

FILM REVIEWS

"The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, contributed the above *Ancestors in the Americas* reviews. AEMS provides information about Asia-related audiovisual materials to scholars and educators. The program offers a Web site (<http://www.aems.uiuc.edu>) with a searchable database and full-text reviews as well as a call-in/write-in service and a bi-annual newsletter, both free of charge. AEMS is supported by funding from The Freeman Foundation and The Japan Center for Global Partnership. For further information contact: Sarah I. Barbour, Program Coordinator. Telephone: (888) 828-2367 or (217) 265-0642. Fax: (217) 265-0641. E-mail: aems@uiuc.edu.

This first film in the *Ancestors in the Americas* series by Loni Ding, one of the foremost filmmakers documenting the Asian American experience, sets the stage for a global understanding of the Asian diaspora. Focusing mainly on the Chinese, and to a lesser extent South Asians and Filipinos, this film documents how the immigration of Asians to the Americas was linked to the transnational movement of capital, goods, and people during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The film makes it very clear that Asian workers were brought to labor in the New World as the African slave trade was in demise. Needed for labor that Europeans and various South Americans were unwilling to perform, Chinese, South Asians, and Filipinos were taken, often against their will or unaware of the conditions they would encounter, to the United States, Cuba, Peru, and Africa. They were brought to work the sugar cane fields of Cuba and Hawaii, the guano pits of Peru, and later, the various developing industries in the American West.

Skillfully combining reenactments, archival footage, stills, oral histories, and interviews with leading Asian American historians, this film follows a line of historical inquiry that has gained prominence in recent years: the Asian presence in America should not begin with the immigration of Chinese to the gold fields of California, but instead, should be viewed as a larger process, one involving Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos (and later Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asians) venturing to parts of the Americas well before



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Coolies, Sailors, and Settlers

Voyage to the New World

Part I of *Ancestors in Americas* film series

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY LONI DING

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the Gold Rush in California.

The film notes that the Philippines was a region where East met West. Colonized by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, Chinese emigrants had long settled there as well. Once the Spanish established a trade network between the Philippines and Mexico, Filipino and Chinese sailors began appearing in Mexico. Filipinos, in fact, settled in Louisiana as early as the 1760s. The trade between the British

colonies in North America and China and India brought Chinese sailors to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston years before the American Revolution, and the tea thrown overboard in the Boston Tea Party was certainly of Asian origin. Thus, Asia has long been a part of American history. (Lest we forget, the New World was "discovered" by Europeans looking for Asia.) Some Chinese sailors jumped ship in these American harbors, and some

eventually married working-class Irish women, forming some of America's first Asian-Caucasian families.

Others, however, were not as lucky. Tricked by unscrupulous labor agents and local crimps, Chinese and Indian laborers were taken to Africa, Cuba, and other parts of Latin America as part of the infamous coolie trade. Ding includes fascinating footage of coolies digging guano on the islands off the coast of Peru, remarking that many died in less than a year. The film also points out that some of the Chinese escaped from the brutalities of the guano islands or the sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean to come to the United States, bringing with them a "Chino-Latino" culture.

Throughout the film, Asian immigrants are portrayed as active agents, attempting to shape their own destinies. Although they faced many hardships and obstacles, they are seen to exercise their rights and wills in seeking to claim their place in America. This first installment ends with a moving reenactment of a young Chinese woman braiding her husband's queue as he prepares to leave for America, the Gold Mountain. The anxiety of separation is palpable as he thinks to himself, "I need not fear slavery, I will not be whipped or herded like so many pigs," as she wonders when and if he will return, and if he dies, who will tend his grave or carry on the family name. This scene serves as a segue to the next chapter, when Chinese join the Gold Rush to seek the family fortune in America. ■

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