

Finding KUKAN

Viewer's Guide



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USING THIS GUIDE

This screening guide is a tool to facilitate dialogue and deepen understanding of the complex issues and themes explored in the feature documentary *Finding KUKAN*. This guide is not meant to be a comprehensive primer on a given topic. Rather, it seeks to give context and raise questions that encourage viewers to think more deeply. We provide sources for further exploration of key topics, as well as sample questions to prompt group discussion and individual research.

Visit the Finding KUKAN website to purchase the film or for more information: findingKUKAN.com



Li Ling-Ai and Rey Scott in front of the Clay Theatre at the San Francisco premiere of *KUKAN*, 1941 (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

FILM SUMMARY

KUKAN, a landmark color film that revealed atrocities of World War II China to audiences around the world, was the first ever American feature documentary to receive an Academy Award® in 1942. But for decades it was considered a lost film with no copy known to exist. When Robin Lung discovers a badly damaged film print of the “lost” *KUKAN*, she pieces together the inspirational tale of the two renegades behind the making of it -- Chinese American playwright and activist Li Ling-Ai and cameraman Rey Scott. In the process, Lung shines a revealing light on the saga of Chinese in America and the long history of racial and gender discrimination behind the camera. *Finding KUKAN* is both a personal film about a fourth-generation Chinese American digging into her own culture and a wide-ranging exploration of decades of history between China and the United States.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I started this film project in 2008 as a way to bring greater visibility to an inspirational Chinese American woman – the kind of woman I longed to see more of in mainstream media. At the time, I knew very little about the history of U.S./China relations or the experiences of Chinese Americans living in early 20th century America under the prejudicial Chinese Exclusion Laws. So I was lucky to discover Li Ling-Ai in 2009. Even though she died in 2003, Li Ling-Ai spent her whole life promoting China and documenting her Chinese American roots. By tracking her story, I learned a lot about my own Chinese American heritage and ended up taking my first trip to China in 2014. The seven-year process of bringing Li Ling-Ai's story to the screen has enriched and empowered my life in many other ways. I hope that *Finding KUKAN* will open similar doors of discovery to viewers of the film and inspire them to document their own histories, so that those stories can live on to inform and inspire future generations.

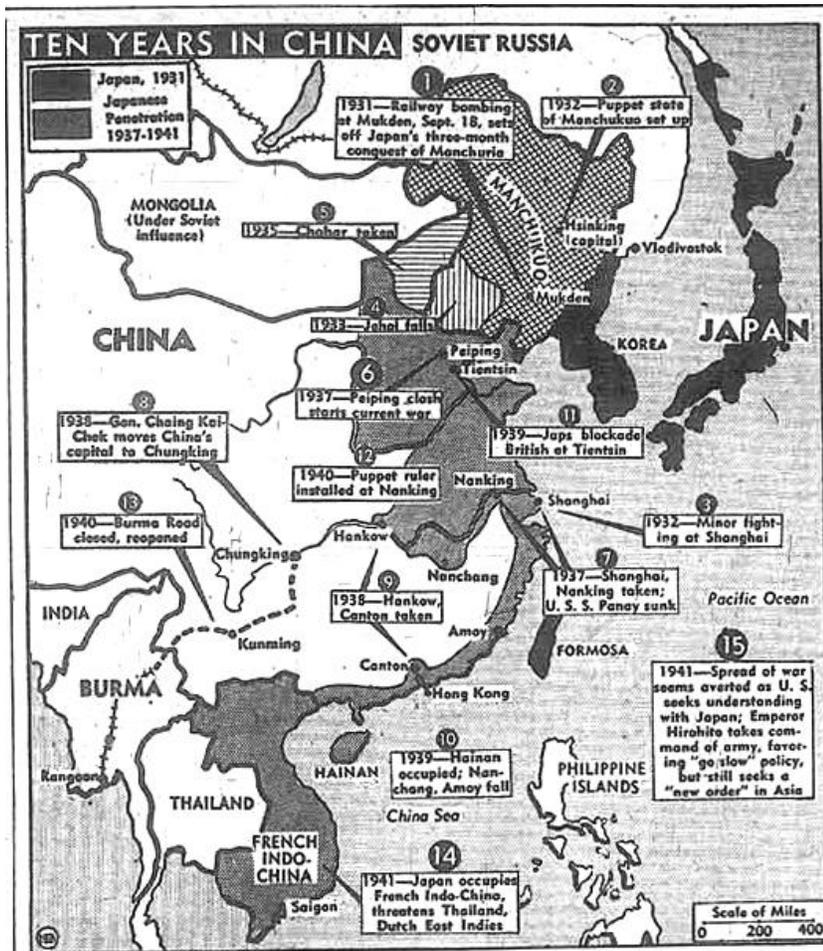


Director Robin Lung with portrait of Li Ling-Ai by Michelle Scott (photo credit: Michelle Scott)

