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## Silent film a landmark in Chinese-American cinema

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By Emily Wilson SAN FRANCISCO, AFP

A silent film made by a Chinese immigrant family in the United States in the early 1900s is believed to be the first Asian American movie ever made, historians say.

The 35-minute-long film "The Curse of Quon Gwon" was shot in 1916 by American-born Chinese woman Marion Wong and was recently screened at the San Francisco International Asian-American Film Festival.

For years two reels of film had languished in a dusty wardrobe, a small slice of celluloid history in permanent danger of deteriorating beyond repair and being lost forever.

It was saved however by film-maker Arthur Dong, who rediscovered the film after being contacted by descendants of Wong while researching his new documentary "Hollywood Chinese."

Realizing the importance of the movie, Dong took the film to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

"I went to them and said, 'You must save this'," Dong said.

Now fully restored, "The Curse of Quon Gwon" was last year admitted to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress, an honor afforded to only 25 films a year.

Made in Oakland, California, the film tells the story of a family placed under the curse of an ancient Chinese god. Director and producer Wong stars as a villainess while her sister, Violet Wong, is the heroine.

Experts say they are baffled at how Wong, 21 at the time, managed to shoot what is a relatively sophisticated film for its era.

"I'm amazed by her ambition," said Stephen Gong, a film historian and executive director of the Center for Asian American Media.

"She wanted to make as good a film as D.W. Griffith, the big filmmaker at the time."

Violet Wong's grandson, Greg Mark, agrees.

He had the film transferred from 35 mm to 16 mm format in the late 1960s while working as a teacher's assistant in one of the first Asian American Studies classes at the University of California, Berkeley.

"I told my grandma where I was working and she told me 'There's a film in the cupboard. Do something with it.'"

Mark said he didn't dream of disobeying his grandmother's wishes.

"The women were the backbone of our family," he said. "Aunt Marion, think of what she did. I'm amazed she was able to put together a package like this."

According to family folklore, Wong had some help.

Essanay Film Company had a studio in Niles, about 20 miles from Oakland. In 1915, their biggest star, Charlie Chaplin, made 14 short films in Niles.

Wong's parents ran a restaurant in the theater district of Oakland and family members think Wong must have met the film crew.

Gong agrees, saying that using a hand cranked 35 mm camera was something Wong would have needed to learn from someone.

"The movie has a very complex story line," he said. "It's well edited and she knows about film language.

"For example, there's a scene where the character feels shackled and she looks down and chains appears on her hands and then disappear. She wasn't play acting. This is a professional effort, not a home movie."

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