Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts

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Mandarins in Hollywood
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My mother has always pointed to my crop of stubborn, black hair as being something permanent as the Great Wall of China. All together—mother, a $1.59 drug store hairbrush, and even myself had settled long ago, with fine Chinese courtesy and amenity, the fact that I had a crop of stubborn, black hair. I was quite proud of it.

Even as dynasties and Great Walls crumble, so I found one day, with mingled joy and sorrow, that the luxurious matting of crowning glory of which I had been so proud had to be shaven. Shaven bare as a locust-plagued rice field.

Speaking of locust-plagued rice fields—but then, that's another part of this tale of my loss of equilibrium, loss of my jet-black hair, my discovery that Hollywood is NOT Hollywood without its Chinamen who are laundrmen disguised as movie actors. And also the fact, ironically enough to me as a Chinese, that the first movie studio built in Southern California was next door to a Chinese laundry.

Zzzzzzzz—the buzz of the studio barber's cutter shaved my hair cleanly and completely. I sat gingerly in the chair, like a bridegroom brooding over the fatal step. Suddenly the old bait-tune joined the ZZZZ:Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz buzz ... “ching-chong-chinaman, sitting on a nail ... along came a white man and chop off his tail, ...” The tune struck me as being very funny. Because this time the Chinaman had to be paid for having his tail fastened on. And very handsomely too, at the exchequer of seven-fifty a day. Couple of more fast ZZzz’s and I was initiated as another movie actor, a young farmer in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's production of The Good Earth (1937).

This was my bare-headed entry within the sacred portals of Movieland, the so-called sacred portals for which thousands would pay anything to pass. I paid with a crop of fine black hair.

What did I get in return? Strange truths more incredible than some newsreel stuff that is shot: confirmation that the Hollywood Chinese is a paradox, an oriental mosaic in the cinematic pattern created through no effort of its own, and yet a most vital part of the whole design; that in this land of movies and madness, cuties and quixotism, your chop-suey waiter of today may perform tomorrow on the screen as your favorite warlord; that an Irishman controls the Chinese actor's market; that the only Chinese temple I ran
across in Hollywood was Shirley Temple, when she spoke Mandarin in the picture "Stowaway" (1936); that where else and how else would I have a chance to play billiards with Gary Cooper?

This was Hollywood, I found out, the land where the best known Chinese happens to be a Swedish gentleman by the name of Mr. Warner Oland. This was Hollywood, the land of the 100% pure, unadulterated bona fide, Homo Sapiens of Mongolian stock who had to be taught how to tie a Chinese queue by an American makeup man. Do you blame me, then, for even expecting to see Harpo Marx play the immortal part of O-lan in "The Good Earth?"

And so, as I trudged along to M-G-M's wardrobe department, I expected to get some Robert Ripley one-tos on the chin—believe some things whether I wanted to or not—and high adventure in Hollywood. I even secretly hoped that Ted Healy would get some Chinese stooges.

Mental left jab number one crossed me up as soon as I reached the wardrobe department. Hundreds of ragged, peasant-blue Chinese coolie and farmer robes hung on the wardrobe walls. Torn, worn coats and trousers with cavernous holes and mud. Filthy-looking rags. After being brought up on a bath-a-day regime, I couldn't quite stomach the idea of having to wear all this next to my skin.

The wardrobe girl asked my coat size.

"Thirty-six, please," I answered absently, as my eye checked off the varying blackness of dirt and mud on each costume on the racks. She evidently noticed my meticulous reluctance, as I looked at the terribly ragged coat and trousers given me.

"It's all right, bright boy," she smiled, "all this stuff is sterilized... a'matter, new at the game?"

Sterilized. So this was stark movie realism, with health certification on dirty farmer's clothing guaranteed by Hollywood's death-to-germs brigades. These hundreds of costumes after a hot, sweaty, dirty day at the studios—sterilized, and ready the next day. One almost expects them to be wrapped in cellophane.

New at the game? I was, and bewildered, in jumping fresh from a sedate college atmosphere to the crazy, whirling satellite called Hollywood. I certainly didn't learn in my "industrial trends" classes that dirt and filth-ridden costumes are sterilized every night. College geography didn't mention that Movieland is the ONLY place in the whole wide world where the Chinese population, men, women, and children, know what it means when the assistant director yells, "Quiet!" College geography gave no indication that the best replica of a Shanghai Bund is the result of skilled carpentry right inside the studio; that the best Tibetan scenes, outside of Tibet, such as in "Lost Horizon" (1937), are at the edge of the Mojave desert; that the most fertile Yangtze valley farm is located in a Los Angeles valley called Chatsworth.

After getting my wardrobe number punched on the "work check," I proceeded to the makeup department. We get a different "work check" from Central Casting every time. For you see, it's not EVERY day that your children of the glamour world work, or shall we say act? And so it's not every day either; that they eat.

The check is one's open sesame. I get it at the casting office. It has my name; the costume I am to get—whether for the day I am to be a coolie, farmer, mandarin, vendor, or soldier. And most important, to me and to everybody else, the stipulation of the day's work—five dollars, seven-fifty, or ten
dollars. It seems the cleaner the role the higher the paycheck.

