WOODWARD'S

Oral History Collection

Interview with:

Sid Chow Tan (SCT),
Documentarian, Producer &
Community Organizer

Conducted by Nathan Crompton (NC)

Transcribed by
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Sid's place
DTES, Vancouver, BC

The following interview was commissioned for the occasion of *Direct Action in the Archive: A Screening of Sid Chow Tan's Video Journalism*. The program presented a compilation of eight videos produced by Sid between 1988 and 2017, followed by a conversation between him and I. The works I selected for the screening chronicles three decades of Sid's partisan participation in Vancouver's activist movements as a documentarian, journalist, and militant.

I met Sid and Nathan in Vancouver's activist milieu, organizing against displacement in Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside. Though they would surely balk at the thought, for us fresh-faced militants the two of them were veritable movement elders – albeit hailing from distant generations of the struggle. I believe what aligns their practices is their wielding, or perhaps welding, of history; their work cultivates the future victories of our present social movements by reconstituting their collective past. To paraphrase the late John Berger: "A people cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and act as a people than one that has been able to situate itself in history."

What follows is a comradely chat between two veterans of Vancouver's left, covering Sid's early leadership in the Chinese Head Tax Redress movement, his experience as an activist-producer in the embattled field of community television politics, and his various lives as an environmentalist, playwright, and would-be city councillor. To no one's surprise, this list keeps growing. Sid remarked that *Direct Action in the Archive* was the first time his works have been shown in an exhibition context, and that he delighted in his late-career start as an artist. I must say I am proud to play a modest role in this auspicious discovery.

– Vincent Tao, 2018

"Well nothing beats people power. I'm convinced of that now. Because if something did we'd all be dead now. There would be no Left. There would be nothing that's going on. You wouldn't have a homeless person from the community on TV talking about things we need to do. So there is something out there and I think people in the world – good people or even bad people – they realize that you need to control the media for good or bad."

– Sid Chow Tan

NC: So we're going to talk about video production, about the archives, and we're going to talk about Sid Tan as an historian.

SCT: Sure. I don't think I'm much of an historian, except for the videos, which I started doing in the late '80s and early '90s. I started doing those because I realized I had access to video equipment. And I was very lucky...because back when I started doing video, you could actually make a living at it. But only because the cable television regulations at the time allowed you to get the gear from Rogers or Shaw and work out a contract with somebody that you're going to shoot something – shoot it, and edit it and give it to them.

NC: And they would play it on cable TV?

SCT: They would play it on cable. That was the guarantee. I'd say, not only will I tape this and shoot it and record it, but it will actually get shown on television. My finished product will get shown. You can't pay me for the product I'm going to make for you, that I'm going to produce for you. However, you can contribute to the time, the props, whatever is needed to do this production properly. And that's the way it went.

NC: And so those were kind of like documentaries?

SCT: They were documentaries, and sometimes commercials. I wouldn't call it advertising, but sponsorship. Like just whatever I could make, I made. And if I could make something and it would cost me a couple hundred dollars to make it and I could get five hundred dollars for it, I'm in. Because when I started doing this, three or four hundred dollars was a month's rent. If I could do one of these things a month I got my rent paid. If I do two of these things a month I got my rent and expenses paid. And if I can do four or six, which is what I used to do, I could actually save money. You know, I might even be able to buy a house! [Laughs]. No, but you know what I mean. Then as I was doing that I glommed onto other things, like community television. I got there because someone recruited me to do a show.

NC: When was that?

SCT: This is 1986 now, just after Expo and all that Expo stuff. Rogers said "We've got to do something or whatever, Sid you got any ideas?" I said yeah. Why don't we do a show called Chinatown Today? They said "Well Sid do you want to produce it?" And I said "I'll help produce it, I like that idea." Okay, now we're going to do a show, of course I'm going to ask to produce it, I asked to host it, it's going to help me promote the videos I want to do. And we did a lot. I did videos for the Cancer Society. It was just a couple hundred dollars here, a couple hundred dollars there. But by the mid-90s, people caught on to that. By 2000, people caught on to the fact that you can get broadcast-quality gear, and as a result it wasn't as easy. And right at that time it's just like boom, I hit internet broadcast.

I did one of the first Freespeech.org broadcasts on the Boycott Shell Campaign in 1995. People around the world saw that. We had people emailing me because of that, like "Oh we want to start an Ogoni solidarity network in Moscow, how do we sign up?" And I'm going Woah!

And then we finally got a hold of Owens Wiwa and Jaggi Singh and said "What do we do?" I've just got a whack of video on that. This was back in 1996, 1997.

