

# Freedom Swimmer

In order to understand the present,  
we need to shed light on the past.



# information

TITLE: *FREEDOM SWIMMER*

YEAR OF PRODUCTION: 2021

SHOOT GAUGE: Digital

ASPECT: 2K

SOUND FORMAT: 5.1

LANGUAGE / SUBTITLES: Cantonese / English

TRAILER:  
<https://vimeo.com/512438867>

FILM LINK:  
<https://vimeo.com/536624658>  
(Password: THELIGHTS)

WEBSITE URLS:  
<https://no-thing.co>  
<https://sacrebleuprod.com>

---

CONTACT:

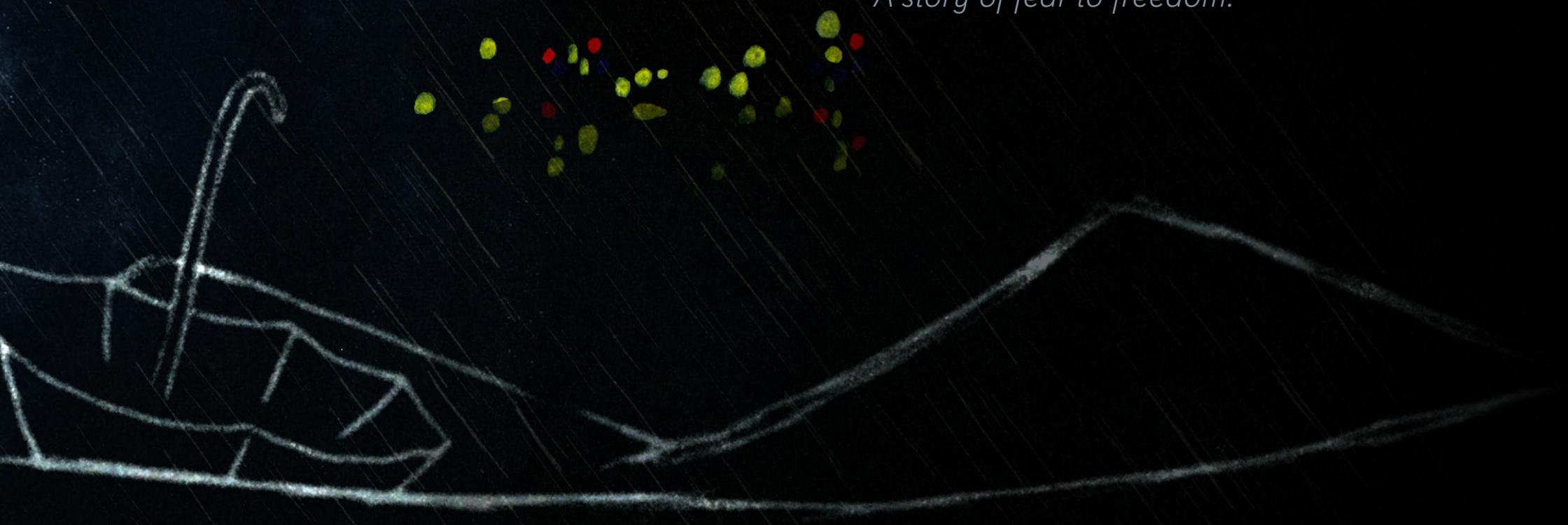
Producer – Australia  
**Brooke Tia Silcox**  
[brooke@no-thing.co](mailto:brooke@no-thing.co)  
+61 439 481 084

Sacrebleu Productions  
**Juliette Louchart**  
[distribution@sacrebleuprod.com](mailto:distribution@sacrebleuprod.com)  
+33 1 42 25 30 27

# synopsis

The story of a grandfather's perilous swim from China to Hong Kong that parallels his granddaughter's own quest for a new freedom .

*"A story of fear to freedom."*



# detailed synopsis

*FREEDOM SWIMMER* documents a mass migration story from the 20th century, which is relatively untold in the Western world— and offers context for a city in turmoil, today.

A granddaughter asks her grandfather to recount his journey from China, swimming to Hong Kong in the 1970's.

