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MING LAI OF HUMANIST FILMS COMPLETES THE “JOURNEY OF A PAPER SON” (Extended Press Release)

Los Angeles, CA, November 30, 2009—Producer/writer/director, Ming Lai, of Humanist Films, LLC recently finished post-production on the short film, “Journey of a Paper Son.”

In this drama, an elderly Chinese man, who’s dying from cancer, shocks his family when he reveals that he’s a “paper son” (one who illegally immigrated to the U.S., using fake documents and claiming he’s the son of an American citizen) and asks them for a final wish to change back his name.

His request threatens to tear apart his family, testing the limits of their love. He forces them to question who he really is and even their own identities. Meanwhile, his doctor desperately tries to save him.

The viewer discovers that he’s just one of countless “paper sons” who were born from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first federal law to restrict immigration to the U.S. based on race or nationality.

Regarding his inspiration for the film, Lai explains, “I always wanted to make a film about Chinese American history. One major event in our rich history is the Chinese Exclusion Act, which deeply affected many generations of our people. I explored this far-reaching event through its profound impact on a single family.

“Journey of a Paper Son” is unique in that very few films have been made about paper sons or the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, it’s meant to be not just a film about the struggles of Chinese American immigrants but more so a universal film about the immigrant experience.

Lai shares story credit with writer, Patrick Lew. Lai’s original screenplay received Third Place at the Boulder Asian Film Festival Short Screenplay Competition 2006.

Lai designed the story to be minimalist, reducing it to its most essential elements. He compares it to poetry, where the meaning lies beneath the words, requiring interpretation. As a result, what is not said is just as important as what is said. He

explains that this approach invites the viewer to participate more, truly sharing the film's experience.

Lai assembled a powerful ensemble cast to play the paper son and his family—veteran actors, Jack Ong (Jin) and Patty Toy Chung (Fei), and rising stars, Angelina Cheng (Gong) and Teddy Chen Culver (Han). Respected actor, Mario Cortez, played Dr. Ortiz, who treats the paper son.

Very few actors could play the role of Jin, the paper son. In addition to being a talented actor, he needed to be Chinese American, senior-aged, and fluent in both Chinese and English. Lai states, "Finding respected veteran actor, Jack Ong, was a great blessing. Because of Jack's own personal experience and family history, he truly understood the meaning behind this epic immigrant story and the painful struggles of this paper son."

Ong and Chung both speak Toisanese, a Chinese dialect that is spoken by many of the earlier Chinese immigrants. While Lai had intended the paper son character to speak Cantonese, another Chinese dialect, he re-wrote the script to incorporate this beautiful language and capture its spirit on film.

Assembling the paper son's family was also challenging. The actors needed to play a convincing family—one with not only a strong resemblance but also complex relationships. Lai says, "The actors were extremely talented and giving, breathing life into their characters. Best of all, they had a wonderful chemistry together, which was reflected onscreen."

During the casting process, Lai enlisted the help of East West Players, the nation's premier Asian American theatre organization, and their A.C.T.S. (Alliance of Creative Talent Services) program. He worked with the respected organization before to cast his award-winning short film, "Pawns of the King." Through their great assistance, he was able to find Ong and Culver for his new film.

The team behind the camera was equally strong. Up-and-coming director of photography, Matt Steinauer, led the camera department. Lai had worked with Steinauer before on multiple projects and appreciated his skills as both a D.P. and camera operator as well as a Steadicam operator.

Skilled 1st A.C., Lawrence Montemayor, and knowledgeable 2nd A.C./D.I.T., Nate Lipp, completed the camera department. The hardworking team of gaffer, Dilip Isaac, key grip/dolly grip, Steve Albovias, and best boy/swing, Jessica Walker, created the realistic lighting for the film. Lai comments, "The camera and lighting/grip departments were the unsung heroes of the shoot, helping us to quickly and powerfully execute our vision."

Veteran sound mixer, Dan Monahan, headed the sound department, assisted by boom operator, Adam Douglass. Lai remarks, “Sound is just as important as the image so to have a respected sound mixer like Dan and a tireless boom operator like Adam recording our sound was invaluable.” Because of the high quality of the production sound, no ADR was necessary, which is usually not the case for many productions.

Lai and Steinauer shot the film with a revolutionary Red One camera and Red lenses from Infinite Siege as well as an Arri Standard Speed lens from The Camera House. Steinauer owns and operates his Red One so he has in-depth knowledge of the advanced camera and its workflow.

Lai had used the Red One before on a series of successful animated/live-action commercials for international probiotic brand Yakult and was impressed by its striking images—much higher resolution than HD cameras with the shallow depth of the field of film.

In addition to its beautiful images, Lai chose the Red One because of its ability to do longer takes as a digital camera, allowing the actors to experiment with their performances. To further aid the actors’ character development, he shot the film chronologically, which is usually not possible because of tight budgets or complicated logistics.

Steinauer shot the film with the Red One’s highest resolution—4K (4520 X 2540), which is more than twice the resolution of HD (1920 X 1080). To achieve the best possible image quality, he employed the camera’s highest recording quality—REDCODE 36. To give the film a classic “film look,” he used a 24p (23.98) frame rate/time base. Lastly, he chose REDspace for a wider color and gamma space.