KUKAN'S PATH TO SUCCESS

In 1937 Li Ling-Ai, a Chinese American playwright from Hawai'i, knew nothing about making movies. Rey Scott, an adventurous photojournalist from the Midwest, had never held a motion picture camera. They had no financial backing from Hollywood or the U.S government. Yet together they created *KUKAN*, an epic color film about China at war that would become the first American documentary feature to receive an Academy Award. What drove Li Ling-Ai and Rey Scott to make *KUKAN*, and how did the film achieve such success?

In the 1930s China was a vulnerable new republic with several political factions vying for control of the country. In 1931 Japan took advantage of China's weakness by invading and capturing the northeast Chinese province of Manchuria, adjacent to Japan's colony, Korea, and an area rich in natural resources. The invasion sparked a patriotic reaction amongst overseas Chinese. Second-generation Chinese Americans like Li Ling-Ai looked for ways to help China. Many of them, including four of Li Ling-Ai's older siblings, moved to unoccupied China after graduating from American universities, seeing more opportunity in China than the United States.



When full-blown war broke out between China and Japan in 1937, the United States government did not intervene to provide direct aid to China initially. Although many American political and military leaders were alarmed by Japanese aggression in China, the majority of American people had no desire to enter another war. They were still recovering from the Great Depression and stinging from the loss of lives suffered in World War I. However, an active and influential pro-China lobby formed in America made up of Chinese and non-Chinese alike. China Aid groups formed across the United States in the late 1930s. Their purpose was to raise funds for humanitarian aid to China and lobby the government to impose sanctions against Japan.

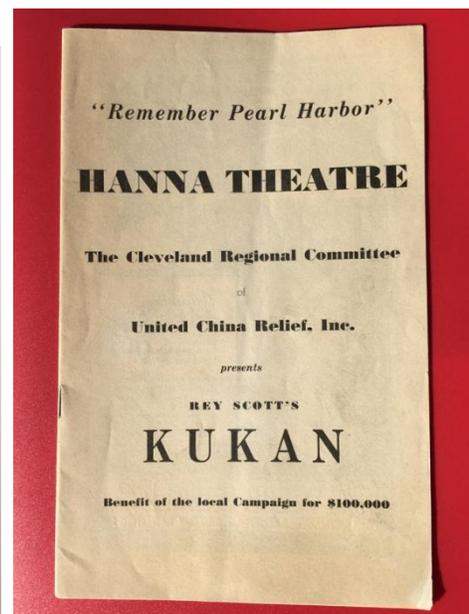
Map showing Japanese expansion before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Published September 17, 1941 in San Luis Obispo Tribune.

Li Ling-Ai and Rey Scott found enthusiastic audiences for the photographs and movies that Rey brought back from the four trips he made to China from 1937 to 1940. Television was not available and moving images of China were rarely seen in the United States.

In 1941 many of the China aid groups consolidated into the umbrella organization known as United China Relief (UCR), which was spearheaded by Time/LIFE media mogul Henry Luce. Since *KUKAN* portrayed a wide variety of China's citizens in a positive light and clearly depicted the brutality of the Japanese military machine against them, UCR used *KUKAN* in fundraising efforts and helped raise the film's profile after it premiered in New York City on June 23, 1941.



Souvenir brochure sold at *KUKAN* screenings in 1941 to benefit United China Relief (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)



Program for December 12, 1941 Cleveland screening of *KUKAN* (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and America's official entry into World War II, Americans became even more interested in China since the two countries were now allies against a common enemy. America's entry into World War II also contributed to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Science's decision to create a new category for documentary films and helped pave the way for *KUKAN* to receive a special Academy Award® in February 1942. Li Ling-Ai's personal charisma also played a role in *KUKAN*'s success. Her beauty and speaking ability attracted press and endeared her to audiences.

