

# 1997 Rhapsody —A Prophetic Documentary Film

By Yau Ma Tei

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Transition  
By Zunzi

Courtesy of *Ming Pao*.

*Yau Ma Tei is the pen-name of Xiao Tong 蕭桐. Born in Peking in 1929, Xiao moved to Taiwan in 1949 and then to Hong Kong in 1961, where he works as a newspaper columnist. Yau Ma Tei is the name of the Kowloon residential district where Xiao lives. "1997 Rhapsody" originally appeared in "Playhouse", a regular feature Xiao Tong wrote for the Hong Kong current affairs magazine Pai-shing Semi-Monthly until 1984.*

## (0) The Great Hall of the People, Peking

*Title: 9:10 a.m., 23 September 1982.*

HONG KONG REPORTER: Sir, should the people of Hong Kong be worried about the future?

ZHAO ZIYANG: You say what?

REPORTER: Should we be concerned about the future?

ZHAO: Not at all.

REPORTER: Why shouldn't we be?

ZHAO: Why should you be?

*Background music: strains of a song recorded in an echo chamber, the words are "What Me Worry, Worry, Worry, Me?"*

## (1) Governor's Residence, Hong Kong

*Title: 1 July 1997.*

*A sign hanging in front of the former residence, red on white reads: "The Xianggang Special Administrative Region".*

*A five-star red flag is slowly hoisted and billows in the wind.*

VOICEOVER: The people of Xianggang have stood up!<sup>1</sup>

MUSIC (*the national anthem of the People's Republic of China*): "Arise, ye people who wish not to be enslaved, use our flesh and blood . . ."

## (2) People's Avenue, Kowloon (formerly Nathan Road)

*The serried ranks of the People's Liberation Army march down Nathan Road amidst the clamour of a military band.*

*There is a sea of red flags waving in welcome; the sound of fireworks fills the air and the crowds roar their approval.*

*A policeman enters.*

HAWKER A: Hey, Ah-Sir, just take a look at those PLA boys of ours. Goddam impressive.

POLICEMAN: Aren't you forgetting, mate, that you swam over here from Canton in 1980?

A: Right you are! I made a special trip from Guangzhou so's I could be here in time to welcome Liberation. How I've been dreaming of this day!

POLICEMAN (*to camera*): Who's he kiddin'?

HAWKER B (*takes one look at the policeman and runs off pushing his cart*): Split, the fuzz!

<sup>1</sup>On 1 October 1949, at the ceremony marking the founding of the People's Republic of China Mao Zedong declared: "The Chinese people have stood up!"

A: Take it easy, cousin. The people of Hong Kong, I mean Xianggang, have stood up. (*sings a famous song from the pre-1949 Liberated Areas*) "The skies in the Liberated Areas are blue and clear, for the masses there ain't nary a tear! . . ." Hey, Ah-Sir, let's take a rest in a shop.

(*The policeman looks in the direction indicated by A: dozens of large companies have hung out new signs such as: "Mainland Immigrants Shop", "Red Flag Store", "Morning Sun Retailers", "The East is Red Canteen", "East Wind Trattoria". Above them high-rise buildings stand empty with massive cloth banners flapping in the wind: "Owner anxious to let. Ten fen per square foot. 20% discount for tenants who rent over 1,000 square feet, and a free bowl of barbecue-pork rice." "Building, excellent fung-shui; must go. Suicidally low prices. It's positively your last chance, Comrades . . ."*)

POLICEMAN: All the capitalists have skipped town. It's all yours now, fella. (*accepts a "Qianmen" cigarette from the hawker and takes a puff*) High class smokes, eh?

A (*pointing at the "Mainland Immigrants Shop" as he draws on his cigarette*): This choice spot only costs me five yuan a month. Water, electricity and rates are paid for by the landlord. Cheap all right, in fact, it's a steal (*laughs*). If you ask me, Ah-Sir, I reckon you should go into business as well.

POLICEMAN: Well, pal, hope you keep an eye out for me in the future.

