

Reel obsession

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A Kailua woman's quest for a heroine turns up a long-lost film about China and its people amid war with Japan

By Mike Gordon

Every so often, as Raymond Scott grew up in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., his father would bring out a film that was made long before he settled down to raise a family.

The elder Scott would show it on one of those pop-up screens in the living room where his wife, four sons and, occasionally, the neighbors would watch transfixed. His film took them on a sweeping tour of China as the country fought the Japa-nese invasion in the late 1930s — from Hong Kong, the Burma Road, Tibet, on the march with guerrilla fighters and, for the last 20 minutes, to the city of Chongqing, as wave after wave of bombers dropped their loads on civilians below.

Afterward the 16 mm film would go back inside its rusted, metal case.

Not once did Scott's father say anything about how he had smuggled his raw footage out of China, about the hundreds of Japa-nese bombs that fell so close he could hear them whistling through the air or the Academy Award he had won.

It was a story that died with him in 1992.

ROBINLUNG, a 52-year-old filmmaker from Kailua, was looking for inspiration when she stumbled onto the mystery of "Kukan," a groundbreaking documentary missing for more than 60 years.

The 1941 film, made without any Hollywood or government backing, was the first to explore the vastness of China and its people, who were at war with Japan when the film was being made.

From the diversity of cultures to the brutality of the conflict, Americans had never seen anything like "Kukan," which was shot on 16 mm color film.

The financial backing for "Kukan" came from a Chinese-American woman in Hawaii who sold her jewelry to raise money. The man behind the hand-held camera had never used one.

But even with its sometimes shaky, sometimes unfocused images, "Kukan" received the first Academy Award for documentaries. Then, after World War II, it disappeared.

The academy listed it as a lost film.

Everything Lung learned about the film left her more and more obsessed with it, to the point where she had to channel her energy into a documentary, "Finding Kukan." It has become the most powerful story she's ever tried to tell, but it wasn't the one she originally sought out.

When she began four years ago, Lung was looking for a way to connect with her Chinese heritage, something she said she had deliberately kept at arm's length for much of her life.

Growing up in Kailua, Lung didn't want to be Chinese. She wanted to be "a cute, blond haole girl."

"My aspiration growing up was not to go to China or explore my roots," Lung said. "If my grandmother was in a Chinese dress and we had to go somewhere, I was embarrassed. I didn't want to identify with being Chinese."

She changed her mind in 2008 while working on two projects that featured strong women from Hawaii: a

documentary about Washington Place and Queen Liliu-oka-lani that aired on PBS Hawaii and Kimberlee Bassford's film on the late Congresswoman Patsy Mink.

But Lung had a problem.

"There weren't that many high-profile Chinese-American women out there, and I really wanted a Chinese-American woman from Hawaii," she said. "I wanted a larger-than-life character who could carry a documentary."

She was searching for a heroine when fate stepped in.

A friend gave Lung a collection of vintage mystery novels that featured a pair of 1940s-era sleuths. Lung discovered that the author, Juanita Sheridan, had based her characters on people she had met and that she had lived for a time in Hawaii.

One of the protagonists was named Lily Wu.

"She was smart and sexy and sophisticated," Lung said. "I said to myself, 'If I find out who these people were who influenced this character, I might find an interesting person.'"

Sheridan was long gone, having died in 1974 in Guadalajara, Mexico, where she lived with her eighth husband. But at this point Lung was becoming a sleuth in her own right and put faith in the author's pattern of basing her characters on real people. In her novels, whenever Lily Wu was beaten up by criminals, she was treated by a female Chinese doctor on Beretania Street.

When Lung researched Chinese doctors in Hawaii, looking for a connection, she discovered an obstetrician-gynecologist who delivered hundreds of babies during this same period. The woman's sixth-oldest child bore uncanny similarities to Lily Wu: She was college-educated, worldly and lived in New York at the same time Sheridan was there.

Her name was Li Ling-Ai.