To tell the epic story of this paper son, Lai and Steinauer created a cinematic look for the film, shooting a 2:1 aspect ratio and then cropping to 2.35:1 in post-production. They used this wide frame to convey the loneliness and alienation of the characters and create a large stage for the actors to work. The expansive frame also helped to capture the impressive hospital set and its austere presence.

Lai tightly storyboarded the film, using his digital SLR. The son of a photographer, he’s passionate about still photography and uses it extensively to plan his shots.

Lai and Steinauer used a variety of camera techniques to shoot the film. They created classic compositions to tell this story based on history and also give it a

timeless quality. They also used a hand-held camera to create a dynamic, moving frame and heighten the tension of certain scenes. In addition, they employed dolly moves to subtly draw the viewer in during crucial scenes.

Makeup and wardrobe were also essential in conveying the story. Key hair stylist/makeup artist, Tamami Ito, magically transformed Ong into Jin, a much older man who's suffering from end-stage stomach cancer. Wardrobe stylist, Lena Wong, helped express each character's personality through her astute wardrobe choices.

Lai was supported by a strong production team, composed of production manager, Emily Cheng, production coordinator, Dan Ogawa, and production assistants, Benjamin Cheng and Denise Matsuyama-Lai.

Steinauer also served as the editor and colorist, which helped ensure that the film had optimal coverage and eliminate any workflow problems with the relatively new Red One camera. He helped simplify the potentially complex process of editing the camera's massive R3D files. He edited the film with Final Cut Pro on an Apple Mac Pro 8-core. To approximate a native workflow, he used a "native-wrapped" method, creating QuickTime-wrapped R3D files.

Steinauer graded the film in Color. He and Lai avoided the realistic or gritty look of many hospital TV shows and instead chose something more stylistic and cinematic. They de-saturated the film to make it look colder and more stark, reinforcing the story's dark subject matter in a less typical way.

Talented composer, Pakk Hui of Valence Music, created the beautiful score. Lai states, "Pakk is extremely gifted, with a sophisticated sense of music and thoughtful, restrained execution." Pakk incorporated some classical Chinese instruments to give the score a Chinese feel to complement the story; however the instrumentation is very subtle so that the score ultimately feels more universal like the story.

Lai had an all-star line-up for the post-production sound department, headed by veteran sound supervisor/sound designer/sound effects editor, Jeff Hutchins, and sound supervisor, Otis Van Osten, of Audio Circus. Their team consisted of dialogue editor/dialogue & music mixer, Carlos Sanches, sound effects mixer, Eric Freeman, foley artist, Ed Steidele, foley mixer, Darrin Mann, and assistant sound editor, Danny Tchibinda.

Lai says, "Jeff and his respected colleagues raised the film to a higher level with their combined expertise in sound." Like the sophisticated score, their intricate sound design helped to heighten the story and underscore important plot points.

Except for the pristine dialogue, they replaced all of the production sound with first-rate foley effects.

Noted still photographer, Sari Makki, captured the action behind-the-scenes and provided the elegant photo and graphic design for the photo exhibit postcard used in the film. Lai comments, “Sari has a powerful way of looking at the world, capturing decisive moments.”

Ryan Thompson and Mike Vaglienty of Giantsteps provided additional visual effects for the film, removing unwanted reflections in the film. Lai remarks, “While they are known for their high-end visual effects work on feature films, music videos, and commercials, they helped to polish our humble film.”

Award-winning graphic designer, Sven Igawa, of Igawa Design created the concept for the simple but powerful title sequence depicting a disappearing family tree. Veteran supervising producer, Doug Tower, and rising animator, Tim Oesterreicher, of Urban Legends Film Co. then brought it to life. Lai states, “In addition to animating the title sequence, Doug essentially helped greenlight the project through his kind support.”

In addition to the title sequence, Igawa also created the film’s compelling poster, elegant website, and other integrated marketing materials. Lai says, “Sven is extremely talented, skilled in not only graphic design but also strategic planning and conceptual thinking, so he’s able to take his work to the level of art.”

Emmy Award-winning editor, Michael Wolf, of Wild Pictures created the clean and simple end credits. Lai had worked with Wolf on another Red project for Yakult and was impressed by his technical skills and creative thinking.

Lai relates a coincidental event at the end of shooting, “We finished production on July 15, 2009 and learned that the California legislature approved a landmark bill—ACR 42—on July 17, 2009 to apologize to the state’s Chinese American community for racist laws, including the Chinese Exclusion Act. We were deeply moved by this historic decision.”

Lai expresses his gratitude to his fine cast and crew: “If it weren’t for their kindness, commitment, and expertise, this film wouldn’t have been possible.” He concludes, “Hopefully, by revealing the past, our film helps to prevent similar events from happening in the future.”

Lai is currently developing “Journey of a Paper Son” into a feature film. He’s also developing the feature film, “Tokyo Liaison.” In this romantic drama, a war photographer, who’s suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and a writer, who’s dealing with the abduction of her young child, begin a relationship and

together search for peace. “Tokyo Liaison” won a John Muir Gold Award at the Yosemite Film Festival 2009 and was a Quarterfinalist at the Scriptapalooza Screenwriting Competition 2009.

ABOUT MING LAI AND HUMANIST FILMS, LLC

Humanist Films, LLC is an emerging film and commercial production company, based in Los Angeles, CA. Founded by producer/writer/director, Ming Lai, Humanist Films is less of a traditional production company than an innovative think tank, gathering the brightest minds to research, plan, create, and challenge.