

Document Citation

Title	Ancestors in America
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Center for Educational Telecommunications</i>
Date	
Type	press kit
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Ding, Loni
Film Subjects	Ancestors in the Americas: coolies, sailors, settlers, Ding, Loni, 1996

ANCESTORS IN AMERICA

a four-part public television series

Part One

Asians in the Americas: Coolies, Sailors and Settlers

Independent filmmaker Loni Ding, whose films *Nisei Soldier* and *The Color of Honor* made history when they were shown to Congress prior to the passage of the Japanese American redress bill, returns this spring with *Asians in the Americas*. This feature documentary digs beneath school book histories, with their cursory look at the Gold Rush-era migration of Chinese laborers who helped build the transcontinental railroad. It brings to life a complex and nearly lost past of journeys that began over three centuries ago and led generations of Asian immigrants to uncertain futures on the shores of the North and South American continents.

The first in a planned four-part public television series called *Ancestors in America*, the lead-off program-*Asians in the Americas: Coolies, Sailors and Settlers*-focuses on the Chinese migration to the Americas. Its unseen narrator is an imaginary Chinese "Every Man," a traveler in time who has made the voyage from his homeland to a hard new world. His sparse commentary suggests an essential commonality among millions of Asians who, across the centuries and for different reasons, have set forth to the Americas:

My name is Wong. My name is Lee. Chang. Chiu. I am part of the Americas because I have been voyaging there for centuries. I will tell you what I know to be true. But there are still some things no one knows. They are lost. There are only whispers. I am on this voyage with you, seeking America's past-and her present.

Asians in the Americas travels throughout the world to trace the globally interlocking story of the East and West. "Asia was always on the Western mind," observes scholar Gary Okihiro, linking Columbus' nautical quest for the "riches of Cathay" to Lewis and Clark's exploration across the American Northwest three centuries later, all in search of a direct route to Asia and its global trade in Indian textiles and spices, and Chinese porcelains, silk, and tea. The expansionist Americas felt an early economic dependency on Asian trade and labor, a dependency that launched untold shipments of Asian workers to the New World, far pre-dating California's Gold Rush.

The resonance of long-forgotten migration patterns are still felt today. *Asians in the Americas* tells its story from points along the way as diverse as a Guangdong village and a fishing community in India, Spanish military barracks in Manila and a Chinese cemetery in Havana. It looks at Filipino sailors who, as early as the 16th century, worked on Spanish galleons running trade routes between Manila and Acapulco. They jumped ship in Mexico, moved northward, and settled in the bayous of Louisiana in the 1760s-a decade before the American Revolution. Vestiges of Filipino shrimping villages remain in Louisiana today, where their living descendants still reside. The film also introduces us to Chinese sailors who worked on European trade ships and, having settled in port cities of the East Coast, were the ancestors of today's Chinese or racially mixed descendant populations in such cities as Salem, Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

The documentary also chronicles pivotal historical moments, perhaps none of which had more dramatic repercussions than China's devastating loss to the West of the opium wars in the mid-

1800s. In the wake of that defeat, England, the United States, and other Western powers forced open Chinese ports to trade, securing the valuable commodity of tea, legalizing opium, and opening the way for forced migration and slavery of Chinese coolies to the Americas- in the Guianas-British, Dutch and French, South America, Cuba, Peru, and the West Indies. Of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Asian Indian "coolies" who were sent in the 1840-70s to labor in the bleak outposts of the New World's mines and plantations, only a fraction survived to return home. Many of the descendants of those who survived the forced enslavement, mutinies, and coolie insurrections settled there, or re-migrated to the United States from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, Dutch Surinam, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Filmmaker Loni Ding, using a "docu-memoir" approach, rescues a nearly irretrievable past and gives it a sense of vividness and urgency that is rare in social histories. She draws from scarce but revealing historical records such as census tracts, newspaper accounts, and birth and death records, as well as folklore, literature from the period, and well-placed comments from scholars to give the documentary its historical underpinnings. Archeological artifacts serve as entries into real and imagined personal stories: "We hang onto these fragments tightly because they are all we have, but finally we make the leap...to imagining what they would tell us if they could speak," explains the time-traveling narrator. In the film's poetic imaginings of what life was like for the early voyagers to the West, multiple viewpoints-from Chinese and American officials, coolies and colonial overlords-contribute to the full range of experiences of different groups of Asian arrivals.

In gathering and presenting what is known about early Chinese presence in the Americas, *Asians in the Americas* also wonders at the invisibility of these American ancestors. The records of their daily lives and contributions to this country are few. They are absent from photographs of American workers. Although there have been Asians living and working in the Americas for over two centuries, mainstream media continues to stereotype them as foreigners. At what point, asks the film, does one become an "American," while also remaining Chinese?

Asians in the Americas demonstrates the particular ability of the moving image art form to uncover myths and reveal truths. It provides a much needed recontextualization of Asian American history and place in the Americas in a global socio-economic framework that is all the more timely in this era of transnational capital and labor. A rich, complex and uncompromised history of the movement of Asians into the Western hemisphere, the documentary poses an implicit question: Who will tell their story now?

The second part of the *Ancestors in America* series- ***Pioneers to the American West***- will be released in Fall 1996.

Director: Loni Ding

USA, 1996, Video, 70 min

Producer/Writer: Loni Ding

Editor: Eric Ladenburg

Music: Zhou Long and Eric Schurig

Major Funding: National Endowment for the Humanities

Additional Funding: California Council for the Humanities, Corporation for
Public Broadcasting, National Asian American Telecommunications Association,
Public Broadcasting Service, Rockefeller Foundation

Center for Educational Telecommunications

1460 Washington Street

San Francisco, CA 94109

tel/fax: (415) 673-6428

e-mail: loniding@uclink2.berkeley.edu

Loni Ding

Loni Ding is a veteran independent filmmaker and producer with more than twenty years experience creating educational television programming designed to appeal to a mass audiences. Her work has played before audiences in four continents. Her 14 national programs include 600 Millennia: China's History Unearthed, a Prime Time Special on the 1975 international tour of an archeological collection from the People's Republic of China, Bean Sprouts, a five part children's series on multi-cultural identity, and The Color of Honor, the Japanese American Soldier in W.W.II, a PBS Prime Time documentary feature. The Color of Honor was also shown in both houses of the U.S. Congress concerning the political and moral contradictions faced by Japanese American youths recruited from U.S. interment camps to serve as American soldiers in the European and Pacific theaters of WW II.

Six years in the making, her current production, Ancestors in America, is a NEH funded pilot program for a multi-part PBS series chronicling the history and experiences of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the US. As storytelling which ultimately draws on the historical experiences of the diversity of Asian American groups-- Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, South Asians and Southeast Asians-- Ancestors in America stretches the documentary genre to represent a remote and inaccessible past by combining narrative film structure to remembered history and historical records.

Ding's awards include several Emmy Awards, a Rockefeller Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Director's Fellowship from the American Film Institute, and the Steven Tatsukawa Memorial Fund Award in honor of her works devoted to Asian Pacific Americans. She teaches in the Asian American Studies Department of UC Berkeley, and currently serves on the national board of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF), N.Y.