

Seattle Screen Scene

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SIFF 2017: *Finding Kukan* (Robin Lung, 2016)

MAY 24, 2017 ~ MELISSA TAMMINGA



Finding Kukan, a feature film debut from Robin Lung, is a documentary that tells the story of one of the first documentaries to win an Academy Award, *Kukan: The Battle Cry of China* (1941). Positioned in China and operating from a Chinese perspective, a perspective unknown to most white Americans at the time, *Kukan* aimed at documenting the Chinese experience of World War II and was noted on its initial release for its stunning ground level footage of the devastating bombing of Chungking (now Chongqing). Photojournalist Rey Scott received the Oscar for the film - "For his extraordinary achievement in producing *Kukan*, the film record of China's struggle, including its photography with a 16mm camera under the most difficult and dangerous conditions (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121453/awards>)" – but Lung, as she tells us in her documentary, discovered another person central to the creation of *Kukan*, a person who had gone essentially overlooked: a Chinese-American woman named Li Ling-Ai.

Li Ling-Ai is credited only as “technical advisor” to *Kukan*, but, as Lung discovers from a 1993 TV interview, Li Ling-Ai seemed to regard the film as her own, a story she herself, not Rey Scott, needed to tell: “I wanted to tell the story of China, the battle cry of the people of China, heroic under suffering.” It’s a curious way to speak about a film for which one is only “technical advisor.” Was she, in fact, more than the technical advisor?

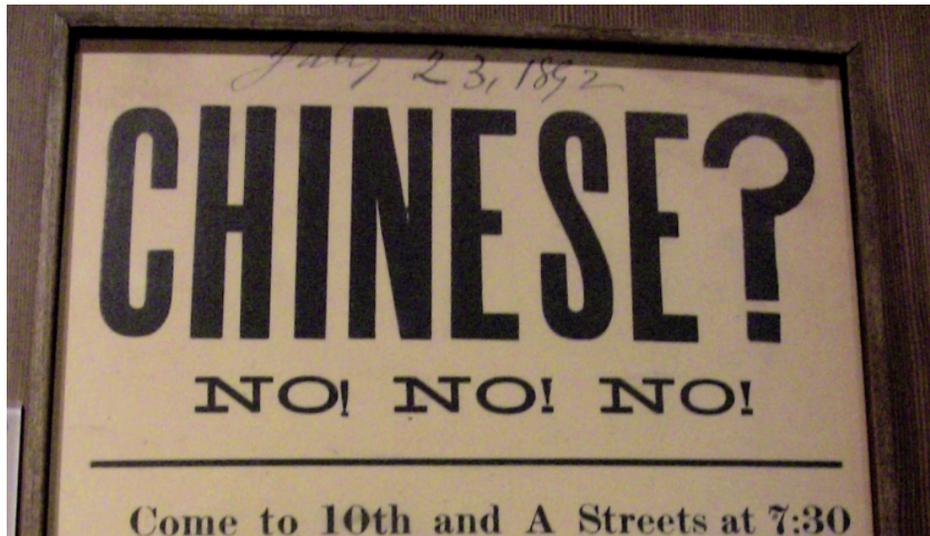
For Lung, the mystery of Li Ling-Ai’s involvement demanded solving, and it set her on what would be a seven year journey. The content of *Kukan*, Lung quickly found, too, promised to be, in itself, extraordinary, and its print history made the content all the more tantalizing, for, as documentary curator Ed Carter notes, it is the only academy award winning documentary without an extant print. Consequently, Lung’s film and the search her film documents is guided by two questions: 1) who is Li Ling-Ai and why is she so little known, and 2) is there, in fact, some surviving print of *Kukan* yet to be discovered that might be restored and shown to the world?

With these key questions at play, themes of loss, erasure, and survival, thread their way through the film, and Lung’s search is permeated by a sense of disappearing history, both cinematic history and personal history. At the outset, Lung realized, *Kukan* itself may be lost to time forever: if a print survived, even if it could be found, perhaps buried and forgotten in someone’s storage, age and air may make such a print unsalvageable. Further, Li Ling-Ai herself died in 2003, and those who knew her personally are also dead or elderly; those surviving friends and family would need to reach back into fuzzy memory to try to grasp at the things Li Ling-Ai said and did.



Lung’s journey back into the history of *Kukan* and of Li Ling-Ai also invites questions of racism and sexism relative to both American culture and in Hollywood. If *Kukan* was indeed in some essential sense, Li Ling-Ai’s project, we must ask how much both racism and sexism had to do with that dismissive “technical advisor” tag. If it’s difficult for women and minorities even today in Hollywood to make and tell their stories, the 1930’s and 40’s were, certainly, far worse. Prior to the 1930’s, many women worked behind the camera, but, as the Library of Congress [entry on “Women Behind the Camera \(https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awmi10/studio_camera.html\)”](https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awmi10/studio_camera.html) notes, during the studio era “positions in the film industry became specialized and codified, unions were formed, creative decisions were made by production heads, and the women who had [previously] flourished behind the camera were shut out of positions of power and prestige . . . the ranks of women directors and producers were decimated.” As a woman, Li Ling-Ai would have had very little power in the industry. Additionally, of course, she was a Chinese-American. The Chinese Exclusion Act, that blatantly racist immigration law,

was still in effect until 1943, and, as further indication of overt systemic racism, an interracial marriage ban was in place in California until 1948. For Li Ling-Ai then, to publicly helm a film would have been improbable if not impossible.



Lung's film ultimately provides both valuable historical and cultural context as well as answers to her guiding questions, and, in another layer of complexity, it represents an often frustrating, personal, filmmaker's quest. Lung positions herself in her documentary as the searcher, rather than removing herself from the frame, and she invites us along with her as a part of her journey towards joyous discoveries and provoking dead ends. The result is a film that is as warmly personal as it is engaging in its content. Lung does include some talking head interviews, but, more often, her interviews are framed as conversations to which we might listen in.

Structurally, the film does not always follow a clear pattern, and certain story paths are introduced and abandoned, perhaps an effect of Lung's seven year long project. At some level, too, Li Ling-Ai remains, by the end, a rather mysterious person, and the film, *Kukan*, as a cinematic object, just out of reach of one's understanding, two effects, which, while perhaps understandable, may not be those over which Lung had complete control as a filmmaker. A film may end ambiguously, certain questions unanswered, and still end satisfyingly; this film doesn't quite achieve that complete satisfaction.

Nonetheless, *Finding Kukan* is the story of an extraordinary woman and an extraordinary 1941 film – tantalizing clips from which Lung peppers her film – and it is a story any student or lover of film will find fascinating. There is one moment, too, near the end of the film, when Lung points her camera at a small group of rapt cinema goers, watching images on the screen they'd never imagined could exist. Deeply moving, that moment points to one reason the art of film itself is so precious: it has the power, like no other art, to cross time and space, to preserve and dignify the human experience. and to connect us with one another.



Finding Kukan plays on May 27 at [SIFF Cinema Uptown](https://www.siff.net/festival/siff-cinema-uptown) (<https://www.siff.net/festival/siff-cinema-uptown>) with director Robin Lung in attendance, May 28 at [AMC Pacific Place](https://www.siff.net/festival/amc-pacific-place) (<https://www.siff.net/festival/amc-pacific-place>), and June 2 at [Ark Lodge Cinemas](https://www.siff.net/festival/ark-lodge-cinemas) (<https://www.siff.net/festival/ark-lodge-cinemas>).

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