close on Mei sleeping. I wanted to somehow convey that innocence (the book) belongs to Mei, but it exists and rests somewhat loosely. Eventually, Mei's book is lost – only to be picked up by a benevolent church cleaning man who'll return it to her.

Another choice made in post was when Clark brings a church-offering box back to his office. In a previous scene, Clark keeps his door wide open, but in this scene, he closes it and locks it. In the final cut of the film, Clark locks the door and as he does, the choir singing in the background cuts out. It's not common for me to cut out music so suddenly, but I felt like this was a choice I needed to make to emphasize Clark's devious plan. This was probably the clearest example I used the film's music/sound and performance/picture to work together. It's a quick moment, but I felt as though it's a well-purposed interruption for the story.

The most challenging part of the film to cut was the final confrontation scene. That shoot day's near-impossible scheduling could only provide the most bare-bone-important pieces of coverage as talent slowly had to leave set for their personal obligations. It was a location where recording sound was near impossible with a boom pole and therefore employed the use of five or six wireless microphones. We were also filming with two cameras set up at different positions in the room covering different actors. As actors began to leave set, it became more difficult to keep track of where eye lines were. Cutting this scene required a lot of patience and organization. I had to sort through footage from two cameras and through six wireless microphones. Because each microphone were positioned at different places in the room, it was sometimes hard to determine which take was the best and eventually I had to occasionally mix different tracks with each other. If we were to look at the editing timeline, there would be a mess of clip conglomerations towards the end of the film. It's beautiful, but messy. In terms of the camera footage, there were moments when a take would be very clean with everyone in sight and then suddenly someone would block the camera, but the other camera would have a clean composition. Part of the challenge with this scene was cutting between the cameras and yet

making it make sense to the audience's perception of the space. Even though this scene was the most difficult scene to cut, it was also a great lesson in organizing multiple cameras and audio.

Though the post-production process was concurrent with principal, it provided a rough visual context for planning upcoming shoots and served as references for continuity.

### **INITIAL RECEPTION (RIT SOFA Screenings)**

Once my advisory committee approved a cut of the film, it was time to screen the film in front of faculty and students from the RIT School of Film & Animation. I had to present a short artist's statement and receive reactions and critiques post-screening. The reception of *Two Blocks From Heaven* was mostly and generally positive. After I shared my statement, I was met with a silent room. I could see some faces still processing everything. Soon enough, I had received questions about my inspiration for the film's subject matter and why I sounded so cavalier about the statistics of people trafficked into the United States. I explained how I had heard so much about the topic in other countries and thought the US and my home were exempt from such issues. I restated how shocking and sobering it was to learn the issue's proximity to home. Following that question, another faculty member applauded the fact that I approached the project with passion. She also stated that she was engaged throughout the film and that she loved the story. Students who commented enjoyed the believability of the actors' performances and that they were engulfed in the story, the performances, the look of the film, and the overall subject. Another faculty member applauded the film and then gave one of the only critiques in room, which was concerning the ending. He felt that it was somewhat anti-climactic with all of the build leading up to the final confrontation at the church. I couldn't explain to him the type of day that shoot was. I'd love to do a pick up for it, but it was just impossible with scheduling. We did the best we could. He talked about how it felt like the momentum dropped off at that point. As

soon as he said that, I knew that was something I noticed but I couldn't point out while I was cutting the film. In fact, it was good to hear. Other faculty members expressed their love for the production value of the film mostly due to the set design. A member mentioned the use of newspapers and how it made the environment dirty and that she felt grimy in those moments. She also talked about how she loved the characters, particularly Craig's character Clark. She described how repulsive he looks and just how evil he is for his part in the story. Fortunately, Craig wasn't in the room for her comment. Many other students then went on to comment on how they were locked in the story and that the characters seemed like real people.

After screenings, there were still students who came to me just to tell me about how they enjoyed the film and that they were emotionally moved by certain parts. One student, who I will keep anonymous, said that it was the first film made at RIT that she actually paid full attention too and the fact that she was genuinely worried for the characters.

A few days after screenings, I was notified that *Two Blocks From Heaven* was reviewed and selected by faculty to participate in the 2015 RIT SOFA Honors Show (28 out of 350 student films were selected). It was a wonderful experience to hear the different feedback. All of the critiques and observations my peers shared only put the film in a position to be refined further for a much more final cut. It was truly a pleasure to be able to celebrate the process with so many of my peers.

## **CONCLUSION & CLOSING REMARKS**

As this project comes to a close, the future of *Two Blocks From Heaven* can only be revealed as more people view it. It has the ability to serve, not only the film community, but also on the human trafficking activism front, the Christian faith community, and Chinese communities. The potential for this film can reach as far as the United Nations, other

organizations and even a feature-length iteration. My hope for the film is that it would continue to engage, impact and entertain those who have the opportunity to see it. The process made me bleed and cry, but it was worth every drop. The responses and reactions I have received thus far concerning the film has been encouraging and motivating.

While working on this film since its conception has been grueling, it has been the type of grueling that bears much fruit. A farmer tills his fields and works them before daybreak until he decides that the day of work is done. He may not see the fruit of what he plants until the proper time comes, but all of the work that he sows into the field reaps something beautiful. This film has tested my patience, my ability to keep calm, my technical abilities, my organization skills, my ability to make thoughtful quick decisions and my will. Through it all, I have gained much and only in retrospect can I honestly say that it was a time of character chiseling – an invisible, violent, slow chipping that has brought about growth and a curious longing for more. My hope is that I would continue to strive to become a better filmmaker, director, and a better person. The journey continues.



# TWO BLOCKS FROM HEAVEN

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*MFA Thesis Proposal* SCHOOL OF FILM &  
ANIMATION ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF  
TECHNOLOGY

APPROVED FOR SUBMISSION BY:

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Peter Kiwitt  
*Advisor*

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Date

## SYNOPSIS

In the world of human trafficking, there lies an invisible war between good and evil. In most cases, evil is on a winning streak. Children, teenagers, and adults are snuck away from their foreign homes and subjected to live lives hidden and reserved for a single purpose: sex.

