CHINA UNDER GROUND

PLANET CHINA 13

NANCY KWAN
MAKI HSIEH
AFRUZ AMIGHI
JAS CHARANJIVA
RICHARD PEÑA
HAO WU
PIXIE LIAO
ALPINE DECLINE
ED SHEW

This free ebook includes interviews with artists, writers, entrepreneurs & thinkers

China-underground.com and CinaOggi.it are two web magazines curated by Matteo Damiani and Dominique Musorrafiti dedicated to Chinese culture. Since 2002, China-underground has organized cultural events, festivals, and created documentaries, photo reports, and magazines.

Content & Design

Dominique Musorrafiti
dominique@cinaoggi.it

Matteo Damiani
info@china-underground.com

NANCY KWAN

MAKI HSIEH

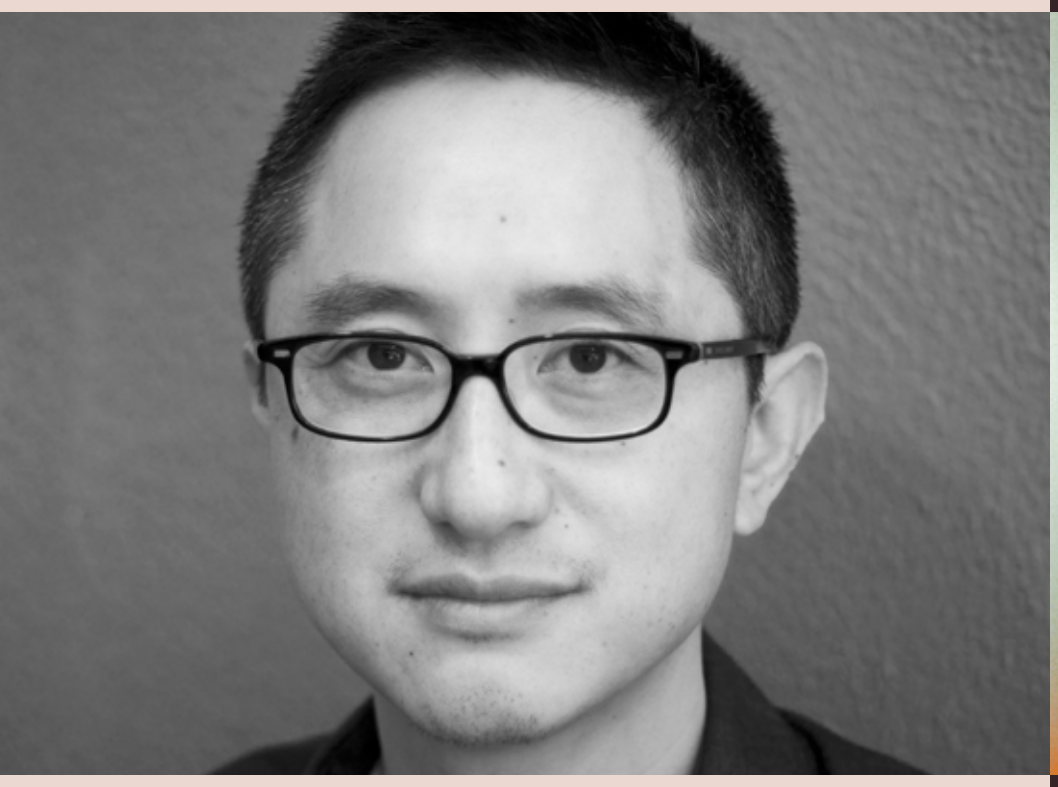
AFRUZ AMIGHI

JAS CHARANJIVA

PIXY LIAO

RICHARD PEÑA

ED SHEW



HAO WU

ALPINE DECLINE

ASIAN HALL OF FAME

NANCY KWAN
Lifetime Achievement Award
Cinema Icon

BRANDON LEE
In Memoriam
Actor & Cultural Icon

STEVE AOKI
EDM DJ Producer

HON. TANI G. CANTIL-SAKAUYE
California Chief Justice

PHIL CHEN
Bass Guitarist

REN HANAMI
Actress & Producer

KEN JEONG
Actor & Producer

SUMI JO
Opera Legend

DR. LINDA M. LIAU
Neurosurgeon

INDRA NOOYI
Legendary Executive

Maki Mae
Musical Guest

headliner **Danny Seraphine & CTA**
Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Chicago Founding Member

Frank Buckley, KTLA 5
Master of Ceremonies

honoring founder **Robert Chinn Foundation 35th Anniversary**

Asian Hall of Fame elevates Asian excellence and serves a vital role in advancing Asian inclusive unity globally

Asian Hall of Fame is the first global and the world's leading organisation of Asian recognition, which works to elevate Asian excellence, promote racial equity, inclusion and seeks to strengthen, consolidate and ensure unity in diversity. Established in 2004 by the Robert Chinn Foundation, Asian Hall of Fame is grounded in the legacy of Seattle financial pioneer Robert Chinn who founded United Savings and Loan in 1960, the first Asian-owned bank in the United States, to fight economic racism against Asian families denied mortgages and small business loans. It advocates for 4 billion Asians, Asian American Pacific Islanders, native and indigenous tribes worldwide. Maki Hsieh is the first Chief Executive Officer of The Robert Chinn Foundation, one of the oldest Asian family private philanthropies in America, that continues the vision of Robert Chinn for the betterment of the community. Through its grantmaking, the Foundation seeks to correct the undervaluation of Asians' contributions in the United States and around the world and educates the public to create greater historical understanding about Asians, support youth education and early career development, and promote excellence, Asian art and intercultural narratives. It's one of the leading voices of Stop Asian Hate and in 2021 inducted ten distinguished honorees from the United States, Korea, India, Hong Kong and Jamaica for their legacy, philanthropy, and advancement of equity. The Asian Hall of Fame fosters year-round programs to advance digital media equity and elevate Asian representation in national narratives. Since the rise of hate crime during Covid 19 the Foundation promotes advanced trauma recovery. In a collaboration with Robby Krieger from The Doors, Maki Mae launched the charity album "Seasonal Songbook" and had championed a larger than life campaign to Stop Asian Hate. The album, supported by the Asian Hall of Fame and Robert Chinn Foundation, has garnered two Grammy awards (Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album of the Year and also Best Pop Duo/Group Performance of the Year).

Nancy Kwan

Actress, Producer, and Philanthropist

Photo courtesy of Nancy Kwan,
Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti,
A special thanks to Rochelle Srigley Asian Hall of Fame

Born in Hong Kong and growing up in Kowloon Tong, Nancy Kwan Ka-shen is a Chinese-American actress, philanthropist, and former dancer who played a pivotal role in the acceptance of actors of Asian ancestry in major Hollywood film roles. She pursued her dream of becoming a ballet dancer by attending the Royal Ballet School in London where she studied and performed for four years. Upon graduating from high school, she sojourned in France, Italy, and Switzerland on a luxury trip. Afterward, she traveled back to Hong Kong, where she started a ballet school. It was on a summer holiday in Hong Kong that a chance event changed her life. Ray Stark, a Hollywood producer, was in town to do the location scouting for the film adaption of The World of Suzie Wong, set in Hong Kong, which was based on a bestselling novel by Richard Mason and was made into a popular Broadway play. Mr. Stark spotted Nancy among over 500 applicants, and although she had no acting experience, summoned her for a screen test. After getting her father's permission, she signed a contract and moved to Hollywood for extensive coaching and more screen tests. Ray Stark gave her a big publicity push. Glamorous photos of Nancy Kwan appeared in major magazines of the day such as Time, Look, Esquire, Cosmopolitan, Modern Screen, and the cover of Life. He threw a big party for her attended by many Hollywood stars. He even arranged for her to meet the Queen of England. The film premiered at Radio City Music Hall on Thanksgiving weekend in 1960 and was a huge commercial success. In 1961, she starred in Flower Drum Song, a story of romance and clashing cultures set in San Francisco's Chinatown, in a role where she had much space to dance. The film was distinguished for being the "first big-budget American film" with an all-Asian cast. The film became another big box office hit and garnered five Academy Award nominations. After starring in The World of Suzie Wong and Flower Drum Song, Kwan experienced a rapid rise to celebrity, following these big hits, and she was always in a starring role in a whirlwind of films made in Hollywood, Europe, and the Far East. She also worked in television, starring in popular television series such as Kung Fu and Fantasy Island. Nancy starred opposite William Holden, Dick Van Dyke, Dean Martin, Robert Stack, Jack Lord, Donald Pleasence, Leslie Neilson, Omar Sharif, David Carridine, Pierce Brosnan, etc. When not busy acting she did volunteer work for homeless children and became a spokesperson for the Asian-American Voters Coalition. Her work with the Coalition earned her a meeting with the President at the White House.

The World of Suzie Wong (1960)

Nancy Kwan was promoted as the "Chinese Bardot", but she was also blessed with the gamine charm of a young Audrey Hepburn

From a Hong Kong dancer you ended up in an acting career in Hollywood. How did you first get into acting? What motivated you to try this path? Did your dance knowledge help you to be more self-confident as an actress?

I was home in Hong Kong for the summer holidays, while studying ballet at The Royal Ballet in England. This was in 1959. I decided to attend an audition to watch my favorite Chinese Actresses audition for the role of Suzie Wong in the film The World of Suzie Wong. Producer Ray Stark approached me and asked if I wanted to do a screen test. I told him I was a ballet dancer not an actress. He asked me to do a screen test anyway. To my surprise I was offered a seven years contract with Ray Stark / Seven Arts. My dance knowledge not only gave me more self-confidence, and discipline for life.

Who influenced you as a person and as an actress? What do you enjoy the most about acting?

I have been in the Entertainment Industry for many years. After all these years I am still learning from my fellow actors.

"The World of Suzie Wong" was your first film, and also blazed the trail for Asians to the business. Can you tell us more about this period? What did it mean for you?

The World of Suzie Wong was my first film, and because the film was a box office success, I was offered my second film, Flower Drum Song, giving me the opportunity to use my dancing skills. Flower Drum Song was the first film produced by a major studio, with an all Asian cast. Blazing the trail for Asians in the business.

What were the biggest challenges during your beginning Have you faced some unexpected moments?

We face challenges every day. That's part of our growing process. Hopefully we learn from our mistakes.

What limits of life did acting help you overcome and what did it help you strengthen? What is the biggest lesson you have learned from it?

I am still learning from life everyday.

How do you feel when watching your acting work?

Once I finish a film, I seldom watch my work.

What are your thoughts on the current state of Asian representation in Hollywood? How much has changed in the last few years compared to when you started?

When I started in the business, there were hardly any Asian actors working in films. I am happy to say I see many more talented young Asian actors working today.

Can you share with us a meaningful story related to a movie or from the backstage that you have carried in your heart over the years?

I am often asked which is my favorite film. I don't have a favorite film. But I do remember special moments in the films I 've made.

You are the first Eurasian American actress that has played many roles in Hollywood. You dressed different identities, and with your acting, you deeply investigated women's souls. What does identity represent for you and what does it mean to be a multicultural person?

I come from two cultures, my father was Chinese and my mother was English, and I always felt it gave me a better understanding of human nature.

Nancy Kwan became the first Chinese actress to achieve fame in Western cinema, and has made dozens of films from the sixties to today

Flower Drum Song (1961)

She had known personally Bruce Lee, "Karate advisor" (action choreographer) for the fight scenes, which has given her stunt fight training on the film The Wrecking Crew. In this movie she fought the character played by Sharon Tate by throwing a flying kick. Her martial arts move was based on her dance foundation

How do you feel about cinema nowadays? From your point of view, which are the main opportunities and advantages? Do you think cinema is helping Asian actors and people behind the camera? Are things slowly changing, or is there still much to do?

There is a vast improvement of Asians working in the Entertainment industry today. I would like to see more Asian Actors in substantial roles.

Nancy Kwan, Bruce Lee and Sharon Tate on the set of The Wrecking Crew (1968)

Maki Hsieh

Violinst, Concert Pianist, Soprano Vocalist

Photo courtesy of Maki Hsieh, Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti, A special thanks to Rochelle Srigley, Asian Hall of Fame

Maki Hsieh is a concert pianist, violinist, and soprano. Remarkably, Maki was born mostly deaf and lives largely in a world of vibrations. She is Chinese, Japanese, Korean-American and grew up in Tokyo and Taipei. She was classically trained at Peabody Conservatory and fusing her prodigious artistry as violinist and genre-defying vocalist with fluent multilingual skills and a three-octave range, Maki Hsieh also explores electronic beats to forge a truly distinctive and unforgettable soundscape. Maki is a multifaceted creative force, who excels because of her extraordinary

singing voice and range. Her style which combines violin and vocal is full of dynamic power and explosive qualities. With her amazing spirit and tremendous talent, she creates a very special energy. Maki was a communications officer for two Disney Chairman and Al Gore and is a Recording Academy and Forbes Council member, she served as Executive Director of Arcadia Performing Arts Foundation and she was CEO for Pinnacle Group. She re-entered the music scene in 2013 with her debut single Kyoto; a dub-step piece produced by US DJ Skrillex who mixed electric violin and soprano vocals with pulsating beats. Maki Hsieh is a talent passionate about transcending boundaries for audiences across genres, around the world, with this spirit she took her timeless classics sounds on tour with the aim of help also in welfare initiatives. She sang the national anthem at major sports arenas, sang in a Cannes Film Festival movie, performed on NBC's America's Got Talent, and appeared in major televised events. She has headlined stunning performances also for dignitaries including Queen Fabiola of the Belgian royal family. Maki Hsieh donates her concerts to benefit charities such as UNICEF and Special Olympics World Games, she was the California State Senate 2019 Woman of the Year for her work as a cultural ambassador empowering community transformation, and for her philanthropic work. In the same year, she became the first Chief Executive Officer of The Robert Chinn Foundation and she oversaw all aspects of the foundation's operations and community support and directed the Asian Hall of Fame program. In 2020, Maki donated a relief concert to help raise awareness of Covid-19 and support hate crime survivors through the Asian Hall of Fame GoFundMe for its Stop Asian Hate Campaign. With her vision of artistry seen as a catalyst to unite and transform, she inspired the Asian Hall of Fame and Robert Chinn Foundation to fund the charity album Seasonal Songbook, a hugely accomplished work that represents Maki Mae's most requested pieces and iconic collaborations with legendary Los Angeles-based artists and producers including Robby Krieger, Ed Roth, Toshi Yanagi, Ringo Starr's engineer Bruce Sugar, 7-time Grammy and 3-time Emmy-winning bassist Kevin Brandon (Aretha Franklin, Justin Timberlake), percussionist Leo Costa (Sergio Mendes, Herb Alpert), drummer Rock Deadrick (Ziggy Marley), Wu Tang-Clan's engineer Michael Riach, and engineer Steve Valenzuela (Kelly Clarkson, Rod Stewart). Maki Mae's intensely personal Seasonal Songbook spans 200 years of music history from the original German "Ave Maria" to the contemporary "Hallelujah." 100% of album sales support the Asian Hall of Fame Digital Media & Arts Equity Initiative. Its success inspired a second album Walk On By for release in 2022.