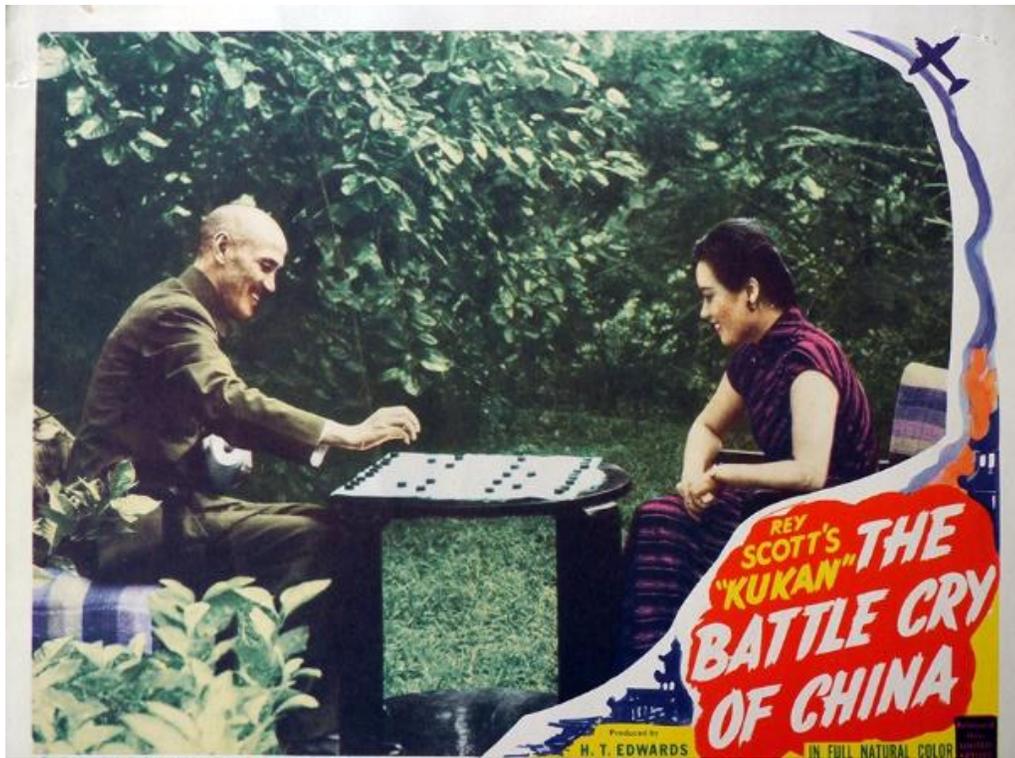


Miss Li Ling-Ai works for China

Li Ling-Ai has, in her many anti-China activities, directed Bowl of Rice parties for the benefit of United China Relief, and served as technical adviser of "Kukan," Rey Scott's current colour film

Full page photo of Li Ling-Ai in Vogue Magazine, August 1, 1941

Li Ling-Ai's public relations role on *KUKAN* typified a new kind of agency that many other Chinese and Chinese American women exhibited during World War II as demand for their skills and labor increased. One of the most notable examples of this was Soong Mei-ling, the fashionable, English-speaking, Christian wife of China's leader Chiang Kai-shek. Soong Mei-ling greatly impressed the American public with her intelligence, beauty, and charm. *KUKAN* footage and publicity materials feature her image prominently. In 1943 Soong Mei-ling toured America to seek more aid for China. Acting as a stand-in for her non-English speaking husband, she drew crowds as large as 30,000. She was the first Chinese national and the second woman to address both houses of the US Congress and was called "the most powerful woman in the world."



Lobby card for United Artists release of *KUKAN* featuring Chiang Kai-shek & Soong Mei-ling (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

KUKAN: The Secret of Unconquerable China was originally 90 minutes long (including a 5-minute intermission) and was distributed to major U.S. cities on 16mm film by the small New York City company Adventure Films. In April of 1942 United Artists acquired the film for broader distribution, and in August 1942 they released a 63-minute version on 35mm known as *KUKAN: The Battle Cry of China*. By blowing the film up to 35mm United Artists was able to book *KUKAN* in more theaters, and the film screened widely across America and Canada through 1943. But the film fell into obscurity after World War II ended, and film historians considered it a “lost” film for decades.

