

## Document Citation

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# ANCESTORS IN THE AMERICAS: COOLIES, SAILORS, SETTLERS

(DOCU)

A Center for Educational Telecommunications production. Produced, directed, written by Loni Ding. Camera (color, video to 16mm), Kyle Kibbe, Alexandra Halkin, May Ying Welsh, Ashley James, Neal Morrison, Robb Moss, Wanda Pruska, John Pai, John Eskai, Amy Kato; editor, Eric Ladenburg; assistant editor, Sean Thomas; music, Zhou Long; sound score/additional music, Eric Schurig; production manager, Sarah Lewison; associate producer, Grace Lee. Reviewed on videocassette, San Francisco, Feb. 28, 1996. (In S.F. Asian American Film Festival.) Running time: 66 MIN.

Narrator: Saburo Shimono.

**D**irector Loni Ding's "Ancestors in the Americas," posited as first in a four-part series, offers an ambitious overview of Asian impact on Western history. This sprawl provides considerable food for thought, though it's crafted in terms suited to broadcast rather than theatrical play. After initial fest dates, pic's wide-ranging agenda should attract international tube interest.

Ding begins with familiar images of U.S. "Chinese laundries" and restaurants — our traditional idea of the Asian emigre experience. But she quickly develops a far larger canvas, one that suggests, through a complex pastiche of visual and sound bites, that the Asian diaspora played an infinitely greater role in colonialist-era development of North and South America than hitherto acknowledged.

Film moves back and forth through so many periods, cultures and reference points that it risks incoherence. But this freewheeling approach suits a stance that's less bent on exhaustive detail than on impressionistic revisionism. "Ancestors" is clearly meant as a basic springboard for discussion on some

aspects of an enlightened, post-Western-centric world history.

Among myriad elements here, many may come as a surprise: the Filipino "Manilamen" who settled Louisiana shrimp villages in the 1700s; tumultuous early Spanish-Chinese relations; the fact that China's allegedly ancient opium addiction was really the result of lucrative 18th-century British trade.

Pic points out that despite forced treaties and rampant exploitation, Asian migrants had a tremendous impact on the economic development of the Americas, through both labor and financial investment. Of course, the latter was often rewarded by government-sanctioned betrayal. Pic is clearly a sweeping prologue to more detailed follow-ups, complete with final title card anticipating "Part 2: Pioneers to the American West."

Brisk tech package employs diverse elements — period stills, archival reels, interviews with academics and curators, location shooting around the globe — to stimulating but tube-scale effect; periodic theme-separating blackouts suggest possible commercial breaks. Narration is largely in the voice of an "imaginary timeless Asian American," whose quasi-poetical musings sound very PBS-ish.

—Dennis Harvey

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