

**Los Angeles Filmforum presents**  
***How to Have an American Baby*, by Leslie Tai**  
**Sunday May 10, 2025, 1:00 pm**  
**At 2220 Arts + Archives**

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2025 is our 50th year. [www.lafilmforum.org](http://www.lafilmforum.org)

**In person discussion following the screening with director Leslie Tai and Michael Berry**

HOW TO HAVE AN AMERICAN BABY is a kaleidoscopic voyage into the shadow economy that caters to Chinese tourists who travel to the U.S. on “birthing vacations”—in order to obtain U.S. citizenship for their babies. Tracing the underground birth tourism industry from Beijing to Los Angeles, the film weaves together vignettes and deeply private moments. Inside bedrooms, delivery rooms, and family meetings, the story of a hidden global economy emerges—depicting the aspirations and anxieties, fortunes and tragedies that befall the ordinary people caught in the web of its influence.

More timely than ever, given the current administration's attacks on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and birthright citizenship, Tai's film provides an intimate and nuanced look at some of the people actually affected. Filmed largely in the San Gabriel Valley and China, the film's sensitive eye confronts us with the difficult choices, high personal and monetary costs, and fraught exchanges faced by these women, complicating our understanding of the socio-economic and legal issues surrounding “birthing vacations” and the desire for American citizenship.

**Michael Berry** is Professor of Contemporary Chinese Cultural Studies and Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at UCLA. A Guggenheim Fellow (2023) and a two-time National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellow (2008, 2021), Berry is the author/editor of ten books on Chinese literature and cinema including *Speaking in Images* (2006), *A History of Pain* (2008), *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* (2022), and *Translation, Disinformation, and Wuhan Diary* (2022). He has served as a film consultant and a juror for numerous film festivals, including the Golden Horse (Taiwan) and the Fresh Wave (Hong Kong). He is also the translator of numerous books, including *To Live* (2004), *Remains of Life* (2017), *Hospital* (2023), *Exorcism* (2023), *Dead Souls* (2025), *Soft Burial* (2025), and *The Running Flame* (2025).

**Leslie Tai** is a Chinese-American filmmaker from San Francisco whose work chronicles the dreams, anxieties, and consumer desire of China's rising middle class and the Chinese diaspora through a distinctly female lens. Her award-winning work has screened worldwide at venues such as Tribeca Film Festival, MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, Visions du Réel, True/False, IDFA, BAMPFA, the Wexner, REDCAT, UCCA (Beijing), and broadcast on PBS' award-winning series POV and The New York Times Op-Docs. From 2006-2011, Tai made and

exhibited work in the underground Beijing documentary film movement, as a student of Chinese filmmaker Wu Wenguang and participant artist of Caochangdi Workstation. Tai is the recipient of a U.S. Fulbright Fellowship to China and 2019 Creative Capital Award. Her work is supported by organizations such as Field of Vision, Fork Films, SFFILM, California Humanities, Firelight Media, and fellowships from MacDowell, Yaddo, Bogliasco, NYFF's Artist Academy, and Berlinale Talents. She holds an MFA in Documentary Film and Video from Stanford University. HOW TO HAVE AN AMERICAN BABY is Tai's feature debut.

### **Screening:**

#### ***How to Have an American Baby***

Directed, Filmed, Edited by Leslie Tai, 2023, digital color, sound, 117 minutes  
Mandarin & English with English subtitles

Tracing the underground birth tourism industry from Beijing and Shanghai to Los Angeles, HOW TO HAVE AN AMERICAN BABY is a feature-length creative documentary that takes us behind the closed doors of the once-booming shadow economy catering to Chinese tourists who travel to the U.S. to give birth—in order to obtain U.S. citizenship for their babies. Told through a series of intimately observed, interwoven storylines, we meet expectant mothers, maternity hotel operators and operator wannabes, local doctors and civic officials, birth tourism agents in China, and the nannies, cooks, and chauffeurs that fuel this industry. Inside bedrooms, delivery rooms, and private family meetings, the story of a hidden global economy emerges – depicting the aspirations and anxieties, fortunes and tragedies that befall the ordinary people caught in the web of its influence.

### **Director's Statement:**

In September 2014, I spent several weeks living with my co-producer Tang in a single family home in the suburbs of Los Angeles County. She had recently given birth to a baby boy and was renting out a room in a six-bedroom house in Rowland Heights, California, about 25 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Upon arriving, I was shocked to find 14 people living under one roof. What appeared like a regular single family home from the outside, was in fact, operating as a Chinese maternity hotel. Inside were four families from China, their nannies, cooks, and babies, an extended host family—messy and real—brought together by the quest to have an American baby. It was a microcosm and an allegory for the U.S. and China. That China's unprecedented economic growth could sprout a privileged class that could afford to travel to the U.S. for this huge and risky undertaking, giving birth in a completely foreign land and navigating the healthcare system with nothing but cash and at the mercy and good will of their maternity hotel operators and cash-hungry doctors and hospitals—in order to obtain the “benefits of U.S. citizenship”—all packaged and sold as if it were some kind of vacation? Insurance for the future? For me, this was the epitome of American capitalism played out to its most logical extent and the irony of the distinct brand of Capitalism “with Chinese characteristics” being practiced here was all too clear. After all, what in America is not for sale? The Chinese were simply buying.

By the time I entered the story, this underground economy had all but taken over the Chinese ethnic enclaves of Southern California. Chocho was my key into this otherworld that was hidden in plain sight.

Strolling through her hilltop neighborhood at dusk, she pointed out house after house—each as nondescript as the next—that were operating as “maternity hotels.” I was immediately transfixed by the image of hundreds of Chinese women on this one hilltop alone, busy incubating their own fates and the fates of their American babies—out of sight and behind closed doors. What kind of messy lives were happening behind the façade of the all-American suburban dream: palm trees, hilltop views, swimming pools? In that instant, I knew the film would demand an unconventional narrative approach:

This film is about lives unfolding simultaneously in a complex world.

Told through vignettes, the film is made up of emotional snapshots of mutual strangers, loosely related, but brought together by their own, Chinese twist on the American dream. Like wandering the labyrinthine hallways of an Asian karaoke palace, we peer into the self-contained worlds or “slices of life” of perfect strangers—placed side by side. Everyone is singing their hearts out. Like ships passing in the night, they are caught in an invisible web of relations that only the audience perceives.

In this film, I am interested in observing the private moments of people whose motivations and worldview are outwardly at odds with one another—placing them side by side, paradoxically in conversation with one another. My goal is to expand and to complicate our notions of human intentions; to draw the audience into the subjective experiences of the protagonists in ways that are disturbing, emotional, and unexpected.

Behind closed doors, a cross-section of society incubates their destinies and desires. And the story of a hidden global economy emerges through the sum of its parts.

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Los Angeles Filmforum screenings are supported by the California Arts Council, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, and the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming soon:

May 10 (Saturday night) - Community partner for Sarah Maldoror: *Through a Lens of Resistance and Rebellion*, at the UCLA Film & TV Archive

May 22 (Thursday) - *Sanctuary Station*, by Brigid McCaffrey (in person!)

May 25 – Co-presenting Works by Nam June Paik at the Philosophical Research Society

June 1 – *Turang*, by Bachtiar Siagian

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