You are a classically trained violinist, concert pianist, 13 language soprano. What inspired you to pursue a career in music? Have you always wanted to be a musician and a singer?

I never had any intention to pursue a career in music. And the reason is because it always was a safe harbor and a private diary for me. I was born with an umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, so I was already dead. When I was born, I was blue, I was not breathing. And then they helped me to breathe. And then a few months later, I actually died. Again, I had a crib death, and I was blue, not breathing, and my mother woke me up. Because of these complications. I was born mostly deaf. And I could not understand languages very well. In fact, I spoke my own language for a couple of years. And the teachers told my mother, I must be a special needs child and had a very bad temper. And I must have some kind of attention deficit disorder and she should send me to a special school. But instead of doing that, my mother signed me up for piano lessons so that I could connect with the world in some way she didn't know that was my hearing that was causing me to act out.

How old were you when you started playing music? What are your fondest memories of training to become a musician? What have been the most important influences on your musical life and career?

I started taking piano lessons when I was four years old, I was very mean to my teachers, I hit them, I made them cry. This one lasted a few years until one day when I was around seven years old, I realized that the vibration I was feeling in the piano matched the note on the page. And that somehow made people smile and clap. And it was a real Helen Keller moment where I realized what music meant. When I was nine years old in second grade the Taipei American school where I was attending had a choir and band in a very robust music program. So I signed up for choir because I could hear very high things like I could hear the flute, I could hear birds, so I gravitated towards singing. And I signed up for the band because I played piano, and then I signed up for orchestra because I really liked the sound of the violin. I could connect with the violin because I could hear it, I could sense the vibration of the violin. And then this continued through high school where I was involved in musical theatre band choir via orchestra, speech, and debate, I was always very

much comfortable on the stage. But really, it was a private diary. For me, it wasn't really something that I intended to become a public career. Growing up as an American citizen overseas also gave me a lot of opportunities to serve as a cultural ambassador. My father was instrumental in helping to build the National Concert Hall in Taiwan. He was an arts benefactor, and my mother was a professor at the National Taiwan University. So she really enjoyed giving back to the community and letting the Chinese community have a closer relationship with Korea and Japan. So it was a very active cultural environment I enjoyed. This kind of cultural intelligence really helped me to debut. My first professional debut was when I was 15 years old, and the first lady of Taiwan was trying to develop closer relationships between Taiwan and Japan, and she hosted an international friendship concert. I was asked to perform the violin for the friendship concert. That was a very memorable experience because it was my debut, but also because I realized that music was a powerful way to create emotional experiences and bring people together and that was very important to me. I decided to go to Johns Hopkins because I wanted to pursue neuroscience and find a way to cure things like crib death and my hearing and I had this naive idea that I was going to change the world through medicine and I quickly discovered it was a lot harder than it looked. So whenever I was a little bit sad that I was not that's smart to succeed in medicine, I would escape to the Peabody Conservatory and that was where they had a sister school and I met Berl Senofsky, who was one of the top music, violin teachers in the world next to Dorothy DeLay at Juilliard and we became very good friends. I remember just sitting at his studio every Thursday afternoon, and we would just listen to records. I mean, this would go on for like two or three years, every Thursday afternoon, just listen to old records and we would play this game where he would ask was this violin piece played by a man or a woman, what kind of violin is played on and I got to be really good like six times out of 10 I could identify whether the violinist was female or male, the nationality, whether they were Jewish, or from America or they were trained in Juilliard or Illinois because there's a specific way that people would play and what kind of violin whether it was French or German or Italian, it was really interesting just sitting and listening to music. And at the same time, I also started to train in opera at Peabody Conservatory, and I was very fascinated by the languages so we had to learn. My mother was a linguist, so languages and the

way that they connected people and brought people together to me was a source of fascination. So that was when I started to study lyrical diction: I performed in Italian, French and German, Latin, English, Spanish. The first time I first sang in Spanish was during a recital, and then Dvořák composed in Czechoslovakia, and so I started to learn Czech. I was also asked to perform once for the Philippines, a song in Tagalog and I also performed in Mandarin, Japanese, Korean. Of course, Arirang is really famous in Korea. And then lastly, Ravel composed a series of songs in Hebrew, there was one called Kaddisch, that I was asked to perform so I also performed in Hebrew. Those are the 14 languages that I performed. And I think that is really important to realize that cultural intelligence is the key to creating cultural unity and understanding. So for me, that was really important in branching out into language. I did not pursue music as a career after conservatory and Berl Senofsky was very angry with me. And we left on very bad terms. He was very angry because I decided to go into banking and follow in my father's footsteps. And at that time, I turned down a Master's of opera performance scholarship at Peabody to go into banking. And he was very upset and he said I was wasting my talent and wasting my life and I was going to regret it. And a couple of years later, when I was married, raising a family and I was working in San Francisco, I read in a newsletter that he had passed away, and we never had a chance to say goodbye. And that made me really sad. So I decided to follow through with one of the promises I made to him, which was to apply for the Queen Elizabeth international competition in Belgium. He was the first and only American violinist to ever win this competition. And I promised him that I would apply to this competition. And I was just at that deadline and there's a certain age you can't go past. I just thought that was like the last possible time because they rotate disciplines every four years, and I applied for the vocal competition, and I was accepted. And there were 125 vocalists who competed in Belgium and I flew to Brussels and I sang for the queen, Queen Fabiola of Belgium. At that time, I also sang for Joan Sutherland and several other distinguished panelists. And I think that was another highlight of mine, where I sang for the queen of Belgium and these panelists, and I just felt an immense sense of pride, representing Asians at the competition and also representing Americans because there were only a few Americans who were invited. I was the first Asian American ever to be invited and I represented California. There was a Hispanic

singer, she would come from Texas, there was an African American singer from Alabama. There was one male singer, he was from New York, and there was one wonderful blonde singer from Tennessee, and that pretty much represented America, and that was amazing just to see that level of diversity represented at an international festival and that's when I realized that America has a really robust heart. When we represent on an international stage, we bring to it something very different from the other artists who are coming directly from Japan, Korea or China or Taiwan have a very different cultural sense or style that they bring. And it did make me feel very proud to represent America and also represent Asian artists.

You are Chinese, Japanese, Korean-American that grew up in Tokyo and Taipei before moving to the States. How has your Asian American identity influenced your work? Did living in different countries influence your way to see life and be creative?

My mother was naturalized in the United States. And then she went back when she met my father and my younger sister and I was born as American citizens overseas. And so we enjoyed the expatriate experience, even though I look Chinese, and I can speak Mandarin, and I eat all the food, good food that other people eat. But right away, they can tell that I'm an American. Because I wore make-up, I had a perm. I wore a retainer, I had a backpack and sneakers, I talked back to my mother, I was very vocal and was very different from the local Chinese friends who were from Taiwan, and they were not American. So it was very clear that if you were American, you're American. And it didn't matter. If you were African American, or Chinese American, or Japanese American, you're American. And that kind of reverence that I felt as an American Overseas gave me a lot of pride and being an American, and a lot of confidence in who I am. I did not identify myself as one nationality or ethnicity or the other because I was very proud to be American. Growing up as a kind of bridge between cultures was also really exciting because I clearly was born and raised to be a cultural ambassador. So for me, it was very natural, to go from Chinese friends, to Japanese friends, to Korean friends to American friends, it was just very natural. Of course, in an international school, you also had people from Canada, Brazil, Germany, and Europe. It was a very international hub. I came to the United States when I was 15 years old and It really was a shock. It took me maybe about eight years to adjust. Because in

Maki Mae is the stage name for Maki Hsieh, President & CEO of Asian Hall of Fame, and also CEO of the sixth-generation Robert Chinn Foundation

the United States, even though you are American, you're not seen equally, the Americans are not equal here. And the inequality is based on a lot of things, like what car you drive, or what zip code you live in, what company you work for, what job you have, but it also is divided by race, which is really interesting. And I noticed that a lot of Chinese who live in America, they're not proud of being Chinese, they're ashamed of saying they're Chinese, they're ashamed of talking about their grandparents who have an accent or don't speak English, they don't want to be seen as Chinese and don't want to be seen as American, but then we're also Chinese American, you know. So I think that one of the things that's inspired me is the focus on cultural intelligence, and how cultural intelligence is one of the answers to overcoming unconscious bias against Asians living in America and Asians living in Canada and other countries around the world. We really have to elevate interracial cross-cultural respect of Asian contributions to the community, but then how can we expect other people to respect us if they don't know what we have contributed? So I think that this entire focus is on my part of letting people know what Asians have contributed to the community, to the country, and also to humanity. This continues with my work in terms of Asian Hall of Fame.

You are a fluent soprano in 13 different languages. How is it important to think and communicate in different languages in a multicultural world to understand humans and prevent stereotypes and bias?

I want to add that my fourteenth language is Portuguese. I was asked to sing a bossa nova set with a jazz band. And I had to sing in Portuguese. So that was actually difficult because it's not Spanish, it's very different and has a different kind of slant to it. I'm just honored and privileged whenever I have to learn a new language to perform because it really connects to the heart of people. And that's why I think being involved in creative arts is so important as a writer, dancer, actor, musician, photographer, culinary artist, it's so important because we hold the keys to civilization, and we hold the keys to the heart of humanity.

How has music enriched your life? What do you love most about it? Can you share with us any meaningful stories?

Music became a public career when my oldest daughter was in fourth grade. At that time, there was a very popular television show, called America's Got Tal-

ent. And a lot of musicians were asked to play a lot of violins and on the show, she came to me and also sing opera to electronic mu- she said, “Mom, you should be on sic and I collaborated with Avicii, America’s Got Talent. You should I went to Burning Man and play do something really unique. What with Diplo and Skrillex at the pla- you should do is you should take ya and I played in music festivals, your opera and your violin and put I was on a spaceship at EDC and I it on this thing called dubstep”. was just doing a lot of work. My And that this was all her idea. And daughter when she became a high at that time, I was working for school student, she actually need- the Walt Disney Company, I was a ed me to be closer to home. So I corporate person, I was wearing then stopped my public career in black suits every day, and I said, electronic dance music to help out “Listen, Mommy does not have with the Performing Arts Centre at time for this kind of thing”. And her high school. Then my young- she said, “No, everybody’s listen- er sister passed away. This was a ing to this. It’s called Skrillex. You huge turning point because my should place your something on younger sister and I were the only this”. And I listen to this: “Honey, two relatives of our family in the this is just a lot of noise. I don’t United States. And she was also even understand what it is, it’s my only sibling. She passed away just like electronic noise coming in a terrible accident. She basically from a laptop. I don’t understand slipped and fell after getting out of how I can even integrate anything her bathtub, on a Wednesday, hit with this”. And so she challenged her head, and by Saturday she was me and finally inspired me to do gone over a brain hemorrhage. something because she claimed When that happened, it really trau- that I was not cool, and I needed matized me and it traumatized my to be cool, so because I was so mother and the whole family, right sad that was not cool in the eyes because it was such a shock. And it of my beloved daughter, I decid- made me realize that I wanted to ed to try putting a SAKURA lyrics do something with the talent that to Skrillex’ hit song Kyoto from his I had, the knowledge I had, and Grammy album Bangrang. And I the cultural intelligence that I had put it on YouTube that went viral. to bring people together. So the I got an America’s Got Talent and California State Senate honors a performed my opera violin and woman in their congressional dis- electronic music. I got picked up trict every year and it’s called Cal- by management and I started do- ifornia woman of the year. When ing a lot of gigs all around LA. I was I received the award in 2019, they

asked me what I wanted to do. And I said, "Well, I love to bring my music to the public. Instead of this loud music with the light show and the dance crew and go-go boots. All that's fun. Instead of having it just for fun, I like to kind of change people's hearts in some way. And the way that I would like to do this is to bring my music to just 100 people in historic venues around California. And then all the proceeds of the concert are donated to a local charity." So this started my whole idea of charity concerts, right in my mind, of using my music for the greater good.

You are the CEO of the Asian Hall of Fame, and also CEO of the sixth-generation Robert Chinn Foundation, can you tell us more about them? What are the main missions? What were the most important milestones? How has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected you?

