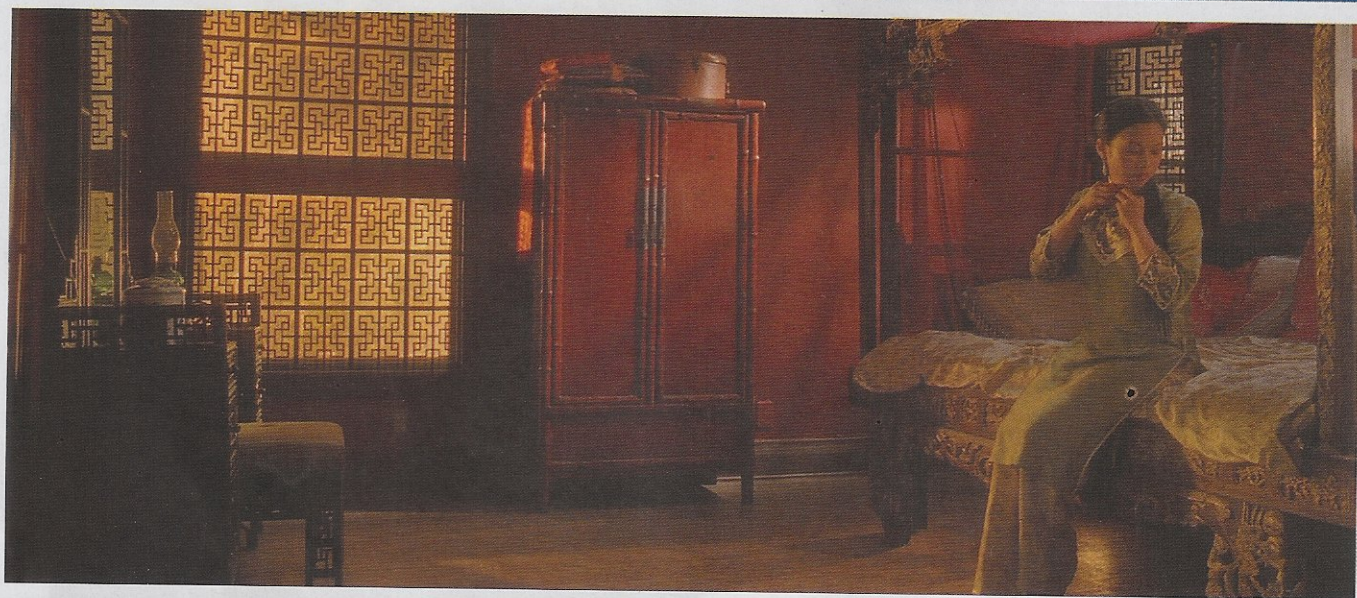


Short Takes



Fangfang (Felix Fang), a prostitute in a Chinese brothel, struggles for freedom in the short film *The Red House*.

Cultural Liberation

By Noah Kadner

The short film *The Red House* tells the story of a weary prostitute, Fangfang (Felix Fang), and her struggle for freedom from a rural Chinese brothel in 1915. Foot binding, the once-common practice of hobbling young women's feet as a show of social status, also figures prominently. Writer/director Jiaqi Lin put the project together in Los Angeles as her graduate thesis at the New York Film Academy.

"My background is more in animation, and about a year ago I wasn't actually thinking of writing any specific story for my thesis film," says Lin. "But then a friend said I should write something about my Chinese culture. So, I came up with a script based on stories I'd heard about binding, and everyone who read it said I'd really need a good producer to pull it off."

Contemplating a complex period piece, the ambitious Lin set her sights on major Hollywood talent to help bring her story to life. Via an online ad and some lucky breaks, Lin secured veteran filmmaker Larry Kaster of *Rush Hour Productions* as her producer. "I'd never produced a student film before, but when I first met Jiaqi, I could tell she was very smart and knew what she wanted," says Kaster. "Everyone else told her that the budget she had to work with would be no problem, but I said we couldn't do her script justice for that kind of money. I wanted to work with people that I knew and do something that would be completely professional."

Kaster brought on longtime collaborator Donald M. Morgan, ASC (*Starman*, *Something the Lord Made*) as director of photogra-

phy. "I was really impressed with the script," remembers Morgan. "Another interesting thing was that Jiaqi wanted to shoot film. With so many student projects going digital these days, we were all very excited about doing a film shoot instead."