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NOTES ON LI LING-AI

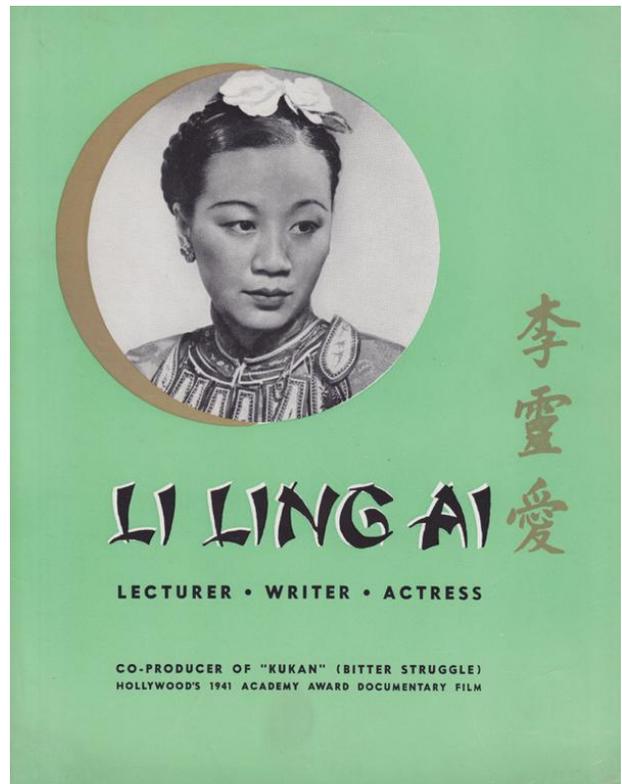
Born in Hawai‘i on May 19, 1908, Li Ling-Ai, or Gladys Li as she was known by her family and childhood friends, was the sixth of nine children and grew up in an unconventional household. Her parents were among the first Chinese doctors practicing western medicine in Hawai‘i during the late 1800s. Her mother Kong Tai Heong was raised in a Lutheran orphanage in Hong Kong and became a devout Christian. She was a popular obstetrician in Hawai‘i and kept a busy professional practice while raising nine children.

Li Ling-Ai’s father Li Khai Fai was a principled physiologist who was vilified by many Chinese for reporting one of the first bubonic plague cases to the authorities in 1900, resulting in the burning of the entire Honolulu Chinatown district and the forced quarantine of all its inhabitants. James C. Mohr calls the 1900 Chinatown fire “the worst civic disaster in Hawaiian history” next to the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Despite criticism, Li Khai Fai never wavered from his outspoken convictions. He helped found one of the first Chinese language newspapers in Hawai'i and the Mun Lun Chinese language school that still exists today. He was also a firm believer in the United States democratic system and imbued all of his children with the notion that being a good American and a good Chinese went hand in hand.



Li family circa 1918. Li Ling-Ai standing at far right. (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)



Li Ling-Ai lecture brochure from the 1940s that names her Co-producer of KUKAN (Courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

Thus, Li Ling-Ai was the epitome of East meets West. She was given a classical western education at prestigious Punahou School while learning Chinese language, dance and music at Mun Lun. She developed an early affection for the stage, gaining acclaim as a published playwright and director while still in college at the University of Hawai'i. She created a dramatic Orientalist persona for herself that attracted Western audiences and boosted her career as a self-proclaimed China expert.

In 1935, the *Los Angeles Times* daily columnist Harry Carr met Ling-Ai in the journalism class he was teaching in Hawai'i. He described her in his column as "brilliant, indolent, and beautiful. She comes to the class arrayed like a princess of Cathay in long Chinese gowns. She has been over the world intellectually and physically. She is a dramatist and a dancer, cynical, gay and withering in her powers of intuition."

