

Hollywood Chinese

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Hollywood Chinese: A Very Queer Story

An Interview with Filmmaker Arthur Dong

Filmmaker Arthur Dong, who created *Coming Out Under Fire*, *Licensed to Kill*, *Family Fundamentals* and other LGBT films, has finished a new film *Hollywood Chinese*, a vivid and entertaining journey tracking the experience of Chinese Americans in America's film industry. The film opens in the Bay Area on April 11 at San Francisco's Sundance Kabuki Cinemas and at Oakland's Grand Lake Theater. A San Francisco native, Arthur Dong recently spoke to Bay Times about the film.



Whowould have thought that it would be a heterosexual Chinese director (Ang Lee) to bring the a great gay love story (*Brokeback Mountain*) to the silver screen.

(Bay Times) So, you're going to be at the screening in San Francisco on Friday and in Oakland on Saturday. You've assembled one hell of a cast - Ang Lee, Wayne Wang, Joan Chen, David Henry Huang, B.D. Wong, Nancy Kwan, Amy Tan and Fu Man Chu. But I gotta ask - is it a queer film?

(Arthur Dong) Am I queer?

*No, I mean is the film, *Hollywood Chinese*, queer?*

That's the answer. Am I queer?

Ah ha!

So there.

Okay, identity politics is so passé. You got me, but now I'm curious. Do you believe that a queer sensibility is embedded in one's vision?

I believe that my films are embedded with my vision and I happen to be a gay man. I'm not saying all gay people produce gay products, but I do. I can't speak for everybody.

So what would you call queer aesthetic?

I'm not sure if I'm actually comfortable with that kind of labeling. I'm a filmmaker, and when I produce a film, I want to please myself. I want to make a film that I want to see. Now, I'm a gay audience member, so is every film I like a queer film that has queer aesthetics? That's not for me to say, but I say consider the source of a film. And yes, consider the audience of one, me.

So let's go back to the beginning. Why did you make this film?

I am a film lover and I made this film for film lovers. The stories of Chinese Americans in the industry are rich. But it is really about the people in the film and what they went through.

Indulge me - where do you fit into the story?

I grew up in old Chinatown here in San Francisco. It used to have four theaters and they all showed Cantonese language films. It was really a community back in the '50s and '60s. We were immigrant families that worked six days a week, but Sunday was the day off and everyone went to the movies.

You'd take your kids and we'd be running around in the aisles playing tag. It was our playground, but I also watched movies. It became an obsession of mine.

I was brought up on Chinese movies from Asia. In the early '60s they showed the films *The World of Susie Wong* and *Flower Drum Song*. This was very unusual because they only showed films made in Asia. The theater was just packed. Those were the first Chinese I saw in Hollywood films.

Through the years, these two films have had ups and downs in terms of acceptance from the Asian community. But when they first came out, we loved them.

In the '70s, identity politics came into play, and those films were criticized for their stereotypes. Now, of course, actress Nancy Kwan (*The World of Susie Wong*) is just totally revered by the Asian American community. She made it possible for all of us to work in the industry.

Alan Berube just recently passed away. He was someone who really helped me understand this question of gay sensibility. In the early '90s, he was teaching Queer History at UC Santa Cruz. I wanted to do a film based on his book, *Coming Out Under Fire*, and I wasn't sure he knew who I was. When we met, he said, "Of course I know who you are. I use *Forbidden City* in my queer history class."

I didn't understand. It is a film about Chinese American nightclubs in the 1940s! I didn't think it was an LGBT film. He said, "That's just the queerest film around. It doesn't talk about being gay or being queer, but it is so gay. You just pick up on it from the people, the way they acted, the stories they were telling."

That was the first time I thought about what exactly is a gay film, in terms of my work. I knew that certain people in *Forbidden City* were gay, but in fact they always asked me to turn off the tape recorder when that topic came up. I always acknowledged and honored their requests. But Alan picked up on it anyway!

It's interesting, the gay community's perception about what gay is and gay isn't. Another major LGBT publication requested a screener of *Hollywood Chinese*, and when we followed up, they asked, "What compelling reason can you give me to cover this film?" I was like - what? I asked them: What makes a gay film? Do you want pretty boys half naked with butts hanging out? If that is what you want, this ain't it. And it's so not right, because it narrowly defines who we are as a people.

So, as a filmmaker, do you feel like your work in general is inspired by your interest in identity?

When I did *Licensed To Kill*, I did that film particularly because I was a gay bash victim. I didn't need to explore my own feeling about being gay bashed, but I wanted to understand why gay bashing happened at all. I guess my personal background and experiences fuel my desire to understand people and our collective stories. I think with *Hollywood Chinese*, I picked it because I love film.

