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LIFE IS CHEAP... BUT TOILET PAPER IS EXPENSIVE

TUE 3/18 | 9:45PM KABUKI | LIFE18

USA 1989 | 89mins | Video Color | English & Cantonese w/E.S.

DIRECTORS: Wayne Wang, Spencer Nakasako **EXEC. PRODUCER:** Wang **PRODUCER:** Winnie Fredriksz **WRITER:** Nakasako **CINEMATOGRAPHER:** Amir Mokri **EDITOR:** Sandy Nervig **SOUND:** Curtis Choy **MUSIC:** Mark Adler **CAST:** Nakasako, Victor Wong, Cheng Kwan Min, Cora Miao

Several years after igniting Asian American narrative cinema with *Chan is Missing* (1981), Wayne Wang returned to his birthplace: Hong Kong. While *Chan* was a noir-tinged ode to San Francisco that dabbled in avant-garde cinema, *Life is Cheap...But Toilet Paper is Expensive* is an impressionistic portrait of a city in flux. As Wang's protagonist puts it, Hong Kong is a place where "anything goes and everything happens."

The movie follows a nameless San Franciscan (writer, co-director and SFIAAFF luminary Spencer Nakasako)—"Chinese on one side, Japanese on the other and in the middle: American"—who serves as a courier, carrying a metal briefcase from San Francisco to Hong Kong. In his attempts to hand over the briefcase to a triad boss, our hero goes deep into the rabbit hole of Hong Kong circa 1989, mixing with prostitutes, former Red Guards and a slew of colorful personalities that make up the fabric of this fascinating, confusing city. The film playfully combines documentary and narrative styles, inviting characters to directly address the camera and depicting local rituals, most notably a duck slaughter, in painstaking detail.

Anchored by what may be the longest foot chase ever captured on film, *Life is Cheap* is a tour through a Hong Kong preparing for its impending return to the mainland. Don't let the film's controversial history fool you (it initially received an X rating from the MPAA); this is the work of a great Asian American artist going home.

—Jonathan L. Knapp