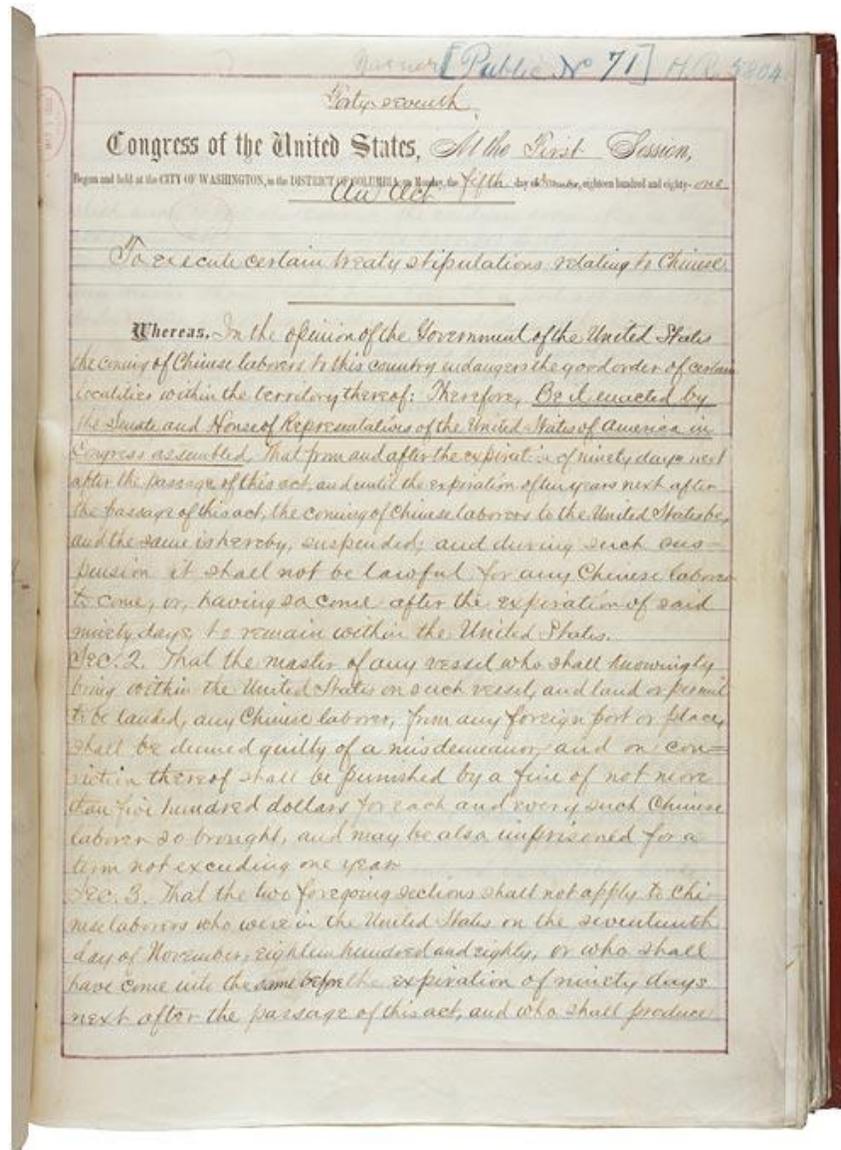
Though she defied tradition in many ways, Li Ling-Ai identified closely with her father and his efforts to bring reform to China. After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, it became her mission to bring China's plight to the attention of the western world. The film *KUKAN* was conceived by Li Ling-Ai as a part of that mission. After the film was complete, Li Ling-Ai continued to educate Americans about the history and culture of China through lectures, radio and television performances, cooking lessons, and writings. A memoir she wrote about her parents, entitled *Life is for a Long Time*, was published in 1972. It remains one of the few published documents about Chinese American immigrant life in early 20th century Hawai'i. Li Ling-Ai married in 1932, divorced her husband in 1937, and relocated to New York City in 1940. She lived the rest of her life in New York City as a single career woman and died there in 2003 at the age of 95.

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ANTI-CHINESE RACISM IN 1930s & 40s AMERICA

Li Ling-Ai began her career in the early 1930s when anti-Chinese laws and attitudes were pervasive in America. The broad-reaching Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress in 1882 was meant to ban Chinese laborers from immigrating to America and taking over jobs that Caucasians hoped to monopolize. But the Chinese Exclusion Act also prevented Chinese living in the U.S. from becoming naturalized citizens. Although second-generation Chinese Americans like Li Ling-Ai were U.S. citizens by birth, they continued to face segregation in schools, employment discrimination, and prohibitions on property and business ownership.



The Chinese Exclusion Act was signed on May 6, 1882 by President Chester A. Arthur. It was the first time that a federal law banned a specific nationality and class of people from entering the U.S. (photo courtesy The National Archives and Records Administration)

Negative attitudes towards Chinese also showed up in state anti-miscegenation laws that began to include Asians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The laws presumed the superiority of

a Caucasian race and were written to preserve an assumed idea of racial purity. By 1930, 30 out of the existing 48 states enforced anti-miscegenation laws that outlawed marriages between whites and non-whites. Fourteen of those states, including Arizona, California, Georgia, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming specifically named Chinese or 'Mongolians' among the ethnicities prevented from marrying Caucasians.

Anti-miscegenation laws also affected how Hollywood films were made. In 1930, the Motion Picture Production Code explicitly forbade the depiction of interracial romance on screen. The Code was actively enforced through the late 1940s and limited the roles that non-white actors could play. The casting of the 1937 Academy Award-nominated *The Good Earth* is a good example of this. The film, based on a best-selling novel by Pearl Buck, is set in China and is about a Chinese farming family. The media considered Anna May Wong, who was the most famous Chinese American actress of the time, to be perfect for the female lead character O-Lan. But when the lead male role went to Caucasian actor Paul Muni, Anna May Wong was no longer eligible for the part. The role went to the Caucasian actress Louise Rainer who won an Academy Award for her portrayal.