NC: To step back – in the '80s, when you're starting, what are some of the themes politically?

SCT: Well my major theme that I did, which I'm probably best known for and which I've done the most work on is the Chinese Head Tax Exclusion Act redress campaign. That was in the mid-80s, before Expo. Seems like forever ago. I had a lot of reasons for that, like our family is a head tax family, so that would be the start. That's what I did when I got on TV and started talking, that's what I started talking about, and in fact I had people that were saying, "Sid, has everything you do got to be about the head tax?" and I said, "You don't understand. I'm catching up. If we were on top of this and we knew what the fuck we were doing, there would have been ten years of this activism already." So I did that, and we pushed it and pushed it. And then in 2006 we got a partial redress. I call it a partial redress because, well, basically I would say we got screwed by the government. They made a big deal of it but less than 800 families out of 80,000 families that paid the tax got it back. Less than one tenth of one per cent.

NC: How did they choose these families?

SCT: It's a long story, it was a two-part redress. In terms of my use of the word "screwed": let me tell you other people might not see it that way. It's important when you're dealing with governments to get things in writing, which we didn't. The deal was this, verbally: "We are going to get a list of all the surviving head tax payers and all the surviving spouses of head tax payers who passed away. And we're going to deal with that first." We said, "Okay agreed. Then what?" And

they said: “After that, we’ll engage in a consultation process which will deal with the excluded families.” Which is way more insidious than the head tax. I see the head tax as a very simple thing. Just a straight out-and-out cash grab on a marginalized community. That’s all it was. It was racism obviously, but it was more a cash grab. It was not about keeping the Chinese out of Canada completely, it was 500 bucks and you’re in. Cash grab. But in 1923, it was complete exclusion. My grandma was in that group — she was excluded from Canada, had married her husband in the mid-’20s and was not able to come to Canada until the ‘50s.

NC: Your grandfather was here, and she wasn’t able to join him?

SCT: My grandfather was [here]. She was in Hong Kong at that time and then in China later. We’re talking about the government separating families. It’s going on now in the United States with Trump, but it’s been going on a long time, you just have to ask the Chinese. [Laughs]. I mean, legislated separation. Anyways so there was so much going on, we didn’t have a lot of time to explain these things. It seemed like everyone wanted to talk about the head tax; they didn’t want to talk about exclusion, and now we know why. Because there’s no defense on the exclusion.

NC: So tell me about the campaign for Head Tax redress.

SCT: The campaign for redress was split first of all in trying to deal with the most immediate problem. With our seniors, if you paid the head tax, that means that in 1923, this is 1980, that was fifty years ago. If you were 20 years old then you’re 80 years old now. There’s an urgency here. And as I said, when we completed the federal redress, less than 800 families out of 80,000 families actually got the thousand-dollar repayment.

NC: 80,000 who were head taxed?

SCT: Head tax certificates.

NC: Wow, that's very partial.

SCT: Actually, more than 80,000. More like 82,000. I used to know the exact number.

NC: So some of the earlier videos you did are around the head tax movement.

SCT: Well the redress was the start. And then the second issue I picked up was community media. I thought, "Wow! This community television stuff is the cat's meow." I'm one of these guys who has never taken a single television production course or media production course in my life. I started editing on a linear editor in the mid-'80s, and then I followed it up with digital. I don't know what it was about me, but I just got interested in these things. By mid-1995, while people were still doing their videos and shit like that, I was putting stuff on the internet already. I was getting contracts with Canada Post and all these other things that wanted activist-themed videos.

So by that time I had a bit of a reputation for being on time and on budget, being willing to go the extra mile. From '95 to 2005 or so, I had a pretty good run where I managed to save a bit of money and was able to help my kids out. Up until that time, I was going from hand-to-mouth. I had to borrow money from my grandma every once in a while just to make ends meet. I was living with her. She couldn't understand what was going on. She would ask "What's wrong with you? You have a university degree. I see you leave here every day, like you're going somewhere and you come back late. You've got to be doing some-

thing." And I said "I am. I'm working but I'm not earning big money. I'm just earning enough to get by because the stuff I'm doing I find really interesting and important." And she said "Oh yeah? Like what?" And I said "Well, how about the Chinese head tax redress?" And she said "Oh no, don't do that."

In fact, when I actually sort of told her this is what I was doing and some friends had said they'd seen me on TV and stuff like that, she told me not to. I said "What's the problem?" And she said "Don't get involved in that. What if the greencoats – the immigration officials – come in the middle of the night and tie you up, take you away and throw you in the river? Then where would our family be?" And I thought okay, I'm in. If my grandmother feels like this, there's a reason why. I'm in. I never did talk with her about it again.

