

CHOOSING TO BE THE HERO, THE JOKER, THE VILLAIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR DONG

Oliver Wang



Arthur Dong, circa 1970.

The son of Chinese immigrants, Arthur Dong got his start in filmmaking at San Francisco's Galileo High School in the late 1960s. His breakthrough came over a decade later when he shot a short black-and-white film about his mother, *Sewing Woman* (1982). Its Oscar nomination in 1983 for Best Documentary Short helped launch Dong's career, and over the next thirty-five years he's become a prominent documentarian in both Asian American and queer cinema.

Dong's filmography covers three broad areas of interest. His early work, including *Sewing Woman*, focused on the experiences of first-generation Chinese immigrants to the United States. Three of his early shorts formed what he now describes as "the Toisan Trilogy," named after the linguistic

region of China from which his family and other immigrants in the Bay Area originally emigrated. These films were pivotal in shaping early directions for Asian American independent cinema in the 1980s, especially in terms of highlighting the distinct personal and familial stories of different Chinese immigrant communities.

His first feature documentary, *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* (1989), looked at the lives and legacies of Chinatown nightclub performers in both San Francisco and New York. Despite the popularity of these nightclubs, the performers and their stories had largely been invisible, even within Chinese and Asian American communities, and even more so in mainstream American media. In 2007, he picked up this focus on Asian American entertainers again by releasing *Hollywood Chinese*, an exploration of the representations of the Chinese in the American movie industry as well as the contributions of little-remembered filmmakers and actors of Chinese descent. Dong has subsequently turned both films into photography books. In 2015, he released *The Killing Fields of Dr. Haing S. Ngor*, a feature profile of the late Cambodian American actor who escaped the Khmer Rouge in the seventies.

Finally, Dong is widely recognized for his pioneering documentaries examining the LGBTQ community, including *Coming Out under Fire* (1994), which looked at the lives of gays and lesbians in the U.S. military during the era before and up through "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies, and *Licensed to Kill* (1997), which saw him traveling to prisons to conduct interviews with perpetrators of antigay violence. Dong has been pivotal in using his work to bridge Asian American and LGBTQ communities through collaborative screenings and similar efforts.

This interview was conducted with Arthur Dong at his home in Silver Lake, a residential area of Los Angeles, in early October 2019.

OLIVER WANG: Arthur, your last documentary, *The Killing Fields of Dr. Haing S. Ngor*, about the late Cambodian American actor, was released in 2015.

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Since then, you've redirected your energies into books adapted from two of your earlier films. What's driven your change of direction?

ARTHUR DONG: My childhood ambition was to be a film historian. This goes back to my very early teens. We're talking about the sixties! Being a film historian then was uncommon. I could count on two hands the film history books I found available. I remember receiving one full of pictures, [C. W. Ceram's 1965] *Archaeology of the Cinema*. My sister gave it to me as a birthday present, and I treasured it. Through the decades, I've seen more coffee-table film history books coming out—but none about Chinese Americans in Hollywood. That was one of my motivations to do this.

WANG: What does the book version of *Hollywood Chinese* accomplish that is different from what the film could do?

DONG: In a film, I'm limited to ninety minutes, which is the attention span of most viewers. But in the book form, you can open the page and stay with an image for as long as you want and really study it. That's what I've done for decades: study these images, the details. In my book, there are certain photographs that are cropped, really focused, because I wanted people to see the details that I'm seeing and not miss them.

WANG: If your childhood ambition was to be a film historian, how did you end up becoming a filmmaker instead?

DONG: By accident. This was the late sixties, and the independent movement for filmmakers in San Francisco was just starting. My high school art teacher, Rob McConnell, took a course on how to teach film in high school. That was a very radical idea back then. One day, he called four of us and said, "I have a special project for you. I'm going to have you make a film. And Arthur, you're going to be the director." That's how I started my film career.

WANG: What did you end up making?