At that time, I decided that I wanted to do something more global on my corporate side, on my branding side, and I had a couple of people call me for the next opportunity and Seattle called. And this was six months before COVID. But Karen Wong, who's the chairman of the board called, and said, "We will love for you to help Asian Hall of Fame go to the next level" Asian Hall of Fame, was a kind of dinner party that was established by her father's Foundation, Robert Chinn Foundation in Seattle was only known to 200 people in Seattle, and it celebrated a lot of great Asian Americans. But they're seeing that all these people were inducted, and I wanted to take it to the next level. So I said, Yes, I moved my family to Seattle, and I started working for the foundation. We quickly discovered that the Asian hall of Fame has a wonderful name, but it's not known outside of Seattle. So one of the things that you can make things quickly known is attach a few concerts to it. And it became very apparent that the foundation didn't have enough resources to book a big talent. So because I'm a professionally managed artist, I went back to my management company, and the company's called Pinnacle out of New York. And I said that I would like to donate my charity concerts to the cause of Robert Chinn Foundation and Asian Hall of Fame to help elevate Asians in the mainstream marketplace. And they said, okay. "If I donated my concerts to them, then they would donate their marketing and production costs to the foundation because I'm tied to the event as their assigned artist". They also designated John Nicholas, who is the senior managing director in charge of the West Coast and Pacific Rim. So they designated a re-

ally senior executive to handle my charity concerts donated to the foundation. We donated to a concert. This is right before COVID, December 2019. It was a fantastic success. We advanced 35 grants to all these wonderful nonprofits during this time. And it was so popular that people wanted us to do a Mother's Day concert. So we established a Mother's Day concert, it was all supposed to happen in May, and suddenly COVID hit. By March, we shut down all of our operations. And we moved quickly. Our headquarters is in L.A. because all of the production is still in L.A. and then we had a problem, regarding our season. We didn't have anything booked for our season. All of our events are live. So I went to my inductees. I said "Listen, we now have this COVID-19 crisis where there are not enough masks and there are not enough face shields. What if we collaborated? What if we had our Mother's Day concert go online?". I was just shooting it in my living room. Then "if you guys can put together your plea, your PSA videos, and we could piece it together then I have the inductee supporting the cause and then I am donating my charity concert and maybe we can generate some traction for donating face shields and face masks to our frontline workers." And they agreed so the Mother's Day concert was shot in my living room with Ed Roth. He's a pianist for Annie Lennox and Joe Walsh. He's also my musical director. And then we had Toshi Yanagi, who was a guitarist for Jimmy Kimmel Live. We got together. And we did this concert. And then the inductees came together and recorded their PSAs that encourage people to donate for face shields. And, it was a huge success. We had more than 234 media mentions covering it. We had the most impressions I've ever had, like 600 million impressions of the concert and the cause. And we were able to deliver 25,800 pieces of PPE to 271 organizations. We made this a nationwide effort and we said "if you need PPE, please just fill out this form on our website". It was a very simple form. It had five questions on it. Anybody who submitted a request received a package in the mail. And we were very happy to do this and Asian Hall of Fame and the Robert Chinn Foundation supported this effort and were very happy to do so. When we saw the success of the Mother's Day concert, Karen Wong and the board then came back to us and said "Would you consider donating a charity album?"

In a collaboration with Robby Krieger from The Doors, you championed a larger campaign to "Stop Asian Hate". Can you tell us how the project came to life?

Now charity album is a whole other thing. Because that means that you need musicians to track you need studio time you need an engineer to record it. You need a tuner to tune it afterward and it goes down the assembly line of production. You want a really good mixing engineer, then it's got to be mastered, then you have to package it, then you have to write the liner notes and you have to shoot the music video. They have to do all of these things and Pinnacle and I had a serious conversation and we knew that this level of production was going to be like $100,000, it was going to be a lot of money that the Foundation did not have. But we then decided to help the foundation because we knew it was important to have a charity album that supported COVID-19. And later on, Stop Asian Hate was just around the corner and we didn't know at that time. But we went ahead and just signed a contract with Robert Chinn, where all of the album proceeds are donated to Robert Chinn and Asian Hall of Fame. The inductees joined in a choir. They sang in the choir part of this one song. We had the top musicians play on this record. It was a Bossa Nova Jazz kind of a Christmas record. It was submitted to the Grammy category called traditional Pop Vocal Album of the Year, which is a very difficult category, predominantly Caucasian artists. And we're very happy to submit this record. It was mixed by Ringo Starr's engineer, Bruce Sugar. It was a fantastic record. And the way that Robby Krieger got involved was Ed Roth, my musical director, he played Ave Maria. Robby is not Christian. He's Jewish. But when he heard Ave Maria, he said, "Oh my god, this is a real artist!" Because it's operatic. But it's also accessible, right, because most opera singers sing with a big vibrato. And it's not really accessible. It's hard to hear. But I created a special technique where I level out the vibrato. And I make it very high and very soft and sustain it with a special breath technique. And actually, the way that I created this technique is on my website. He heard it and said, "Oh, my god, I want to be on this record". And then Ed Roth played for Robby "My favorite things", because Ed Roth is the pianist for Robby Krieger. And when Robby heard "My favorite things", he said, "Oh, I play this all the time, I would like to add my guitar to it", and that's how we collaborated and started this friendship of him recording. And then we became friends that way. We also have a similar heart

for donating to charity and having charity concerts. So that was right-aligned with what he was interested in. And then we collaborated and that was our Grammy category, Best Pop Duo Group Performance of the year. So we submitted to that category. With Covid-19 Asian hate crimes started to escalate. And the album then started to donate proceeds to stop Asian hate and everything that we did, we would take the album on tour for the Mother's Day concert we had at the Tokyo theme. And then the Seattle concert we had a lot of Seattle leaders talk about the concert and was raising awareness for our GoFundMe campaign for Stop Asian Hate which we exceeded our goal to give grants to hate crime survivors and help with their medical care and also help with their platform of telling their story. Robin was all in on it and it was very exciting to be part of that. And you know, one of the things that this really shows you is that if you allow talent to lead you, whether it's music or writing or other talent, things will open up and then you will be able to make a difference in a way that you didn't even think was possible. I believe that Asian hate is happening more than before because every time something bad is happening in the economy or in the world Asians are blamed.

Asian Art Museum APA Heritage Month 2021

On May 2021 was Asian Pacific American Heritage Month and Asian Art Museum and its partner cultural organizations across the city of San Francisco offered their diverse activities online. All May, Asian Art Museum Highlighted Unique Achievements of APA Community through Art, Food, Performances. Since the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated xenophobia and bigotry toward Chinese People and All Asian American and Pacific Islander communities Asian Art Museum took the opportunity to talk about Anti-Asian violence.

With the challenges posed by the pandemic and the rise in anti-Asian violence, APA Heritage month was a critical opportunity to showcase the impact and importance of APA accomplishments and to celebrate a community whose many contributions have shaped the spirit of the Bay Area—and the nation—for generations. We want to thank the Asian Art Museum for introducing and sharing the powerful art of Afruz Amighi and Jas Charanjiva.

Photos courtesy of Afruz Amighi & Asian Art Museum
Special Thanks to Zac Rose
Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti

Afruz Amighi

NewYork based sculptor and installation artist

Photograph © Asian Art Museum

Afruz Amighi is a sculptor and installation artist whose work has been exhibited in the United States, London, and Asia, who currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She was born in Tehran to Jewish and Zoroastrian parents. She graduated from Barnard College, Columbia University with a BA in political science, before completing an MFA at New York University. At the inception of her artistic career, Amighi used woven polyethylene, a material used to fabricate tents in refugee camps, to create geometric patterns inspired by the shapes of mosques and palaces. Afruz Amighi's delicate abstract sculptures refer to a complex array of architectural sources: the meandering arabesques of Islamic mosques, the angular shapes of Gothic churches, the ornamentations of Manhattan Art Deco buildings, and the urban landscape of Brooklyn, among others. Architecture in its various expressions is a medium for Amighi to investigate how humans across cultures and ages build structures that reflect common ideals and aesthetic values despite the complexity and precariousness of society. She realized artworks that examined issues of loss and displacement, Amighi's new sculptures and practice became in the year more personal and more political. She was the inaugural recipient of the Jameel Prize for Middle Eastern Contemporary Art awarded by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2009. In 2011, she was granted a fellowship in sculpture by the New York Foundation for the Arts. In 2013, Amighi's work was commissioned for the 55th Venice Biennale. In 2017, a series of Amighi's feminist sculptures were presented at the Sophia Contemporary Gallery, London. In 2018 the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, TN presented her first one-person museum exhibition. Her work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, USA; the Houston Museum of Fine Art, TX, USA; The Cleveland Museum of Art, OH, USA; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK and The Devi Foundation, New Delhi, India, among others.

What life obstacles has art helped you overcome, and what did it help you strengthen? What is the biggest lesson you have learned from art?

For me, art is the ultimate escape. The world is undeniably beautiful, but it is also a place of immense suffering. Using my hands to make things allows me to take a break from this pain...it's like an intermission during which I can enter a dimension that soothes. People often call art a form of 'therapy', and I do not dispute this, however for me, it is a temporary escape from which I return changed, but not necessarily 'better'. I don't believe in progress. Transformation yes, progress no. What I have learned from art is that it is inseparable from meaningful human existence. It is not a luxury but a necessity. Because we have ripped art away from ritual and tried to fuse it to the market, we often become confused about its essence. The dark ages. It is not always found within a frame or a gallery and remembering this is the ultimate gift.

How can art help build a more inclusive world? What role can art play to cope during this time of increase in bias and hate crimes?

Art is escape, and any escape involves being transported. Often we are taken to an unfamiliar place. But we are unafraid of this unfamiliarity. When the synapses of the brain are engaged in this experience our consciousness expands and creates more room for

things we may have previously thought impossible. We dissociate fear from the unknown. So when in life we encounter things that are different, we are not automatically afraid of them. This space is another way of describing imagination and inclusivity is part of that. New models are possible, desirable. They may not even be new. Inclusivity has existed in past societies. Hate in an institutionalized form, I think, is fairly modern. So whether we look forward or backward in history for inspiration is irrelevant, it is that when we look, our eyes are bigger.

Can you share with us any meaningful story behind your art project? What do you want to communicate with your art?

There is a story behind this project. It is about both the formed and the unformed. The images that hover in our minds, but are never actualized. The images that make the leap from mind to earth and are actualized. 'My House, My Tomb' is an installation inspired by a myth that grew up around the Taj Mahal, built by Shah Jehan in 1632 as a tombstone for his beloved wife. As legend has it, Shah Jehan wanted to build an identical version of the Taj as a tomb for himself, but this time in black marble instead of white. This never happened. But the myth of the black Taj is widely known. And so it exists in different visual iterations in millions of people's minds. 'My House, My Tomb' is my mind's version. I am happy for the viewer to know this story just as I am happy for them to not know it. It doesn't matter. For me, art must be visceral. It must evoke a feeling, a sensation that is not necessarily intellectual but of the heart.

What is your experience as an artist in the era of social media? Do you think social media and new technologies are influencing art and the audience?

I use social media occasionally and each time I feel tainted. It's a simulation that I am not fond of. People who say 'well, it's a way to stay in touch with friends around the world blah blah blah' are really just addicted to digital affirmation. AS WE ALL ARE. That's the problem. Social media plays on and exacerbates the void that is part of existence. And you can follow me on Instagram @_afruzita_ hahahahahaha! How does social media influence art? Well, it encourages passivity. It elevates a narrow visual experience over the total engagement of all of the senses. Our eyes are trained to pass over a three-inch phone zone. We need to exercise our eyes, literally, every day. Over

My House, My Tomb is inspired by monumental religious architecture

an expanse, up-down left-right. Not to mention our sense of feeling, even just the air around an artwork making our arm-hairs stand on end, or doing nothing to our arm-hairs as we walk away in apathy. It's like taking those annoying museum barriers that are placed around artwork and strangulating people with them. Am I being dramatic? Well, after a year of Instagram art-viewing during the pandemic, I went with my friend to see a few exhibits in person and I wept. I was so grateful to smell the paint on the wall behind the painting, to see a scratch on the gallery floor. All the flaws and all of the warmth.

My House, My Tomb

Resembling a pair of delicate chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, My House, My Tomb is a sculptural diptych "drawn" with industrial materials, including chains and fiberglass, but the primary medium is light. Afruz Amighi's art installation My House, My Tomb employs light and shadow to evoke forgotten histories of the Taj Mahal, which she understands as places of refuge and solace. With one hanging structure made of steel and its twin constructed of steel clothed with black mesh, Amighi evokes a history that never came to pass: the pairing of a black mausoleum for Shah Jahan with the shining white Taj Mahal he built as his wife's tomb. Strikingly illuminated, the hanging sculpture casts dramatic shadows on the surrounding Beaux-Arts-style vaults and columns of the museum loggia. Viewed in this setting, the work evokes questions about the relationships between planar geometry and three-dimensional space, Islamic and Western architecture, and absence and presence. My House, My Tomb is also the first Fang Family Launchpad installation. The aim is to showcase the power of contemporary work in a historical architectural setting. The Fang Family Launchpad is both a physical space in the Asian Art Museum loggia's and a program highlighting emerging and mid-career artists with rotating, site-adapted installations.

Her installation My House, My Tomb, 2015/2021 is made with fiberglass mesh, metal chains, and LED light

Photos courtesy of Afruz Amighi & Asian Art Museum
Special Thanks to Zac Rose
Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti

Jas Charanjiva

Artist, activist, and entrepreneur

Jas Charanjiva is a Mumbai-based street artist, who was raised in Northern California and was influenced by San Francisco's Mission District murals, uses her vibrant art in service of global feminist and activist movements. Jas Charanjiva, at the age of 12, while living in California received her first professional skateboard and loved the art on the back of its deck. Since then she was deeply interested in underground street art and started to observe and shape her style in graffiti and underground art. Jas is currently a co-founder at Kulture shop which is an art + design brand that curates and champions the best Indian Graphic Artists from around the world and prints their exclusive works on limited editions tees and art prints.

