

HISTORY



From left: A poster of *Kukan*, which was awarded an honorary Oscar by the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science in 1942.



‘Lost’ movie brings home horror of occupation



A unique documentary about the 1937 invasion of China recently had its first screening in the country, more than 70 years after it alerted the world to the brutality of life under the Japanese and won an Academy Award. **Tan Yingzi** reports from Chongqing.

Zhou Yong will always remember the day he signed an agreement to bring a long-lost 1941 Oscar-winning documentary to China for the first time. “It’s the most complete record of the Japanese invasion of China by a Westerner. Every viewer will be deeply touched and shocked by the struggles ordinary Chinese people faced throughout the war,” he said.

Kukan was officially classified as “lost” for almost 70 years, but a print was unearthed in 2009, and restoration work, which began in 2010, is still not finished. However, a VHS copy of the movie was finally screened in China in July at a seminar held in Chongqing, the country’s wartime capital.

On April 3, Zhou, director of the Research Center for the Anti-Japanese War in the Unoccupied Area in Chongqing, signed an agreement with the family of the late Rey Scott, who shot and narrated the movie, to purchase the rights to screen *Kukan* for use by researchers and in public education.

The documentary, co-produced and sponsored between 1937 and 1940 by Li Ling-Ai, a Chinese-American playwright, is the only color film about life in occupied China. It records the struggles and sacrifices of the Chinese people during the early years of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45).

Kukan means “hard working”, a quality Li believed helped the Chinese people beat the Japanese occupiers. The movie caused a sensation when it premiered in New York on June 23, 1941, and was reviewed by media in the US and across the world, including The New York Times, the Chicago Daily Times, Time magazine and The Daily Telegraph in London. President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw it at a private screening at the White House, and the 85-minute movie — subtitled *The Secret of Unconquerable China* — was awarded an honorary Oscar by the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

After the war, *Kukan* faded from view, and was officially classified as “lost” by the academy. There was no sighting of it until six years ago when Robin Lung, a Chinese-American movie producer, discovered a copy in the basement of a house belonging to one of Scott’s descendants.

In April 2010, the academy started work to restore the 16mm print,



Robin Lung discovered *Kukan*, a long-lost Oscar-winning documentary, when she began researching the life of Li Ling-Ai (pictured), a Chinese-American playwright from Hawaii, for a proposed movie. *Kukan* is described as “the most complete record of the Japanese invasion of China by a Westerner”. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

and Lung is now in the final stages of making *Finding Kukan*, a documentary about the movie’s rediscovery and its creators.

East meets West

In 1937, when Japan invaded China, Li decided she had a mission to bring the plight of Chinese people to the world’s attention. She pawned her grandmother’s jewelry to fund a movie and hired Scott, a photojournalist from the US midwest, to travel around China and document whatever he saw.

Born in Hawaii on May 19, 1908, Li was the sixth of nine children. She grew up in an unconventional household — in the late 1800s, her parents were among the first Chinese physicians to practice Western medicine in Hawaii — and she lived in China in the early 1930s, according to Lung.

“Ling-Ai was the epitome of East meets West. She was given a classic Western education at the prestig-

ious Punahou School (also US President Barack Obama’s alma mater) while learning Chinese language, dance and music from Chinese Imperial Court scholars at Mun Lun,” Lung wrote on a website she set up to promote *Kukan*.

Scott made four hazardous trips to China between 1937 and 1940, traveling extensively — from Shanghai and Nanjing to the southern parts of the provinces of Yunnan and Guangdong, plus the Gobi Desert and Chongqing — and using a 16mm motion picture camera and the most advanced color film to capture ordinary lives and the battle against the Japanese.

“Legend says 300 steps lead up to Chongqing, so I counted them. It’s 340 steps,” Scott says in the narration, describing how he excitedly rode a horse up the steps of Chaotianmen Pier in Chongqing.

The final 20 minutes of *Kukan* show a Japanese air raid on the defenseless city on Aug 19 and 20,

1940, and many critics have hailed the segment as the most impressive part of the documentary. Scott recorded the lives of the local people during the two-day barrage, showing how they tried to hide from the bombardment. He also captured footage of the bombed-out downtown from the roof of the US embassy on the other side of the Yangtze River.

Reviewing *Kukan* in The New York Times on its release, movie critic Bosley Crowther described the closing sequence as “one of the most awesome bits of motion picture yet seen in this day of frightful news events ... somehow this wanton violence appears even more horrible than the scenes we have witnessed of London’s destruction”.

The Academy Award came in the form of a certificate, rather than a statue. Scott was commended “for his extraordinary achievement in producing *Kukan*, the film record of China’s struggle, including photog-

raphy with a 16-mm camera under the most difficult and dangerous conditions”. Although she was co-producer and sponsor, Li was listed as “technical advisor” in the film’s credits.

‘An epic film’

Zhou, who is also professor of modern Chinese history at the Southwest University in Chongqing, called *Kukan* “an epic film” about China’s resistance to the Japanese occupation, and said it provides new evidence of Japan’s aerial bombing campaign and the unprovoked killing of civilians.

“It is the only award-winning film that tells the story of China’s fight against Japan’s invasion,” he said.