"The first novel in the Lily Wu series is about two women from Hawaii who meet up in New York," Lung said. "They latch on to each other and become roommates and solve this crime in New York. They eventually come back to Hawaii and solve three more crimes in Hawaii."

As Lung looked into the doctor's life, she found a family history written by Ling-Ai. It was mostly about her parents, but at the end of the book, Ling-Ai wrote a single paragraph about herself. And in it she revealed she had helped produce a documentary about China called "Kukan."

It was directed by a man Lung had never heard of: Rey Scott.

Lung found little information about the film online and wasn't really interested in what it was about or that it was lost. She was still looking for a heroine — for the woman behind Lily Wu.

She kept learning more about Ling-Ai. She was a Punahou School and University of Hawaii graduate who was active in Hono-lulu theater and was the Far East adviser for the "Ripley's Believe It or Not" cartoon, which highlighted true and bizarre facts. She was a dancer and an author, a colorful, outspoken woman who used a cigarette holder when she smoked. One of Ling-Ai's nephews sent Lung old photographs of his aunt and a transcript from a radio interview with Rey Scott about the film.

Scott's description of Ling-Ai's older sister, who was a doctor in Nanking, changed everything for Lung. As Japanese bombs fell on the city, Ling-Ai's sister had performed amputations without anesthesia in a Red Cross hospital.

Lung began to see this as more than the story of a Chinese-American heroine.

"That's when I realized, 'Oh my gosh, this film is about something amazing,'" she said. "It all started coming to life

for me. I started dreaming about it, about discovering stuff. I started to get obsessed with Ling-Ai."

SLOWLY, with perseverance and a dash of luck, Lung put the pieces together. She read old newspaper stories about Ling-Ai, talked to more relatives and watched a brief interview videotaped in 1993.

She uncovered the story of Scott and Ling-Ai.

Rey was short for Reyn-olds. He was a newsman from St. Louis with short, wavy hair and a goatee. He wound up in Hawaii in the spring of 1937 working for The Hono-lulu Advertiser, Lung said. He took photographs for the paper of women in swimsuits on Waikiki Beach.

The 29-year-old Ling-Ai was learning to fly that summer. In August she told a writer at the Hono-lulu Star-Bulletin that she wanted to pilot a transport plane to help China in its war with Japan. When she met Scott in the Advertiser newsroom for an interview, their conversation turned to China, Lung said.

Ling-Ai told Scott, who was 32 at the time, that he was wasting his time taking "cheesecake" photos on the beach. The real story was in China, but Scott told her he couldn't afford to go. Ling-Ai then offered to finance the trip. She would even sell her jewelry.

When Scott still refused, Ling-Ai called him a coward. She dared him to go.

And with that Scott was on his way to China, Lung said. He would travel through the country four times, did freelance stories for the London Daily Telegraph and Life magazine, and filmed "Kukan" from 1939 to 1940. Scott would cover 10,000 miles.

Lung's obsession with Ling-Ai brought her to this point.

Even though she had steadily interviewed people about Ling-Ai's mother — the obstetrician-gynecologist Lung believed would make a great documentary — every conversation ultimately focused on Ling-Ai. Lung even found friends who said Ling-Ai would often bemoan the fact she did not have a copy of "Kukan."

Lung decided to see whether the film was stored at the National Archives and, to her astonishment, found a 30-minute portion of "Kukan" at the agency's film branch in Maryland that somehow everyone had overlooked.

But the discovery brought an epiphany: Even if all she had was the partial film, Lung knew she had to make a documentary about "Kukan." And that meant she needed permission from Scott's heirs because the director held the copyright. But who were they? And where were they?

After her discovery at the National Archives, Lung went looking for Scott's death records. She hit pay dirt at an online website that catalogs U.S. graves, read an obituary notice filed at a nearby county library and turned to Facebook where she discovered two of his four sons.

One of them, Mark, who lives in Tallahassee, Fla., called Lung in December 2009. No, he didn't have his father's film.

But his brother Raymond, in Georgia, did.

"I couldn't believe it," Lung said. "It was like a dream."

No one had been interested in the film in years.