What life obstacles has art helped you overcome, and what did it help you strengthen? What is the biggest lesson you have learned from art?

As an Indian teen living in America, I had strict parents who didn't allow us to hang out with our friends outside school. I wanted to be like my American friends who had freedom to have boyfriends, go to parties, attend sleepovers, etc. Music and art provided an outlet for me which kept me busy and allowed me to discover and become inspired by artists I still love today. Later in life, art helped strengthen my voice to speak on issues. It's become a tool for me, in that sense. My voice through art is much louder and far-reaching than the voice with which I normally use. People tend to pay attention when they see art. This opens the gate for me. My voice through art is then shared and seen by others. Art is a powerful way to amplify my message. The biggest lesson I've learned from art thus far, is that sometimes you just need to allow the viewer to come up with their own interpretation. I was watching an interview with Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails speaking about his own music. He said (verbatim) "The reason why I tend to shy away from talking about lyrics is it can shed too much light on what my intent was. To me, it's about your experience with that song and what it means to you and how it feels to you. I've had many songs ruined by the writer telling

Don’t Mess With Me

“Don’t Mess With Me” (2013/2020), aka The Pink Lady, is a piece of street art that became quite viral over the years, due to Jas’s character. After a violent crime in Delhi, a gang rape, Jas Charanjiva turned to art to confront harmful social conventions and raise awareness about the “boom” of new cultural approaches towards women and women’s safety. The artist responds to the public outcry and demand for change with an image of a woman brandishing brass knuckles that spell out “BOOM.” The Pink Lady mural has come to be known as a symbol of women’s empowerment. This artwork is becoming a symbol of courage and change for many women in and outside India. “Don’t Mess With Me” since 2021 is open for visitors at the East West Bank Art Terrace, an outdoor platform for contemporary art featuring thought-provoking works by both emerging and world-renowned artists. The artwork can also be viewed from the corner of McAllister and Hyde Streets, outside the Asian Art Museum.

me what they meant by it, or correcting me about what I thought the lyric was about which was way better.” I resonated with what Trent Reznor had said. Two years ago, I created a 5-storey mural of a young girl standing amongst nature, looking peaceful with a river flowing from her belly. Several people who walked by were asked by an interviewer to express what the mural meant to them. At first I thought “I hope they give the right answer otherwise I didn’t do a good job”, but then I let go of this thought once I started hearing the responses. Their unprovoked interpretations were beautiful and some were very personal.

“Everything starts from the fire I have for wanting to see things change.”
- Jas Charanjiva

How can art help build a more inclusive world? What role can art play to cope during this time of increase in bias and hate crimes?

Preface: Throughout my childhood and teenage life, I was influenced by mostly caucasian people. They were everywhere - on my cereal box, cartoons, tv shows, store catalogs, magazines. It made me want to be like them because they were being celebrated, I suppose. Thankfully, we had 'Good Times' and 'The Jeffersons', both shows that revolved around Black culture. For my first few years of schooling in Canada, I was among a handful of brown kids in a predominantly white school. My sister and I were loved by our peers and we had seamlessly blended in as far as I knew and still know looking back. I remember with such regret a sweet small-framed Indian boy sitting alone next to me and my girlfriends in the cafeteria. He leaned over and gently asked if I was Indian. I scoffed and told him "No" before I scooted closer to my friends. The little boy must have felt traumatised. What a horrible and uncharacteristic thing I did, which left me feeling really bad and confused about my sudden action. I understood many years later that not living in an inclusive world can be dangerous, harmful, hurtful and confusing. It can make you reject yourself and in turn reject others. There were no Indian influencers for me growing up. Where was the South Asian representation in pop culture during my formative years? Art plays a massive role in pop culture. Through pop culture, we shape society for better or worse. In order for art to play a role in this volatile time of hate crimes and biases, art with an agenda needs to reach the masses NOW. If art is as powerful as I and others believe it to be, then we need to get the most impactful work that people can resonate with out to the streets and subways in the form of street art and video installations - in order to create dialogue, in order to question ourselves, in order to influence new concepts and open the eyes of those who aren't "woke". Bringing the art from marginalised communities and giving those artists a platform to talk intimately about personal experiences where biases and hate affected them can touch hearts and change perspectives. Art already does that but when art can't be stumbled upon by the public, then art won't be able to reach its fullest potential in reaching those who need their hearts touched and their perspectives changed the most.

Her street art rallies for women's empowerment and for an inclusive, cruelty-free future. The Pink Lady means different things to different people

Richard Peña

Professor of Film Studies at Columbia University, where he specializes in film theory and international cinema

Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti
Photos courtesy of Richard Peña, Ulysse del Drago
Special thanks to Jeremy Willinger and China Institute (New York)

From 1988 to 2012, he was the Program Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Director of the New York Film Festival. A frequent lecturer on film internationally, in 2014-2015 he was a Visiting Professor in Brazilian Studies at Princeton, and in 2015-2016 a Visiting Professor in Film Studies at Harvard. In May, 2016, he was the recipient of the "Cathedra Bergman" at the UNAM in Mexico City, He currently hosts WNET/Channel 13's weekly Reel 13.

"The Goddess" directed by Wu Yanggong

What's the story behind your interest in films? Was it a childhood dream to carve a career in this field?

I grew up in NYC, which was even a better city for cinephiles back then than it is now. By the time I was in college I knew that whatever I did, it would involve cinema, and indeed a childhood dream was achieved when I was asked to work at the NYFF.

You helped make New York's film culture more cosmopolitan and multicultural. You have organized retrospectives on internationally acclaimed directors including major film series devoted to cinema from various countries. What were some of the biggest challenges?

I worked as a professional film programmer from 1980 until 2012 (the first 8 years were at the Art Institute of Chicago). The great majority of this time was during the "celluloid era," which meant that practically everything we screened was screened on 35mm celluloid. Back then, when I proposed a major film series to, say, the Polish government, they would have to create new, subtitled 35mm prints. That could be very expensive. Now, most restorations are done digitally, and it's much cheaper to create and ship hard drives.

Professor Richard Peña organized with the China Film Archive the first major U.S. screening for a collection of about 20 films made in the early years of China's state-run studio system

Can you share with us your curatorial philosophy and vision?

Hmmm…what I could say is that I hate "black holes" in film history. To stick with Chinese cinema: while there had retrospectives of pre-1949 Chinese cinema, and the emergence of the "Fifth Generation" shone a bright spotlight on contemporary work, there had been little work of the so-called "Seventeen Years." So I tried to see as many films from that period as possible, and learn about those years, and this eventually led to a major series on "The Seventeen Years" at the New York Film Festival in 2010.

You've been to China many times. What has impressed you the most over the years?

On a personal level, my friends. Beyond that, when you are in China you feel history happening all around you. The transformation of China from when I first visited in 1986 and now is beyond words.

"Xiao Wu" directed by Jia Zhangke

“Yellow Earth” directed by Chen Kaige

What do you think is the role of Chinese directors of the sixth and fifth-generation (such as Chen Kaige and Jia Zhangke) that highlighted periods of transitions and social changes, and what is the weight they have in sharing to the rest of the world their point of view about rural and urban China?

Work by these filmmakers and others have often challenged what we might call the “official” narrative of contemporary China. We know about China’s extraordinary economic boom; who are the victims, or losers, of that boom? To experience that we have to see XIAO WU or GHOST TOWN.

Richard Peña, former programmer of the New York Film Festival, successfully opened audiences’ horizons and introduced them to different cinemas in the world such as African, Taiwanese, South Korean, Polish, Hungarian, Romania, Arab, Cuban and Argentine

“Suzhou River” directed by Lou Ye

Richard Peña helped audiences deepen and discover classic and new directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, Pedro Almodovar, Abbas Kiarostami, Lars Von Trier, Jia Zhangke, and Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Do you think these films, with their universal language through the human emotions, while maintaining the uniqueness of the author, had helped the audience across the world to understand more about China and Chinese culture? In the era of globalization, does cinema manage to be a tool capable of preventing or stemming prejudices?

Don’t know how “universal” their language is. My sense is that the sensibilities of a Jia Zhang-ke or a Lou Ye, are close to their contemporaries around the world. The stories they tell are readily comprehensible to, say, Brazilians, because Brazilians also understand the consequences of unequal development.

In the last 40 years China has changed enormously, in numerous aspects, as well as from the point of view of film productions. As Professor of Professional Practice in the Film department at Columbia University, can you share with us what are the main reasons and curiosities of young people who approach and start studies about Chinese cinema? How have the tastes of the new generations and audiences changed over the years?

I believe that most of my students over the years in my Chinese cinema class come to the class wanting to learn more about, and understand, China—the biggest international story of the past 50 years. Ideally, they then come to recognize and appreciate the extraordinary beauty and brilliance of the films I show. Over the years, certain films have spoken more to some students than others. A film such as Wu Yanggong's GODDESS (1934) is seen now as a remarkably prescient feminist work, one that contemporary audiences can appreciate.

Can you share with us any meaningful story related to a Chinese movie, from the backstage of a festival or a conversation with a Chinese director?

Once I was having dinner with a Chinese director in Beijing, and as we were finishing he invited me to a screening of his film, a film which I knew was banned in China. I expressed my surprise that it was screening, and he explained it was being shown at a bar, on DVD. We went to the screening, and there were about 150 people there, who engaged with the filmmaker in a debate on the film which unfortunately I couldn't understand. No one seemed especially concerned that the bar would be raided. It was a bit of "theater": we'll pretend to ban your film, and you'll pretend to accept that, but of course we know you'll show the film in these semi-clandestine circumstances.

“Ghost Town” directed by Zhao Dayong

It was often pointed out that the lack of access to content was the main cause of ignorance and prejudice. But we have seen that it doesn’t work that way. What do you think of the role of platforms such as Netflix and Amazon both as promotion and for the fruition of international film and television of small and large productions on the themes of identity, diversity, and inclusion? What additional role in the times of the pandemic and the lockdown? What side effects in an every month huge expanding catalog?

This is really a complex question. I’m not a great fan of the platforms: it’s nice they contain an international assortment of films and series, but the more they produce international works, the more they flatten out and homogenize that material. Their documentaries at this point seem completely interchangeable; the platform-decreed form overwhelms whatever content. Also, what the platforms provide in terms of access, we lose in terms of the communal experience

Hao Wu

Photo courtesy of Hao Wu
Interview by Matteo Damiani

Director of the documentary 76 Days on Wuhan COVID Outbreak

Hao Wu is an independent filmmaker based in New York, author of the acclaimed documentary People's Republic of Desire and All in my Family. During the outbreak of the pandemic, the director began to think about this project, with the help of two collaborators who had full access to hospitals in Wuhan to make a documentary that would show the human aspects of this drama. The film, after a troubled genesis due to the pandemic and the international situation, has enjoyed great success at international film festivals premiering at the Toronto Film Festival in September.

Where were you, when the outbreak occurred in Wuhan, and how did you decide to make a documentary about COVID-19?

I was in Shanghai, visiting my parents and my sister's family for Chinese New Year. The day I flew to Shanghai, the government put Wuhan under lockdown. So I was in Shanghai the first 10 days of the lockdown myself. Usually as a filmmaker this type of subject matter, I would normally not approach because my past films are very character-driven. I don't like to do newsy topics because I wonder, what more can I bring to a subject if it's been well reported by news media. When I was in Shanghai, because Wuhan was put under lockdown, the rest of China went into shutdown as well. Seeing the entire city completely empty, it was like an apocalyptic movie. So it was an eerie experience. Giving that time all we could do was staying indoors and scrolling through social media, trying to understand what was happening. And noticing what was the dire situation in the early days, I was very angry just like many other Chinese people I knew at that time. So when I came back to the US in early February, a US network asked me if I wanted to make a film about this outbreak, I immediately said yes. Later on, the US network dropped out of the project, and I continued independently.

How did you select your collaborators in Wuhan? Was it difficult to stay in touch?

As soon as I started researching this film, I talked to filmmaker and reporter friends, I was introduced to filmmakers and reporters who had already started filming in Wuhan. I started talking to them online and they passed some footage to me of what they've been filming. I talked to over a dozen before I saw the footage from my eventual collaborators. As soon as I saw the footage, I was like, wow, this footage is so unique and so emotional. And so real. I started talking to them about collaborating. Throughout the collaboration during the production, basically every day after filming, they uploaded the footage using a cloud service in China. Since I had their logins I would download the footage in New York as soon as they become available. And once I review this footage, I will have a conversation with them.

How did they gain access to hospitals in Wuhan?

During the lockdown, access to the hospital was limited to medical workers, patients, and reporters. Because both of my two collaborators are reporters in China, Weixi Chen was a video reporter for Esquire China, and the anonymous is a photojournalist working for a local newspaper. Especially in the early days of the lockdown, access to the hospital was granted by each hospital. Therefore it was im-

possible to access some hospitals, like the hospital of Dr. Li Wenlaing, who was one of the early whistleblowers and later passed away from contracting COVID on his job. So this hospital, nobody could get inside. But with other hospitals, as long as the hospital chief agreed to let you in, you could potentially just get inside if you were a reporter. They just apply to the hospital, saying "we want to do the reporting here". Once we're inside, we'll have the time or energy to watch over your shoulder. So they were just like embedded inside of the hospital, they could just film as much as they want.

Can you tell us why one of the directors decided to be Anonymous?