DONG: One of the students in our class, Leland Wong—he's a community artist now—was in a lion-dance troupe, so I went up to him and said, "Let's film your troupe going around Chinatown during the Chinese New Year festivities." That became the film *Dance of the Lion*. It won a couple of awards, which was very unusual back then, because awards for young filmmakers was really a new idea. From there, I made my next film, *Public*, on my own. It was an animated, five-minute film about social

oppressions and mores. That really pushed me over the edge into filmmaking.

WANG: You grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown. In the introduction to *Hollywood Chinese*, you write that there were five different movie theaters in the neighborhood then. Were any of them a main haunt of yours?

DONG: All of them, really. When I look through my collection of movie-theater fliers—I have about eight hundred—I have memories of all of them. The lobbies served as playgrounds for the kids. It was free babysitting, because kids always got in for free. The parents got to see the movies and crack watermelon seeds, and the kids got to play. I played once in a while, but I really wanted to see the movies.

WANG: Unlike many other Asian Americans, because you lived in Chinatown, you grew up watching Chinese films starring people who looked like you. What impact did that have on your identity and imagination?

DONG: It told me that our experiences ran the gamut. You could choose to be the hero, the joker, the villain—it was all there. It wasn't like I was only given images of myself as a wicked person. The whole range of emotions was given to me on the screen with Chinese characters. Now, these were all Chinese characters, not Chinese American.

WANG: Was that distinction important to you back then?

DONG: I don't believe I ever went to those movies and thought to myself, "That's not a Chinese American." Stories are stories, and when I saw those stories, conflicts, characters, resolutions, figuring out life, those were our stories. They were human stories.

WANG: You must have seen the original film version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song* [Henry Coster, 1961], which was based on the novel by the Chinese American author C. Y. Lee and is set in San Francisco's Chinatown. What did you think of it?

DONG: To see the film in a Chinatown setting with a Chinese audience was just wonderful. I had no qualms about it. I know some critics do, but you have to remember: I grew up on Hollywood musicals, which are total fantasies, make-believe. It was a revelation to see my neighborhood represented and see how Hollywood would treat it. I knew



Singer Larry Ching with nightclub performers in *Forbidden City, USA*.

it wasn't "real-real," but in the end, I thought it was a great story about immigration and assimilation. Looking back, I think it was a very radical film, while acknowledging that some may have problems with it.

WANG: *Flower Drum Song* also lies between two of your documentaries: *Hollywood Chinese*, which partially explores how Hollywood has represented Chinese Americans, and its predecessor, *Forbidden City, USA*, which looks at the Chinatown nightclub scene, also depicted in *Flower Drum Song*. What is it about those communities of entertainers, onstage and on-screen, that you're compelled by?

DONG: They're outsiders fighting the system: sometimes they win, sometimes they lose, often something in between. *Forbidden City, USA* was totally about rebels. Race was part

of the fight, the obstacle that these artists had to confront and overcome—or not overcome. It was the same with *Hollywood Chinese*, which is about working in this industry, how that was navigated by film artists, and whether they were successful or not.

WANG: In terms of how you navigated the industry yourself, I'd like to return to your now-classic documentary, *Sewing Woman*. It was about your mother, Zem Ping Dong, and other seamstresses like her. What gave you the idea to make this film?

DONG: I was in my last two years, finishing up at San Francisco State's film department. I was also working part-time at the Employment Development Department in Chinatown, interviewing applicants, helping them find work. A lot of them were sewing women. I had never talked to my mom

about her story, but I talked to all these other sewing woman about coming to America and their struggles.

One of the courses I was taking was cinematography, and I wanted to practice using a camera but everybody had taken the fancy ones. But there were all these World War II cameras—Bell & Howell DR-70s—that no one wanted because they were old, with turret lenses. I checked one out and went to my mom’s sewing factory, where I was brought up as a child. I just took shots. The workers didn’t care; it was just Arthur with a toy.