*Two Blocks From Heaven* is set in New York City and is the story of two young Chinese girls named Chen and Mei. Chen has been a sex slave for a few years. Her days are filled with lonely, lustful and passionate men. What gets her through this hell is the angelic choir that she sometimes hears singing in the church next door. Her hope is fading like the songs she hears, but she finds renewal when Mei arrives. Mei came with the expectation that she had been enrolled in a special foreign exchange school program. The opportunity to travel and see the United States is an exciting dream to accomplish, but she soon finds out that she is dropped off at a brothel. Mei's new 'home' has become her prison, but her unwillingness to settle and her innocent cry for humanity is the very catalyst that would re-spark Chen's hope and spur action to escape.

## RATIONALE

An inspiration for developing a story like this and exploring a topic so difficult and disturbing came from an incident that happened very close to my home. One night, my pastor was locking up the church and he saw multiple police cars surrounding the adjacent building. For safety sake, he remained inside behind the glass to observe. Policemen were standing by. He described to me the flashing swirl of red and blue lights. Then, a door is broken down and soon after, very young girls of various ethnicities come marching out. It was a brothel raid. This story was covered in the news within the week. Soon, we all learned that the Madam was operating two illegal brothels that sold illegal immigrants for sex: One in Queens, NY and one right next to my church back home on Long Island. I knew that sex trafficking and prostitution of various degrees existed in the United States, but to hear that slavery was happening right next to my church – it rendered me speechless and in shock. What does one do when you're free and singing songs of salvation and freedom while young people next door are suffering in a nation that essentially made freedom its promised brand?

My first impression of this kind of prostitution was that these people chose that life, but in most cases, if not all, these people were coerced into such a business. Every real story for each real individual in these very real circumstances can be similar or very different. I wanted to tell a story that is set in that world and that is in the perspective of these young girls. Most films I have seen that depict sex trafficking have been only used as a detail or device of the main plot line. I thought it would be a good challenge as a writer/director to execute such a story. In terms of the story, I wanted to include some elements of my Christian faith as a beacon of hope for these characters, which is why I made the church choir next door to the brothel play a role in Chen's sense of hope. The film will involve people, their imperfections, and their potential for evil, but it will also involve people's potential for good.

There are themes of good versus evil, fear pressing against hope, and restoring freedom for the captives. These themes are universal and relevant. Even though the world of human trafficking may not be common for audiences, the themes of oppression, depression, suppression and the inner longing for freedom out of the draining mundane and seemingly endless and pointless routine is something we all can relate to.

## TREATMENT

It's night. In a studio apartment above a New York City Asian-style massage parlor, the mixed colored lights shine through the frosted window. Clark, Caucasian, 50s-60s, sits in a chair across the room. He is sweaty. He wipes the lower half of his face with his hand. He fidgets with the ring on his finger. A young Chinese girl, Chen, 17, steps forward into view. Clark nods to her and Chen slips off her dress. Clark slips off his ring and sets it on the table next to him. He stands up, and begins to undo his belt. He tells her to come near.

Meanwhile, a lone gas station glows like a star in the middle of the nowhere. An unmarked van is parked at a pump. The driver, Billy, an average built Caucasian, 30, is outside pumping gas. Harry, Chinese-American, 30, is returning to the van. He slides the door open and offers a snack to the young Chinese girl, Mei, 15. Mei has her backpack and suitcase next to her. She is reading a Japanese comic book by the window where the light is. She asks Harry, in Chinese, how much farther until they reach the school. Harry tells her, in Chinese, that it's going to be another couple of hours but they're not that far. They'll be there in the morning. As Harry closes the door, Mei thanks Harry for the food. Harry closes the door. Billy looks at Harry – they look at each other because they know where they're actually going.

Back at the studio apartment, Clark is washing his hands in the sink. Behind him, Chen is clothed and sitting on the bed awaiting payment. Clark puts his ring back on. He walks over to the bed, flips open some cash from his pocket and drops it on Chen's lap. Chen watches him leave.

It's Sunday morning. In a New York City church, the congregation is standing and clapping as the church choir, led by choir director Nancy, Chinese-American, 50s, lively sings on the stage. The mighty sound leaks out the windows to an alley.

In the alley, there is a dumpster and some trash pressed along the side of the wall. The van pulls in the alley. Mei asks Harry where they are. Harry doesn't answer. Harry opens the sliding doors and tells Mei that they've arrived. Mei steps down with her backpack and suitcase. Harry calls Madam Li to notify a delivery. They take Mei to a backdoor.

Inside the Asian-style massage parlor, Madam Li flips the Open/Closed sign to Closed and locks the door. Inside her office, Mr. Li, Madam's husband, is asleep in the chair. Madam Li hits Mr. Li to wake and tells him, in Chinese, to open the backdoor while she prepares Billy and Harry's payment. Mr. Li, just waking, reluctantly moves out the office.

In the studio apartment, Chen is already awake. She sits close to the frosted window with her ear pressed against the glass so that she can hear the music coming from the church next door. She hears a heavy metal door down below. She quickly turns to the door.

While Mei waits outside Madam Li's office, we see Madam Li hand Harry cash. She looks over to Mei who is observing. Billy, Harry and Madam Li walk out the office. Mei looks to Harry for an explanation, but Harry ignores her and the two men leave. Mei calls out to Harry. He ignores her. Madam Li tells Mei, in Chinese, to leave her bags and that she won't need them anymore. Mei insists on holding on to them because of her things. Madam Li interrupts her and tells Mei that she will do as she is told. Mei speaks up again. Madam Li slaps her in the face. Surprised by the violence, Mei backs off and tries to flee. Madam reaches for her arm. Mei attempts to leave, but Mr. Li steps in the way. Mei is trapped.

In the apartment, Chen is at the window, but as soon as the door opens, she stands straight up and lowers her head to Madam Li. Mei is told to go inside. Mei doesn't move. Mr. Li forces Mei in. Madam Li locks the door closed. She bangs it and hits it to no effect. Chen watches Mei slowly figure this out. Then, Chen grabs Mei's arm and tells her, in Chinese, to stop and that

there's no use. Confused and frustrated, Mei asks why she's there and what kind of school it is that her mother sent her to. Chen has no response.