“At the time, the film alerted the US government and its people to Japan’s wartime atrocities, the Chinese people’s huge sacrifice and the country’s important role during the war. In the end, the two countries became allies to fight Japan.”

According to Lung, when *Kukan* premiered in June 1941, Washington was still maintaining a policy of neutrality, but the film clearly depicted the brutality of the Japanese military machine and became a rallying point for those eager to sway public opinion toward US engagement in WWII.

Henry Luce, a US publishing magnate who owned Time, held a private screening for his employees, and the film was also used as a fund-raising tool by a number of relief organizations. However, despite the movie playing in theaters across the US, it was never screened in China.

After the war, few Western historians focused on China’s eight-year battle, and the country’s resistance was marginalized in histories of the global conflict, according to Zhou.

“The film will help historians to recognize China’s role in the war, and help China and the United States to cherish their common past and share the responsibility of safeguarding the post-war world order,” he added.

In 2013, Rana Mitter, professor of modern Chinese history and politics at the University of Oxford in England, published *China’s War With Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival*, in which he argued that China’s crucial role in WWII has been airbrushed from history. The US edition of the book is called *Forgotten Ally*.

Mitter, who viewed *Kukan* during a visit to Chongqing, said he hadn’t heard of the movie until his trip, but he was deeply impressed by the detailed record of life during wartime.

“I didn’t previously know about *Kukan*. However, it’s a goldmine — a really valuable perspective on China’s wartime capital,” the British historian said. “The fact that it’s in color gives real immediacy to the war. It’s horrifying to see the bombing raids over Chongqing, but it’s very heartening to see the scenes of children in school and people trading in the streets, carrying on with their lives despite the terrible circumstances of the conflict.”

Li Danke, professor of history at Fairfield University in the US, described *Kukan* as “an encyclopedia” of the wartime history of Chongqing, China’s many ethnic groups and the Chinese diaspora.

“Overseas Chinese, such as Li Ling-Ai, made great contributions to China and America during the war. The rediscovery of *Kukan* will help to enhance the status and influence of Chinese-Americans in American society,” she said.

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Research results in lucky discovery for Sino-American filmmaker

By **TAN YINGZI** in Chongqing

Robin Lung discovered the long-lost movie *Kukan* in 2009, when she began researching the life of Li Ling-Ai for a documentary.

Lung, a fourth-generation Chinese-American from Hawaii, is a graduate of Stanford University and Hunter College in New York, and has made two documentaries about strong females from the island state — Liliuokalani, Hawaii’s last queen, and Patsy Mink, a Japanese-American congresswoman during the 1970s.

For her third feature, Lung planned to make a documentary about Li, another strong woman from Hawaii, and one who shared her Sino-US background.

Lung first learned about Li when

she read a memoir the late filmmaker had written about her physician parents, who left China for Hawaii in the late 1800s.

“The biography of Li Ling-Ai that was on the jacket flap of the memoir intrigued me. This woman obviously had a very colorful and accomplished life, yet I had never heard of her before. What really intrigued me was that she claimed to be the co-producer of a film called *Kukan*. I had never heard of any female Chinese film producers who lived in the 1930s,” Lung wrote in an e-mail exchange with China Daily.

However, she was unable to unearth much information about Li or the documentary, so she started out on a journey to find the missing movie.

She discovered a 35-minute ver-

“*Kukan* is an inspirational example of a brave Chinese woman who dared to be a cultural producer and create positive change in the world.”

Robin Lung, Chinese-American movie producer

sion of the movie — 50 minutes shorter than the full cut — at the National Archives of the United States in Washington, and then set about searching for descendants of Rey Scott, the cameraman who shot the movie, to collect their stories about the documentary.

Lung finally found one of Scott’s sons, and they discovered a com-

plete 85-minute copy of *Kukan* in the basement of his house.

With the help of historian Zhou Yong, director of the Research Center for the Anti-Japanese War in the Unoccupied Area in Chongqing, the film had its first screening in China at a seminar in the city in July and attracted huge interest.

Now Lung is working on *Finding*

Kukan, a documentary that will tell the story of the film and its creators, Li and Scott.

“During the late 1930s, when Li Ling-Ai first conceived of the project, prejudicial laws against Chinese were still in effect in the US. So *Kukan* is an inspirational example of a brave Chinese woman who dared to be a cultural producer and create positive change in the world, even though she faced many obstacles,” she said.

Scott’s granddaughter, visual artist Michelle Scott, said the family was largely unaware of *Kukan* until Lung made contact.

“The (movie) was passed among the four brothers (Rey’s sons) after he passed away, and finally ended up in storage at my father’s house. Rey

was so humble, and he never made a big deal of his accomplishments to his family (at least, that’s what my father told me), and I think for that reason it just sat with the piles of his other photos for a while and no one gave it much thought,” she said.

Lung’s new documentary is now in post-production and is expected to be finished next year. She plans to screen it at theaters across the US, in China and at major international film festivals. She also plans to release it on video-on-demand platforms, such as Netflix and Youku, the Chinese equivalent of YouTube.

“If *Finding Kukan* has even one-hundredth of the impact that the original film had (and is still having), all the hard work will have been worth it,” she said.