(*Columns of People's Liberation Army soldiers cross Nathan Road.*)

ARMY SONG: "Every revolutionary soldier must pay attention, to the Three Great Disciplines and the Eight Awarenesses . . ."

(*At the newspaper stalls outside the People's Restaurant there are only about half-a-dozen papers on display, with an equal number of magazines, and four pictorials.<sup>2</sup> The owner of the stall is sitting on a stool to one side staring into space.*)

### (3) Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon

*A poster at the entrance to the People's Theatre reads:*

*"Lin Zexu" Now Playing in Xianggang for the First Time. Starring Zhao Dan.<sup>3</sup>  
A red banner hangs at the entrance: Full House.*

### (4) People's Park (formerly Victoria Park), Causeway Bay

*Cymbals and drums can be heard in the park. Troupes of men and women are dancing the Red Silk Dance as they boisterously sing "Socialism is Good".*

<sup>2</sup>In 1988 there were 43 daily newspapers and more than 500 magazines and pictorials published in Hong Kong.

<sup>3</sup>This film is a famous screen representation of the life of Lin Zexu, the Viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi whose campaign against the opium trade led to the First Opium War and the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain in 1842.

## (5) Happy Valley Racecourse

*Two workers have just hung up a new sign outside the race track. It reads "East Wind Park".*

## (6) A Betting Centre

*The iron grill of a Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club Off-Course Betting Centre is firmly shut; a few lone sparrows flit around outside.*

STEWARD OF THE JOCKEY CLUB (*looking at the agency wistfully*): I've lost my job. Tomorrow I'm going back to my ancestral village to start growing sweet potatoes. (*He departs disconsolately.*)

## (7) The Hong Kong Stock Exchange

*The Exchange has been renamed "People's Market". And the notices on the blackboards around the floor read:*

*Chinese Cabbage: ten fen a catty;  
Bitter Melon: ten fen a catty;  
Watercress: five fen a catty;  
Lean pork: ten fen a catty.*

*The floor of the Stock Exchange is now covered with baskets containing vegetables, fruit, fish and fowl. There are also many tubs of goldfish on display.*

VENDOR: (*in imitation of broker's agents*): Comrades! Me selling, you buying. Bitter melon, cabbage, ten fen a catty.

## (8) The Good Times Restaurant

*Enter a solitary diner.*

*The waiters are lolling around at tables drinking tea, smoking and reading the People's Daily.*

DINER: Eh, boy! . . . (*no response. He hurriedly changes the form of address.*)  
Comrade, comrade!

*A waiter wanders over dragging his feet.*

WAITER: What d'ya want?

DINER: One bowl of rice with barbecue-pork.

WAITER: That'll be thirty cents and two grain ration coupons.

DINER: (*feeling in his pocket*): I, I don't seem to have any coupons on me . . .

WAITER: No coupons no food. Piss off.

*(The diner departs.)*

## (9) The Xianggang People's Bank

*A bank robber storms in and pulls out a rifle.*

ROBBER (*shouts*): This is a stickup!

*The tellers look at him terrified.*

ROBBER (*to himself*): Forget it. If I'm caught they'll use me for target practice.

I'll be a goner for sure. (*signals with his hand*) Take it easy folks.

*(The robber throws down his weapon and flees. The tellers look at each other in surprise.)*

## (10) Robinson Road

*Afternoon*

*Yau Ma Tei drives up to a luxurious European-style mansion in a Rolls Royce and walks inside.*

*The Peking correspondent for the Associated Press, Joe Coveryarse stands up to greet him.*

JOE: I've flown down to Hong Kong just to interview you.

YAU: You are . . . ?

JOE (*presenting his name card*): Joe Coveryarse, AP Peking correspondent.

YAU: Ah, yes. Please take a seat.

*(Two Filipina maids appear with glasses of brandy.)*

JOE: I've heard that for the past thirty years you've been living in poverty. They say you used to live in one of those "pigeon nest" tenements with only 80 square feet of space. The rent was HK\$2,660 a month. But now . . .