Morgan, with the help of ASC associate Bruce Berke of Eastman Kodak, selected Kodak Vision3 500T 5219 35mm color negative as his film stock and shot 3-perf framed for a final 2.40:1 aspect ratio. "Kodak was very helpful with us," adds Morgan. "They did everything they could to help make this project happen."

Morgan's longtime working relationship with Panavision's David Dodson, an ASC associate, also came in handy in helping the production to secure a pair of Panaflex Platinum cameras, along with legacy Zeiss Super Speed prime lenses. "One of the main characters was a 6-year-old girl," says Morgan. "I realized with her I really needed two cameras. I wanted to make sure we were rolling both every time she was in a scene so we wouldn't lose anything from her initial performance to the close-up. Also, with the required on-set tutoring, we would only have her for a very limited amount of time each shooting day."

"My biggest fear was the set," recalls Kaster. "In reading the script, it really felt like it had to be a build — or we had to find a miracle location." As it turned out, Kaster explains, "the real miracle was production designer Michael Paul Clausen," who discovered an older Victorian-house location in the Adams-Normandie neighborhood of Los Angeles that could stand in, with minimal redressing, for both the interiors and exteriors of the 1915 Chinese brothel. The house had been used for numerous special events and film productions over the years and had fallen into enough disrepair that

Unit photography by Peter Switzer. All images courtesy of the filmmakers.



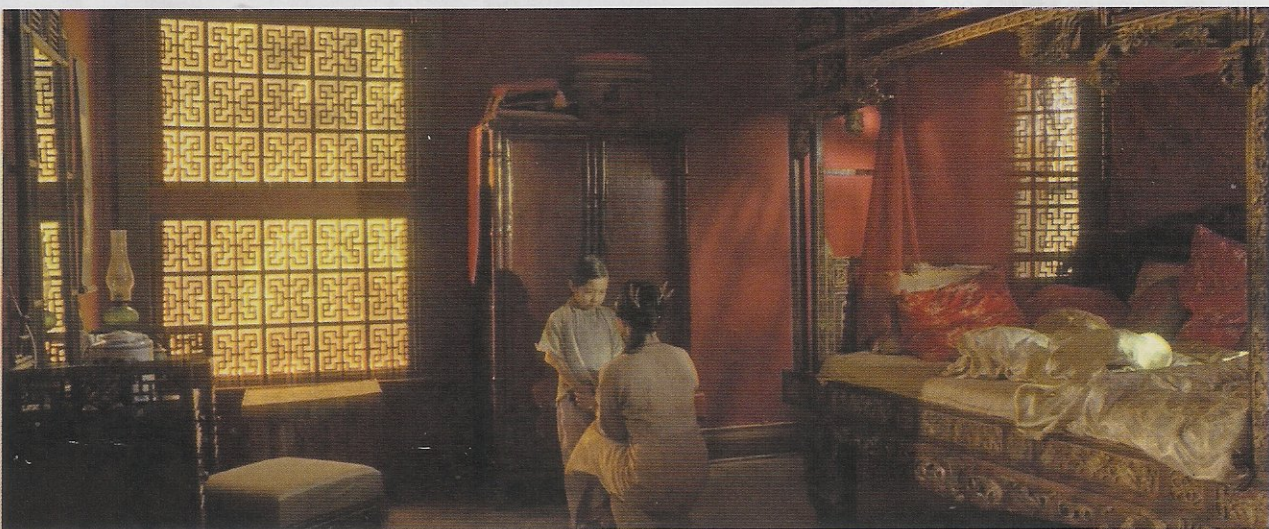
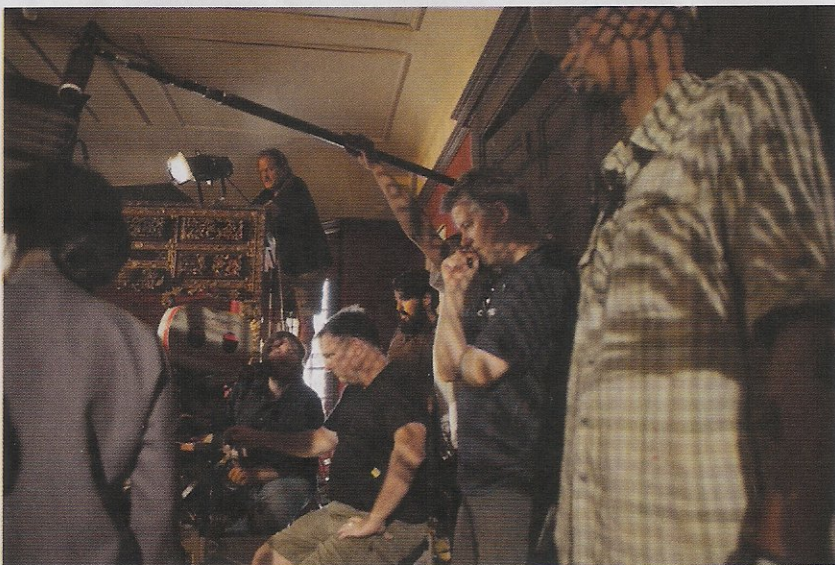
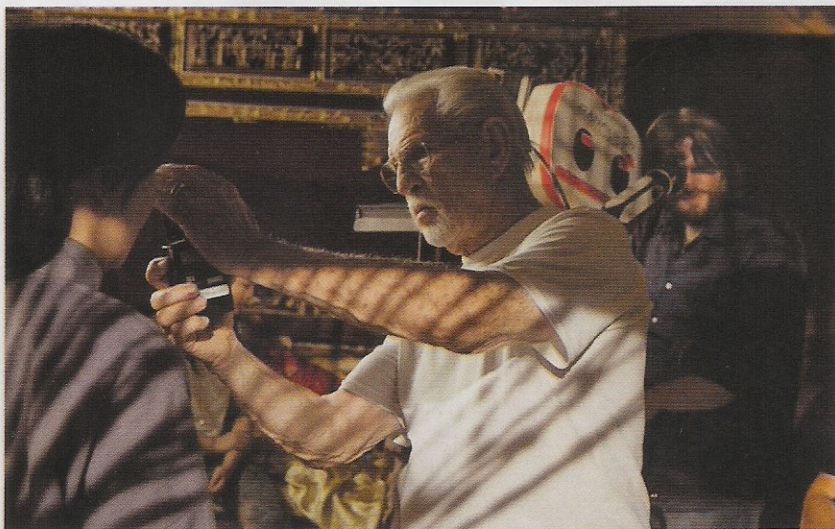
Top: A mother (Mika Santoh, fourth from left) thanks Fangfang for taking care of her young daughter, Amei. Middle: Writer/director Jiaqi Lin (middle) watches a scene as cinematographer Donald M. Morgan, ASC (partly blocked by camera) looks on. Bottom: The story depicts the once-common practice of foot binding.