One of two million mainland residents who swam across the southern sea border near Shenzhen, it was a decade-long struggle to leave. Many others died trying or were captured and sent to labour camps. He was one of the lucky ones.

From the 1950's to 1980's Hong Kong was a symbol of freedom to many Chinese, glimpsed across the water. The grandfather, like many other refugees, went on to have a successful life in Hong Kong and was part of the working-class movement that powered local industry and helped transform the city into a financial success story.

*FREEDOM SWIMMER* explores the effect of past cultural trauma, allowing the audience to find a new perspective on the current situation. It reflects the depth of a symbol that is 'freedom' - that Hong Kong both represents and holds onto so tightly.

On a wider-scale, this is a universal story of the dispossessed— what it takes to flee your country, what it means to fight for freedom, what it is like to leave everything in hope of liberty.





# director's statement

BY OLIVIA MARTIN-MCGUIRE

As a storyteller I am interested in cultural and intergenerational trauma and how lived experience informs and affects behaviour and, to an extent, the resulting cycles and patterns. I am interested in exploring what's behind events and current narratives— and how understanding or empathising with these stories helps us better connect with each other.

When this story came to me, I was living in Hong Kong, after a period living in China. I had recently finished a feature documentary exploring contemporary China through its wedding industry. It was a totally different topic and world— and yet what was behind this new account in *Freedom Swimmer* was a familiar echo.

I felt this story offered another window into the changes facing Hong Kong now— by understanding the past a little more. The film is based on a journey across water in search of freedom, that took more than a decade to get right. It feels like there's a lack of understanding of the refugee experience in the Western world.

It is a story that those interviewed wanted to tell - but feared the consequences of doing so. As an outsider, I believed I was in a unique position to help them tell it— so this was a unique opportunity to help the story have a voice.



The film is based on a series of audio interviews from intergenerational family members in Hong Kong. The Interviewees requested anonymity, so I recorded audio interviews with several other freedom swimmers and protestors, as well as some who had chosen to migrate to the UK. This allowed me to blend specific details so individual stories weren't directly attributable.

| *“There is no fear, when there is no hope.”*

Something else that seemed striking to me when I interviewed both the freedom swimmers and the current-day protestors was the parallels and commonalities in language.

Both generations talked about their situations as “being hopeless” but being “prepared to die” for their efforts. They talked about camaraderie or “the community” that existed for those that pushed back then and now - how this became their “freedom”. There were also symbolic parallels in relation to actions or objects that became motifs in the film.

The fluid, leaderless and faceless protests now, mirrored the journeys in the dark, makeshift tactics or tools and group pragmatism that existed amongst the freedom swimmers. Even the protestors call, “to be water” seemed connected to that original journey from the mainland.

| *Blending hand-drawn animation and film, the symbolic parallels are tightly woven for both generations, as the story slips between the past and the present.*



# animation approach

BY AGNÈS PATRON

When Olivia reached out to me to ask me to take over the animation of *FREEDOM SWIMMER*, she immediately brought up *And The Bear*, my Cannes film festival selected animation as a reference: the footage from the film struck her as “a light coming out of the darkness.” This is why we have chosen to use watercolour on black paper again with the chiaroscuro effect, imagining the animation as a moving projection of the Grandfather’s memories.

In *FREEDOM SWIMMER* the painting emerges from the depths and blackness of the paper but then blends in again during the transitions between film, archive and animation. The image accompanies the story without always directly illustrating it.

*There are realistic scenes based on period references and more dreamlike and abstract passages that transpire as the animation echoes the scenes of the present.*

With animation we could play with form to emphasize the power of the elements (rough sea, wind, driving rain) that the two protagonists are about to face.

Small spots of pure paint evoke the lights of Hong Kong or the danger of the torches of the soldiers. All the techniques are used to allow the narration of the Grandfather’s story to fill with emotion.



# producer's statement

BY RON DYENS

Faced with a world whose freedoms are dwindling, the short film medium retains a voice that is important to nurture and support. This film is a testimony. It is also, in a way, a warning.

It is a little known story but one that resonates with current events. The freedom swimmers came to find freedom in Hong Kong and their Grandchildren went to defend it at all costs.