In the 1930s and 40s many Americans became fascinated with China, and American attitudes towards Chinese Americans turned more positive as China became an ally of the U.S. in World War II. Li Ling-Ai capitalized on these societal changes by focusing her career on educating Americans about China and Chinese culture. In 1941, she began to work for Robert Ripley of Believe-It-Or-Not fame and appeared repeatedly on his television show in 1949. She was the first Asian American female co-host of a nationally broadcast American show. Yet Li Ling-Ai's 1993 interview comment, "I was tired and sick of being called Chin Chin Chinaman," indicates that negative Chinese stereotypes still existed that restricted her life and aspirations.

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NOTES ON REY SCOTT

Rey Scott (aka Reynolds Gilmore Scott), was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1905. After graduating from Bethany College in West Virginia, he interviewed famed photojournalist Julien Bryan who inspired him to become a roving reporter and freelance photographer. Soon after arriving in Hawai'i in 1937 he got a job as a night editor at the *Honolulu Advertiser* and met Li Ling-Ai during an interview. She convinced Scott to go to China to document the Japanese military invasion and occupation of the country. Scott visited China four times, filming the country with 16mm Kodachrome color film in 1939 and 1940. This footage became the 85-minute feature documentary *KUKAN*.

Again . . .

Rey Scott
Ace
Newsreelman
and
Roving Correspondent

Blazes a "ROMANCE TRAIL" in search
of PEOPLE—LIFE—HIGH ADVENTURE — FRONT PAGE NEWS —
and "FOUR-STAR" PICTURES.



CHINA!

Commissioned by
LIFE
Pathe News Reel
New York Times
North American Newspaper Alliance



LIFE Picture of Week . . .

and . . .
All New NATURAL COLOR MOTION PICTURES

RETURNING IN NOVEMBER
with
A Vivid Eye Witness Account

Into the heart of troubled China, Rey Scott, who filmed the burning of Canton, is traveling by motor truck the old Marco Polo route from Rangoon, Burma, to Chungking, China's new capitol, 2400 miles to the north. Along this centuries' old road . . . now free China's lone artery of commerce with the outside world, Rey Scott is writing and filming in glorious natural color motion pictures the thrilling story of China's recovery. The human side of millions of nationally aroused Chinese rebuilding industry, agriculture, and trade—a NEW and GREATER China—far in the interior. Vivid, sweeping human drama!

Rey Scott lecture brochure from the 1940s (image from Iowa Digital Library, Redpath Chautauqua Collection)

In February 1942, Scott received a special Academy Award® for producing *KUKAN* – it was the first award to recognize an American feature documentary. During World War II Scott served as a captain in the Army Signal Corps under director John Huston and was an un-credited cameraman on the Academy Award®-nominated documentary *Report from the Aleutians*. Scott received multiple decorations for his service in the Aleutians, Algeria, and the Volturno-Cassino and Anzio-Nettuno fronts during World War II. Towards the end of the war he suffered from shell shock and entered Mason General Hospital in Long Island, New York for treatment in 1945. While visiting Scott at the hospital, John Huston was inspired to make the controversial documentary *Let There Be Light* about a group of soldiers being treated there for PTSD. Rey Scott never made another feature film after World War II. He became a successful portrait photographer in Florida and died in 1992 at the age of 87.

Sources:

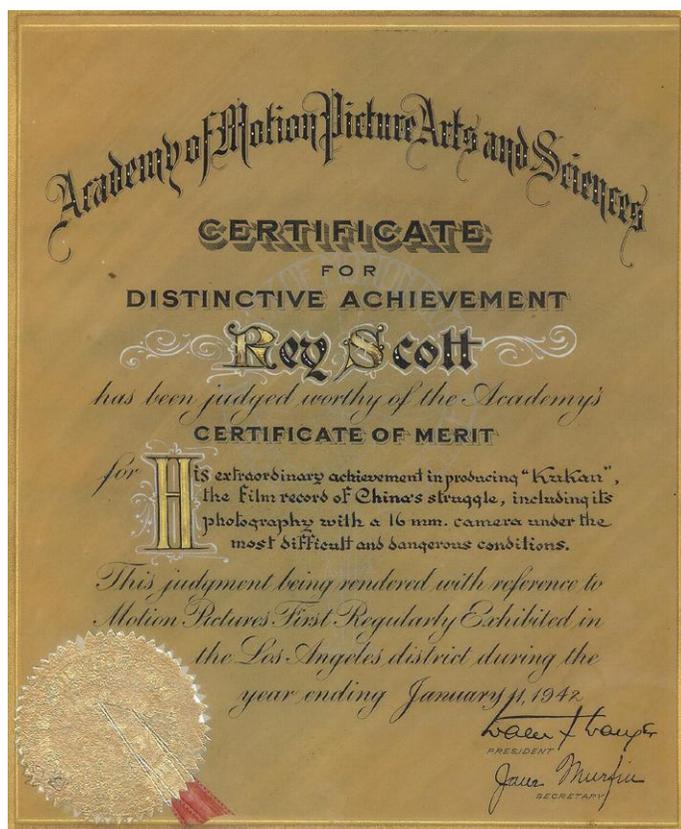
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EARLY DOCUMENTARIES & THE ACADEMY AWARDS