It's my regret that she didn't live long enough to get the ex gratia payment. She would have been eligible. She died in 2001. And the government made the 800 head tax for the surviving head tax payers and surviving spouses of deceased head tax payers. She would have been a surviving spouse of a deceased head tax payer. That's my regret in it, but I know a lot of older people and they did [get paid] and they thanked me. And working on that I've never felt more like a leader in anything that I ever have in my life. We had a national network. I was Chinese Canadian National Council chairman from 1996 to 2003 or 2004. And then I stepped down from the chairmanship to help steer the redress settlement, which was, like I said, no settlement. We got screwed. I told you about the first step, that was it. The second step never happened.

NC: Could that campaign be reactivated today?

SCT: The reason the second step didn't happen was not because of the government, in many ways. It was because we had all these internal

voices, what I call ‘Uncle Tongs’ and ‘Auntie Wontons’ saying “That’s enough! we can’t go further, I don’t know how you can make the case! These people weren’t even in Canada then!” And I said “That’s the point! They should have been in Canada but they were stopped from being here by racist law.” And then we got these people giving us legal opinions: “Well, that was the law of the land.”

NC: Oh, geez.

SCT: And I said well the head tax was the law of the land too, no? And they would say that this was different.

NC: Especially with the separation of families, you would think that a similar argument could be made.

SCT: Well, I don’t know. The thing that I got out of that and that I found really useful was my son ended up going to law school. And he wrote for one of his legal cases about the redress. And he tried to put it into perspective for me and it was really good. Because I had never looked at it the way that he did, which was to emphasize the fact that this was primarily a media campaign. We had no legal justification except the moral argument. That’s it. Which is the argument usually in the fight against most injustices.

NC: Absolutely.

SCT: So we had that. And this is 2006. Remember that in 2006, that was 12 years ago. At that time I was 59. And I’m thinking shit man, I got to start doing something. One of the things I’ve been working on is an opera that I helped write, with a group of four people. It will be showing in May [2018] at the Firehall theatre.

NC: What’s that?

SCT: *Gold Mountain Turtle Island*.

NC: This coming May?

SCT: Another thing I worked on was an article for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation about growing up Chinese in Saskatchewan. I would have been a writer.

NC: You are a writer.

SCT: Well, yeah. What I mean is I would not have digressed into television production had I not been so poor and needed to make a living. [Laughs]. I mean I did that and as it turns out that was one of the best things for me. Because in some ways I did distinguish myself at that, at the community level. But I'm 20 years behind on the writing side. 30 years behind. Because I didn't really get into the writing stuff—

NC: You didn't build your writing practice...

SCT: Yeah. And as it is, writing, I've probably written 30 or 40 Georgia Straight articles, never got paid for a single one — well I got paid for one. But I've known [Straight editor] Charlie Smith for a long time and he would always ask "Do you have a comment on this?" And I'd say "Well am I going to get paid?" And he'd go "ha ha ha." And that would be the end of it.

NC: Really?

SCT: Well, you know we used to go for lunch and we used to talk about stuff. Especially when I ran for Council in 1999. I ran with Ann Roberts, and also with a Green Party candidate. That was when they had 7 COPE and 3 Greens and when that happened they called it the COPE-

Green Alliance. We also had at that time, in 1999, Tim Louis and Fred Bass. They didn't get elected until 2001 I think.

NC: Right.

SCT: But they got elected with Larry Campbell. The savior, fucking shit. And then it just went bullshit all over from there on. But I was on the original Green thing and then when I got involved a bit I thought, "I shouldn't be with the Greens. I should be with COPE." And then I joined COPE and was on the executive of COPE for about 5 years.

NC: So that would have been...

SCT: That would have been after Larry Campbell. I think I may have gotten in there just when Sam Sullivan won.

NC: During the Vision split-off–

SCT: –that would have been 2008, when I tried to run for a council seat with COPE. And then COPE at that time turned into Vision right after the Larry Campbell fiasco. And Sam Sullivan got in and that's the way it's been since. I ran in 2014 and I didn't get as many votes as I did in 1999, things by then were way different.

NC: So when I think about some of the highlights or some of the videos that I've used and enjoyed and seen – Woodsquat, DNC [Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council] kind of mid-2010's, Chinatown organizing around the Heights Review – it seems like there's nothing that you have missed.

