

Arthur Dong documentary: 'Hollywood Chinese'

G. Allen Johnson

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At first glance, the Sun Sing Center looks like any number of shops along Grant Avenue in Chinatown. There are trinkets for tourists, T-shirts and Hong Kong videos.

Walking into the store through a long walkway, you sense that it is not a typical work space. For one thing, it is cavernous; for another, there are the unmistakable remains of a proscenium arch, which frames what could have been a stage.

You are now back in Chinatown's past. The Sun Sing Center used to be the Sun Sing Theater, and, before that, the Mandarin Theater. It was a Chinese opera house - used as a set by Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth during the filming of "The Lady From Shanghai" - then a movie theater. The projection booth is still there, and the balcony is stacked with boxes.

This is just one of the Chinatown theaters that colored the dreams of filmmaker Arthur Dong, who took a Chronicle reporter and photographer on a tour of Chinatown's film past before settling in for lunch at a favorite noodle shop.

The son of a waiter and a seamstress - his mother, now in her 80s, still lives in his childhood home - Dong spent his childhood weekends watching "Flower Drum Song" at the Grandview Theater on Jackson Street, where a Buddhist shop now operates under the still-existing marquee, or taking in the latest Ivy Ling Po or Li Li Hua movie at the Bella Union ("A little more special, because you went to see a Mandarin film with more expensive production values," Dong said) on Kearny, now an optometrist shop. He could also be seen sneaking into the World Theater on Broadway and the Great Star on Jackson.

Now 53, Dong has paid homage to his childhood with his heartfelt documentary "Hollywood Chinese," about the history of Chinese Americans in the movies. It is packed with film clips and revealing interviews with actors such as Nancy Kwan, Joan Chen and B.D. Wong; directors such as Ang Lee and Wayne Wang; and white performers who portrayed Asians, including - Luise Rainer, who won an Oscar for playing a Chinese peasant in 1937's "The Good Earth," and Christopher Lee, who portrayed Fu Manchu in a series of films in the 1960s.

"Everybody loves movies," said Dong, whose other films include "Forbidden City, U.S.A.," about Chinatown nightclubs, and "Licensed to Kill," about anti-gay hate crimes. "I made this film for film lovers.

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That's first and foremost. On a political level, it's about representation. It's about seeing each other as human beings."

It turns out that the earliest known Asian American feature film was made in the East Bay, by Oakland's Marion Wong, who directed her sister Violet Wong in "The Curse of the Quon Gwon" in 1916. Sessue Hayakawa was a star in the silent era and James B. Leong was a filmmaker; Anna May Wong bridged the silent and sound eras and Keye Luke was Charlie Chan's "No. 1 son."

In Chinatown, films were being made as well as shown. Dong showed us the alley where producer Joseph Sunn Jue, who built the Grandview, made films in an adjacent studio and on the streets.

For Dong, this could have been Asian American cinema's greatest triumph; instead, it is its greatest tragedy. When the Grandview was sold to a new owner, he reportedly threw out all of the musty Jue films in the attic. Dong is doggedly pursuing rumored stray prints of those films that might be in various archives around the world.

A happier tale begins with the ascension of Kwan as the first Asian American star since Wong - but Kwan gets the lead not in B pictures - as Wong did - but in A pictures. In "The World of Suzie Wong," she starred opposite William Holden. In "Flower Drum Song," an adaptation of San Franciscan C.Y. Lee's novel and Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical, she headlined the first all-Asian cast of a Hollywood movie.

Though Kwan's films have come under fire for their stereotyping, Chinese Americans in Chinatown appreciated that Asians were finally being taken seriously in Hollywood.

"I just remember the theaters being packed," Dong said. "They were usually full anyway, because that's what we did during the weekends, but when 'Flower Drum Song' and 'World of Suzie Wong' played, they were events, and it was packed - packed with Chinese folks and Chinese Americans who came to see these Hollywood films about Chinese people."

Stephen Gong, executive director of the Center for Asian American Media in San Francisco, says in Dong's film: "Nancy Kwan singing 'I Enjoy Being a Girl' really made me want to grow up."

Kwan's career as a leading lady degenerated into grindhouse features such as "Wonder Women," but she paved the way for Chen, Lucy Liu and other actresses.

Dong's Hollywood heroes were Kwan, of course, but also cinematographer James Wong Howe, a Chinese American who worked from the silent era through "Funny Lady" in 1975, nominated for nine Academy Awards and winning for "The Rose Tattoo" and "Hud."

An unusual kid, Dong started examining cinematography credits at age 10.

"I was a total film geek," Dong said. "At these showings, what they would give are one-sheet programs, which would have a couple of pictures from the film, a synopsis and a cast list, and my sister and I would collect them. We used to compete to see who saw the most films every year. At the end of the year, we'd

stack 'em up, and we'd have our favorite stars. We'd say, 'How many films of this actor did you see?' "

That passion for film is evident in "Hollywood Chinese." Realizing that his subjects are more than industry professionals, but were once film geeks like himself, he begins his film with each interviewee expounding on why he or she loves movies.

"Think of the huge size of it," actress Tsai Chin says of the projected image. "This image into you - you cannot help but be affected by it."

Dong said that's because he didn't want his film to be agenda driven; he wanted it to appreciate the artists depicted.

"It's really about them," Dong said. "This is a film about them. Through their stories, we learn about history, and through what they went through, what happened in Hollywood."

HOLLYWOOD CHINESE (not rated) opens April 11 at Bay Area theaters.

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