Because while we were making this film, even though doing editing, it became clear to us we wanted to make it very human, just to tell the human stories on the front line rather than making it political. But because COVID-19 has become such a sensitive geopolitical news topic, and the way we edited our film, the way we tell our stories, first of all, we're not exactly sure how the government in China would respond to that. Secondly, on the Chinese internet, there are now more and more very nationalistic internet trolls, who attack anybody they perceived to be portraying China in a negative light. For my co-director, we credited him because he's an aspiring filmmaker. He wants to make more

films. So he wanted to get properly credited on this film. And he also lives in Beijing, he's less afraid, while anonymous because he's a local reporter based in Wuhan who has only worked for state-owned companies before, he was kind of afraid of losing his job, especially he's afraid of the threats of the internet trolls.

How did you choose the main characters?

During production, the only person we know who would become a main character is an old grandpa who suffered from dementia. We didn't know which one will be main character, or supporting character until I started editing the film, because when they were filming in the hospital, it was very chaotic. There were so many peo-

76 DAYS

ple coming and going and during the production, we actually didn't have much idea about who might be the main characters. Beginning with post-production, for a period of time, we thought maybe nobody will be the main character, but everybody will be. The film is a portrait of the people on the frontline. But then later on gradually during post-production, during editing, some people's story reappears, more frequently than others. So that's why you saw the female head nurse who wants to return the personal effects of the death to their families, and also to the male nurse who was really attentive to the patient's care. Those characters gradually emerged during editing.

Why did the two video makers from Wuhan abandon the project? How did you react? How did you manage to overcome the situation?

In March, the Trump administration struggling to contain the outbreak, started calling the virus the China virus, the Wuhan virus, blaming China, and China started to get really defensive and aggressive. China started tightly controlling the narrative. And so my two co-directors at that time became understandably nervous. They were also nervous because we had never collaborated before, we actually never met before. I've only talked to them over the internet. And I'm an independent filmmaker based in New York. There was just too much risk. So, to me, it was really devastating because I have spent so much time working with them, and I have thought so much about this project. My grandpa passed away in early March from cancer, so I wasn't able to go back to say goodbye to him, because of the travel restriction between the US and China. I just felt like I was being impacted by this COVID-19, I really wanted to, you know, make a film about this. So in the end, what I did was starting looking through the footage, trying to build a film together, and quickly cut out a rough assembly, as I showed it to my co-directors to show them that my creative intentions, were in line with theirs. My editing style kind of follow the lead of their filming style. So as soon after they watched my rough guide, they understood that our creative visions were pretty much in sync.

The documentary is dedicated to the medical staff around the world. What do you think about the wave of conspiracy theories that have swept Western social media? What is the source of this disbelief in what happens on the front lines?

I spent a lot of time reading about

past pandemics and in any pandemic, anytime, when catastrophes like this happen, it's in human nature to assign blame to some other people. We have spent so much time reading news about statistics and numbers, in some ways, I feel like a lot of people are becoming desensitized. And, also, because of the political divide in many different countries, a lot of people focused their energy and attention on the politics and the numbers around the pandemic, instead of paying more attention to the human tragedies, the human cost. I really am not in a position to comment on why they believe in these conspiracies or what they believe, but I guess it's human nature. When something like this happens, there will always be conspiracy theories.

What is your next project?

I'm developing a few projects, both documentary, and scripted projects at this time. It's hard to travel around in the US to research documentaries because of COVID-19. One of the things I'm working on is about some Asian Americans suing Harvard University for alleged discrimination, and its admission process, and this lawsuit may go to the Supreme Court later this year. I'm in early production. But like I said earlier, it is really difficult to do filming in this environment.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly called coronavirus China flu, Wuhan virus, etc. Over the year, we have seen an escalation of racist incidents, often including violent ones, against citizens who appeared to be Asian. How did this atmosphere influence the making of the documentary?

I think you watched my past films, you know my work, my goal is to tell the complexity of China not to follow some established narratives. By focusing on the human stories, by portraying Chinese people as full human beings, making tough decisions on the front lines, and ready to help each other, I guess that's my little way of combating this prevailing narrative. You know, whenever we think about COVID and China right now, it's about the criticism about its early mishandling, or the early censorship of the information there. I'm not saying those stories are not true, but that's not the whole picture. So I guess the story we were narrating in 76 days, is trying to bring humanity back to the people showing how resilient, and how courageous they are when they try to survive the long term.

Pixy Liao

The balance of power in a romantic relationships with authenticity and vulnerability

Interview by Dominique Musorrafiti
Photos courtesy of Pixy Liao

Try to live like a pair of Siamese twins II (2009),
© Pixy Liao

Born and raised in Shanghai, Pixy Yijun Liao is a multidisciplinary artist currently resides in Brooklyn, NY. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree, Pixy moved to the United States to pursue an MFA in Photography at the University of Memphis. Pixy has garnered awards and accolades for “Experimental Relationship”, an ongoing photography series she started in 2007. In her artwork, she explores the question of gender identity and women’s representation in today’s world. She restoring what is being sexualized in womanhood and shifting it into an opposite weapon. Collaborating with her male muse boyfriend, Liao dismantling relationship stereotypes. She takes a deep inspection at love relationships, often reversing the power dynamics between a man and a woman to humorous effect, and challenging the expectations imposed.

Homemade Sushi (2010), © Pixy Liao

You decided to leave a career as a designer, and inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up" you started your career as a photographer. Can you tell us about the main challenges of the beginnings? What motivated and kept you determinate?

When I went to study photography in the US, my idea of becoming a photographer was very vague. I didn't know what type of photographer I wanted to be or what type of photos I wanted to make, I just thought that I could be a photographer so that I could make work with a minimum level of other people's interference and hopefully be as rich as the photographer in the film. It took me a while to figure out what kind of photos I truly enjoy to make. I tried landscape, portraits, fashion photos and even wedding photos. Until I started making the "Experimental Relationship" project, I finally felt I was making my own photos. I enjoy it so much that I don't even think about quitting.

At the beginning of the "Experimental Relationship" series, did you have any doubts about exposing an intimate part of your relationship? What was Moro's very first reaction? Both Chinese and Japanese cultures place a strong focus on family. Have you asked yourself any questions about their possible reactions?

I used photography as an excuse to get to know Moro. So he had always been my model since the very beginning before the Experimental Relationship project. He has always been very supportive and rarely rejected my photo request. And I didn't think of the photos as exposing an intimate part of our relationship because these are staged photos, not documentary photos. When I first started making the project, we were both international students in the US. We were far away from our family and peers. I purposefully kept it a secret from our families. I don't think it was possible if I could start the same project living in Asia. It was a time that I used the advantage of living by myself in a foreign country to allow myself to grow into the person I wanted to be.

The woman who clicks the shutter (2018),
© Pixy Liao

Two Heads (2019),
© Pixy Liao

You rethought the role of the male as a muse, and you flip it with humor too. How much in the series of images is stage photography, and how much spontaneous? In some of your shoots, you are also the model. What does it mean to you?

Probably more than 90% of the image is staged. My project is concept based. I rarely do a photoshoot without having a plan first. That being said, I don't fully control every detail in the photos. I choose location, clothing, position, basic pose, but there's always room for improvising. Especially for Moro, I encourage him to improvise based on the situation I created. So his facial expression and body gestures are more of his own. When I'm in the photos too that creates more uncertainty to the photos cuz I cannot see the photo when taking it. Actually, I wasn't even sure when the photos will be taken cuz Moro is the one who takes the photos a lot of times. I think it is a performance or even a game we do in front of the camera.

Hang in there (2015), © Pixy Liao

Your images are also historical documentation of your relationship over time. Do you look at your early photos, even with the eyes of those who look at distant memories? How do you feel about reviewing certain moments or periods of the past? What do you hope viewers will understand through your images?

One gem from doing a long term project like this is that you have recorded the precious time that you have spent with loved ones. When I see my old photos, I'm always more forgiving. I found many old missed photos that are worth publishing through this. When I just take a photo of myself, I'm always very critical of the image of myself. Maybe I don't look good enough in one photo or maybe I

Her most well-known series "Experimental Relationship", which received a special mention at Paris Photo Festival, is an ongoing project that paints her long-time relationship with her Japanese boyfriend Moro

Temple for her installation (2019), © Pixy Liao

Carry the Weight of You (2017),
© Pixy Liao

Golden Mouse (2014),
© Pixy Liao

didn't pose as the way I wanted. But years later, when I look back, I would think how silly I was. The younger self will always look better. After I get past the point of my own image issue, I can discover other good things about a photo and find some missed good old images. I don't expect the viewer to understand my images in a certain way. I want them to respond to them, whether they like them or dislike them or the images make them question something. It's also an experiment on how people respond to this relationship.

Is there one of your intimate portrayals from your series that you are more connected to or that marked a significant moment or change in your relationship? Can you share with us the story behind it or any meaningful event from the backstage of the photo shooting set?

The photos do not always come out the way I envisioned because when I take photos of us together, I could only imagine how we're gonna look like in the photos. For example in the photo called "It's never been easy to carry you", there is a lot of empty space on the top part of the photo. It was not like how I planned it to be. Because Moro is quite heavy for me, his weight kept pushing me down

during the photo shoot. When I saw the scanned image, I was very disappointed because the composition is not what I wanted. But later, I realized that the photograph is actually telling the truth. The fact that he is heavy for me to carry that pushes me out of my ideal position in the photo, it's also a metaphor of our life. I always imagined myself as a strong woman, but actually a lot of the time I struggle with the burden of our relationship, just like in the photo, his body pushes me down. After realizing that, I started to like this photo and named it "It's never been easy to carry you". There's always a difference between what you desire and what you actually get. Even with all the staging, there are always things out of my control. I'm just learning to accept those.

From Shanghai to the States. You have lived in Memphis, and now you are based in Brooklyn. Which were the biggest advantages, which main differences did you notice that helped you to grow as a person and as a photographer?

I started studying photography in the US. The biggest advantage is that I live in a new environment away from my family and peers. That gave me a great space for me to grow without being interfered with. The difference between Memphis & Brooklyn is huge. Memphis is a very photo genetic city. And there are many places to take photos. When I moved to Brooklyn, the photo opportunity is much much less. But it's a great place to live as an immigrant in the US. Now, most of my photos were taken when I'm traveling.

You have been working in the world of photography and art for many years. What do you think the role of gender has in contemporary photography? Does gender still matter? Are women slowly changing art and photography?

I think gender always matters. It helps people to see things from a different point of view, a photographer's point of view. Everything about the photographer matters, his/her gender, race, cultural background, etc,. Are women changing art and photography? That's not depending on the photographers. The photographers are just making their own photos. It depends on the platforms and audience who want to see those photos. I think the world today definitely wants to see more female photographers' work or LGBTQ or BIPOC photographers' work. It's a good sign that we have a more diverse view of the art world now. I hope it's not just a trend.

In the age of social media, do you think that world cultural differences in love relationships have leveled off? Do you think that the new generations overcome prejudices and taboos more easily than those of the past? What do you think has changed since you started your project "Experimental Relationship"?

Yes. I definitely notice that people of my generation and the generation before me think about love relationships much differently than the younger generation like Gen Z. For them, it's much more common to accept the idea of gender fluidity and they don't judge people much who are in minority groups. I also know it doesn't come easily. It comes from generation and generation of people's hard work to make those "taboo" things more seen. Thinking about the artists/ people that influenced me and the people who influenced them. And it's slowly changing the world. I have been making this project for more than a decade. I just recently (in 2018) felt comfortable to show the work in public in China (in a photo festival). The response I got from the audience was encouraging. That is not something I could imagine happening 10 years ago, maybe not even 5 years ago. But it's getting ok now.

You used the "female gaze" also in other artwork, sculpture, and other processes, like A Collection of Penises, Man Bags, Soft Heeled Shoes, and Breast Spray. Are they collateral projects or somehow related to your main photography work? Are you working on something new?

Yes, my work is based on my female experiences. I think my other works are equal to my photo work. They might be not so much about the heterosexual relationship, but more focus on the female experience. I am working on a conceptual work about female leadership.

In addition to photography partners, you and Moro have together a band: PIMO. Can you tell us about this project?

Our band PIMO is a totally different story. Moro is a musician. Our roles switched to what we do in photography. We started collaborating in music in 2011. In our band, Moro is the leader. He would compose, perform, record, basically do everything, while I just sing in the band. We usually work on lyrics together. We call ourselves a toy rock band. We sing songs about our common interests in life, like cats and grandmas. You can listen to our music at pimo.bandcamp.com

It's never been easy to carry you (2013),
© Pixy Liao

"I make art based on my feelings growing up as a girl in China, and on how I feel as a woman in today's world." - Pixy Liao

What limits of your relationship did working together in photos and music projects help you to overcome, and what did it help you strengthen? Being involved in a synergetic multileveled artwork collaboration evolved your relationship?

The photo project has made us partners. This project is based on our relationship and grows with our relationship. At the same time, this project has become part of our life. In the beginning, he would just do as I said, but now he participates more. He truly understands what I'm doing and he contributes his ideas or reactions during the photoshoots. If I stop shooting for a long time, he encourages me to take photos again. The more we continue in the project, the better we know each other and trust each other. And the music project is a good balance for us. In photos, I'm the director. In music, he is the leader. For me, it's both an enjoyment and also my way of paying him back.

Interview by Matteo Damiani
Photos courtesy of Ed Shew

Ed Shew

Author Of Chinese Brothers, American Sons

Ed Shew was born in 1949 in St. Louis, Missouri (USA), the son of Chinese parents. His peasant father immigrated from Guangdong province in southern China. His mother, whose parents ran a Chinese hand laundry, was born in St. Louis' Chinatown (also known as Hop Alley), which was leveled in the mid-1960s for construction of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball stadium. Ed grew up in the city of St. Louis and is married with two sons. Moving to be closer to some of their grandchildren, he and his wife Jo Ann now live just west of St. Louis in St. Charles County, Missouri. They visited China in 2012. Ed's lasting memory is from rural southern China, witnessing the breath-taking natural scenery of the mountain-side, jade- and emerald-colored, terraced rice fields. They have been farmed for centuries and many still with plow-pulling water buffalo. In his spare time, Ed is engaged in social justice activities for his church and the community. In addition, he's a devoted fan of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team.