SCT: Oh, I don't know. I missed a lot of stuff I wish I could have done. But when you get going and you've been doing it for a while,

I take a bit of pride in it in the sense that I kind of call what I know I can do. I don't bother getting involved in stuff where I know I'm not going to be able to see it through or I'm going to need help to see it through.

NC: Yeah.

SCT: Because I know what it's like when you need help and help doesn't show up. And I've just been involved in so many things where I said I'd bottom-line something and then I'd look around and say "Where is everybody?" So a lot of that was the head tax thing, trying to move the exclusion thing forward. And I did that, I mean I still moved that forward in 2014, the Provincial government gave us its apology, and in response I was widely quoted, it was a highlight for me where I said, "I think this government can take this apology and shove it where the sun don't shine." And I got quoted across Canada.

NC: That's great.

SCT: Focusing on the government's quick-wins apologies. You remember in 2014, Christie Clark tried to do the quick-wins apology? We called a press conference with [Grand Chief] Stewart Philip from the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and Charan Gill from PICS (Progressive Intercultural Community Services). At that time when we were doing all this stuff, what helped is we had a space, W2, so we could do a lot of stuff there. And we did do a lot. In fact, that's probably why we got booted out of there.

NC: Where does Access fit into this picture?

Sid: Well I'd always been doing Access but it was part of W2. So that when W2 went downhill we were just able to seamlessly move as Access. I just got a hold of Shaw and said we wanted to use the studio now.

What we used to do, when we moved into W2, we called it W2 TV. But before W2 TV it was called Access. So it was seamless.

NC: So I have two questions. One is in terms of the videos logistically, where is all the stuff from the '80s and the '90s?

SCT: If they have survived – if this is tape we're talking about now, not digital – they're all in storage.

NC: And so once you're into digital and doing Access and stuff, where is that stuff archived?

SCT: It's all uploaded online. Now, whether I can find it or not is another question. [Laughs].

NC: And it's the same with the W2 stuff?

SCT: The W2 stuff will be a combination of being online and tape which I have.

NC: I have a more philosophical question about building community, but also politically building a social movement, and building the Left in Vancouver. How do you see the relationship with this kind of video work, both "in the moment" and after the fact, as historical documents?

SCT: It's become very clear to me today, if you look at it and you go down through history, what is the first thing a government does when it gets in power? Especially a dictatorial government? It takes over the media. That's the relationship. It's very simple. It took me a while to figure it out but that's what it is. That's why Trump is doing this fake media bullshit.

NC: Because media is power.

SCT: Power is power. Media is access to power.

NC: There are two powers: people power or state power, you've always been on the side of the people.

SCT: Well nothing beats people power. I'm convinced of that now. Because if something did we'd all be dead now. There would be no Left. There would be nothing that's going on. You wouldn't have a homeless person from the community on TV talking about things we need to do. So there is something out there and I think people in the world – good people or even bad people – they realize that you need to control the media for good or bad. I think we're tilting Right now, if you look at the way that Trump is doing it in the States and all that – the needle has moved significantly. So there's that.

NC: Ok so let's go back to the history, were you making video during Expo '86?

SCT: I got into video in '86, right after the end of Expo. That's when I got political. I got political probably about 6 months into doing community television, which I started after Expo was over, which was probably what? September? October? And then I did a show in December, with some help. And then I started doing my own shows – I didn't really start doing a political show I think until about 1990.

NC: Okay. So how did you get the equipment and the skills and everything?

SCT: I just learned, hands-on. I learned editing, someone taught me how to edit, linear editing.

NC: Did you have connections?

SCT: Not really. Because I had all the equipment I needed. I had better equipment to use than they did. Like, I had the cable company's equipment.

NC: Right.

SCT: [The cable companies] didn't know. Most people told me "Don't tell people about this!"

NC: I'm sure some of your stuff is archived.

SCT: No, I don't think so.

NC: No? It should be.

SCT: We had hauled a lot of tapes down from Neighbourhood Television, I think the office on Commercial Drive? At one time there were four neighbourhood television offices in Vancouver.

NC: Wow. When was that?

SCT: Up until 1997. And they were all staffed.

NC: Was this through Shaw?

SCT: Up until 1997, Rogers. And then they slowly became Shaw and then Shaw bought them out.

NC: So, this was like, legislation that forced the big companies to subsidize community television.

SCT: Yep, it's all gone now. It's a shame. It's amazing. That's what happens when people don't have the institutionalized memory. If you talk to anybody that's my age about community television, they'll only tell you the good memories and what it was like at the neighbourhood offices on Victoria Drive or the West End. But it's all gone. And they were really good about it. And when I say they were really good, [I mean] they were so fucking sneaky. And so slow. It took like 20 years to dismantle it, just a little bit at a time. Like, you don't have this anymore, then you don't have this anymore.