Later in the room, Mr. Li drops a mattress on the floor for Mei. He hangs up a drape as a temporary partition. Madam Li reminds Mei that she will do as she is told or she will call Mei's mother to tell her what a disappointment Mei is. Madam Li tells Mei that a spoiled, misbehaved daughter is undesirable and shameful. "Is that why your mother was so willing to send you this far for school?" Madam Li continues to manipulate Mei's dignity. Madam Li shows Mei what happens for misbehavior. Mr. Li beats Chen with his hands. Mei is frozen. She wants to turn away, but we see Madam Li hold her head to watch. Mei tries to close her eyes.

In the next moment, Chen and Mei are alone in the room. Chen is sitting in the chair by the window. Chen is scratching at the frosted window and occasionally rubbing her bruises. Mei is crying in the corner. She asks what she did to deserve any of this and asks why she's there and why all of this is happening. Chen remains quiet. Chen then tells Mei that it's best not to think too much. After a moment, Chen asks Mei where she's from. Mei wipes her teary face. Mei says that she wants to go home. Chen says that she doesn't remember what home is like. Mr. Li unlocks the door and tells Chen to get ready and tells Mei to stay behind the curtain, but pay attention. We see Mei look to Chen for answers, but Chen is fixed on Mr. Li's command.

In the massage parlor, Madam Li flips the Open/Closed sign to Open. In the studio apartment, montage: Chen goes to work as clients (Johns) come in one after the other throughout the day and into the night. The faceless clients sit in the chair and undo their belts as Chen's dress drops. Cash drops on Chen as clients leave. Mei observes from behind the curtain. She is in shock of the reality set before her. This is her fate.

It's nighttime. Towards the back of the parlor, Clark anxiously waits in a chair. His feet are tapping. Madam Li steps in to escort Clark to the apartment upstairs. She recognizes Clark as one of her best and well-paying clients. She promises him that tonight will be enjoyable and that there's no need to worry – just have fun. Madam Li walks with Clark to the stairwell door and tells him that there is another girl there that he is not allowed to touch unless he would pay an even higher price, but for now she is off limits. "You're an honest man, right?" Clark twists the ring on his finger.

Chen lies in bed, tired. Mei is sleeping, but murmuring as if she's having nightmares. The door knocks and Mr. Li opens the door. Clark sees the drape partition and looks to Chen. He sets down his ring, moves to the bed, and unbuttons his shirt.

Meanwhile, in Madam Li's office, she asks Mr. Li how much he thinks a virgin should cost. Mr. Li doesn't know.

A moment later, Clark resets his pants and belt. Clark drops money on the table by the bed and grabs his ring. He turns to the drape partition. He moves towards and peeks behind the drape curtain. He stares for a moment. Mei changes position. Clark leaves the room. In the corridor, Clark lifts up his ring to wear. He looks back to the room behind him. He doesn't know what he's doing, but he wants something.

Downstairs, by the office, Madam Li asks Clark how it went. He doesn't answer, but instead he asks about the other girl (Mei). Madam Li tells him that she is much more expensive because she is new and she is a virgin. He then asks how much? Meanwhile, Mei is talking in her sleep. She suddenly wakes up and darts to the door and pulls on it. It won't open. In the corridor, we see Mr. Li walking away.

It's daytime. In the alley, Franklin, the church janitor, lifts the dumpster lid and tosses some trash bags.

In the room, Chen and Mei press their ears against the window. Mei doesn't hear anything special. Mei asks about the music. They talk of beauty and dying dreams. Mei asks why Chen doesn't open the window. The window is shut tight. They both attempt to open the window and it budges slightly. The apartment door unlocks. Mei and Chen quickly turn around and stand up straight for Madam Li. Chen slides in front of the window. Madam Li reminds and threatens the girls that if they misbehave, they will be punished. Madam Li focuses her attention on Mei because of the special client she will be having later on and the amount of money Madam Li will be profiting from Mei's services. Madam Li tells the girls to clean up.

In the late afternoon, inside the church, we follow Franklin as he wipes down the wooden pews. The church praise band, choir director Nancy and the choir is setting up for a rehearsal. Franklin stops cleaning to watch the choir warm up together in a resounding chord. In the room, Chen is by the window. Mei hears the singing.

Later, Clark waits in the alley. He keeps looking over his shoulder as he squeezes a thick envelope in his hands. To his immediate relief, Mr. Li opens the backdoor. Clark steps into Madam Li's office. She asks if he has the money. He hesitantly presents her with the thick envelope. She opens it and counts very quickly. She tells Mr. Li to get Mei ready. Mr. Li leaves.

Inside the apartment, the girls stand up straight. Mr. Li tells Chen to get lost because Mei is going to work tonight. Chen is taken aback. She looks at Mei who looks back at her. Mr. Li tells Chen, "Don't move." Chen doesn't do anything. She just stands against the wall as Mei is transforming in to a slave like her.

Clark and Madam Li walk in to the apartment. Mei is standing in front of the bed. Madam Li glares at Mei to stand straight and to bow her head. Clark stands there staring at Mei. Madam Li walks out with a final remark, "Enjoy." Everyone watches the door close. Clark looks back at Mei. He steps back and tells her to disrobe. Mei doesn't comply. Clark insists. Mei doesn't comply. Clark insists again and mentions how much he's paid. Clark moves towards her and tells her that she will listen. Clark takes his shirt off and his belt. He looks slightly crazed with lust in his eyes. Mei is frozen. Chen is frozen watching all of this happen in front of her. Clark pushes Mei in to bed. A shadow covers Mei. Clark grabs her and attempts to rape her – working to strip her clothes off. Mei screams and kicks him off. Meanwhile, Madam Li is in her office counting cash. She can hear the noise upstairs and thinks it's going well.

Clark bounces back to continue. Chen watches painfully. Mei cries for help and screams, Clark covers her mouth. Chen musters up everything she has and attacks Clark with all of her suppressed pain until Clark is knocked unconscious. Chen grabs Mei's arm and they both push the window to open, but it won't go any farther than a crack. Chen pulls Mei try the door. Downstairs, Mr. Li tells Madam Li that it's gotten a lot quieter. Madam Li tells Mr. Li to go check the quietness. Chen and Mei sneak down the stairs and past Madam Li's office. They see Madam Li still handling cash. They quickly and quietly move to the backdoor exit.

