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Bridging the Hollywood Divide with "The Good Earth" and "Flower Drum Song"

By **Arthur Dong** (accompanying his *Hollywood Chinese* to the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival) Click [HERE](#) for MPM's review of the film.)

For the past decade, my work has covered America's destructive war against homosexuality in a trilogy of films that focused on murders of gay men, conservative Christians and the military's policy governing gay service members. *Hollywood Chinese* was a much-needed break from this tense period of reportage. It was also an opportunity to delve back into my affection for the Hollywood film.

The movie theaters in my hometown of San Francisco were both my childhood playgrounds and my first film schools. Since I can remember, my parents took all of us kids to the local Chinatown movie houses as a weekend treat to see Chinese-language imports from overseas. This was no passive activity restricted to sitting still with eyes glued on the big screen. When bored with the melodrama that was onscreen, we'd find other kids and chase each other up and down the aisles, or hang out in the lounges, or climb around the upper stalls. This was totally acceptable - we didn't have day care centers in Chinatown back then. Despite the playtime, however, I did develop a roster of favorite Chinese movie stars and took in hundreds of hours of Chinese storytelling and imagery.



JUSTIN LIN DIRECTS JAMES FRANCO IN ANNAPOLIS. COPYRIGHT DEEP FOCUS PRODUCTIONS

When old enough, I eventually ventured outside Chinatown and haunted the now-defunct revival houses that programmed Hollywood classics. Hollywood was another world. I was equally captivated with Jean Harlow, *The Apu Trilogy* and, of course, *Citizen Kane*. The experience of looking at images shot decades before I was born was fascinating. I actually had plans to become a film historian, and, even though the filmmaking bug hit me, my passion for the archaeology of film has only deepened through the years.

During those early years of watching Hollywood fare, and after having been weaned on Chinese films that featured real Chinese people, it was a curiosity whenever there was a Chinese character - whether played by a Chinese or other Asian - in a Hollywood movie. Actually, *Flower Drum Song* was the first English-language film I ever saw in a theater and it was, coincidentally, at a Chinatown neighborhood movie house. This was a special event for the community and the theater was packed with all sorts of Chinese folks - old, young, those in-between, Toishan-speaking, English-speaking, bilingual - and there was a buzz in the air. What a treat to gather together and see Chinese characters, even if they weren't all played by Chinese people, in a widescreen Hollywood musical. Two hours and thirteen minutes later, we'd pour out of the dark theater and there we were:

"Grant Avenue! Where is that?
San Francisco, that's where's that! California, U.S.A.!"

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It was a kind of surreal virtual experience: Art imitates life, and vice versa.

And then there was *The Good Earth*. It was something else to watch Luise Rainer and Paul Muni portray Chinese peasants in yellow-face, leading a cast of thousands of real-life Chinese extras and bit players, not to mention millions of locusts. I don't recall if I was delighted or offended, but, if anything, I was intrigued. And, oh, the set design was pretty authentic and the camera work gorgeous. It was, and still is, a great piece of classic Hollywood moviemaking.

Then came the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, ethnic pride. *Flower Drum Song* and *The Good Earth's* kow-towing, pidgin-speaking caricatures were rejected alongside Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. Songs like "Chop Suey" became an embarrassment for politicized Asian Americans. It didn't matter that *Flower Drum Song* was based on a book written by a Chinese American; it was, in the end, a white man's concoction. As for *The Good Earth*, well, it was based on a book written by Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of a missionary in China, and that fact alone carries a lot of political baggage. I think it's only fair, though, to point out that the novel won the 1932 Pulitzer Prize and was resurrected to the 2004 bestseller list when Oprah Winfrey chose it for her book club. For many of its original readers, the novel challenged Western racism and helped prepare Americans of the 1930s to see Chinese as allies in the coming war with Japan.

In any case, despite the discomfort of it all for some, for me, *Flower Drum Song* and *The Good Earth* exploded with a revolutionary imagination of a long-misrepresented people. To witness it today is to appreciate it both as cultural relic, with a bit of not-so-innocent transgression. But because of the debates over identity politics that began to swell in the counter-revolutionary 1960s, and even to present-day, some of my fondest memories in a movie theater were, and still are, targets of social and cultural critiques.

With *Hollywood Chinese*, I take a lifelong affection for film and combine it with a quest to understand the complexities of cinema. It's my journey into the world of Hollywood moviemaking, to discover how stories and images of the Chinese fit within an entertainment industry that mixes art with commerce, a universal art form that affects the way we see each other and ourselves. I didn't set out to produce a definitive encyclopedic treatment of the topic, but rather a trip through Hollywood as seen through the lens of legends like Nancy Kwan, who broke racial barriers with her star-making turns in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Flower Drum Song* (1961).

Meeting Luise Rainer

In order to flush out a narrative arc for *Hollywood Chinese*, I felt it was also critical to hear from non-Asians who played Chinese in yellow-face. So there it was, 2003, the 75th anniversary of the Oscars®, and the Academy gathered as many living winners of the acting awards as possible to appear in that year's broadcast. I attended a post-rehearsals reception for them, and it was a pretty private affair; there we were, having drinks and joking around with the likes of Olivia de Havilland and Celeste Holm - we could've been at the Brown Derby - it was a film aficionado's wet dream! And then I spotted her, yes "her": Luise Rainer, the first actor to win back-to-back Oscars® for *The Great Ziegfeld* and *The Good Earth*. She was still alive - all 93 years of her!

By 2003, I had already been in development on *Hollywood Chinese* for about five years but hadn't shot a single frame of footage yet. Now there was no excuse. Luise Rainer was a surviving connection to an era of Hollywood when white actors playing Asians was the norm, when yellow-face spoke volumes about race relations in the industry. I had to get her on camera.

But Luise Rainer had been around the block a few times and wasn't an easy interview to get. After all, she was once married to playwright Clifford Odets and she had a notorious reputation for talking back to Louis B. Mayer before dumping Hollywood altogether. And flattery was a lost cause. Long story short: It was about all connections and perseverance. A flurry of phone calls, and a few months later, I found myself in Luise Rainer's London apartment on the city's hottest day in history. Remember that summer of 2003 when all the Brits melted? I was there.

Luise Rainer was true to form and continued to be the diva that she deserved to be. Limo service, approval of the make-up artist, lighting, a definite time limit. But there was sweetness about her too. She showed me her pair of Oscars® and lamented how they had tarnished, but lit up when I told her it was possible to have them refinished. And she made sure the cookies and tea were out and that I accompanied her to dinner with a group of artists in a private dining club where you gained entry through an unmarked door - very speakeasy and very Dorothy Parker. She proudly announced to her guests that I had traveled all the way from L.A. to interview her.

On the night before the shoot, we went through her closet to pick out an outfit and then pondered over what to do with her hair. We both agreed a beret was the best look. Then on location the next day, I melted, the crew melted - everyone melted - but Luise Rainer was a pro. When she came into the room, it was like a scene from *Sunset Blvd.*: Yes, she was ready for her close-up. With each documentary I make, there comes a time when I know I have a film.

This was that moment.

**words from "Grant Avenue," one of the musical's songs*



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