I brought it back to my instructor and we looked at the footage. Because I had used high-grain film stock, it had this rough, raw feel about it, and it was gorgeous. I thought, “Well, I gotta do something with this,” and somewhere along the line I thought, “I’ll make a movie about my mom.”

WANG: What did she think of this idea?

DONG: When I told her she said, “Oh, no no no, you’re not gonna have my face up there for all of the people to see.” Also, at that time, the unions were trying to [organize] the sewing factories and there was media coverage about the working conditions. So that didn’t help me, either, because the owner was upset: “What? You’re going to show our factory?” I mean, she was a friend, too. They were all my friends, they were all my “aunties.” And my mom said, “I’m not going to sit down for an interview.” What was I going to do?

My sister said, “Use a voice-over, I’ll write a story.” And my father, who was more sympathetic, said: “Why don’t you just use photos from the family albums?” And then my brother had footage of his wedding that he let me use. Everybody helped, but no one told my mom. It was so bad! My ethics were just really screwed up, but I had to graduate. It took me ten years to get my degree and, you know Chinese parents, they want you to have a degree, right? So I said, “Well, I’m doing this for her.” That was my rationale.

WANG: At some point she had to find out, though.

DONG: I did say to myself, I would show the film to her and if she didn’t like it, I wouldn’t show it again. I had to borrow a projector, bring it to my parents’ home, put up a sheet, and show the film to her, with my brother-in-law translating in her ear. After the film was finished, she just ran to the bathroom and she was crying.

WANG: Did you interpret that reaction as positive or negative?

DONG: It was okay. I really knew it was okay when the videotape version came out. Every time a relative came over,



A family photo in *Sewing Woman*.

she would put the video in the VCR and say, “This is a movie my son made about me.”

WANG: You started the 1980s with *Sewing Woman*, which is somber and contemplative, but ended the decade with *Forbidden City, USA*, which had so much verve. Looking back, *Forbidden City, USA* made for a tonal contrast, not just from your earlier films but also compared with other Asian American, social-issue documentaries of that era.

DONG: I believe that everybody has their own story, and their own way of telling it, but by the time 1985 came around, I was just tired of the serious issue films. I wanted a little glamour and song and dance because I’m a lover of Busby Berkeley and all the Warner and MGM musicals. That’s why I really latched on to *Forbidden City, USA*. Because it was sexy, it was glamorous.

I remember talking to an [Asian American media] person and showing her some images of the entertainers I thought were exciting. She really disliked them, saying, “This is exactly what we’re trying to fight, the exotic image.” And I felt, “My goodness.” That’s what I was tired of: not having fun, not embracing fun. And for me, as someone who’s interested in image history, I felt that [attitude] wasn’t acknowledging

and honoring the history of the entertainers, their experience, their stories. I knew them. I knew they were rebels.

WANG: When you first started making films, the concept of Asian American cinema was still in its infancy. Your work became formative within that movement. Did you set out to make “Asian American cinema” back then?

DONG: I’m not sure where I fit in with all that, if I fit in at all. I suppose that I do?

WANG: I’m surprised to hear you say that! As someone who used to teach Asian American cinema, I always considered your work part of “the canon.” Why don’t you think you fit in?

DONG: It comes from when I started making films about gay issues. The Asian American community and film festivals embraced *Sewing Woman* and *Forbidden City, USA*. But when I made *Coming Out under Fire* [about gay and lesbian soldiers in the U.S. military], which was my first gay film, I thought these same festivals would embrace that, too. But no. They said, “This doesn’t fit into our mission statement.” I’d say, “But your mission statement says your festival’s for Asian American filmmakers, and I’ve been one for my last two films, so why all of a sudden am I not?”

WANG: How did you resolve that?