Of course, for the farmer's roles in the *The Good Earth* for which I had to sacrifice my well-admired crop of hair, there were special agreements and reimbursements. I was guaranteed three months' work. Every morning to me was as exciting as an Irish Sweepstakes drawing. As soon as I get the precious work ticket, I know whether or not it affords that new book, tie, or flowers to the girl.

Even in the makeup department, my ticket is checked. All wigs are accounted for. And here, for the first, but not the last time in my life, I wore a queue. Artificial one, fastened and kept secure with an adhesive, but a queue nevertheless. The year was 1936, the scene a Hollywood studio, twenty-five years after the banishment of the old Manchu regime in China, and with it, the banishment of queue—and a bunch of young American Chinese, all of whom have never been to China, learning how to braid pigtaile, just like their fathers did years and years ago.

Of course, we have our banal chatter as the makeup men adjust our pigtaile. Just like a bunch of mannequins with nervous tongues. Well, Hollywood's higher-ups may have its Jack Oakies, vitriolic Dorothy Parkers, etcetera, who are noted for their bons mots. Hollywood's Chinese movie colony also have their ideas of what is called a "snappy comeback."

On that very first day, when the makeup men were dawdling over the pigtaile, out of the clear I heard some Oriental Jack Benny cut with:

"Aw, go mind your own P's and Queues."

But then, maybe he didn't mean it that way at all. Just like some extras weren't meant to be sturdy Chinese farmers, after hard nights of bar life—and had to be tanned with studio make-up and grease paint to look like the real McCoy.

Check, costume, wig, makeup—this was the regular routine, when on the lucky days we worked. I say lucky, because once, for instance, we waited eight (eight, count them) days on an outdoor shot to be taken. Got up every morning at 5:30, dashed to the studio, and then coldly informed by the weatherman that "Sorry, that particular cloud effect for background did not appear." At least, we got breakfast and carfare money.

And so, on to the set assigned for the day—with heads high for art and hearts light for the seven and a half shekels.

Again, on the eventful and equilibrium-upsetting first day, another dose of irony. Old Tom Gubbins, the Irishman who controls the Chinese actors' market, and who speaks Cantonese as well, if not better, than the most hardened Grant Avenue chop-suey cook, is the Chinese headman on the movie sets. He is sometimes technical director, and all the time the Chinese "straw-boss."

He is already a living legend. Born in China, and adventured to the States when a young man. Like many other Hollywood figures, he rose meteorically with the industry. From studio prop boy, he is now the "unofficial mayor of Chinatown." Gubbins owns a curio shop, supplies most of the Oriental props to movie sets, and is the contact man for Chinese players to all the major film factories. He thinks Chinese, talks Chinese, eats Chinese food all the time, and possesses one of the most effective and picturesque string of Celestial phrases which I have ever run across.

Gubbins' too-picturesque and lashing command of the Chinese tongue comes in good use throughout the regular routine of the studio play. We Chi
Chinese extras are no different than the American player. It's a routine of sitting around most of the time—and hoping the stars, directors, cameramen, and technical workers don't coordinate. Because the longer they stall the longer we work. And in sitting around, we have plenty of time to talk; to queen the prettiest girls on the set; to play skadunk, which is a short and expensive studio version of poker; and to wonder what it is all about.

In the midst of wondering what it is all about, we would be awakened by Gubbins' staccato Chinese commands. Or that of his assistants. It always makes me laugh. Imagine, hiring a bunch of Chinese interpreters to relay the director's English instructions. And every son of old Mother China speaks English. That's Hollywood.

But a studio lunch is not Hollywood. No sir, it's old China come alive. We jostle and push in line for the studio lunch when on location. I missed my first midday meal by being too polite in line. It never happened again.

Anyway, eating lunch, whether in the studio restaurant or on location, is just a prelude to the big show. After that is when the real eating comes. The more women working that day, the bigger the feast. We always make a rough count in the morning, and could figure on noonday Chinese delicacies of all sort.

Probably years ago some Mrs. Wong brought slices of rare Chinese roast duck to eat at the studio during the lunch hour. Many Chinese still eat nothing but Chinese food, you know. And a Mrs. Lee or Mrs. Sing, as women of all nationalities, would bring something better than Mrs. Wong's to eat and offer. And so this fine old Chinese custom is firmly established in the studios. We young extras love it.

It's a regular riot, like a colossal festive day in a Chinese village. To the ladies, studio work is pin money, and a fine social occasion to outdo the other in culinary skill and magnanimity. And relaxed, sitting around the sets, which are real enough, one actually lives and breathes China, thousands of miles across the ocean. We are all in costumes, of course. Fine ladies, stiff in rich brocades; pretty young girls, some in peasants' costumes, some in peacock-hued gowns, all passing around banana-flavored sweets, preserved gingers, spiced olives and prunes, cured duck liver, and other delicacies to their favorite young swains.