"It had been sitting in the basement since their father died," Lung said. "No one had asked about it. It was just part of the family lore. And they didn't know what I wanted."

At first the Scotts thought Lung might be a long-lost half sister.

"They knew a Chinese woman was involved in this film, and they didn't know much about her," Lung said. "They knew it was a mysterious part of their father's life."

They knew he had been married twice before he met their mother, Lenore. And they had a scrapbook, too, with articles about the film and a photograph of Ling-Ai.

"They knew all along that she was a part of his past, but their father never told them anything about who she was," Lung said.

EDCARTER, the documentary curator at the Academy of Motion Picture Sciences in Los Angeles, had searched the world for "Kukan" and come up with nothing. One of his jobs is to find the best possible copy of the winning documentaries, but this task seemed impossible.

He looked at film collections in the United States and in China, where film archivists and historians had never heard of "Kukan." He researched Scott's life to see whether the director might have donated the film to his college alma mater, Butler University. He didn't know whether Scott had any surviving family members or even when or where the director had died.

"I tried every trick I could think of," Carter said. "The information on him was just so sketchy."

What he did learn about Scott was intriguing. Because one of Scott's friends was Oscar-winning director John Huston, whose papers are stored with the academy, Carter was able to gain valuable insights.

Scott was a man in search of adventure.

During World War II, Scott and Huston made movies for the U.S. Army Signal Corps, first in the Aleutian Islands and later in Italy. In Huston's 1980 autobiography, "An Open Book," he wrote that Scott had no regard for authority and was "a bloody, no-good rogue and a lovely fellow" and "a drinking man."

Huston said Scott risked his neck every chance he got. When Scott ran out of film during enemy aerial raids, he would pull out his .45-caliber handgun and start firing.

"He would go and do all these crazy missions where no one else would go," Carter said. "All the other combat photographers, they thought he was a man who would take too many risks."

They assumed Scott was taking it all in stride, but it caught up with him by the end of the war, Carter said. Scott wound up in a military psychiatric hospital on Long Island, N.Y., for treatment of what the Army at the time called "shell shock."

"Kukan" was significant socially, politically and journalistically, Carter said.

It was one of two films chosen in 1941 — the other was the British film "Target for Tonight" — that received special recognition in the academy's new documentary category. "Kukan" is the first American feature-length documentary to receive an Oscar.

"There were all these editorials in major American newspapers about this film," Carter said. "This is the first time they had seen what Japan was actually doing in China."

Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt was captivated during a private White House screening, Carter said.

Yet somehow the film still managed to disappear from sight.

"Over time, prints were lost or deteriorated, and Rey's life went in a different direction," Carter said. "There was nobody around to keep the film alive."

In January 2010, after six years of looking, Carter had just about given up.

"And completely out of the blue, the phone rings," he said. "It's Robin on the phone, and she says, 'Do you know anything about the film "Kukan"?' It was like an episode of 'The Twilight Zone.'"

She had found an original copy of the movie with Scott's heirs as well as the 30-minute segment that was at the National Archives.

The heat and humidity in Georgia, where the filmmaker's son, Raymond Scott, lived, had taken a toll on the film stock, so the academy sent it to a restoration lab in Maryland.

"It was about as bad as a film could be," Carter said. "It was shrunken and warped and curled."

The goal of restoration is to treat the film so it is flat enough to run through a digital scanner. Color corrections can also be done.

"We are crossing our fingers that the lab can bring it back to life," Carter said.

When the first documentary Oscar was handed out, the category was still "experimental," so everyone received a plaque instead of the familiar statuette, Carter said. When it became a permanent category a few years later, the academy sent replacement trophies to everyone it could find.

Scott did not receive one.

"The sons of the filmmaker who had this print have asked if they could get a replacement Oscar," Carter said. "The academy's policy is since their father was the one who won and since he passed, the academy is not going to do that."

RAYMOND SCOTT'S father wasn't the sort of man to share details about his life unless pressed, so the story about the bombers stands out.