Rey Scott received a special Academy Award® for *KUKAN* in February 1942 at the 14th Academy Award® ceremonies. It was the first year that the Academy honored the documentary category. In 1926, the Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term “documentary” to describe the film *Moana*, a visual account of the daily life of a Polynesian youth produced and directed by the pioneer American filmmakers Robert and Frances Flaherty. In the 1930s documentary production grew in scope and developed beyond ethnographic studies about exotic cultures to include films about pressing social and political issues. World War II in Europe, Asia, and Africa signaled a turning point for nonfiction filmmaking, as war-related films became powerful propaganda tools. In January 1942, a month after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and U.S. entry into World War II, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Board of Governors voted to approve a recommendation that Special Awards be given for the Best Documentary Feature and the Best Documentary Short Subject of 1941. The Academy formed a Documentary Committee consisting of screenwriter Richard Macaulay, actor Henry Fonda, producer David O. Selznick, cinematographer Joseph Valentine and director Henry Hathaway. After reviewing the films for consideration, the Committee wrote,

We find that during the past year two particularly outstanding documentary features have been shown, *KUKAN* and *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*. These are each of high quality and production origin as to make competitive voting difficult inasmuch as the field is still too new for standards of comparison to be generally agreed upon.

The Committee went on to recommend that Awards Certificate of Merit be given to both the producers of *KUKAN* and the producers of *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*, a docudrama, directed by Harry Watt, about a British bombing mission over Germany. Thus, there was no official Documentary Feature winner that year. At an Academy Board of Directors meeting at the Brown Derby on February 20, 1942, producer David O. Selznick, screenwriters Howard Estabrook and James Hilton, and sound technician John Aalberg formed a committee to write the text of the citations for *KUKAN* and *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*.



Rey Scott's special Academy Award for *KUKAN* (courtesy Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

On the evening of February 26, 1942 at the Biltmore Hotel Academy Awards ceremonies, John Grierson presented the awards for documentaries and read the citation for *KUKAN*: "The Academy is honored to present 'for his extraordinary achievement in producing *KUKAN*, the film record of China's struggle, including its photography with a 16mm camera under the most difficult and dangerous conditions.' to Rey Scott." Grierson added that the award certificate would be delivered to Rey Scott who was currently in New York. It's interesting to note that in 1942 Oscar statuettes were not presented to all the award categories. Some category winners like Best Song and Best Score received plaques, and other category winners like Best Set Decoration received certificates.

Sources:

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SHADOW THEATER RE-ENACTMENTS IN *FINDING KUKAN*

Director Robin Lung chose to illustrate several historical scenes in *Finding KUKAN* with a modern form of shadow puppetry developed by Larry Reed, founder of the San Francisco Bay Area theatrical company ShadowLight Productions. Lung chose this abstract visual effect to highlight the murky nature of personal and historical memory and the necessary role imagination plays in recreating historical events.



Wan-Chao Chang performs in shadow scenes for Finding KUKAN (photo courtesy of Nested Egg Productions, LLC)

Shadow puppetry is said to have originated in China over two thousand years ago. Since then, distinctly different forms of shadow play theater have developed in different parts of Asia and

Europe. Larry Reed is one of the few Americans to be trained in the traditional form of Balinese shadow puppetry known as wayang kulit, and he has performed in this tradition around the world over the last 35 years. In the early 1990's, Reed invented an ingenious shadow casting method, which integrates traditional Balinese shadow theatre techniques, cinematic effects, as well as modern theatre and dance styles.



Shadow theater artist Larry Reed (photo courtesy ShadowLight Productions)

In 2015 Reed and Lung produced scenes for *Finding KUKAN* using Reed's unique shadow casting techniques. Taiwanese dancer/choreographer Wan-Chao Chang created and performed several original pieces to evoke key moments in the life of *Finding KUKAN*'s main character Li Ling-Ai. Using a large 15ft X 30ft screen and specially-designed lights to cast silhouettes of actors, props and cut out sets, cinematic effects were created that call to mind black and white film noir movies from the 1930s while paying tribute to the traditional Asian performance arts that Li Ling-Ai studied and promoted during her lifetime.