In the apartment corridor, Mr. Li sees that Chen's door is open. He sees Clark unconscious on the floor. In the alley, Chen and Mei sneak out the parlor backdoor. Chen and Mei run out of the alley and round the corner. As they do, the music from the church is getting clearer. Chen and Mei try to catch their breath as they run. Chen stops at the doors of the church and tries to open the door. The doors won't open. Chen bangs on the door to no effect.

Franklin who just tossed more trash out in to the dumpster from the church's backdoor, hears the door banging. He goes around to the front to investigate. Behind them, Franklin steps forward. Chen and Mei, suspicious of men step back in caution. Franklin puts his hands up to show that he's not going to hurt them. He pulls out keys. He then slowly moves to unlock the

doors. Chen and Mei can hear the music clearly. Franklin directs them to go inside. The girls don't move. Franklin shrugs and goes inside first.

Mr. Li rounds the corner out of the alley to the street side and sees Chen and Mei. Mr. Li walks towards them, calmly. Chen and Mei open the church door and Mr. Li runs over to the church door. As Chen steps in, Mr. Li grabs her arm, only to find Franklin in the doorway. Franklin asks what Mr. Li is doing. Mr. Li quickly tries to assure that the girls are his daughters. Franklin doesn't believe him. Franklin looks at Mr. Li straight and tells him to leave or he will call the police. Mr. Li lets go of his tight grip and steps back.

Inside, Franklin closes the church doors and locks it. We see Mr. Li disappear as the doors close. Chen and Mei are staring at the entrance of the sanctuary. Franklin notices them and stands behind them as they watch the choir rehearse. He leads them inside to watch. In the church sanctuary, the choir stops for direction. The choir director Nancy notices some choir members looking behind her. Nancy turns around and sees the two girls. She tells her trusted pianist to take over and walks over to them. Franklin tells Nancy that the girls were banging on the doors. Nancy asks if the girls speak Chinese in Chinese. Nancy says that they should get them something to drink and call the police.

In the senior pastor's office, Mei is asleep. Chen finishes her drink. She looks like she could doze off at any second. Nancy tells her that they are safe and that nobody is going to hurt them and then smiles. Chen smiles back and slowly drifts. The choir's song resonates through the building. We move around the office and we see a photograph above the girls. It's a romantic photo of Nancy holding hands with Clark, the senior pastor.

## TIMELINE

SPRING 2014	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
<i>TASK:</i>				
Finalize Thesis Proposal				
Write Script				
Revise Script				

SUMMER 2014	JUN	JUL	AUG
<i>TASK:</i>			
Finalize Script / Script Lock			
Script Breakdown			
Casting			
Location Scout			
Shotlist/Storyboard			
Crew			
Fundraising			

[illegible]

## BUDGET

Budget					
Title: "Two Blocks from Heaven"			Director: David M. Tan		
4 Months Pre-production			Producer: David M. Tan		
8 Days Shooting			Running Time: 20 minutes		

Account#		Quantity	Fee	Subtotal	Acct. Total
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<b>100 Story</b>					\$0.00
Story and Script		1		\$0.00	\$0.00
<b>200 Talent</b>					\$1,100.00
Producer		Self	For 7 Days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Director		Self	For 7 Days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Supporting Actors		7		\$100.00	\$700.00
Lead Actors		2		\$200.00	\$400.00
<b>300 Production Personnel</b>					\$0.00
Director of Photography		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Gaffer		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Grip		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Sound		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Boom Operator		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Makeup Artist		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Script Supervisor		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Still Photographer		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
<b>400 Travel and Locations</b>					\$1,860.00
Cast and Crew meals		10	Days (for 12)	\$65.00	\$650.00
Locations Fees		4		\$200.00	\$800.00
Petty Cash		2		\$100.00	\$200.00
Auto Mileage		700	miles	\$0.30	\$210.00
<b>500 Production Equipment</b>					\$0.00
Camera & Support		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Lighting		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Grip		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
Sound		10	days	\$0.00	\$0.00
<b>600 Art Direction</b>					\$660.00
Props		8		\$30.00	\$240.00



Set Dressing		4		\$100.00	\$400.00	
Makeup Supplies		1		\$20.00	\$20.00	
<b>700 Sound</b>						\$200.00
Sound Designer		3	weeks	\$0.00	\$0.00	
Sound Effects		3	weeks	\$0.00	\$0.00	
Composer		4	weeks	\$200.00	\$200.00	
<b>800 Editing and Post-productions</b>						\$0.00
Editor		4	month	\$0.00	\$0.00	
Colorist		4	weeks	\$0.00	\$0.00	
<b>900 Office</b>						\$300.00
Shipping					\$50.00	
Postage					\$50.00	
Festival Fees					\$200.00	
<b>1000 Fundraising/Promotion</b>						\$50.00
Website Design		1		\$0.00	\$0.00	
Posters		100	posters	\$0.50	\$50.00	
					Subtotal	\$4,170.00
<b>1100 Contingency</b>						
Contingency					15%	\$625.50
					Film Total	\$4,795.50

## APPENDIX B: The Script

TWO BLOCKS FROM HEAVEN

By

David M. Tan  
(January, 11 2015)

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Tan.

David Tan  
Writer, Director, Producer  
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1 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

It's dim. A couple lamps light the room. CLOSE ON Chinese girl, CHEN, 20, lies on her side in bed. She's got bed hair. A LOVER MAN, sitting on the other side of the bed, adjusts his shoe, stands and leaves. CHOIR SINGING.

Chen goes to the translucent frost window and leans in. Some light comes through. The room looks very lived in. There's a red-pinkish hue throughout the room and a oriental partition.

2 EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

Inserts the fuel nozzle. Asian-American, ALEX, 30, pumps gas into the van. The van reads: "FIVE STARS SHUTTLE SERVICE. *BEST BUS (Chinese).*" Brightly lit station.

Alex exits the store with a plastic bag of snacks and drinks. He hastily walks towards the van.