"He told me one story about the Japa-nese coming to bomb Chongqing," said Scott, 59, a retired software programmer. "He was laying on his back with his camera, and he could see the bomb bay doors opening up and he didn't know where the bombs were going. He thought that was the best damn footage. But when he developed it, it was all out of focus."

It was one of the few times Scott had asked his father what it was like to film "Kukan."

"He didn't tell me if he was afraid in China, but he wouldn't have told me he was afraid," he said.

Scott always enjoyed watching his father's film, even though he was too young to appreciate it.

"We saw it many times but were not smart enough to know what went into it," he said. "Over the years I had heard some of the stories, but the significance of it was not impressed on us. He would just show it. He didn't even boast about the Academy Award. Maybe he just wanted to see the film."

Sometimes his father talked about World War II. He spoke of the soldiers in Naples, Italy, dying all around him as he filmed, of doing his best not to show any fear.

"He said he was afraid of being afraid, so he would do things," Scott said. "He was afraid of being seen as a coward, and he would force himself to do things."

But his life was different after that.

The elder Scott settled down in Fort Lauderdale in 1950 and opened Rey Scott Studios. He specialized in photos of yachts for postcards and portraits of prominent businessmen and celebrities.

"No matter what he was doing, he always had time for me," his son said. "He was always giving. He never said no. He was a great dad."

Rey Scott was 87 when he died in 1992.

Afterward his estate was divided among his sons, and "Kukan" ultimately found its way to a musty basement closet in Raymond Scott's home in Lake Lanier, Ga.

The family had no idea the film was considered lost or that they had the last complete copy. About 15 years ago Raymond Scott asked local film restoration companies whether they could restore it. They couldn't.

"It was hard to find someone who knew what they were doing," he said. "I would put it back in the can and let it go at that."

Lung's work on her documentary has given Scott and his brothers a bit of history that was lost when their father died.

"In a way, Robin is revealing to me things I would like to know and things I did not ask him," Scott said. "We were close. I loved my dad. But maybe it was a generational thing. He didn't volunteer this stuff."

One of the most enduring questions will never be answered with any certainty: Why didn't Rey Scott go to Hollywood after World War II like his friend John Huston?

Raymond Scott believes the answer lies in the things his father filmed.

"I think he saw a lot of things," he said. "That's my guess. He never spoke of it. But if a car would backfire or there would be a loud noise, he would put his fist up. It was involuntary. He had been through something."

LUNGHAS done a lot of work on her documentary, "Finding Kukan," but still needs \$470,000 to finish it. She hopes to complete the film by early 2015.

The documentary has become a personal quest for her — in so many ways it always was. In Ling-Ai she found a heroine beyond her expectations. In Scott she found a daring but forgotten war correspondent. In the film they made — as well as the film Lung hopes to make — she found the passion of conviction.

And in Ling-Ai and Scott the filmmaker found another mystery, one she does not expect to solve.

Lung has read the letters they exchanged, the newspaper quotes and radio interview transcripts, poring over every comment to understand their relationship.

They flirted. They were close. They had an undeniable bond: Together they had triumphed against the odds. And Lung, a romantic at heart, is convinced there was love.

But somehow, much like the film they had made, the two had lost each other. Among the documents the filmmaker received from Ling-Ai's family was one from the late 1970s that indicated Ling-Ai thought Scott had died.

"He wasn't dead but she assumed he was," Lung said. "That's what made me think they lost touch with each other during the war. I don't know if they ever got back in touch with each other."

Ling-Ai died in October 2003 in New York. She was 95.

The mystery of "Kukan" has a footnote. In July 2011, as Lung rummaged through a container of Scott's belongings with his granddaughter during the Hawaii filmmaker's first visit to Georgia, they discovered an old leather address book.

Rey Scott was in his 80s when he used the book to record the names of a handful of friends.

http://www.staradvertiser.com/featurespremium/20121118__Reel_obsession.html

One of the entries, complete with a New York phone number, was Li Ling-Ai.

If you would like to contact Robin Lung, you can email her at nestedegg@hawaii.rr.com or through her website, www.findingkukan.com.

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