

## FILM REVIEW

### S. Leo Chiang's *Mr. Cao Goes to Washington*

[Walking Iris Media, 2012. 72 minutes]

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#### THE DOWNFALL OF AN IDEALIST IN THE FACE OF PARTISANSHIP

S. Leo Chiang's documentary-biopic, *Mr. Cao Goes to Washington*, opens in New Orleans in 2010 as Joseph Cao closes out his two years in the U.S. House of Representatives and hopes desperately but doubtfully for reelection—a situation Cao likens to “waiting to see a dentist before you get your teeth pulled out.” Part character study and part exposé of the current state of partisan politics in Congress, the film tells the story of Cao's 2008 victory—the biggest upset of the 2008 Congressional elections—and his two years of service. During his term, Congressman Cao goes from enthusiastic idealist to a man whose face registers the alarm of one who has mistakenly but irreversibly offered himself up to the machinations of a sadistic dentist.

Mr. Cao has known disappointment prior to his foray into politics. As a younger man, Cao joined the seminary fueled by the fervent belief that membership would position him to effectively “alleviate human suffering.” Six years in the Society of Jesus left him feeling “impatient,” he explains—the blighted world remained indifferent to his faithful efforts. Cao then answers another calling, this time to political office in which he believes a genuine public servant could more swiftly bring about change.

The titular analogy to Mr. Smith of Frank Capra's 1939 academy-award winning drama, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, seems obvious. Chiang's camera records close-ups of Mr. Cao's face in its trajectory from a repository of enthusiasm and naiveté (still intact subsequent Cao's disenchantment with the priesthood) to a manifestation of a brand of disillusionment unique to the gap between what American democracy promises and what it practices. Yet the allusion proves more layered as the film triangulates race, class, and partisan politics in 21st-century America. While Capra's fictional idealist, Jefferson Smith, is appointed to a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate on a lark, Joseph Cao—member of the Republican Party and the small Vietnamese American community of New Orleans—is elected over an African American democratic incumbent by the mostly

African American and Democrat constituents of Louisiana's Second District. Cao is the first Vietnamese American Congressman and the first Republican elected by this district in more than a century. News clips and interviews with Second District constituents reveal that circumstance—the corruption of the nine-term incumbent, William Jefferson, had become evident with the discovery of \$90,000 cash in his freezer—prompts voters to either abstain on election day or take a chance that Cao is sincere in his pledge to loyally represent the post-Katrina needs and desires of the district.

Chiang's portrayal of Cao explores the ways in which the Vietnamese immigrant—"survivor of the fall of Saigon" as one newscaster describes him—however idealistic or naïve, might actually be uniquely situated to embody the refreshing possibility of utilizing a seat in Congress to transcend partisanship and give voice to one of the most severely disenfranchised communities in the country.

For viewers, perhaps especially those whose voting records reflect constituents' records in Louisiana's Second District, the film highlights a handful of dramatic moments that speak to the rhetorical and political possibilities of Congressman Cao's exceptional positioning. In an address to a gathering of Young Republicans, Mr. Cao implores the sea of nonplussed white faces: "There are 178 members of Congress who are Republican and guess how many are nonwhite? One. You're looking at him. So—we have to be a party of diversity that reflects the American melting pot."

Elsewhere in the film, through his swift response to the catastrophic British Petroleum Oil Spill, Cao demonstrates an authentic understanding of the lives and livelihoods of those working in the Louisiana fishing industry. He chides BP corporate executives, noting "[t]he clean-up process has been a disgrace" and that "the claims process has been dismal." Cao follows this indictment with the harsh assertion that, instead of requesting the executives' resignations, it would have been more fitting to use a Samurai-era approach where "we would give you a knife and ask you to commit harikari," he explains.

These moments, along with Cao's initial support of President Obama's health care plan, are incredibly satisfying to his constituents as well as to American filmgoers poised to embrace any sign of bipartisan cooperation or thinking in the House. As it turns out, however, Cao's congressional career hinges upon what U.S. citizens have tended to either celebrate or demonize as "Obamacare." Thus, Cao's unlikely triumph of the 2008 election disintegrates into a sort of double tragedy at the intersection of the personal and the political by 2010.

Having lost all Republican backing as a result of going rogue as the only Republican to vote for President Obama's health care plan, Cao decides to vote against it in the second round—citing his Roman Catholic

opposition to abortion as the primary reason. Cao's about-face comes as a disappointment, especially after the clear explanation Cao gives in defense of his controversial first vote for "Obamacare": simply, it was the "right thing to do for [his] district." President Obama and Second District voters alike conclude that Cao could have been the right person to represent New Orleans, but that it is impossible as long as he is with "the wrong party."

The film concludes with the camera still lingering on Joseph Cao's contemplative and now even more bewildered face. Having lost his father with whom he was able to spend very little time in his last days, as well as having lost the 2010 congressional election to Cedric Richmond—a candidate Obama endorses but Cao considers a morally unworthy opponent—Cao looms in Chiang's camera as the ultimate lost innocent. In two years, Mr. Cao became a dismayed fatherless son set adrift once again, but this time without a new calling to reset the path he had so eagerly and doggedly forged toward the lofty goal of saving the world through honest, whole-hearted public service.

Unexpectedly, viewers—even those who, like me, imagine themselves either too jaded or too sophisticated to get emotionally caught up in an updated rendition of Capra's *Mr. Smith*—discovered that we, too, have lost something. And, worse, recent goings-on in Washington demonstrate that we are not going to get those losses back. Likewise, viewers walk away with a sense of Cao's exceptional, if brief, rise and fall, but also with the unfortunate understanding that the camera is not likely to be pointed on "the accidental Congressman" again anytime soon.