3 EXT./INT. VAN - NIGHT

Van door slides open. Luggage on the seats. Eric sets down the plastic bag on the van floor. He takes out water bottles and sets it on a seat in front of him, next to a Chinese girl, MEI, 17. She is asleep with an open Manga on her chest.

4 EXT. TUNNEL - NIGHT

Orange lights pass as the van drives through the tunnel.

5 EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Dumpsters. Trash. MISTER LI, 50, lights a cigarette. Smokes. The van pulls in.

6 EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Sleepy Mei holds the Manga under her arm. She hops off the van with two large suitcases in hand. Alex stands by the van door. Takes her bags. The Manga drops on the ground unnoticed. Mei looks all around at this 'new place'.

(CONTINUED)

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Is this it?

Alex smiles and takes over Mei's bags.

Alex opens the backdoor and lets Mei walk through.

7 INT. BASEMENT ROOM - DAY

A dark, concrete, storage room. Just a light seeping in beneath the door. Mei carelessly walks in. Eric leaves her bags outside, steps in, but quickly turns out. Door shuts. Mei is alone.

8 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Chen is sitting on her bed. Chen stares at her clean-face reflection in a mirror. She's ready to put on make-up but hesitates to. She applies make-up. She wears a smock dress.

Behind her, a shoebox full of make-up products and personal affects is open. A glass jar and some cash lies next to it.

Chen divides the cash tips for herself and into another pile. She doesn't get much. Disappointed. She throws the cash into her box.

9 INT. BASEMENT ROOM - DAY

Mei bangs on the door. She gives up and backs off to the wall. No one's coming.

DOOR UNLOCKS. MADAM LI, 50, is at the door and enters. Mister Li follows. A single light bulb dangles above. Mei and Madam Li speak Chinese.

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Thank you! They locked me in here.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Take off your pants.

MEI  
Huh? What?

(CONTINUED)

MADAM LI  
Take it off.

MEI  
Why?

Madam Li slaps Mei hard across the face. Mister Li quickly comes over, forcefully binds her hands. He hits her with his belt. Madam Li pulls a rubber glove onto her hand.

10 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - DAY

CLOSE ON Mei's passport. Passport closes. Madam Li stuffs an envelope with two stacks of cash. Hands it to Alex.

Madam Li opens a drawer and drops Mei's passport into a pile of passports next to a box of condoms.

11 EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Alex comes out the parlor backdoor with the envelope. Church Janitor, FRANKIE, 35, carries trash bags out the church side door. He walks past Mei's Manga. The van starts up.

As Frankie drops his last bag in the dumpster, the van drives off.

12 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

The lamps are on around the room. Chen, head down, sits on the bed by her shoebox. CLOSE ON clean, folded sheets drops on the bed. Takes Chen's money. Madam Li counts through the cash. Chen sees Mister Li fixing up a partition in the background. Madam Li speaks Chinese.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
You have been good, Chen. Hard  
working.

Chen looks up. Madam Li holds the money in her hand in front of Chen.

MADAM LI  
There is a new one. You will teach  
her how to be a good girl and  
she'll take your place. You will be  
rewarded. Maybe pay off your debt  
sooner.

Madam Li unexpectedly gives Chen a little more cash. Chen collects it together. Madam Li gently cradles Chen by the side of her neck.

13 INT. BASEMENT ROOM - NIGHT

Handcuffed Mei lies on her side on the ground with her knees bent to her chest. Her hair and face are damp. Alone. She stares at the crack of light under the door.

14 INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mister Li approaches Chen's door. Mister Li unlocks the door. Madam Li, Mister Li and a cleaned up Mei go in. She's dressed in a light dress, hair tied back. Mei holds a folded stack of sheets. We see inside: Chen is at the window standing with her head lowered. Door closes.

15 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Mister Li readjusts the curtain partition. Madam Li has her hands on Mei's shoulders. Madam Li speaks Chinese.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Welcome home. That's just for you.

Mei, holding the stack of sheets, sees the mattress on the floor.

MADAM LI  
Chen will show you what to do. You  
pay attention and watch her. Look  
at me.

Madam Li turns Mei around and holds her face. She softly and intimidatingly pats Mei's neck.

MADAM LI (CONT'D)  
You do what I tell you. Understand?

Mei cowers.

CUT TO:

16 INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mister Li shuts the door. Locks it. He reaches for his pack of cigarettes. Madam Li slaps it out of Mister Li's hand. Madam Li speaks Chinese.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
What did I say? No smoking.

Mister Li GRUNTS as he picks up the pack.

17 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Mei tries opening the door. Kicks the door frustrated. Chen watches Mei. Mei tries opening the window. Chen speaks Chinese.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
It's doesn't open.

Mei bangs on the window.

CHEN  
(firmly)  
Hey! Do you want them to come back here?

Mei tries to continue. Chen stops her and grabs Mei's arm.

CHEN  
You come into my room, you follow my rules. Understand?

Chen notices Mei is afraid that she'll do something to her. Beat.

CHEN  
(calmly)  
What's your name?  
(beat)  
I won't hurt you.

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
**Su XiaoMei.**

CHEN  
XiaoMei. Get comfortable.

Mei calms.

18 INT. CHINESE GROCERY STORE - DAY

CLARK, 50, walks through an aisle of Chinese food. There's Chinese gifts and decorations all around. Clark walks all the way to the back of the store through the 'employees only' portal.

19 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - DAY

Chinese decorations. Clark flips indecisively between pages in a binder like a menu. He is wearing glasses and has a wedding ring on. Mister Li sits by the door behind Clark, drinking tea.

CLARK  
This one. Number 6.

Slides the binder across the desk. CLOSE ON Madam Li takes the binder.

MADAM LI  
Very good.  
(in Chinese)  
Lazy, get them ready.

Mister Li leaves.

20 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Mister Li pulls Mei behind the curtain partition.

MISTER LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Don't move. Can you see her?

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
What's going on?

Mister Li grabs Mei's hair and back of the head. Tugs it downwards. Mei cowers her eyes as if he is about to hit her.

MISTER LI  
Did I say you can speak? Hm? Just  
shut up and watch.

Mister Li leaves. Chen closes the window blinds slightly.

