



HOLLYWOOD CHINESE

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By David Noh

Arthur Dong once again proves that he is one of the most intelligent, incisive documentarians alive with *Hollywood Chinese*, his study of the portrayal of this ethnic group in the movies. From the earliest, silent-era depictions of stereotyped Yellow Peril denizens to the present-day empowerment of the martial-arts oeuvre and its overwhelming influence in the industry, it's been a tumultuous, complex road and Dong is alert to its every twist and turn. Myriad, amazingly culled interviews with actors, filmmakers and historians add rich texture to this bracingly entertaining, fast-moving survey.

Along the way, Dong discovers vital, forgotten filmmakers like Marion Wong, who made independent Chinese-themed films in the silent era like *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1916). The long period of "yellow face" is covered, in which Asian actors were compelled to play clichéd, groveling house servants and, during World War II, Japanese villains. (Ironically, many of the latter were portrayed by Chinese actors, at a time when Japan was occupying and terrorizing their homeland.) James Hong amusingly describes using the panting menace of Peter Lorre (who played Japanese detective Mr. Moto) whenever he's called upon to convey menace today. Like Lorre, white actors such as Warner Oland and Sidney Toler made careers of portraying Chinese characters, particularly Charlie Chan, the detective with the endless fount of fortune-cookie aphorisms, many of which are hilariously repeated here—i.e., "Truth like football—receive many kicks before reaching goal."

A defining, if depressing, moment occurred in 1937 with the MGM super-production of *The Good Earth*. Pearl Buck's bestseller would have seemed to offer major, juicy roles for Chinese actors of the time, but the leads were played by the white Paul Muni and Luise Rainer (who, at 97, appears here, veiled in wrinkles but still astutely recalling that film). Anna May Wong, the most prominent Asian actor of her time, was passed over (Dong shows a studio memo describing her screen test as inadequate), but the film did offer studio employment opportunities for hundreds of real Chinese. Indeed, Bessie Loo, who played a minor part in the film, was able to launch her subsequent career as an agent via her skill in organizing the ethnic extras. (Her husband, Richard, was the most prominent "Evil Jap" in the movies.)

Certain breakthroughs occurred in the 1960s, with the release of *Flower Drum Song* and *The World of Suzie Wong*, which both starred Nancy Kwan, the first Chinese woman to be really featured as a star. A humorous Kwan is interviewed and she recalls the disdain her Suzie Wong was met with by certain contemporaries who excoriated her for representing women of her race as prostitutes. (It's called acting, people.)

Ang Lee's triumphant, historic acceptance of the Best Director Oscar for *Brokeback Mountain* is shown as evidence of how far things have come, along with the busy career of Justin Lin (with his progressive *Better Luck Tomorrow*), but there is still obviously work to be done. Joan Chen states how, after the success of *The Last Emperor*, she was offered no movie roles and had to make the decision to leave Los Angeles and strike out on her own, resulting in her emergence as a director. As for the men, B.D. Wong is particularly revealing when he expresses how difficult it is to convince the powers-that-be that Asian men have as much masculinity and forcefulness as other actors, an age-old quandary which also brings up deep-seated issues in Asian men themselves. This might be called the Long Duk Dong Equation, in reference to that infamous *Sixteen Candles* character played by Gedde Watanabe, perhaps today's foremost purveyor of still-extant yellow face.