DONG: This question of whether I’m “Asian American” or “gay” actually started with *Forbidden City, USA*. The Center for Asian American Media [CAAM] was still called the National Asian American Telecommunications Association [NAATA] back then. They wanted to use the film for a benefit premiere gala. This was 1989, so I said, “That’d be great, but you need to partner with a gay Asian American group. That’s my requirement.”

It was near the height of the AIDS epidemic, and I felt the Chinese American and gay communities needed to be working together more. The Chinese American community was largely not supportive of what was going on with the AIDS crisis. I wanted to push this, I wanted to encourage them to get together. I wanted the word “AIDS” to be mentioned at the gala and on the program. And it was great because NAATA said, “Yeah, let’s do this.”

WANG: *Coming Out under Fire* ended up having its San Francisco premiere as the closing-night film at the Asian American Film Festival in 1994, and I think it was a collaboration between both NAATA and Frameline?

DONG: We had just come from winning an award at Sundance, and it was very unusual for an Asian American back then to win an award at Sundance. So there was excitement about *Coming Out under Fire*, and Frameline, the gay film festival up there, had wanted it. I wanted NAATA to be part of this, so I approached them and said, “I would rather this be a collaborative effort to premiere this film in my hometown. I want it to be at the Castro [Theater]. I want to see Asian Americans driving or taking the MUNI to the Castro, and going into the Castro Theater, and seeing a film about gay issues by an Asian American filmmaker they respect.” I also wanted it to be in collaboration with Frameline because I wanted people to see that I’m in both communities.

It’s not an unusual scenario today, but back then it was, well, “Whoa.” But it worked. It was a totally sold-out event. It was really great—one of the highlights of my life. But why did I have to push for that? Well, because someone had to say, “Hey, we’re not homogenous. We have different parts of us [the community] which become a sum total of our whole.” I wanted the Asian American community to recognize that.

WANG: One last thing. You were approached by the new owners of the Formosa Cafe in Los Angeles, which had been a famous bar during Hollywood’s Golden Era. You ended up curating a “Hollywood Chinese” exhibition in the bar’s back room. How did that come about?

DONG: It was through a very sweet email from one of the designers working there. They were remodeling the back room and thought it would be a good idea to include photographs of some Chinese American actors. One of the owners was a big fan of my *Forbidden City, USA* book, and he suggested that someone contact me.

I was apprehensive, because there’s a certain level of appropriation of Chinese culture in what the [original] Formosa Cafe was, just like Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. I wasn’t sure whether or not I wanted to be part of that. It was a real creative challenge for me as well, because I’d never created an exhibition in a bar. But I thought, “What an interesting challenge to be able to try to tell a story about the Chinese in Hollywood, in a watering hole where I had questions about the decor.”

WANG: Moving through the café to reach your exhibit is a surreal experience because, while your movie lobby cards and stills might visually echo some of the kitsch Orientalist fantasia of the front half, the content of your images is rooted in actors’ actual

lives and careers. What was especially powerful is the fact that the entire bar is lined with actor headshots, but in the front the faces are overwhelming white, whereas in the back there is your collection of headshots of Asian American actors. There's something very subversive about how your exhibit challenges the whiteness of Hollywood that you see represented in the front of the bar.

DONG: That's why I took the job! In my films, I look at social issues, political issues, but explore them through human drama so the audience gets hooked into the emotional journey of the characters: the journey they go through, the conflicts they have to overcome or not overcome. I want to discuss and dissect social issues, but I don't want to be didactic about them.

I wanted diners at the Formosa Cafe who were there for a couple of drinks, celebrating a birthday or whatever, to say, "What's going on here?" They suddenly look up and realize that they are surrounded by Asian faces, and it might startle them into a realization that they're seeing something different than what they saw at the front of the restaurant.

That's why I took the challenge. In this space, how can I tell a story that might say something to its patrons, whether they want to hear the story or not? They're going to be faced with these images that I'm going to put together. How am I going to tell the story I want to tell? The exhibit's subversiveness is very much in line with what I've always done.