Where does the idea for the book come from?

Icannot say that a light bulb went off, and I was duly inspired. However, while reading about Chinese history in the United States, I unexpectedly discovered that no first-hand account describing the life of a Chinese worker of the Transcontinental Railroad has ever been found. Historians have searched this nation and the winding road back to China, to the roots of these forgotten, invisible men. Many were literate, yet not a scrap of their writing remains. Being an American of Chinese ancestry, I had heard a bit about the many Chinese migrants who toiled in perilous conditions to help construct America's first Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s. But I wanted to find out more. I decided to write a story of two brothers, Li Chang and Li Yu, who could mirror somewhat my relationship with my older and only brother, John. I also wanted to showcase the importance of food, because few other cultures are as food-oriented as the Chinese, my family included. Another element to the book is a homage to my wife Jo Ann in the form of the never-ending love story between Li Yu and his love, at first sight, Wang Wei.

How did you proceed to find information? How long did it take you to make this volume? Where did you start from?

Now with a creative impulse, and after early retirement in July 2011, with a notion to keep myself busy, and with no intention to ever publish, I decided to write a book about the Chinese experience in America. I understood that race had to be an integral part of the story of where we have been as a country, and where we need to go. One of the first things I did was to purchase a book detailing how to write a first novel in six months. Thereafter, I searched for books, videos, websites, etc. detailing: Chinese history especially in the 1850s, why the Chinese came to this new land of America and their lives as gold miners and the inhumanity of life in California. I explored life in San Francisco's Chinatown, the "why" of the Transcontinental Railroad, the railroad recruitment of the Chinese, the conquering of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and its Summit Tunnel, the Forty-Mile Desert, the Chinese strike, the Ten-Mile Day and the driving in of the Golden Spike signifying the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Slow forward to the spring of 2019, six months became almost eight years. Finally, my wife Jo Ann put her foot down. Enough with the encouragement, she ultimately

insisted I find a "professional" to look at this manuscript, an unpublished work. Shaken, I finally found someone, Graham Earnshaw of Earnshaw Books in Hong Kong. The official release date of Chinese Brothers, American Sons is June 1, 2020.

Who are Li Yu and Li Chang?

As I researched this railroad-building era, I learned more about the many Chinese who came over during the Gold Rush in the 1850s. Who knew at least 20 percent of the miners were Chinese? I didn't. I then decided to weave together a story, a historical novel, about two adventurous Chinese brothers, the eldest, slightly built Li Chang, a philosopher and peasant turned cook, and his 16-year old, muscular brother Li Yu, a peasant and would-be writer and poet. They leave their families, and Li Yu's pregnant wife, Sun Wei, in China, and come to America in 1854 in search of Gold Mountain. I wanted to create a vehicle to explore their hardships and the discrimination they faced, but also to explore their joys and sorrows, their relationship with each other, and their growing love for America even as they faced the constant pull to return to China, to the families they continued to support financially. I investigated what their hopes and dreams might have been, and took them to their opening a restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown through to the hammering-in of the Golden Spike, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. Throw in a few Chinese food references and the importance of the Chinese food culture, some preaching from a Confucian pulpit, elements of human trafficking, and a dash of a love story, and you have Chinese Brothers, American Sons. The Li brothers are somewhat based upon my brother and me. In the beginning, Li Yu looks up to Li Chang; by the end of the book, Li Chang now looks up to his younger brother Li Yu. I still look up to my brother; perhaps, he looks up to me, also. As to the Chinese railroad workers, I am grateful to have the chance to give a voice to those whose labor on the Transcontinental Railroad helped to shape the physical and social landscape of the American West. But the story does not end there, as the book's epilogue reveals.

Around 1850, China was experiencing one of its most difficult moments, including famines, rebellions, and the opium wars which created the ideal conditions for discontent and widespread despair. What did America represent for ordinary Chinese citizens?

In the midst of the discontent and widespread despair, a Canton-

ese nursery rhyme of the era expressed the collective longings of entire families and the ordinary Chinese citizen:

Swallows and magpies,
flying in glee:
Greetings for the New Year.
Daddy has gone to Gold Mountain
to earn money.
He will earn gold and silver, Ten
thousand taels.
When he returns,
We will build a house and buy
farmland.

Was there gold everywhere? On the streets, in the hills, mountains, rivers, and valleys? Gold just waiting to be picked up? That was the hope of many Chinese immigrants, many of them countryside peasants who spent their lives, generation after generation, in nonstop and backbreaking labor. In times of famine, people ate little more than a bit of rice to sustain them. Most lived and died and gained little knowledge of life beyond their village. The ordinary Chinese citizen, the inland peasant, and the coastal coolie yearned to escape from famine, and war and the tax collector. But how? Nowhere was the urgency to leave greater than in the province of Kwangtung on the southern coast. With no food and no other options, many Chinese decided to leave China for the dream of Gold Mountain. Gold Mountain was California. When gold was discovered there in 1848, a Chinese resident in California, one of the fifty Chinese there at the time, shared the news via letter with a friend in Canton. Soon the region hummed with excitement, and people talked of nothing else. If only they could reach Gold Mountain, perhaps all their problems would be solved. Most people in Kwangtung province had only a dim concept of America. Almost no one had met anyone from America or any foreigner at all. Their only perception of white people was often the rumors of blue-eyed barbarian missionaries kidnapping and eating Chinese children. But survival and a sense of adventure were stronger than the fear of the unknown. The promise of gold ignited the imaginations of the poverty-stricken people of southern China. Hope soared among the poor. They decided they could briefly go to Gold Mountain, then return rich enough to ensure a new standard of living for themselves and their families. A handful of gold might be all that was needed to start anew, to purchase some land that would free them from the tyranny of rent, to build a house, to hire tutors for their children so they could pass the imperial examinations and become Mandarins. In short, to achieve the prosperity and status that was denied them solely by their birth as

CHINESE BROTHERS, AMERICAN SONS

AN HISTORICAL NOVEL

ED SHEW

a peasant or "coolie." Frantically, men in the region of Canton decided to leave. They borrowed money from friends and relatives, sold off their water buffalo, or signed with a responsible immigration broker, called a towkay, who paid for their passage in exchange for a share of their future earnings in America. It sometimes took up to five years to repay. Knowing the young men who left for Gold Mountain might be gone for many months, if not years, the community knew it was important to bond each man to his home village. Most importantly, the purpose of his trip was to earn money to bring back home. Therefore, it was customary to marry him off to a local woman and to encourage him to father a child in the months or even weeks before he left. This step—the creation of a new family—had two purposes: an obligation for him to send back remittances, and a guarantee for him to preserve the ancestral bloodline. On coming to America, the peasants of Kwangtung province and the city dwellers of Canton were not the passive and defenseless coolies they were often portrayed to be. They were not simpletons tricked by fast-talking labor contractors and "shanghaied" onto the ships against their will. They were mostly adventurers, young men mostly in their teens to mid-20s. And they came to Gold Mountain not in fear and servility, but with the courage and boldness that inspired immigrants from Europe. The mining life, hard as it was, promised rewards. They were hoping that $200 or $300 could be amassed—enough by the standards of Kwangtung for a return home and a luxury retirement.

What were the major cultural differences that two Chinese peasants could find between China and America at the time?

China was a land where elders were respected and one's betters were revered. America, by contrast, was untamed. Anything went. Li Chang challenged Li Yu: "Cooperate with others to accomplish a common purpose. If people see they have the same goals as you, they will be on your side. And also, if you just learn a single trick, Li Yu, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of people. You can never really understand a person until you consider things from their point of view until you climb inside of their skin and walk around in it." "Our Chinese culture tells us that speaking out is rude and not knowing one's place, especially to someone in authority." But Li You learned, "Individualism is a part of American culture, and assertiveness is necessary for communicating and getting what we want." Most Americans in the 1850s had scarcely a clue what to

make of the Chinese. Prior to the Gold Rush, few Americans had ever encountered a Chinese outside the pages of Marco Polo. As a people, the Chinese were almost as exotic as aliens from another planet. The majority of Chinese, of course, were non-Christians, which made them immediately suspect in an era in America when even Catholics were eyed with suspicion. Many of the Chinese spoke little or no English, and although this by itself did not distinguish them from thousands of Chileans and Mexicans and French and Belgians in California, the Chinese language and especially the Chinese script was downright bizarre next to the speech and writing of Mother Europe. Chinese dress and hairstyle—the long pigtails, or queues—evoked endless comment, and made the Chinese easily recognizable at a distance. Their use of opium put additional distance between the Chinese and others in California while alcohol was their drug of choice. Stranger still, and more suspect, were the odd ways in which the Chinese ate food. They ate dog meat! And it was said that the Celestials devoured mice and rats, too. They refused to eat the normal diet of beans and beef that the white miners consumed. Instead, they imported food from China: dried oysters, dried fish, dried abalone, dried fruits, dried mushrooms, dried seaweed, dried crackers and candies, and an endless variety of roasted, sweet and sour, and dried meats, poultry, and pork, rice, and teas. These feasts of "Un-Christian foods" prepared by their own cooks and the brewing of barrels of tea to be served all day long in tiny cups such as "ladies see fit to use" had the Yankees imagining dark, mysterious rituals. In an era when racial thinking was unabashed and nearly universal, most whites had no difficulty classing the Chinese as inherently inferior. White miners generally viewed Chinese miners with disdain and contempt, and some with hatred. The white 49ers, as the miners were called, saw a lack of "manhood" in the men from Kwangtung province not only in their diminutive size but in the ways they dressed and bathed. In the rugged frontier camps, after work, the Chinese miners religiously washed in hot bathtubs made from whiskey kegs. "Look at them midgets, wouldja? Gettin' all soaped up like a buncha women. Yeah, those monkeys sure do smell purty with all that flower water," taunted the white miners. Without women, most miners were forced for the first time to perform all domestic chores for themselves: cooking, washing, housekeeping, and sewing repairs in their tattered clothing. Chinese men saw an opportunity in these economic activities deemed unde-

sirable by white men. Setting up makeshift restaurants to sell hot cooked food, taking care of children, and doing laundry — all services that were traditionally considered women's work — these occupations created a stereotype of the Chinese as servile that would persist long into the future.

The book takes place during a 15-year period spanning the Gold Rush and the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. How do national events reflect the fate of individuals?

These early Chinese immigrants were greeted with hatred, widespread discrimination, and even deadly violence. Chinese immigrants were viewed with suspicion as low-skilled, sub-standard cheap labor, and reviled as wholly foreign. The anti-Chinese sentiment was quickly codified into California's local and state policies during the 1850s and 1860s. In 1854, the California Supreme Court, in the most significant government action against the Chinese, ruled in People v. Hall that the Chinese were barred from testifying against whites in court. These laws restricted Chinese workers' freedoms and severely restricted the ways they could earn a living. Barred from most common jobs or owning land, Chinese workers—who were predominantly men—were forced into making it on their own doing what American men saw as women's work, such as laundry and cooking food. In the early 1860s with the country in the civil war, the discussions in California and in the halls of Congress about what to do with the Chinese had a little immediate impact on the daily life of Chinese Americans. For most of them, the right to suffrage or election to public office was the last thing on their minds; their ambition was not to be part of the governing class but to just earn a living. A turning point was the election of President Abraham Lincoln in 1861. Lincoln was adamant in his belief that the railroad was absolutely necessary, despite the naysayers arguing about who would pay for it and who would build it. The new line would encourage communities and outposts on the frontier, provide settlers with safe, dependable, and affordable passage westwards. Most importantly, it would tie the new states of California and Oregon, rich with natural resources and trade potential, to the rest of the country. A Transcontinental Railroad would bring the entire nation closer together, would make Americans across the continent feel like one person. That was what Lincoln hoped. And indeed, "Abraham's faith moved mountains," as one political pundit said. At the peak of the Civil War, with unity on Presi-