Mei is peeking out the curtain.

(CONTINUED)



CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Just listen to what they tell you  
and you will be okay.

21 INT. HALLWAY - DAY

As Madam Li and Clark approaches Chen's door, Mister Li stands by the door. Madam Li stops.

MADAM LI  
Ah, one more thing. There is a new  
girl here. No touch, no trouble,  
okay?

22 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Chen reaches for Clark's belt. She undoes it. Mei watches from behind the curtain.

Clark is on the bed with his back to the wall. His open button-down shirt reveals his tanktop underwear. He pleasures in Chen's "handiwork" below. Behind the curtain, Mei still watches. Clark looks up straight at Mei. Mei notices. Clark deepens his stare at Mei with lustful eyes. Mei panics.

Mei runs out of the curtain and to the door. Chen stops working.

23 INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Mei moves down the hall. Chen comes out wrapped in sheets.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
What are you doing? Come back  
inside.

24 INT. STAIRWELL - DAY

Mister Li, sitting on the steps, plays with an unlit cigarette. He hears MUFFLED FOOTSTEPS.

25 INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Chen waves for Mei to return.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
You're going to get us in trouble.

Mei turns back to see Chen. Chen freezes and looks up beyond Mei. Mei bumps in to Mister Li.

Mister Li looks up when Clark exits the room. He tucks his shirt, flustered and agitated. He didn't get his "happy ending".

26 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - DAY

Clark stands flustered and agitated. Madam Li walks around him to the desk chair.

CLARK  
I just want it back.

MADAM LI  
You touch girl already. That cost money. But you can go back now and finish.

CLARK  
Look, I don't have time.

MADAM LI  
Then you come back. Same girl, no extra.

Clark rubs his face. He is about to leave.

CLARK  
How about the other one?

MADAM LI  
Oh, she much more expensive. She is 2000.

Clark is taken aback by the number.

CLARK  
You've got to be kidding me.

MADAM LI  
She is a very special girl. She never touched by a man. Very good price for a girl like this.

(CONTINUED)

Clark backs off to pace around and think.

CLARK  
How about 1000?

MADAM LI  
2000 already very cheap.

CLARK  
I would need a couple days.

MADAM LI  
I hold until Sunday.

CLARK  
Make it Saturday.

Madam Li bows her head slightly in agreement.

27 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Mei tries to turn her head away, but Madam Li holds it straight. Mister Li beats Chen with his belt. Chen cries.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Look what you did. Look what you did. This is what happens when you don't obey me.

MEI  
Stop. Stop.

MADAM LI  
Shut up. Next time, it'll be you.  
(to Mister Li)  
Harder.

Mister Li wails on Chen.

MADAM LI  
Not the face.  
(to Mei)  
It cost a lot of money to bring you here. You have to pay your debt. If you don't do what you're suppose to, then I will put you back in the basement, where we will make you work. Or I will sell you to very bad men who will do very bad things to you. Either way is my way. Look at her.

Mei shakes in Madam Li's tight hold. Mister Li continues to wail on Chen.

28 INT. CHURCH KITCHEN - DAY

CLOSE ON Manga. Frankie takes his last bite of a sandwich at the counter. In his other hand, he holds the Manga open, skimming.

29 INT. CHURCH HALL - DAY

Frankie dumps a small bin in to his whopped-open garbage bag. He's wearing rubber gloves.

Sunday School posters, church things, crosses. Frankie walks past with the gloves and bag.

30 INT. CHURCH DEACONS OFFICE - DAY

Typical office decorated with church posters, calendars and crosses. A MAN sitting at his desk. Anxiously taps his fingers. Frankie turns in and knocks on the door sign "DEACONS AND ELDERS OFFICE". Frankie grabs the bin.

FRANKIE  
How you doing, Mr. Hayes?

The Man is flustered Clark Hayes, a Deacon and elder of this church.

CLARK  
Here's another one, Frankie.

Clark lifts up his bin.

31 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Mei lies awake in her bed. The curtain is pulled back. Chen stands at the window. Mei turns to her. Chen gently rubs her arm. She has some small bruising.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
I told you. You need to listen.

Beat.

(CONTINUED)

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
I'm sorry. I'm not suppose to be  
here, Chen. It's all wrong.

Chen turns to the window and closes her eyes.

CHEN  
How far did you think you were  
going to get?

MEI  
I don't know.

CHEN  
There's no where to go. You're a  
stranger here. No one helps  
strangers.

Beat.

MEI  
How can you live like this?

CHEN  
(to herself)  
You get use to it.

MEI  
I was to work in the store. They  
sent for me.

Chen steps back from the window.

CHEN  
(softly)  
Goodnight, XiaoMei.

Chen lies in bed, staring up.

32 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Chen applies make-up on herself (eye liner). Mei holds up a  
small mirror for her.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Do you want to try?

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
I don't wear that.

(CONTINUED)

CHEN  
Even a little bit?

Chen opens a powdering kit and teases Mei with the pad. Mei shakes her head away.

MEI  
No...

Mei is warming up to Chen a bit.

33 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - LATER

Chen works on Mei's lips with lipstick.

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
It all feels heavy.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Come on. Don't move.

Chen adds the final touches. Smiling, Chen holds a mirror up. Mei sees herself Beat. Mei pushes the mirror down. Mei wipes up her face with a wipe.

CHEN  
But you look so pretty.

MEI  
I don't want this.

Chen puts away the make-up.

CHEN  
You don't have a choice. She'll  
make you. There are really bad men  
out there. We're lucky.

Mei stands up and goes to the window.

CHEN  
Look, you can make money here. You  
can help your family make money.  
You'll be fine. That's why you're  
with me. I'm here to help you.  
Learn from me.

Mei stares straight back at Chen.

UNLOCKS. Madam Li comes in.

(CONTINUED)

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Hey! What's going on here? We're  
open now.

Chen puts her box away. Mei leaves the window to go behind the curtain. Madam Li comes to Mei and forcefully grabs her arm.

MADAM LI  
You better behave. Understand?

Madam Li pushes Mei and leaves. LOCKS. Mei peeks from the curtain.

CHEN  
Try for me, okay?