Sources:

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Li Ling-Ai's early experiences shaped her? How do you think she found the strength to become a writer and performer, despite the social and other limitations she encountered?
2. What are some of the challenges that faced Chinese Americans collectively in the early twentieth century?
3. *KUKAN* was made to encourage the United States to help China during World War II. Why was the U.S. reluctant to enter the war? How did the film help encourage support for China?
4. How did Li Ling-Ai personally become inspired to create *KUKAN*? What was her journey to create the film?
5. How did racial and gender discrimination restrict Li-Ling Ai? How did she challenge these restrictions? Did she challenge and/or reinforce misconceptions of China and Chinese people?
6. Li Ling-Ai is only one of several Chinese women who were important to the story of *KUKAN*. Another famous woman is the first lady of China, Madame Soong Mei-Ling. Why was her role so important?
7. Why is filmmaker Robin Lung so invested in discovering who Li-Ling Ai was? Why is it so important for her to find a copy of *KUKAN* for the Academy of Motion Pictures? Why is it important for her to screen *KUKAN* in China, specifically Chongqing?
8. After making *KUKAN*, Li Ling-Ai's collaborator Rey Scott joined the U.S. military and worked in the film department. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, which affects many servicemen and women. Do you know any veterans? What have been some of their successes and challenges?
9. How does film (or literature and music) help guide people's views on the world? Name a time when watching a film, reading a book, or hearing a piece of music helped shape your views. What was that experience like?
10. In the early decades of the film industry, opportunities in Hollywood for people of color, and women, were virtually nonexistent. Things have improved, but professional opportunities in the media, as well as representation on screen, are still disproportionate. How does race and gender still matter in film and other media? What are some examples of progress that has been made?
11. If Li Ling-Ai were alive, and still a writer and activist, what do you think she might be working on? What are the issues and topics that inspire young creative people today?

FINDING KUKAN DVD CHAPTERS

- 1) 00:05:35 – The Origins of *KUKAN*
- 2) 00:11:37 – Finding Rey Scott and a *KUKAN* Film Print
- 3) 00:17:16 – Li Ling-Ai & Chinese Exclusion; 1937 Nanking; Scenes from *KUKAN*
- 4) 00:28:29 – Divorce; Interracial Romance; NYC & United China Relief
- 5) 00:40:45 – 1940 Chungking Bombing; White House Visit; *KUKAN* Premieres
- 6) 00:54:02 – Publicity; Pearl Harbor Attack; 14th Academy Awards; Fate of *KUKAN*
- 7) 01:01:53 – Filmmaker Crisis; *KUKAN* Comes to China; Li Ling-Ai's Legacy

FINDING KUKAN CAST (in order of appearance)

Loretta Li -- Niece of Li Ling-Ai

Robin Lung – Filmmaker

Li Ling-Ai – Un-credited producer of *KUKAN*

Daniel Kwok, Ph.D. – Professor Emeritus, University of Hawai'i

Ed Carter – Documentary Curator, Academy Motion Picture Arts & Sciences Film Archive

Irmgard Hormann – Friend of Li Ling-Ai

Wing Yung Emery -- China reporter during World War II

Portia Li -- Grand niece of Li Ling-Ai

Phil Hall -- Author, *The History of Independent Cinema*

Mark Scott -- Son of Rey Scott

Michelle Scott -- Granddaughter of Rey Scott

Anne Scott -- Daughter-in-law of Rey Scott

Raymond Scott -- Son of Rey Scott

Joe Lindner -- Preservationist, Academy Motion Picture Arts & Sciences Film Archive

Francesca Todd -- Friend of Li Ling-Ai

Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Ph.D. -- Professor of American Studies, University of California, Irvine

Richard Balin -- Friend of Li Ling-Ai

DeSoto Brown -- Historian, Bishop Museum

Andrew Li -- Nephew of Li Ling-Ai

Christopher Jespersen, Ph.D. -- Author, *American Images of China: 1931-1949*

Danke Li, Ph.D. -- Author, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China*

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Jenny Cho -- Author, *Chinese in Hollywood*

Gladys Hu -- Friend of Li Ling-Ai

Oreon Scott -- Son of Rey Scott

Rey Scott -- Director and Writer of *KUKAN*

A.J. Rohner -- Film Preservationist

Robert Ripley -- American cartoonist, "Believe-It-Or-Not" radio and television personality

Edward Meyer -- Archivist, Ripley Entertainment

Zhou Yong -- Director, Chongqing Research Center for the War of Resistance

Robert St. John -- "Believe-It-Or-Not" television host

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