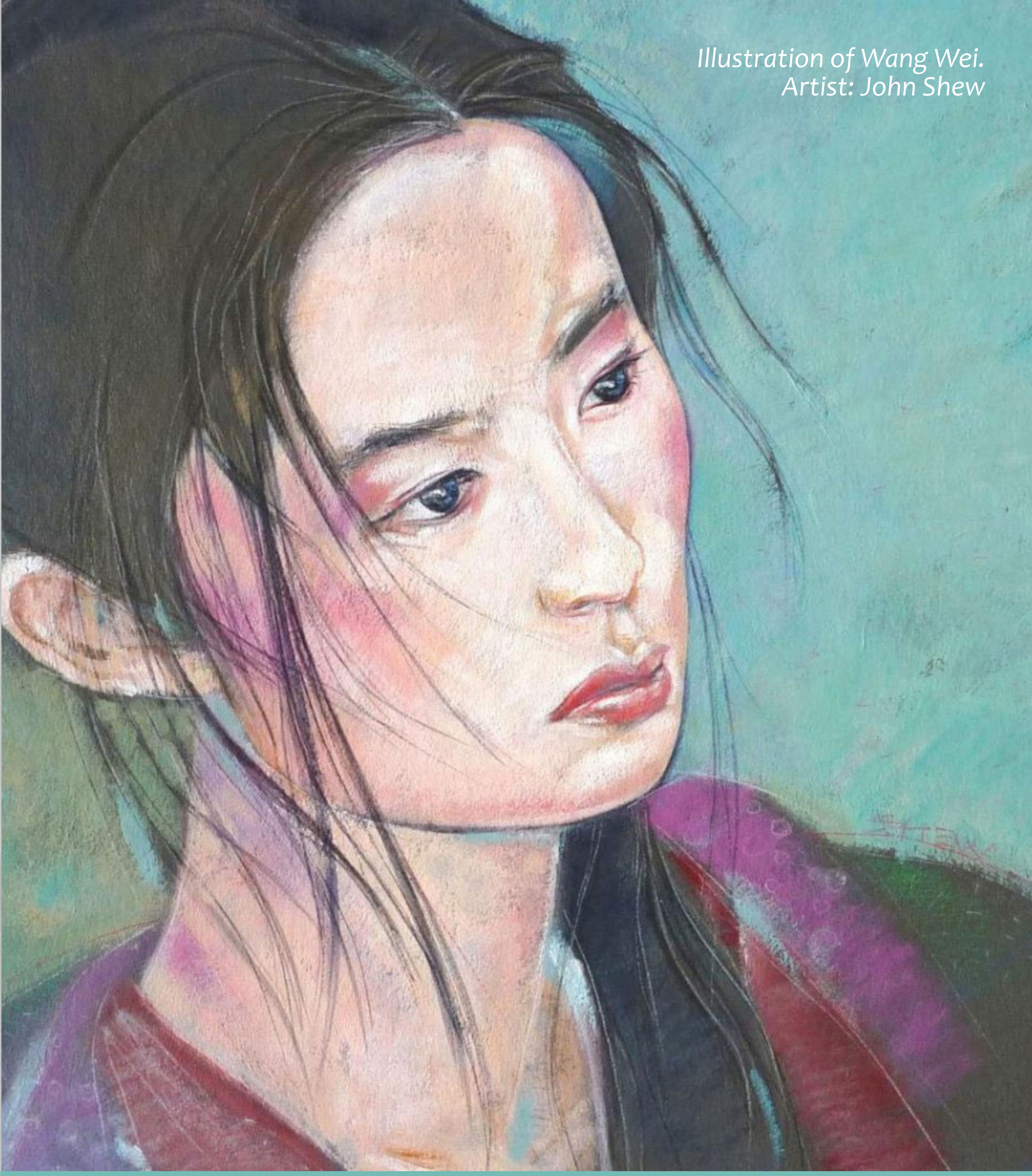


Illustration of Wang Wei.
Artist: John Shew

dent Abraham Lincoln's mind, he sought a way to connect and secure the great expanse of the nation, to make it one, from sea to shining sea. The answer was the Transcontinental Railroad. The antagonism toward the Chinese on the West Coast was not broadly reflected in the corridors of federal power. Many in Washington saw the Chinese as a valuable source of manpower. The war coincided with Lincoln's vision to construct a Transcontinental Railroad, and American capitalists, while initially skeptical, eventually eyed the industrious Chinese as labor for one of the most ambitious engineering feats in history. The prevalent view was that there were not

enough workingmen to do all the labor of building a new country. Some of the consternation came from the civil war which would decide whether or not black people would continue to work for nothing. The surrender at Appomattox in April 1865 ended the civil war and nixed the idea of using Confederate prisoners, so the Central Pacific distributed handbills all over northern California advertising for 5,000 workers immediately. White laborers came and went. The Chinese tunneled through granite mountains and laid tracks through the burning desert. Twelve-hundred lost their lives in the railroad's western construction.

In the common American historical conscience, is the contribution made by the Sino-American community clear?

The importance of the Transcontinental Railroad in American history is well-known. The completion of the railroad was transformative, shortening travel time between New York and San Francisco from up to six months to less than a week. It opened up the West to increased development, helping ensure the economic dominance of the United States into the twentieth century. However, less recognition is paid to thousands of Chinese immigrants who built it. Just how important were Chinese immigrants to the completion of the railroad? It was only after the Central Pacific Railroad failed to find enough white workers that it decided to experiment with Chinese workers. And as work on the railroad continued, other workers quit because of dangerous working conditions or left to try and strike it rich in the silver mines found along the way. Eventually, Chinese workers became the only reliable source of labor with which to build the railroad. By the time of its completion and opening on May 10, 1869, 90 percent of the Central Pacific workers who built the western part of the railroad were Chinese immigrants. In its retelling for many years afterward, the Chinese were openly discriminated against, vilified, and forgotten. Yet despite their significant contributions, the position of Chinese immigrants in the United States did not improve after the railroad was completed. Instead, with an economic crisis looming over the country in the 1870s, anti-Chinese sentiment increased and Chinese workers were scapegoated by populist politicians for various social and economic ills. Anti-Chinese sentiment eventually reached its peak with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which effectively banned all Chinese immigration and denied all Chinese (and eventually all Asian) immigrants the opportunity to gain U.S.

citizenship. It was not until the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1965 that the severe restrictions were lifted, and racial and country of origin quotas were rescinded. On his tour of America in 1879, the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson traveled to California in a third-class "immigrant" car on the Union Pacific Railroad. He grew troubled by the segregation of the Chinese railroad men in a separate car, but even more disturbing to him was the attitude of the white passengers toward those who had helped build the railroad they were traveling upon—"the stupid ill-feeling," he called it. Of these white Americans' conceptions of the Chinese railroad men, Stevenson wrote: "They never seemed to have looked at them, listened to them, or thought of them, but hated them a priori." In 1969, at the 100th anniversary of its completion then-Secretary of Transportation John Volpe praised the Americans who built the railroad, totally ignoring the contribution of the 12,000 Chinese railroad workers. "Who else but Americans could drill 10 tunnels in mountains 30 feet deep in snow?" asked Volpe in his keynote address. "Who else but Americans could have laid ten miles of track in 12 hours?" However, on Oct. 11, 2011, the United States apologized for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The resolution also apologizes for other anti-Chinese legislation enacted in the subsequent 60 years and put the Senate on record as affirming for Chinese and other Asian immigrants the same civil rights afforded other nationalities. The common man/woman on the street may not know of the Chinese contributions to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. It took a while, but the tide is turning somewhat. For example, Stanford University's Chinese Railroad Workers' Project (CRRW) has bolstered America's historical conscience, helped by the digital revolution. Material — including hundreds of 19th-century newspapers, documents, and other records — were scanned and digitized for use by scholars In the United States and China who were then able to communicate with their peers electronically, oftentimes across countries. The ongoing, years-long project also benefited from a change in atmosphere. Interest in and support for efforts to recover the history of marginalized people have grown significantly. According to the Census, there were just over 100,000 Chinese Americans in 1890. Today, there are over five million of Chinese descent living in the United States; two million U.S.-born Chinese, many of whom descended from that early wave of Chinese immigrants to California. The story of Chinese Americans is one of

overcoming exclusion and discrimination in the nineteenth century to becoming integral to American society and to the economy today.

However, there is the misconception that all Chinese in America have high-income jobs. For every physician or doctor, there is an equal number who are a waiter or a waitress. For every Information/ Technology job there is a greater number of cooks/chefs, cashiers, and sales workers when combined. Unlike the earliest Chinese immigrants who came from Taishan, a region of Cantonese-speaking Guangdong province, Chinese immigrants today are much more diverse in terms of their language, skills, and education. Many Americans still hold the view that the Chinese are taking American jobs rather than the white CEOs of American companies who are farming out its jobs to China and elsewhere. And, even prior to the coronavirus and amid these economic concerns, unfavorable opinions of China have reached a 14-year high. Today, 60% of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of China, up from 47% in 2018, according to the Pew Research Center. Native American communities, of course, were also forcibly displaced by the railroad and the westward expansion it enabled.

What was the cultural atmosphere in the first Chinese communities in America?

Tradition generally kept married women at home in China, caring for their children and their in-laws, and because single women did not travel alone, Chinatowns were largely bachelor societies. In most cultures, eating was a social as well as a nutritional experience. But food occupied an even more important place in Chinese culture, which for millennia revered its cuisine as not just biological necessity but an exalted art form. At these restaurants, lonely immigrants, mainly Chinese men forgot, if only for an evening, that they were thousands of miles from their families back home. The Chinese also opened curio stores, enticing white miners to trade gold dust for a variety of collectibles: porcelain vases, carved ivory and jade art, Oriental chess pieces, ink brush scroll paintings, fans, shawls, and teapots. As a group, the Chinese were mostly tenants, not homeowners, renting from white landlords who preferred Chinese because of their willingness to pay more than whites. For example, one house rented to a white man for $200 a month (an exorbitantly high figure at that time) went to a Chinese for $500 a month. However, a sophisticated Chinese community soon appeared with apothecar-

ies, herbalists, butchers, boarding homes, wood yards, tailors, silversmiths, bakers, carvers, engravers, interpreters, and brokers for U.S. merchants. Chinese immigrants also hungered for art and entertainment. Visiting troupes from Kwangtung province performed Cantonese operas there, performances that could last for weeks, attended by both Chinese and curious whites. At these performances, Chinese far from home lost themselves in heroic stories of the past, forgetting for a short while, for some, their demeaning roles in everyday life and how far they had to go to achieve their dreams. As Chinatowns grew, they began to be hemmed in by other neighborhoods. The streets and lanes became increasingly dark and twisted. Whites were both fascinated and repelled by the dim alleys. The alleys were home to tearooms, as well as gambling houses, where the Chinese residents spent their limited work-free hours playing Chinese games such as mahjong and fan-tan, along with dominoes, dice, and poker, which they had learned from Americans. Opium was used among the Chinese, but because of the urgent need to save money to send home, most of the newcomers took narcotics only on Sundays and other nonworking times. Supplying the lonely bachelor society with drugs and prostitutes was the province of the secret societies known as tongs. The word originally means "hall," or organization and tongs were known to exist in San Francisco as early as 1852. They also served as illicit versions of the Chinese Six Companies, offering members financial aid and protection not available elsewhere for housing and business problems.

NOTE: San Francisco's Chinatown in San Francisco, California, is the oldest Chinatown in North America and the largest Chinese enclave outside Asia. It is also the oldest and largest of the four notable Chinese enclaves within San Francisco. Since its establishment in 1848, it has been highly important and influential in the history and culture of ethnic Chinese immigrants in North America. Chinatown is an enclave that continues to retain its own customs, languages, places of worship, social clubs, and identity. There are two hospitals, several parks and squares, numerous churches, a post office, and other infrastructure. Recent immigrants, many of whom are elderly, opt to live in Chinatown because of the availability of affordable housing and their familiarity with the culture. San Francisco's Chinatown is also renowned as a major tourist attraction, drawing more visitors annually than the Golden Gate Bridge.

Alpine Decline

Photos courtesy of
Alpine Decline & Maybe Mars
Interview by Matteo Damiani

Alpine Decline is an alternative/noise rock guitar+drums duo (Pauline Mu, Jonathan Zeitlin) based in Beijing since 2010. The band relocated from Los Angeles to China attracted by the city's brimming underground music scene. During their time in China, they formed a close working relationship with a legend of the Beijing indie scene, musician and producer Yang Haisong, an unofficial third member of the band helping guide their path from Beijing back to LA in 2016. Their new album is For the Betterment of Well People.

What's the origin of the name band?

JONATHAN: Thank you for chatting with us and sharing our new music! After the last band Pauline and I were playing in broke up in a pretty fiery way in the studio, we took a 6-month break from playing music and from the LA music scene and literally spent most of that time hiding out in the high Sierra Nevada mountains. Up there I guess you could say we had what used to be called 'ecstatic visionary experiences' that we thought would be the core of our new music – kind of the reverberations of primal reality expressed through nature. But then when we came back to start writing and recording we found the concrete jungle and tangled social currents of the city infected our sense of celestial enlightenment. Less glowing heart and more iron lung. Then we realized – almost like an epiphany – that this collision of the grime and the sublime was exactly the space we wanted our music to come from. Our identity as Alpine Decline suddenly became very real and tangible to us. The name itself came as almost an afterthought at that point: a super accurate and simple name that captured this gutter-meets-the-galaxy vibe and had a nice phonetic jangle.

When did you start to get into music? How did you meet?

We are both cradle-to-the-grave musicians. Pauline and I both started playing at 4 or 5 and focused on music at the expense of pretty much everything else ever since then. When I was 20 I took out an ad in the classified section of a free LA newspaper advertising myself as a guitarist with some big Marshall amps looking for a band. Pauline was playing drums in a band that had fired their guitarist while recording their debut album and needed someone to fill in for the release tour. We played in several bands after that – for many many years just as bandmates – and then we started to feel like we wanted something different out of music than the people we were playing with. So we started hanging out together just the two of us for the first time and making weird records on the side. And then somehow we fell in love and then a few years later started Alpine Decline.

What are the main influences on your sound?

We come from a rock background: songwriting and good lyrics, live instruments, a bit of chaos and recklessness. Over the years our personal fascinations tripped through genres and artists – Paisley Underground, Dylan and Iggy, shoegaze

Yang Haisong's steadfast hand behind the dials have added a constantly expanding layer of depth and substance to the band's work, which is grounded in intensely personal digestion of the swirling cultural malaise of the day, dueling themes of lies, love, and trust, but always uplifted by a romantic, desperate mission to shape beauty from the chaotic noise around them.

and dungeon drone, Saint Julian Cope, fried jazz and ambient abstractions, girl groups and soul, Fela Kuti and the Boredoms… whatever seemed to have somehow tapped into the infinite for some quick-burning flash of inspiration. But I think we're particularly proud of creating writing and recording processes that kind of shield us from direct musical influences on our sound. When we're working on an album we're manipulating our experiences and environment to create the songs and sound, so it doesn't make any sense to say something like, "Let's give this a [NAME OF ARTIST] vibe!" That would be kind of absurd. It's more like scoring a movie we've written together in our minds and conversations with each other.