My favorite was a sweet old matriarch, who had several daughters and grandchildren acting on the set. She was a Mrs. Leong, whom I discovered, through some connivance of genealogy, to be a distant cousin of mine. Here I was, a nice young man away from home—and you know the strong family ties of the Chinese. The good lady plied us, for the duration of Good Earth, when she worked, with roast duck, pork, chicken, and nice sweetmeats every noon. It was a gastronomical holiday for me.

Every noon hour was a holiday for everybody. Actually, mothers find this a chance, with the whole Los Angeles Chinatown colony moved to the sets on a big scene, to point out subtly the culinary and personable qualities of their daughters. Three or four Cantonese dialects fluidly fill the air with banal, joyful, and happy Chinese talk and laughter. The cackling old men, smoking on willow pipes, would secretly glow at the generous spreads of good food, and openly grumble "Huh, what food WE had when we were young men in the old country."

It was natural that the old folks reminisce, speaking of old times, friends, and things in faraway China. Somehow, these synthetic, plaster and frame
movie sets did something to them. Hollywood created a nostalgic mood for them.

I, and all the other young ones listen eagerly, absorbing of the China which we have not yet seen. Everyone is transplanted, through the animated magic carpet of “back home” food and talk, to the land of his love. Soundly and smack with realism, I was transplanted one day to a China of which I had never dreamed. It happened the first day on location.

The scene was a carefully copied version of a Chinese rice field. The replica of the now-famous farm for The Good Earth at Chatsworth had cost M-G-M thousands of dollars. It was authentic. Too authentic. Long, dark rows of fertile, hand-tilled soil; straw-thatched huts of the peasant farmers in the background. It was a most incongruous scene—there were sound apparatus, movie cameras on cranes, to follow the “shots.” We had on coarse peasants’ wear, with artificial queues coiled on our heads. The directors, sound and technical men, all wore the sartorial flash of Hollywood. The old, the new.

I was barefooted and hoeing a thin row of rice shoots. I felt the warmth of the soil. I was in China. And back of me, a camera followed my every action.

Twenty other young brown bodies gleamed in the California sun, tilling the rice fields. Glistening, actually working and covered with more sweat then clothing. Here we were, twenty young American-born Chinese, trying to simulate, to reenact, for the movies, a scene which was part of the national fiber of our forefathers. My mind was far from the usual prosaic things. Was this a dream, a fantasy, realism? Was this China or Hollywood?

“This, but for the grace of God,” I thought, “I might actually be doing.” Confucius made the classic allusion when he said that a picture is worth a thousand words. One picture was certainly worth more than that to me—fun, money, and a first-class, personally-guided Cook’s tour of Movieland, with all the side shows thrown in for good measure. My routine in The Good Earth, with slight variations, was the same in all the other Chinese pictures.

I was lucky to crack the celluloid fortress in 1936, the biggest, and to borrow a Hollywoodian phrase, most “colossal” year for Chinese pictures in the history of the industry. Even a big silent opus, like Richard Barthelmess in Broken Blossoms (1919) was in comparison to a super such as The Good Earth, a subway ride against a cruise in a Dusenberg. I worked into supers, The Good Earth and Lost Horizon, and several class-mouted productions, like Shirley Temple’s Stowaway and Gary Cooper’s The General Died at Dawn (1936). Had a chance to play billiards with the elongated Mr. Cooper between sets in this film. And Mr. Cooper was a very good billiard player.

Half a dozen other film factory products also utilized my slight histrionic abilities. In one year, I worked in ten pictures. And every other permanent Chinese resident of Los Angeles and Hollywood has appeared before the camera.

During the past ten years, there have been about thirty-five productions, major and minor, utilizing Chinese players. Practically the same bit players and extras, at one time or another, have appeared in them all. No wonder the American gag claims that “All Chinese look alike.” They are alike, and the same persons—in the movies, anyway.

All the year in Movieland, in and out of sets in a half dozen studios, I rubbed elbows, well, at least elbow distance, with all the big names and stars that furnish magazine and news material. From Mr. Robert Taylor at M-G-M to Kay Francis at Warner’s. And never once did I run across the two biggest
and most successful Sino stars of Hollywood—Anna May Wong, the actress, and James Wong Howe, the cameraman.

My Hollywood enthusiasm even ran to a little theatre movement. Years of sitting on gallery seats watching legitimates had developed in me a yen for little theatres. I figured that here, in the hotbed of acting, was the natural, the ideal spot. But my idea that a Chinaman will make a more authentic-looking Chinese actor than an Irishman was a flop, in spite of an affirmation from the old Irish trouper, Dudley Diggs.

"Me . . . trying to look like a Chinaman," grimaced Mr. Diggs. "Hmp."

He was playing an important part, "Mr. Wu" in The General Died at Dawn. It was a fat role, but like most fat roles, Occidentals take the Chinese parts, because the average Hollywoodian Chinese would dawdle over scotch-and-sodas, rather than sweat over lines. This was, I imagine, no more of a paradox than the Hollywood Chinese colony itself.

During my whole year in the flicker world, I felt like a Chinese Gulliver, who had accidentally landed in a strange land, one whose inhabitants are so alike and yet so remotely different than myself. They are a people apart, molded of Asiatic clay to resemble the features of the fantastic molder, The Film Industry.