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Making the cut

A dynamic Malaysian finds her niche with a yellow rectangle.

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MOK Choy Lin, a two-time winner of the Best Documentary prize at the Asian TV Awards, never envisioned a career in television production.

"I thought I would be a print journalist as I was always interested in writing," says the supervising producer with National Geographic Channel International (NGCI).

But offers from several Singaporean corporations to sponsor her undergraduate studies set her on the TV path.

Mok completed her Form Five at SMK Assunta in Selangor and was then offered an ASEAN scholarship to do her A-levels at Temasek Junior College in Singapore. She obtained good results and was spoilt for choice when it came time to decide on her next course.

"I had to choose between a DBS Bank scholarship which required me to study Economics, and one from the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) to study English Literature," Mok recalls.

"My mother got really, really mad when I turned down the offer from DBS. I guess the older generation favours more traditional careers," she adds, laughing.

"But I am a strong-willed person and I felt that as long as I could pave my own way and not be a burden to my parents, I would choose my own path."

Mok was born in 1970 in Johor

Baru to a father who managed rubber plantations and mother who was a housewife. The family moved to Petaling Jaya when her father took up a lecturing post at Universiti Putra Malaysia (then Universiti Pertanian Malaysia).

The TCS offer took her even further. She studied English Literature at Downing College, Cambridge University, and obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in 1993, followed by a Masters degree four years later.

She then crossed the Atlantic and obtained a Master of International Public Policy in 2000 from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, in Washington DC, the United States.

Bonded for six years with TCS, Mok learned the ropes of directing and producing entertainment programmes. She was part of the team behind *Gotcha*, a Singaporean version of *Candid Camera*, and *Showbuzz*, a variety show about celebrities.

She is also credited for studio directing *Under One Roof* and *Phua Chu Kang*, cult sitcoms in Malaysia and across the Causeway.

"I learnt a lot from the job and there were lots of opportunities," Mok says.

Addressing realities

While learning about work, she also learned more about herself and realised what she wanted to do.

"It was probably when I was studio directing sitcoms that I



MOK CHOY LIN: Images are powerful... and documentaries focus on serious issues.

felt I wasn't in the right place. I didn't want to direct actors. What I really wanted was to tackle deeper issues.

"I realised how powerful images can be and I really enjoyed matching pictures to reality. Unlike showbiz, where you probe into the private lives of celebrities and fuel gossip, documentaries go in-depth into the serious issues of life.

"I decided to move on to current affairs. The new 24-hour *Channel News Asia* was being launched in Singapore then and I became a part of it."

Throwing herself into her newfound passion, Mok embarked on field trips across Asia and produced various documentaries before completing her bond with TCS. Among these was a documentary on the Padaung tribe of Thailand, which is famed for its long-necked women.

The international stage

Shortly after getting her Master of International Public Policy, Mok had done some freelance work in Hong Kong for National Geographic Channel (NGC) Asia.

"As I studied in the United States, I'd wanted to work there initially. I guess it had to do with the grass being greener on the other side. But looking back, I'm happy that my career took me back to Asia."

That turn of events came about when she took up the post of supervising producer of NGC in Singapore in 2001.

"As supervising producer, I had to identify and nurture Asian filmmakers and produce documentaries for the international market," she explains.

"There are many preconceptions

about my line of work. Many think that it is glamorous, but in reality, one must dedicate long hours to it as making a good production can be very hard.

"People who do documentaries are not in it for the money as it is very hard to get financing for projects. Most filmmakers are very passionate about and dedicated to their work."

However, there are exceptions.

"I get turned off by people who care more about the money than their films. Also, I get disappointed when I meet filmmakers who don't grab the opportunity to present their films to a global audience."

Mok managed the NGCI and the Economic Development Board of Singapore Documentary Production Fund (EDB), set up in 2002, which invested almost US\$11mil (RM35,993,950) in about 60 documentaries, produced over a five-year period.

After supervising various award-winning shows, Mok was promoted to director of regional production for NGC.

In her new capacity, she helps manage production funds with government bodies in Asia, such as the Media Development Authority of Singapore, the Korean Broadcasting Institute of South Korea, the Government Information Office of Taiwan and the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia (Finas).

According to Mok, every documentary needs a unique storyline and one can learn how to get that by looking to the big screen.

"One learns a lot in terms of story-telling by watching movies. The knowledge can then be applied to documentaries," she says.

Her personal favourites are artistic movies like Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood for Love*.

"I am constantly on the lookout for authentic Asian stories with an international appeal," says Mok. "For example, the fourth season of *ShowReal Asia* features a unique story called *Brat Camp China*, which features an entire generation of spoilt kids in China – a result of its one-child policy."

Chinese parents dote on their sole offspring, and some children get out of control. To correct their behaviour, many of the kids are sent to marching schools where they have to march 3,000km across China over six months, she says.

These schools adopt principles similar to the Red Army's long marches. In *Brat Camp China*, NGC

follows the stories of three delinquents as they embark on a life-changing experience that involves tough discipline and filial piety.

"Ultimately the deeper question in the show is whether tough love works or not," Mok adds. "No matter what school you go to, if things in the home don't change, things won't change."

Musings

Having worked with some of the best Asian filmmakers, she misses filmmaking. "What I love most about it is meeting people on location and telling their stories."

Will she return to filmmaking?

"Who knows?" Mok adds, laughing. "Anything is possible in this industry but I'm happy to concentrate on my responsibilities for now

as I'm very busy and don't have time to make my own films."

And does she long to return to Malaysia?

"I left Malaysia when I was 18 and have never worked here. I suppose it could be possible if National Geographic was based here. But most international broadcasters are based in Hong Kong or Singapore, so it's a little hard!"

"I've been in Singapore for 15 years and I believe that a person can have many different homes. I consider Malaysia and Singapore as my home."

She pauses, before adding, "However, the food in Malaysia is better and I can't wait to visit my favourite *wan tan mee* stall at Petaling Street."

Spoken like a true Malaysian indeed.



The brass rings worn by women of Thailand's Padaung hill tribe don't stretch the neck. Instead, they compress the body.