34 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - LATER

Chen removes JOHN #2's jacket. John #2 drops a couple bills into the jar. Chen pulls up the John's shirt. Unbuckles his belt.

Behind the curtain, Mei's eyes are shut, ears closed. John smells up the skin on Chen's neck. Mei tries opening her eyes. She closes up.

The John is on the bed. Chen climbs on top of him and slips a shoulder.

Mei peeks open her eyes. She opens her eyes fully.

35 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

The tip jar is full of cash. Chen lies in her bed. Mei turns over in her bed, asleep.

Chen turns to her side to face the window. UNLOCKS. Chen turns around to the door. She's not expecting anyone.

MISTER LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
She wants to see you.

Mister Li steps in from the door. Chen musters up strength to sit up.

Chen leaves the room and glances to where Mei is.

36 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Chen's jar is poured out on the desk. Madam Li organizing Chen's tips.

CHEN  
(on the phone; in Chinese,  
subtitled)  
Yes, I'm being good. It's going  
well. Okay. Bye ma-ma.

Chen hangs up.

CHEN  
Thank you.

Madam Li flips through a cash stack.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
See...You help yourself when you do  
what I want. I'm very fair.

Madam Li puts some bills in Chen's jar.

MADAM LI  
That girl had better be ready. I  
need her to work.

37 INT. CHURCH LOBBY - DAY

Clark stands by the sanctuary open doors. CHOIR WARMING UP.  
He grabs the church's offering box that's by the door. It's  
a bit weighty.

38 INT. CHURCH DEACONS OFFICE - DAY

Clark opens the offering box on his desk. He takes out  
a pretty full envelope from his coat pocket. He picks up  
and collects the cash from the box. Counts it and stuffs it  
into the envelope.

39 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Mei, lightly made-up, is at the window. Nervous. Chen is on  
the bed. She takes out a nail polish.

CHEN  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
How about this color?

(CONTINUED)



Mei ignores. Chen rummages through the box.

CHEN  
You're lucky. The man is actually  
very nice. It could be much worse.  
I had very mean ones when I  
started. This one is good.

MEI  
Will it hurt?

CHEN  
Try not to think about it too much.  
You're here and that's it.

Mei takes a deep breath.

40 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - DAY

A fat envelope lands on Madam Li's desk. Madam Li lowers her reading glasses and turns to Clark. She picks up the envelope and slides the cash out. Mister Li sets a broom down by the wall.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Good.

41 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

UNLOCKS. Mister Li steps in. Mei comes to Mister Li and pulls on him.

MEI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Please, I can't do this. I just  
can't.

Mister Li pushes her off. He quickly undoes his belt. He whips it against the wall intimidatingly.

MISTER LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Do you want *this*?! Hm?!

Mister Li hits the wall again. He looks to Chen. Chen steps forward submissively. Mister Li raises his arm at her. Mei watches this. Mei steps in.

(CONTINUED)

MEI  
Wait, stop. Okay...

Mister Li lowers his arm. He looks right at Chen. He teases them sarcastically with a Chinese expression.

MISTER LI  
Add oil.

Mister Li grabs his pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He leaves. DOOR LOCKS. Mei sits down on the bed. Chen stares at Mei. She just stepped in the way of her beating.

CHEN  
Just think of something else.

Chen goes behind the curtain. She can see Mei distraught. She lowers her head and closes her eyes.

42 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - LATER

CHOIR SINGING FAINTLY. Mei is at the window. Her eyes are closed. UNLOCKS. Mei turns around. She keeps her head down. She stands by the bed. Madam Li escorts Clark into the room. Clark puts his coat down. Madam Li comes to Mei.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
Be a very good girl, okay?

Clark starts unbuttoning his shirt sleeves. Madam Li leaves, closes the door.

CLARK  
Come here.

Mei doesn't move.

CLARK  
It's alright.  
(beat)  
Let me look at you.

Clark strokes Mei's face.

CLARK  
Here.

Clark holds Mei's hands and guides it to his chest. He puppets her to unbutton his shirt. He slowly reaches for Mei's dress shoulder. Mei moves his hand off.

(CONTINUED)

CLARK  
I like that.  
(beat)  
So young.

43 INT. STAIRWELL - DAY

Mister Li plays with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He is about to light it. He stops himself. He stands.

44 INT. CHEN'S ROOM - DAY

Behind the curtain, Chen watches Mei. Clark guides Mei's hands to undo his belt. Back to Chen.

Mei is lying on her back on the bed. Clark untucks his shirt. Mei sees Chen. Chen sees her. Clark dives into Mei and begins kissing her neck. Mei squirms. His hand moves across her bare thigh. Chen watches, but can't move. Mei tries to push Clark off. But Clark presses in more insistently.

CHOIR CRESCENDOS. Mei cries out.

MEI  
Stop!

Clark holds Mei's arms down.

Chen swings the glass jar over Clark's head. Knocks over onto the ground. He grabs the bed and his head.

Mei fixes her dress. Chen stares down at Clark in shock of what she just did. Chen looks to the front door. She moves Mei behind her.

They stare at the door, expecting someone to come punish them. Chen investigates the door. No one's coming.

Chen opens the door. Unlocked. Chen and Mei run out. Clark starts to stand by grabbing the bed. It's painful.

45 INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Chen and Mei run down the hall as lightly as possible.

46 INT. MADAM LI'S OFFICE - DAY

Madam Li, with reading glasses, adding a page for Mei in the binder. Stacks of bills on her desk. Madam Li knocks over her gluestick. It rolls off the desk. It rolls to the doorway. Madam Li stands.

47 INT. OUTSIDE MADAM LI'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Chen and Mei come against the wall right outside Madam Li's office. The gluestick rolls right next to her. They don't notice it. Chen peers in. Madam Li is right there. Madam Li grabs Chen's hair.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese)  
What do you think you're doing?  
(to Mei)  
And you!

Madam Li tugs on her. Chen tries to break free. Mei forcefully pushes Madam Li. Chen breaks free. The girls run.

48 INT. BACK OF GROCERY STORY - CONTINUOUS

Chen and Mei race around the narrow corner, passing towering boxes, to the backdoor.

