

# j.b. spins

Jazz, film, and improvised culture.

## about me

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J.B. (Joe Bendel) works in the book publishing industry, and also teaches jazz survey courses at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. He has written jazz articles for publications which would be appalled by his political affiliation. He also coordinated instrument donations for displaced musicians on a volunteer basis for the Jazz Foundation of America during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Send e-mail to: [jb.feedback "at" yahoo "dot" com](mailto:jb.feedback@yaho.com).

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**monday, november 14, 2016**

## DOC NYC '16: Finding Kukan

It is arguably the most historically significant lost American film. It was one of the first documentaries recognized by the Academy Awards (via a special citation) and it provided a first-hand record of the Japanese bombing of Chongqing from the fire-engulfed streets. Yet there are no screenable and preservable prints currently known to be in existence. Fellow Hawaiian filmmaker Robin Lung illuminates the content of the missing film and the role played in its production by the glamorous and mysterious Li Ling-ai in *Finding Kukan* (trailer [here](#)), which screens during [DOC NYC 2016](#).



Frustrated by the lack of media attention devoted to the Japanese aggression in China and concerned for the safety of her beloved nurse sister, Chinese American Li understood the way to reach American hearts and minds was through cinema. Fortunately, there happened to be an adventurous photo-journalist in Honolulu by the name of Rey Scott. With a little goading, Li convinced him to capture conditions throughout China, including the war-era capitol Chongqing for a feature documentary she conceived.

It seems Scott later spliced in footage of Li he shot in the U.S. before leaving for China, but like so many aspects of *Kukan*, the question remains murky. However, Li clearly assumed the financing and publicity responsibilities, even though she was only credited as an advisor. Lung persuasively argues Li did not get the credit or recognition she deserved for *Kukan* (which incidentally roughly means "bitter struggle"). However, she takes nothing away from Scott, who very definitely risked his life shooting the film. In fact, Scott emerges as a sympathetic and somewhat tragic figure, due to struggles with post-

traumatic stress after serving as a military cameraman in several theaters of combat.

While there are certainly issues of appropriation in *Finding Kukan*, it is refreshing that both the Scott and Li families appreciate the contributions of each filmmaker. If there is a villain in the film's mysterious disappearance it is probably the bankrupt distributor or Hollywood's general short-sightedness. Some talking heads speculate 1950s anti-Communism led to the film's devaluation, but this seems unlikely given *Kukan's* pro-Nationalist perspective. It would also be colossally and cosmically unfair that *Kukan* would be discarded, when the deliberate and overt white-wash of Stalinism, *Mission to Moscow* (in which the victims of the Moscow Show Trials had it coming) still survives in all its shame to this day.



Li's story is fascinating and interview footage of her recorded in the mid-1990s, when she too was in her mid-90s, proves she was something else entirely. Sharp as a whip, she could break-up the film crew with her acerbic asides (so do not leave

while the closing credits roll). She could turn on the charm and generate press, so it is rather baffling that she was nearly forgotten until *Finding Kukan* just started making the festival rounds.

*Finding Kukan* makes you want to see *Kukan*, which is rather the point, so let's hope a salvageable print turns up in a vault somewhere. It also inspires respect and affection for its forceful protagonist. Time spent with her is a pleasure. Very highly recommended, *Finding Kukan* screens this Tuesday (11/15) and Wednesday (11/16), as part of DOC NYC 2016.

Labels: [DOC NYC '16](#), [Documentary](#), [Hawaiian Cinema](#), [Li Ling-Ai](#)

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