



## BOOK REVIEWS

***Finding Kukan*, directed by Robin Lung. Nested Egg Productions, 2016. DVD, 75 minutes.**

In *Finding Kukan*, documentary filmmaker Robin Lung positions herself as an intrepid detective, dedicated to solving the mystery of Li Ling-Ai. Who was this Chinese American female filmmaker, and what was her real involvement with the award-winning 1941 documentary *Kukan*? Lung wonders why no one has heard of this pioneering woman who was erased from film history, like so many other women. To add to the mystery, all copies of the film itself have been lost, despite the fact that *Kukan* holds an important place in American film history as the first feature-length documentary recognized with an Academy Award. Thus begins Lung's quest to locate and restore to prominence both the film and its enigmatic heroine, Li Ling-Ai.

*Finding Kukan* skillfully deploys lessons from Asian American history to illustrate the broader context surrounding Li Ling-Ai and her Chinese American family at the turn of the century. This includes brief discussions of racist policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act that limited immigration, anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited romantic relationships between whites and Asians, and the way these policies increased anti-Chinese sentiment. Li Ling-Ai is frustrated with being a target of racist slurs and passionate about finding ways to improve the image of China in the minds of American audiences. Her solution is to enlist the assistance of white male photographer Rey Scott in documenting the suffering and perseverance of China and its people in the wake of Japanese occupation during the 1930s. Together they create the eighty-five-minute color documentary *Kukan*.

While many of the clues about the fate of *Kukan* are held by members of Scott's living family members, this documentary wholly belongs to Li Ling-Ai. She passed away in 2003 before Lung learned of her, but raw footage from a 1993 interview is heavily relied upon throughout *Finding Kukan* to capture her exuberant nature and self-aggrandizing sense of humor. Coupled with

clippings from numerous magazine spreads and news photographs capturing the beauty of her youth, we can clearly sense Li Ling-Ai's presence as a larger-than-life diva. Nonetheless, discovering the truth about Li Ling-Ai is far from easy, and Lung's journey into the past is perilously obstructed by dead ends, red herrings, and personal doubts.

Indeed, *Finding Kukan* asks a number of questions that seem simple at the outset but eventually prove thorny. First of all, is it possible to locate the lost film *Kukan*? Although Lung immediately gets her hands on VHS and 16-mm copies of the film, the restoration process is ultimately wracked with disappointment. This helps the viewer consider what it really means to reconstruct a complete history and why we feel compelled to do so in the first place. In her failure to piece together a complete copy of the film, Lung reminds us that the repression of marginalized narratives can indeed be an insurmountable hurdle and that we may need to be satisfied with the mysteries of an incomplete record. Themes surrounding the persistence of ambiguity throughout the documentary are visually highlighted through the deployment of gorgeous shadow theater, with silhouetted actors and dancers creating shapes against the screen. As viewers use their own imagination to fill in the details, we are reminded that it is sometimes impossible to fully shed light on historical truths.

The second question, of how much credit Li Ling-Ai deserves for her role in creating *Kukan*, proves even more uncertain. It seems clear that her treatment is partially due to the toxic combination of racism and sexism that have always minimized the role of women of color in American history. Even Li Ling-Ai's own family members are dismissive of the possibility that she could have been an important historical figure. Lung works to highlight the uncredited work that Li Ling-Ai took on as the film's producer and uncovers many details about how it was her initiative that pushed the project forward from the beginning. Yet media studies scholars have challenged the way that gender has shaped assumptions about what kind of creative labor is most deserving of praise. Media production roles traditionally taken up by women, such as costuming, makeup, and public relations, have always been unfairly undervalued as merely technical, while roles like directing and filming that are traditionally helmed by men are valued and rewarded. Lung disappointedly concludes that Li Ling-Ai may never have risked her physical safety to capture footage of *Kukan* in China and that she often used her physical beauty to promote the film, but Lung's documentary upholds these gendered binaries of value.

Indeed, although *Finding Kukan* forwards an unapologetically feminist perspective from the outset, this political stance becomes challenging as the film progresses. Lung is troubled to recognize that she is placing unfair pressure on Li Ling-Ai to embody an idealized feminist subject. Stories begin to surface about how Li Ling-Ai relied on her feminine body and sexual stereotypes of

Chinese culture to draw publicity, and there is an open question about whether or not she was romantically involved with Scott. At best, Li Ling-Ai is accused of being an opportunist and, at worst, a prostitute. Although it's clear Lung is deeply devoted to Li Ling-Ai and that her quest for the truth serves as a love letter to this complicated woman, Lung also begins to question if Li Ling-Ai is really the heroine she's been looking for. In doing so, the film deftly highlights core feminist principles about how difficult it is to distance ourselves from the harms of patriarchal ideologies, and how our political ideals and expectations may not align with messy human realities. The film's resistance to tidy conclusions is what ultimately makes the narrative provocative, compelling, and richly rewarding—like the translated title of *Kukan* itself, both women filmmakers have “bitterly persevered against all odds,” and we are lucky to now have a chance to learn their stories.

Lori Kido Lopez

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

***The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, by Anthony Christian Ocampo. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-8047-9754-2.**

Beginning with the premise that Filipino Americans occupy a uniquely liminal position within the flexible racial dynamics in the United States, Anthony Christian Ocampo's ethnographic study, *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, locates Filipino American racialization processes within regionally specific multiethnic experiences of place and space. Ocampo's study begins with a persuasive account that posits the “colonial legacies” of both Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines as foundational instances in the creation of Filipino American racial identity even before Filipino immigration to the United States. This transpacific methodological approach foregrounds the significance of American imperialism and its restructuring of institutions in the Philippines (specifically education) as being integral to the particularity of Filipino American racialization. While being careful to cast the imperialist implementation of both the domestic “Thomasite” education system and the subsequent United States–Philippines *pensionado* program as institutional, soft-power expressions of American “paternalistic racism,” Ocampo nonetheless claims colonial developments in the Filipino education system ultimately laid the foundation for the particular modes of segmented assimilation that Filipino immigrants to the United States (particularly after 1965) would find themselves in.