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A Filmmaker's Guide To Authentic Storytelling

From recording short videos with friends at a young age, to falling in love with the craft, 19 year old college student Daniel Zhang is no amateur to the art of filmmaking.

In the midst of a crowded coffee shop, packed with college students diligently typing away on their dimly lit laptops, chattering groups of friends lean in towards each other with their steaming mugs in hand. After seeing all the occupied tables and chairs, Daniel and I both agreed to relocate to another location in order to talk and get to know one another.

It was nearing the end of September in Champaign, Illinois, and I had just sat down with Zhang at his favorite boba place on campus, Kung Fu Tea. Zhang insisted on ordering my favorite drink on the menu, and to my delight, enjoyed the strawberry slush beverage.

Zhang is a filmmaker and identifies as such. He's a Media and Cinema Studies major with a minor in Computer Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The University at Southern California was his top pick for film school, but he's content with his choice of attendance here at U of I.

Being one of the very few Asians at the College of Media, and in the film industry, Zhang embraces his Chinese American heritage and upbringing. Growing up, Zhang spent the majority of his childhood watching action films and Marvel movies, his favorite superhero being Spider-Man. His interest began at an early age, and after every film consumed, Zhang would watch all of the behind the scenes clips on DVDs.

"I like directing things, working on the effects of editing, and videography," Zhang said. "I think most people in media studies are passionate about movies, but beyond that, they're not into the craft. But there are people like me, who have done things before to get into the industry."

Zhang, who stated that he has been making videos with his childhood friends since middle school, recreated the opening number of Jon M. Chu's 2021 [*Into The Heights*](#) musical drama film. The official video was posted on YouTube on August 3, 2021, titled, "[Into The Heights but it's Asian](#)." The video has reached over 343,679 views, with 1,514 comments and around 37,000 likes.

When I mentioned the amount of traction that the video made, Zhang beamed with pride. How did this production come to be? Zhang then asked if I was familiar with the film and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Zhang owes his inspiration to the cultural narratives and perspectives presented in the film. "We were inspired to make our own version of *Into The Heights*."

“Me and my friends saw the movie adaptation over the summer and we really loved it,” said Zhang. “It is 100% a Latino-American story based in New York, but one thing that we were surprised to connect to was the narrative of being an immigrant and a minority in the U.S., I feel like we have more in common than we think.”

The production was held in Zhang’s hometown church in Naperville, the same place where he had originally met these friends while growing up. Every year, the church has their annual film fest for everyone to compete in. This year, Zhang and his group of childhood friends decided to participate with a budget of only \$50. From planning, to filming and editing, the entire production process wrapped up in a span of two weeks.

“It was super rushed. I spent about a week filming and a week editing,” Zhang said, explaining how he and his team managed to recreate this project.

“A few days prior to filming, we spent time writing the lyrics. Out of respect for the original, we didn’t want to be associated with any kind of cultural appropriation at all. We changed the lyrics to fit an Asian perspective,” said Zhang.

The original *Into The Heights* musical film centers around the main character of Usnavi de la Vega, and his experience of being a Dominican immigrant in New York City, as well as the struggles of pursuing a better life, or the *American Dream*. The location of the opening song in the movie is at a [bodega](#). With this setting in mind, Zhang decided to alternate it in a way to fit Asian American culture, through the choice of a boba shop.

A week later after its publication, the YouTube video received the attention of the director of *Into The Heights*, and the 2018 romantic comedy film *Crazy Rich Asians*.

“One day, I woke up and I looked at my Instagram and it said that John M. Chu was following me,” said Zhang. “I was like, ‘Oh snap! Okay!’ and then I texted the group chat with all of my friends telling them that, ‘Yo, John M. Chu just followed me on Instagram!’”

Later that same day, Zhang was notified by a friend that the *Into The Heights* director posted about him on Twitter. Zhang reactivated his account to see a direct message from Chu, congratulating him on his version of one of the most notorious scenes in the movie. Broadway’s very own *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda follows Zhang on Twitter as well.

Zhang’s family and friends were all excited to hear about the production’s positive feedback after their extensive performances.

Isabelle Wu, a childhood friend of Zhang’s, discussed with me about how the production has had an influence on her own life.

“This is probably something that I’ll brag about forever,” said Wu. “It makes me happy that people can relate to our experiences as Chinese Americans and it’s so surreal seeing what was initially a small project for fun, turn into something so big and special for so many people.”

Fellow filmmaker, Renee Jeng, also talked with me about how her love of directing transcended into the project.

“Seeing such incredible payoff has been one of the most gratifying moments of my life. Like Daniel, I am fascinated with filmmaking, however, nothing has ever been so widely received,” said Jeng. “I am grateful that I was able to be a part of this collaboration that showcases our culture, heritage, and community.”

Zhang and his crew filmed using two cameras, one of them being a Canon EOS 70D, and the other being a Sony.

“I’m not really into cameras. I don’t know any of the technical stuff, but I wish I did because then I would know which one to get,” explained Zhang.

When asked about his technique concerning the accuracy of camera angles and crosscutting, Zhang discussed how he studied the original film to match the scenes.

One viewer even went to the extent of making a new YouTube [video](#), comparing the two videos *Into The Heights* side by side. The comparison reached over 2,000 views and was recognized by Zhang himself.

“It was really helpful to have the original as sort of a storyboard to work off of, but a lot of the framing was designed to suit the set and actors,” said Zhang. “We actually filmed this in our church’s kitchen, so that was our boba shop.”

Zhang also stated how although the equipment involved in the process was not exactly the best of quality, he felt confident that his abilities with cinematography were strong enough to carry out the finalized project.

The success of “Into The Heights but it’s Asian” is significant because not only is Zhang a 19 year old College of Media student at the University of Illinois, but he identifies as an Asian American filmmaker.

Why is this representation so important? When asked about what kind of movies Zhang watched at a young age, he simply talked about the very few faces he saw on the big screen that not only looked like him, but who he could relate to.

“I was really into the concept of superheroes growing up,” said Zhang, as he confessed his love for the marvel superhero, Spider-Man. “The stories were written by white people, for white people, and all of the characters were white. I never really could relate to the characters, and I noticed how being Asian was made different in terms of how we’re portrayed in the media.”

Authentic representation in the media enables future generations to not only find their voice but where they fit into the world. In the past, most films did not showcase what it meant to be a minority living in the U.S., but as of recently, the tide is shifting in terms of storytelling. More stories like *Into The Heights* provide audiences with brief insight of what life is like for a person of color living in America. It is stories and films like this that reflect the outside world for what it really is.

What's next up for Zhang? He plans on creating and posting more content on his YouTube channel, in hopes of one day getting to work on the set of a Marvel film, working alongside those who also dream of cultivating new ways of authentic storytelling and of course, creating awesome superheroes.

“I’ve been more and more conscious about representation in the media, and thinking about how Hollywood can someday look more like America.”

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