*I loved meeting Miriam Wong in Hollywood Chinese - what an incredibly important revelation! An Oakland-based Chinese American woman filmmaker who was making films in 1916! Of course, I loved hearing Ang Lee talk about *Brokeback Mountain*, and looking at Anna May Wong and even seeing those campy *Fu Man Chu* and *Charlie Chan* films. But Miriam Wong's story made the film for me. I want to know more. I now know that *The Curse of Quon Gwon* is the earliest example of Chinese American filmmaking to exist today and one of the few American silent feature films made by a woman. But I got to ask - what was the relationship between Miriam and Violet?*

I don't know - but there was this one photo where Miriam Wong was in total male drag, and Violet is sitting there very sweetly in total female drag. What was that all about? And as Violet Wong's daughter says in the interview, they just did not do things like that back then, women just did not wear pants.

I left it at that. And that's what I love about film - the audience can just decide on their own. But the proof is in the pudding. Look at the picture, come on! And then I flash forward about 50 years later to a photo of them in the '60s, and they are standing next to each other so happy and holding hands.

And it is such a beautiful picture - worth the price of admission.

Yes, so sweet. I love to make films that allow people to draw on their own experience and draw

on their own needs and desires. Like the scene with Anna May Wong and Marlene Dietrich. There have always been rumors that they were lovers on the set of the Shanghai Express. That scene was so filled with tension! Sparks were flying!

And Joan Chen?

Every girl's dream, right? Or any guy's dream, or anyone's dream...

What about that scene from the Last Emperor?

You mean the lesbian opium scene? I didn't use that, but in Hollywood Chinese, there she is eating orchids. What is that all about? For me, that was more subtle than the opium toe sucking scene, but I thought the orchid scene was more sensual. It was kind of like the foreplay for her lesbian coming out with Maggie Han.

Tell us about The Good Earth and yellow face? When I watched Hollywood Chinese it shocked me. I knew about Al Jolson and blackface but I forgot about Paul Muni in yellowface.

It might seem long ago. But yellowface is a white actor putting on make up to be Chinese or Asian, whether it's through make up or whether it is putting plastic in your eyelids to create "Asian eyes," or whether it's putting on buck-teeth like Mickey Rooney did in Breakfast at Tiffany's.

Today we think it's utterly ridiculous, but Nicholas Cage just did it in a recent film. It was a cameo role; he played Fu Manchu, but he doesn't have to do that. But back to The Good Earth. It is a well crafted film, great photography and the performers, except the film is set in China and the characters are Chinese but the actors are not.

Did you notice that when you were a kid?

Yes, and I think it didn't annoy me, it intrigued me. The lead actors are white and they're playing Asian - what kind of psychological effect does that have on the audience? Does the audience think that Chinese actors are not good enough to star in the film?

How did you choose your characters?

I wanted to tell moving stories. I was covering the industry itself and the economics of the industry and how the artists navigated that in order to work. So I picked people that I felt would represent those stories. Like Joan Chen represented a woman's point of view, and how she came to Hollywood and worked in particular kinds of roles. BD Wong - I knew of his work in M Butterfly and Father of the Bride, and also his work in the Steven Segal films. So I wondered what he would say about Chinese male sexuality in films.

Ang Lee represents so many things. He represents Kung Fu, the notion of crossing over to genres that had nothing to do with ethnicity, but rather with storytelling.

So what's next?

I'm raising my kid. I am a daddy! I have a lot of ideas in my idea file. I really enjoy being a father, and if I could only win the lottery and not worry about the college fund...

So now you're living in Los Angeles in the belly of Hollywood. Has the film industry changed its attitudes towards Chinese?

When I graduated from the American Film Institute, I had a half hour narrative film I made called Lotus about a Chinese family in China with only Chinese characters. It was 1987, and the AFI sent me out to make the rounds with agents and studio executives. They said this is a beautiful film, obviously you know how to handle film actors and you know how to tell a good story, but you made a film about Chinese with only Chinese characters, and you're Chinese. We don't have a place for you.

They would not say that today. That's changed, but it is still all about the bottom line and making money. So today, they would say, we have no projects that you can make that will make money for us. There are less yellowface portrayals today, at least Chinese or Asian actors are playing themselves in film these days, so that has changed. But we still have the stereotypes. When I was growing up there were the triads. Instead of opium-dens, today we have new stereotypes. We have the Connie Chungs, the Korean grocers, the wise martial arts teachers.

But look at Juno. It's a big hit, right? It is making beaucoup bucks, especially in the Midwest. Teenagers love that film. The only substantial non-white character with any substantial speaking role is a bigoted Asian American Christian girl with an accent. It perpetuates the notion that Asians are foreigners, they don't belong, they're not one of us. Maybe one day that will change.