The audience feels the solidarity of a people captured, in the Chinese labour camps who tirelessly and discreetly prepared their escape from the mainland by helping each other through discussing their failed attempts. The audience feels how the Grandfather's story is heard by his Granddaughter who is faced with the situation in Hong Kong now and processes her Grandfather's story through her own lens.

It lives beyond the intimate story of the family and their individual destiny, as it shines a light on a much wider and more universal issue of migration and of those who no longer have hope in their country, those who no longer have any choice left but to leave.



It reflects the migrant crisis in Europe, the refugee stance in Australia, the wall with Mexico, borders being closed because of the virus and climatic perils intensifying all sit within the thematic of this story. It seems essential to us, to participate in speaking about these voices, which paradoxically do not have a voice, and who disappear, for the most part, in their efforts to achieve a better life.

After living for a long time in China and Hong Kong and marked by these accounts of swimmers moving from hopelessness to hope, Olivia had the deep need to bring this subject to the screen.

Through the direction of Olivia Martin McGuire and the animation of Agnès Patron we feel the danger but also the hope for a better life where the neon light shines across the border— in Hong Kong.



# the making of

BY BROOKE SILCOX

We worked across three continents, four countries and three languages. The majority of the key creatives on this production have never met in person. A result of adapting to the pandemic, this production was coordinated through email, zoom, skype and a huge amount of trust. Olivia (Writer/ Director/ Producer) and the cinematographer were in London. The animation team in Paris. The edit team in Perth, Western Australia.

Originally intended to be entirely filmed in Hong Kong in early 2020, we had to cancel the shoot and adapt to the unfolding pandemic. It wasn't long before we realised that we were not going to be able to film in Hong Kong at all. We had secured funding from Screen Australia for the documentary shoot but had to re-strategise. Olivia re-scripted the story with the interviewees and in consultation with an Australian story consultant. Animation and archive material became key in the new approach.

Olivia discovered the mysterious atmosphere of Agnès Patron's animation and approached her to be a partner in the manifestation of the film and to translate the historic testimony of the Grandfather in animation. Agnès was taken by the depth of the story and a co-production with Sacrebleu and Ron Dyens was born. Ron's experience with animation and my experience in documentary filmmaking promised a subtle, poetic yet powerful portrayal.



Olivia was in London at the time and so the live action section of the Grandfather's story was filmed there. Given the real storytellers needed to stay anonymous Olivia worked with our Australian cinematographer to introduce the audience to the Grandfather and Granddaughter in an intimate manner with the challenge of not ever disclosing who they are and maintaining their anonymity.

Olivia's creative direction means that we, as the audience are so close to our subjects we see the sweat on his brow, the whiskers in his beard, the dirt under her fingernails and her messy hair draped down her back— the audience occupies a space which is normally only reserved for those we are intimate with.

Our Production designer worked with Olivia to re-create the house of the Grandfather but with a touch of the set of the French film *Amélie*, to bring in a touch of the French collaboration. Our design team added authentic touches to the art direction, which were sourced from their Hong Kong expat community in London.

The production is in Cantonese because the interviewees wanted to use the opportunity to preserve their language. However, being in a foreign language does not make the film feel foreign as we as the audience are invited into the Grandfather's comfortable living room to drink a cup of tea and hear his story.

Agnès' husband, Pierre Oberkampff composed the score in France under the guidance of Olivia. Olivia and Pierre were inspired to make a subtle but suspenseful score that reflected the elements of wind, rain and water along the journey— that could also talk to the past and the present.



A team of researchers were engaged to find the special and exact moments in the archive footage recorded of today and of public executions and humiliations of the Cultural Revolution. The support of Getty Images and our other archivists was instrumental in depicting the cyclical nature of history.

Sacredbleu mobilised CNC's Program Assistance for the initial stages and secured Arte France as the co-producer and French broadcaster, Region Sud, Procerip-Angoa and Sharing Cloud's support. Post-production was completed in Western Australia.

Other than the interviewees whose story this is, several people in the crew have requested to remain anonymous because of possible ramifications to themselves or their family in Hong Kong. In recognition of the sheer dedication, commitment and talent of everyone who worked on the film the rest of the crew chose to waive their credits to stand by those who had to protect themselves from possible retribution.