NC: Was it the BC Liberals who got rid of that legislation?

SCT: Well believe it or not, the people that got rid of that legislation – which is all federal – were both the Liberals and the Conservatives. They wanted it gone because they were both in the pockets of big cable companies. I mean, Rogers gives as much to Videotron as they do to whomever. They just wanted to get rid of this thing. And I have other thoughts on this actually, because now that I've had some time to think about it – is that in the '80s and '90s, when we had the opportunity to start our own community television stations, we didn't. We didn't because the rationale was: Why would we want to do that? Why would we want to maintain the gear? Why would we want to staff the offices. We have everything we want right now and we don't have the responsibility except for content production. So we just let it slide and slide. And finally it got to the point where in 1987, the CRTC says cable companies no longer need to have a community television station, but they are allowed to run one with the 2.5% we give for the production of community television or the community engagement.

NC: Right.

SCT: So that 2.5% became 2%, became 1% and then became zero.

NC: But with Access, there is still...

SCT: There's nothing. Access exists because we were funded.

NC: But it's through Shaw? Or how does that work.

SCT: Shaw doesn't broadcast it. It's just through online now.

NC: Oh. But they let you use their space?

SCT: They let us [use] nothing.

NC: But it's in the Shaw building.

SCT: No. We don't even go there anymore. We can't go there. They asked for our cards back and everything.

NC: Oh wow. Because I remember maybe like 2 years ago...

SCT: 2 years ago at least. But now it's nothing. Zero. Zilch.

NC: Oh, fucking hell.

SCT: Yeah. And that's why I saw this coming and I've been repurposing Full Figure Media Society. But I don't think we're going to get anywhere. And I don't think the enthusiasm is there.

NC: That's part of my question about institutional memory, and writing the history, etc.

SCT: Yeah, but the thing is, Nathan, we're not going to go back to community television. That was a certain time when cable companies were just starting. Remember the cable industry only started in the

‘70s. And in order for them to get monopolies they divided it up so we give Shaw the monopoly for Calgary and Edmonton. We give Premier the monopoly for Vancouver or Victoria. And in exchange for a monopoly, they need to set up community television and run it. And in order for them to run it, we give them 5% of the basic cable fee to run it. And then it went to 3%, then 2.5% and it just went down and then zilch. And it was that institutional memory that disappeared, yes – you know you lose 0.5% and it’s like, okay we can live with that, like from the cable-side, like the people in the cable business, like doing community cable: “Oh well, you guys are getting 0.5% less and you’re kind of like, okay.” The managers just want to keep their jobs. [They’re like] “I don’t give a shit, I’ve still got my job – who can I fire?” And then later on, as it got lower they had to fire themselves.

NC: But despite the fact that we’re in the internet age, I think cable is still big money and the cablecompanies are now internet providers. Like you can imagine that there could be or should be new legislation?

SCT: Well, I don’t know. The cable big money now is coming from advertising of non-cable. The money is coming from internet. If it wasn’t for the internet, Shaw and Rogers and the large cable companies, if they didn’t own the internet cable, they’d be fucked.

NC: So maybe there needs to be a contemporary version levied upon their internet super-profits.

SCT: Well there was an attempt to but the cable moved so fast. Like Vancouver Community Net – do you remember that? That was supposed to be the people’s internet. VCN.bc.ca. I don’t think anyone uses it now except for an address. [Laughs.] As I was getting older I used to [say] these guys have no soul and no morality. And you can say any-

thing you want about them. When you really get down to it, they've got all the fucking money, so, you've got to think. And I think it's really difficult for the people to take on that struggle. Because people have needs.

Corporations can amortize and governments can't even tell if they're amortizing it properly because it's all funny bookkeeping. My brother, who's an accountant, has told me lots of stuff about whatever and you know he just goes on and laughs. The thing about being an accountant, and my brother was a tax accountant, is that you wing everything through. If they catch you, then you go "Oh gee I'm sorry, how much do we owe you?" That's that kind of stuff that [you don't know] unless you've been in business – and I have, when I worked for years as a stockbroker after university.

NC: So do you feel that there's anything we missed or that you think is important?

SCT: Oh there's probably lots of stuff but I'm trying to put it together in a bit of a memoir I'm writing. But I haven't gotten anywhere on that yet.

NC: So, you're writing a memoir?

SCT: Well, I'm writing a memoir like I've been writing a play for like, 25 fucking years.

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