YAU: Hah-hah. Things sure have changed now that Hong Kong's liberated.

JOE: How's that?

YAU: I'll tell you. I bought this mansion on 1 June 1997. The owner was fleeing to America so he let me have it for HK\$1,000.

JOE: Wah! Such a beautiful place for that price.

YAU: He tossed the Rolls into the bargain.

JOE: You're a lucky man, Mr Yau. How's your wife?

YAU: She's gone to Shanghai to buy us a place there.

JOE: A house in Shanghai?

YAU: Well, as vice-chairman of the Hong Kong Writers' Association I get a monthly wage of 3,600 *yuan* and 1,000 *yuan* for every thousand words I write. Now I only write one thousand words a day, but still I've got so much money I don't know what to do with it all.

JOE: But I heard you were really hard up in the old society.

YAU: You bet. Before Liberation I wrote over ten thousand words a day but only got HK\$20 for my efforts. Pitiful, eh? Finally my dreams have come true.

JOE: Hah! (*takes a picture*)

YAU: I'm sixty-eight. I may be old but I feel as strong as an ox. I want to keep on writing . . . .

JOE: Sixty-eight. That's not old. Back in Peking I've heard that Marshal Ye is preparing to come to Hong Kong to get away from the cold northern winter.<sup>4</sup> He'll be celebrating his hundredth birthday here too.

YAU: That's wonderful news. I want to toast the Marshal myself. Speaking of which a good friend of mine, Young Dai, hails from the Marshal's home town.

JOE: Are you talking about Dai Tian, the poet?

YAU: Sure. You know him?

JOE: Just bumped into him in the Peking Hotel the other day. He's been made vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, and has a room on the seventeenth floor of the hotel. He took me out for a Peking-style meal. We had Mongolian hotpot.

YAU: Give him my regards the next time you see him in Peking. I've got lots of other friends but they were all scared shitless and ended up America washing dishes in Chinese restaurants or selling peanuts in Washington. What the heck for? Now they're all clamouring to come back. Anyway patriotism is not a matter of first come, first served. On behalf of the Xianggang Writers' Association I welcome them all to return to the Motherland.

JOE: Mr Yau, could I ask you what you think the prospects are for the future of Xianggang?

YAU: The future of Xianggang, is it? I think that you could say you can see it in my own circumstances. Hah-hah! In short, the situation is not middling, not fair, but excellent!

JOE: Excellent?

YAU: Ah, beautiful Xianggang. Although lots of rich people and millions of dollars in capital have gone elsewhere, that's no big deal. It's like rain or a widowed mother's remarriage—has to happen sooner or later.<sup>5</sup> Nothing you can do about it. If they go, they go. But in the wake of their flight Xianggang has become a major cultural and tourist attraction for the people of China!

### (11) Kowloon Train Station

*Thousands of mainland purchasing agents and tourists are pouring out of the station.*

BUYER A (*in a north-eastern accent*): Xiao Li, I'm heading straight for North Point. Where are you camping tonight?

BUYER B: Same old place: the Hilton.

A: That dump. How can you stand it? I'm staying in the Regent in Kowloon. Come over tonight, I'll take you to a nightclub.

B: Great. See you then!

<sup>4</sup>Ye Jianying (1898-1985), one of China's foremost military leaders died three years after this was written. As a native of Guangdong, Ye would regularly spend the winter months in the south to avoid the harsh weather of northern China.

<sup>5</sup>This is a quotation from Mao Zedong.

## (12) Streets on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon

*The electrical appliance stores, hotels, restaurants and department stores throughout the territory are crowded with purchasing agents and tourists from the mainland. There are queues everywhere.*

“Comrade, where are you from?”  
 “Huhehot, Inner Mongolia. And you?”  
 “Me? I’m from Urumchi.”  
 “How about him?”  
 “He’s down from Lhasa.”