A close-up photograph of a white plate containing several pieces of dragon fruit (pitaya) and other fruits. Some pieces are skewered with wooden sticks. The dragon fruit has a white interior with black seeds and a reddish-pink outer skin. The lighting is warm and focused on the food.

# team

## Olivia Martin McGuire

WRITER & DIRECTOR

Olivia is an Australian-British documentary filmmaker and photographer living in London who spent five years living in China and Hong Kong. *FREEDOM SWIMMER* is her second film. Her first film, the documentary *ChinaLove* is currently on NETFLIX, was nominated for Best Australian Documentary at Sydney Film Festival, and competed in competition at the Asia Pacific Awards. Her photographic work has been exhibited in various international galleries, festivals, museums and publications.

➔ [www.oliviamartinmcguire.com](http://www.oliviamartinmcguire.com)

➔ [instagram: @livmartinmcguire](https://www.instagram.com/livmartinmcguire)

## Agnès Patron

ANIMATOR

Agnès recently won the Best Short Animation César 2021 for her film *L'Heure de Lours (And the Bear)*, which was selected for Cannes, Toronto, Clermont Ferrand and won at Chicago, Aspen, Leeds, Animatou, Tous courts among others. She trained at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts and has directed many award winning films and animation sequences including for ARTE, Daily TV Show and theatrical release.

➔ <https://vimeo.com/505637007>

## Brooke Tia Silcox

PRODUCER, AUSTRALIA

Brooke is an award winning drama and documentary producer from Australia and the founder of No Thing Productions. Brooke won the Screenwest Emerging Producer Prize of \$100,000. Film awards include short film *Judas Collar* being Long Listed for the Oscars, winning in Austin and Australia and documentaries *Meal Tickets* and *Rock Kabul* winning in Australia, Arizona and Mississippi. Brooke associate produced the feature film *Jirga*, which was Australia's Academy Awards submission for Best Foreign Film in 2019 and winner of Australia's Richest Film Prize.

➔ [www.no-thing.co](http://www.no-thing.co)

A goldfish is shown in a glass tank. The background is dark blue with white scribbles. The goldfish is in the center-right, facing left. The tank's edge is visible at the bottom.

## Ron Dyens

PRODUCER, FRANCE

In 1999, Ron Dyens became the director of the L'Archipel Paris Cinema (2 rooms), and in the same year he created his production company: Sacrebleu Productions. Since then, nearly 80 short films have been produced, winning selection at more than 1,500 French and foreign festivals. Sacrebleu Productions has received prestigious awards such as la Palme d'or at Cannes, the César, the Silver Bear, the Procirep Award, two Crystals at Annecy, Grand Prix Reanimania and also an Oscar nomination among many others. He has been a member of l'Académie de César, the Oscars Academy and a Knight of the National Order of Merit since 2019. He has also been elected to the Committee of Feature Film Producers at UniFrance.

➔ [www.sacrebleuprod.com](http://www.sacrebleuprod.com)

## Pierre Oberkampf

COMPOSER

Pierre is a French pianist, composer and sound designer. He is a poly-instrumentalist and he has composed the soundtrack of more than thirty short films including that of *L'Heure de Lours* directed by Agnès Patron.

➔ <https://cargocollective.com/pierreoerkampf/Contact>



# credit roll

Out of respect for those who chose to remain anonymous  
we did not include the credits on the film.

With the support of Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée

Principal production funding from Screen Australia

In co-production ARTE France

Program Unit: Cinema

With the support of Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, in partnership with the CNC

With the support from Procirep-Angoa

Financed with the assistance of Documentary Australia Foundation

With thanks to the entire team at SharingCloud for their support

**arte**



**PROCIREP ANGOA**



**SharingCloud**



ISAN N°: 0000-0005-BE0E-0000-K-0000-0000-E

Visa N°: 153899

© Sacrebleu Productions SARL, No Thing Productions Pty Ltd, ARTE France, 2021.



# Freedom Swimmer

**MOVIE LINK:** <https://vimeo.com/536624658>

**PASSWORD:** THELIGHTS