49 EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Mister Li stands, smoking a cigarette. Chen and Mei burst out the backdoor. Mister Li sees them, tosses his cigarette, goes after them. Chen and Mei run down the other side of the alley. Madam Li comes out the backdoor, waves down Mister Li. SOFT CHOIR.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese)  
Hey Lazy Ass!

Madam Li chases after the girls.

50 EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Chen and Mei race down the alley.

The church sidedoor opens. Just as Frankie is about to come out. The girls push through Frankie and rush inside.

Madam Li and Mister Li are coming up.

51 INT. BACK AREA OF CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Frankie drops his full garbage bags. Chen and Mei are inside.

FRANKIE  
Whoa, where you going?

CHEN  
(panic; in Chinese)  
Close the door! Please help us!  
They're coming to hurt us. Please.

Frankie sees the distress. He looks outside.

52 EXT. ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Frankie looks down the alley. Madam Li and Mister Li slow down. Frankie goes back inside.

53 INT. BACK AREA OF CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Frankie is inside. He looks at the two girls. Trying to figure out what's going on.

MEI  
(in Chinese)  
Please, help us.

Madam Li and Mister Li squeeze through Frankie. They try to go for the girls. Chen and Mei hide behind Frankie.

MADAM LI  
Oh good! Thank you! Thank you very much!  
(gently to girls; in Chinese, subtitled)  
Do you know what this man will do to you? He will beat you and rape you.

FRANKIE  
Excuse me, is there a problem?

MADAM LI  
They just steal something. It's nothing. No problem. We go home and take care, okay?

CHATTER. Clark holds his head and walks by this back area. He sees the group and tries to hide his face. Frankie sees him.

(CONTINUED)

FRANKIE  
Mr. Hayes!

Clark nervously and reluctantly comes forward to the group.

CLARK  
(smiling nervously)  
What's going on?

Chen and Mei see him, eyes widen. Mei panics and points at him.

MEI  
It's him!

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese, subtitled)  
See, you can't trust him.

Clark and Madam Li brush glances.

FRANKIE  
Do you know them?

The girls are scared and shy away behind Frankie more. Frankie notices. Clark looks down at Chen, awkwardly. He rubs his head.

MADAM LI  
They should just come back. We take care.

CLARK  
Hey, well, if it's not our problem, they should go.

FRANKIE  
Look at them, Mr. Hayes.

CLARK  
It's fine.

MADAM LI  
(smiling)  
Please.

Clark moves towards the girls and tries to wave them out.

CLARK  
Come on, let's go.

The girls shy more behind Frankie. Clark looks to Frankie.

(CONTINUED)

CLARK (CONT'D)  
Look, just toss the trash, okay?  
I've got a headache. I'll take care  
of it.

Clark waves at the girls. Beat. Frankie complies and is about to move to pick up the trash bags. The girls grip to his arms tighter. Frankie frees himself. Madam Li and Mister Li reach for the girls. But Frankie shakes his head, wraps his arms around the girls and plows them more inside the church.

FRANKIE  
I'm sorry, Clark. I can't.

MADAM LI  
(in Chinese)  
Hey! What the hell are you doing?

CLARK  
Who's signing your checks, Frankie?

Madam Li turns to Clark.

CLARK  
Frankie.

Frankie hesitates his rebellion. Forget the checks, he walks Chen and Mei in more. Clark and the Li's shrink behind them.

FRANKIE  
I'm calling the police.

54 INT. CHURCH LOBBY - DAY

PEOPLE SINGING CHATTER. PIANO. Chen and Mei slowly walk inside the lobby. The SOUND grows clearer and clearer. Chen and Mei see down the corridor.

55 INT. CHURCH SANCTUARY - LATER

Chen and Mei walk in the center aisle. The girls cannot stop staring all around at the grand space.

56 INT. CHURCH SANCTUARY - LATER

Chen and Mei sit in the pew.

Frankie comes and covers the girls with blankets and hands Mei the Manga and leaves.

Chen stares all around. CHOIR HUMS CHORDS. Chen just closes her eyes for a little bit.



## APPENDIX C: Poster Design



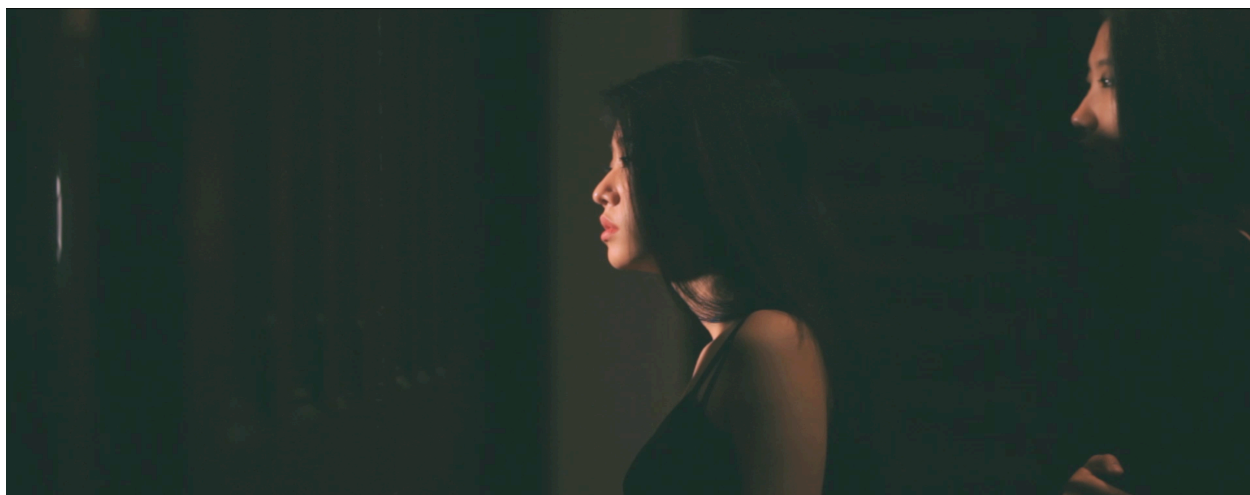
**APPENDIX D: Film Stills**











Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MFA degree in the  
School of Film and Animation  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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