How did your sound change by moving to China?

I mentioned our writing process is centered on manipulating our experiences and environment – kind of like blasting this personal stuff through a prism and then using the separated colors to paint some stories or emotional situations that are more less specific to our particular situation and maybe a bit more exaggerated and cartoonish or cinematic. So when we moved to China – and the East 5th Ring Road of Beijing specifically – this source material changed dramatically. The physical and social environments of LA and Beijing are totally different. Our social relationships and interpersonal interactions in general had a different set of parameters. So the emotional landscape and the kinds of fears and passions and pressures and releases were all likewise different. Of course, this manifested itself in the sound itself when we planned each recording.

What are the main differences between the Beijing and LA music scenes?

Both cities are similar in that they attract some very intelligent and visionary and creative people – and you will meet some similar types of personalities in both scenes. But otherwise, these two scenes are dramatically different in so many ways. LA's music scene mirrors its geographic sprawl. It's like an absurdly massive library with no catalogue system. Hundreds and hundreds of scenes – stacked, overlapping, separated by universes. The other very important difference is the temperament of these two places is completely different. Beijing is a cold Northern city, full of long shadows and gusts of cold wind through overly massive city blocks, political by industry, with a certain sense of consequence to everything – including the music scenes. LA has a warm and bliss-

I hope people catch the message that it is through adopting a process of ritually altering your life – through any door – that you can better yourself and break beyond a reality that, frankly, is crushing all of us right now.” — Alpine Decline

ful climate – a surreal combination of mountains and beaches and deserts and technicolor sunsets – which of course seeps into the music. It's the dream factory, home of Hollywood, so for better or worse there are no effective checks on your vision, no overarching cultural standard to hold oneself to. It offers people the environment to enact a complete fantasy.

Where was For the Betterment of Well People recorded?

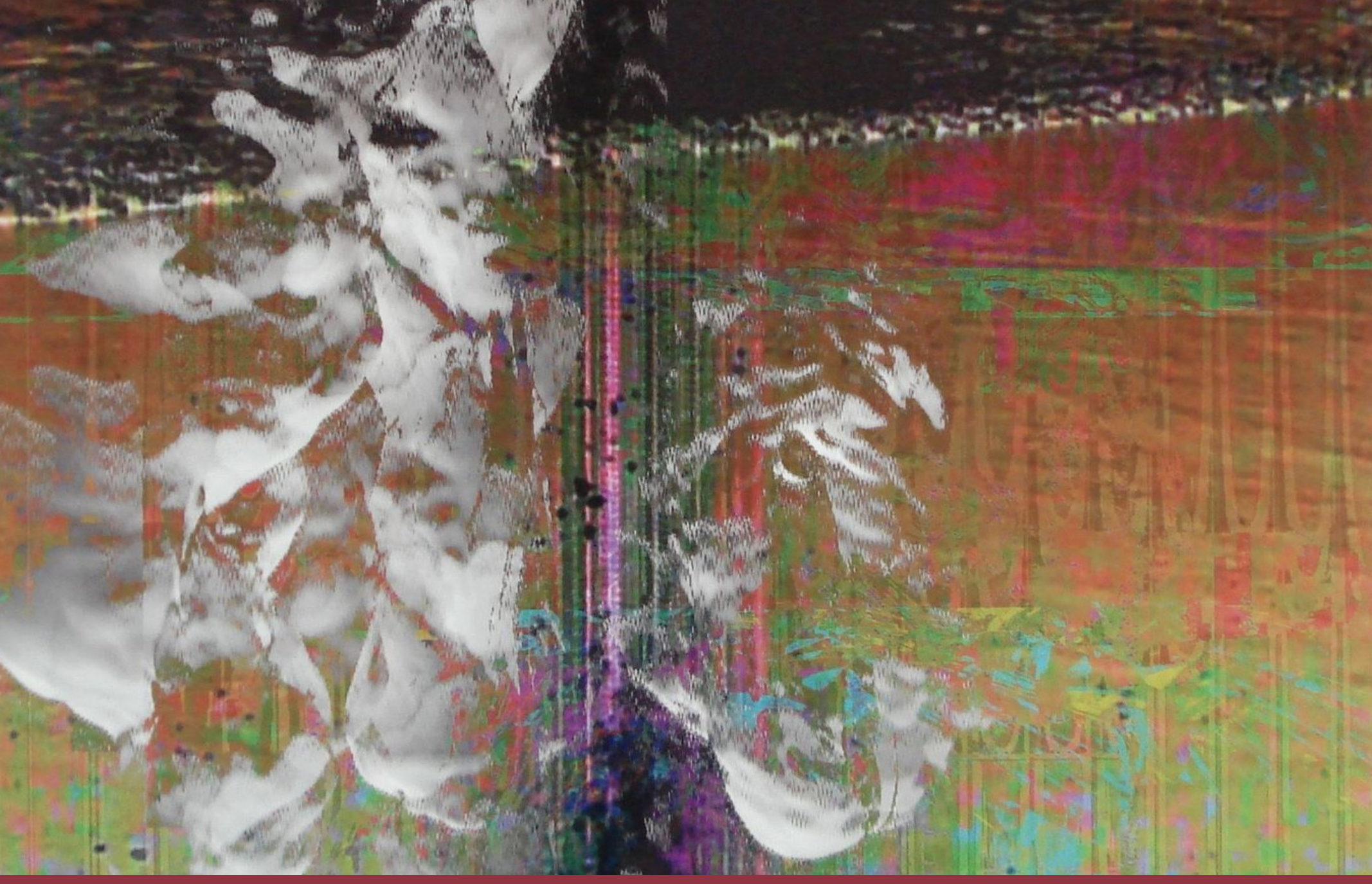
Part of the concept of For the Betterment of Well People was to build up a big band with California musician friends and take them into a big classic LA recording studio. The idea was then Pauline and I – together with Yang Haisong flying in from Beijing – would smash into this warm sunny scene with our own Stranded Star Travelers from Another Time vibe. We scouted out a bunch of amazing LA studios with strange cryptic histories and roots back to deep musical lore – Beach Boys, Pink Floyd kinda thing. We ended up choosing InfiniteSpin – a "drummer's studio" previously owned by Sheila E. In typical LA studio fashion, it was a warm wooden ark in a nondescript building. An absolutely beautiful studio where it was easy to catch sparks.

Did the COVID-19 pandemic have any influence on the sound of your album?

Actually, this album was written and recorded entirely before COVID! So on the one hand it's actually the embodiment of what we miss and craves the most during the pandemic: it's a big group of fun and talented people – musicians, producers, engineers – getting together in a beautiful studio and trying to create some powerful magic in the room. On the other hand, the subject matter of the songs is particularly relevant and applicable to this moment. Not in a prescient way about the pandemic, but on this album, we're focusing specifically on how you might break out of and redefine your reality – and the potential risks. The pandemic has made us feel like we have no agency to control our future or the society around us, but we had some big ideas about this before COVID that surface between the lines on this record.

Can you share with us a story from backstage?

Oh lord! Well in 17 years of playing shows and touring together Pauline and I have been through quite a lot. But the big secret is that backstage is rarely the place where any interesting stories happen. Before the show usually people are either



trying to get a little bit of sleep or get loaded to break the boredom of touring and get up emotionally for the performance. Afterwards it's usually rare to want to hang out backstage when you have precious few hours to blast out into the city for some fun or release before the wheels start turning the next morning. HOWEVER: I'll admit sometimes the efforts to get up for the show lead to good dirt for a rock tell-all memoir — some crazy story like taking too much acid, stealing 4 gallons of milk from the venue kitchen, pouring them out on the dressing room floor and laying down and making "milk angels" (like snow angeles, but with milk, get it?), and then playing a set that was either 1 song for 10 hours or 10 songs in 1 minute. But usually, nothing interesting happens backstage. Trust me.

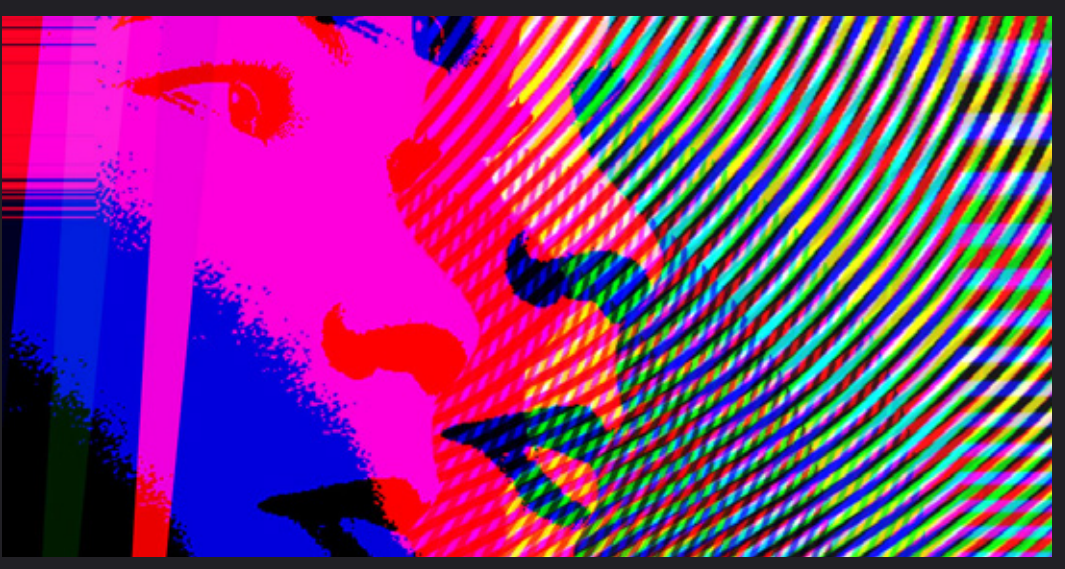
What's your next project?

While quarantining during the pandemic we bought a polyphonic synth called the Waldorf Blofeld, and at some point, we started making up this imaginary new female-fronted band called Today's Kids. We then started recording an imaginary album for them, made entirely with the Waldorf Blofeld, called "Where's Waldorf?". It was just some cabin-fever dream, but now these files exist on our hard drive, so maybe it will come out in some form in the real world. But otherwise, we have begun writing our next Alpine Decline record, which we envision as another big beautiful collaborative magical effort. We'll be ready when the curtain lifts on this pandemic and we can do what we do best again.

PLANET CHINA 12 – STOP HATE, Stand against racism and violence. Exclusive interviews with Julia Chang Wang, Michelle Yang, Popo Fan, Melodie Zhao, Jessica Chou, Mimi Choi, Jingyi Wang, Tina Fung, Si Jie Loo

PLANET CHINA 11 - Celebrating women who push boundaries. Muna Tseng, Shu Lea Cheang, Nona Mock Wyman, Elaine Yan Ling Ng, JuJu Chan Szeto, Shirley Dong, Siu Tin Chi, Tella Chen, Michelle Hong, Denise Huang, Chen Li, Denise Tam, Shuling Guo, Zoie Lam, Chia-Chi Yu, Zihan Yang

PLANET CHINA 10 - Liu Bolin, Zhang Chong, Janice Wong, Alice Poon, Huichi Chiu, Jiannan Wu, Yulong Lli, Heng Yue, Jumping Goat, Katherine Lee



PLANET CHINA 9 - Celebrating women who push boundaries. Li Jingmei, Sissi Chao, Jill Tang, Xing Danwen, Shirley Ying Han, Echo He, Xia Jia, Xue Mo, Meng Du, PeiJu Chien-Pott, Jiayu Liu, Qu Lan, Tiffany Chan, Xiong Jingnan, Gia Wang, Chen Jie

PLANET CHINA 8 - Guobing Yang, RongRong & Inri, Hilda Shen, Zhang Bo, Zhang Chong, Wang Wen, Chen Donfan, Gan Jianyu, Webson Ji, Frode Z. Olsen, Yale Yuan Shifu

PLANET CHINA 7 - Matt Chen, Ken Chan, May Chow, Li Dong, Yu Bo, Jeremy Pang, Taozi, Michelle Lau, Cherry Li, Lee Xin Li, Piero Kuang Sung Ling

PLANET CHINA 6 - Interviews with Hao Wu, Badiucao, Margaret Sun, Elsbeth Von Paridon, Yafei Qi, Eric Fish, Zhang Yang, Hannah Li, Song Wen, Michael Pettis

PLANET CHINA 5 – Interviews with The Chinese LGBTQ community in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and abroad. Interviews with Helen Zia, Joanne Leung, Shanghai Pride, Beijing LGBT Center, PFLAG China, Lin Zhipeng (No. 223), Simon Chung, Lucie Liu, Chen Chen, Lin Junliang.

PLANET CHINA 4 – Interviews with Zhang Huan, Manya Koetse, Jeremy Tiang, Michael Standaert, Rebecca F. Kuang, Lisk Feng, Herman Lee, GuiGui SuiSui, Lance Crayon

PLANET CHINA 3 – Interviews with Wang Xiaoshuai, Stefano Boeri, Li Wei, Hui He, Yan Hua Wang, Boris Wilensky, Hua Dong [Re-Tros], He Sen, Ming Youxu, Josh Summers

PLANET CHINA 2 – Celebrating women who push boundaries. Interviews with Anita Wong, Helen Feng, Zhuo Dan Ting, Min Liu, Qin Leng, Thierry Chow, Tang Min, Yang Ruiqi, Augusta Xu-Holland, Chiara Ye, Matina Cheung, Heanney McCollum, Elle Lee

PLANET CHINA 1 – Interviews with Jia Zhangke, Daniel Lee Postaer,William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux,Robert G. Price, Shadow Chen, Guoke, Chi Wang, Ben Randall, Kevin Tallon, Duran Levinson

China Under Ground