## (13) Prairie Fire Electrical Appliances Shop, Mong Kok, Kowloon

PEASANT A (*pulling out a wad of Renminbi*): Comrade, give us half-a-dozen of those 18-inch colour TVs from West Germany.

SHOP ASSISTANT: Certainly. (*smiling*) Where do you hail from, Comrade?

A (*in a north-western accent*): Us? I’s from Wutai up in Shanxi province.

ASSISTANT: You sure have come a long way!

PEASANT B: Nah—hopped on a plane in Taiyuan and I were here in two hours.

XINJIANG HERDSMAN: Comrade, give us a few of those American aircon units you’ve got and, while you’re at it, I’ll take a couple of washing machines an’ all.

ASSISTANT: Whatever you say.

HERDSMAN: Got any cars in stock?

ASSISTANT: No, sir, but they have them next door.

[*Yau Ma Tei voiceover: Friends, in the six months from July to December 1997, Xianggang earned itself eight thousand seven hundred million in unconvertible Renminbi.*]

## (14) Pickup Shots

*Daytime*

*Mainlanders are swarming all over the Ocean Park aquarium and Repulse Bay.*

“Come on, Xiao Li! What’s there to look at here? I’m interested in those buxom French floosies who dance barebottom at the Red Sun Nightclub. They really turn me on.”

“F . . . in’ hell, Old Wang, you’re a horny old bastard.”

“Hey there, how’s tricks? Did you go off for another fling last night?”

“Those Taiwan chicks sure are wild.”

“Don’t forget your wife wants you to take her back an English bike.”

“Hick, I’ve bought her a car instead: a red Italian sports car.”

“Geez, this bastard gets a few bucks and goes off his head.”

## (15) The Yau Residence, Robinson Road

*Dusk*

JOE COVERYARSE: From what you've told me, Mr Yau, the situation in Hong Kong is not just excellent, it's superb.

YAU: Let me tell you something, brother. By the year 2001 the per capita income of people in Xianggang, like the people throughout the rest of the country, is going to increase two hundred-fold. By then a factory apprentice will make 3,600 Renminbi a month. Nothing can stop us. Hah-hah-hah!

JOE: I'm afraid I must be on my way, Mr Yau.

YAU: Surely you can stay for a simple meal though?—(to servant) Helen, what are we having for dinner tonight? Could you show our guest the menu?

*(The servant hands Joe the dinner menu.)*

JOE (reading): Seven appetizers, East River Salt-roasted Chicken, Stir-fried Shrimp, Crab-meat Dumplings, Chicken-filled Pastries, Crisp-fried Prawns, Winter Melon Soup with Eight Precious Ingredients, Prawn Dumplings, Beehive-shaped Yam Puffs, Fresh Mushrooms with Hearts of Cabbage, Peking-style Squirrel Fish, Fried Rice and Noodles, and Two Desserts . . . Very impressive, indeed!

YAU: Really, we have nothing special to offer you. But do drink up. (raises glass) Bottoms up!

*(Joe thanks Yau effusively.)*

## (16) Kai Tak Airport, renamed Jiulong People's Aerodrome

*Daytime*

*A CAAC plane lands.*

*The door opens and a silver-haired Zhao Ziyang, dressed in a metallic-blue suit, appears at the top of the gangway.*

*Music swells as over one thousand primary school children rush forward waving bouquets of flowers, shouting "Welcome, welcome, a warm, warm welcome!"*

*Chinese and foreign reporters crowd forward to take advantage of the photo opportunity.*

HONG KONG REPORTER: Do you remember me, Premier Zhao?

ZHAO: Ah?

REPORTER: On the morning of 23 September 1982, I spoke with you at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing . . .

ZHAO: Ah, yes. Now I remember. Why we're old friends! Now you can see for yourself. There's absolutely no need for the people of Xianggang to be concerned about their future. They don't have a worry in the world.

*(freeze frame)*

*(Cries of "Welcome, welcome, a warm, warm welcome" continue amidst the martial music.)*

—Au revoir