it was ultimately scheduled for demolition soon after the production wrapped.

Once the location was set, Morgan's team had just two days of prep and a single day of prelighting before *The Red House's* brisk seven-day production began this past May. Gaffer Keith Roverud and key grip Rick Perez, who were both working with Morgan for the first time, were able to source an ample lighting, generator and grip package from Acey Decy Lighting in San Fernando. "Larry's had a long-term relationship with Acey Decy," notes Morgan. "We were able to get everything we needed, from 200-watt Inkie Fresnel units up to 4K HMI Pars. With the amount of lighting and camera equipment we ultimately used — and given our time frame — we were really only able to complete this project through the professionalism of an experienced team, especially A-camera operator Noah Pankow and 1st AC Jim Gavin, who quickly developed a working relationship with the director."

The Red House opens with Fangfang concluding business with a client and being called by the madam, Mama Yan (Leann Lei), into the brothel's entryway, where she's told to take charge of a new conscript: a 6-year-old girl named Amei (Makayla Gatmaitan). Morgan lit the scene with a mixture of practical lanterns built into the set and smaller fixtures that augmented the natural sunlight coming through the location's windows.

"We lit the entryway with 4-by-4, 2-by-2, and single-bank Kino Flos and some



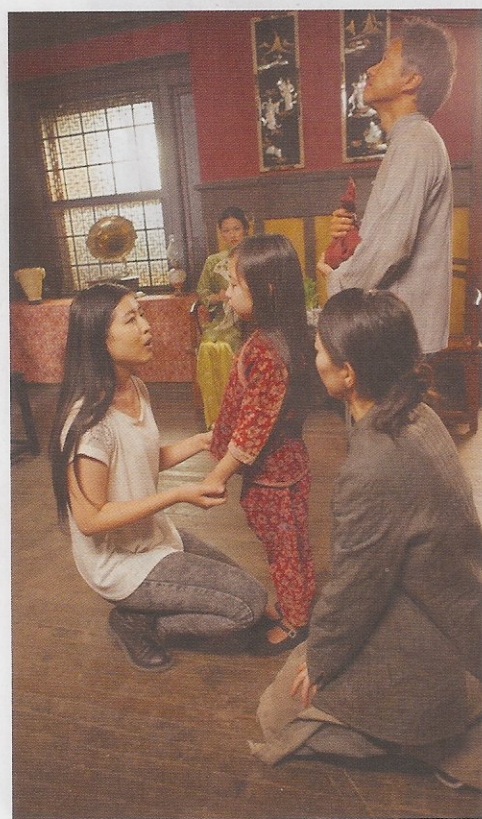
Top: Morgan checks the lighting for a bedroom scene. Middle: The crew prepares to shoot. Bottom: Light through the windows provided further ambience for scenes in Fangfang's bedroom.

smaller HMI units gelled with $\frac{1}{4}$ CTO," says Roverud. "We also used a Celeb 200 DMX LED light, which you can dial to any color temperature from 2,700K up to 5,500K. The house was facing south, so we got almost too much light coming in from the outside early in the morning. We decided to wait a little bit for the sun to get off the windows on our first shots."

Later in the film, Fangfang discovers Amei being accosted by another client in a garden outside of the brothel and helps her get away. For the exterior, Roverud deployed 4K HMI Pars, the production's strongest lighting instruments. "That main exterior scene was staged under a little cabana that provided foreground shade, but the background would go in and out of sun," says Roverud. "The HMIs worked as fill through an 8-by-8 silk. Due to the small size of the cabana, we used the 4Ks where we'd normally use 18Ks. For the actors, we rigged a 12-by-12 silk directly over the cabana to help control the sunlight."

The crux of *The Red House's* story involves the ritual of foot binding, which crippled many Chinese women, ostensibly for aesthetic appeal though in essence resulting in subjugation. The filmmakers chose to depict the practice frankly but without being overly graphic.

"Don was against showing actual feet, but it was important that we underscored the practice," notes Kaster. "When



Top: Fangfang takes charge of Amei (Makayla Gatmaitan), the brothel's new conscript.
Bottom: Lin discusses a scene with Gatmaitan.

Fangfang finally decides to help Amei, it's because she makes the connection between her own life and what the child is being spared from." Makeup artist Lauren Wilde collaborated with B-camera operator Ricardo Gale to devise a simple prosthetic

combined with a camera trick to help provide a brief but close-up glimpse of the ultimate effects of the practice toward the end of the movie.

Morgan worked closely with Lin over the week's shoot and was impressed by her strong directing spirit. "We told her right away, 'You're the boss,'" says Morgan. "We wanted to do her version of the story. I always admire people who make sure they get what they want. She reminded me of directors I've worked with for 30 years, like Joe Sargent. Joe's the kind of guy that if I tell him an idea and he likes it, he'll tell everyone it was mine. And if he doesn't like it, he'll be quiet."

Kaster concurs with Morgan's assessment. "Jiaqi was initially a little nervous about how she'd work with Don," says Kaster. "With Don, the director is the wind behind the sails and he's going to fight for her to get everything. Jiaqi asked me one day, 'Will Don be angry if I don't sit right next to the monitor but go with the actors instead?' I told her, 'That's every cameraman's dream!'"

While the production shot, FotoKem scanned the 35mm dailies with a Spirit DataCine directly to HDCam SR tapes at 1920x1080 resolution. This process was supervised by ASC associate Mark Van Horne. "Mark was Don's first call each morning to check on the negative and the previous night's scanning," notes Kaster. The transfer was a flat, one-light pass designed to protect the widest possible latitude for the final color correction. After the

transfer to SR, the tapes were digitized into DNxHD 175 files for use with the production's Avid Media Composer editing software. The final output was designated for digital exhibition only with DVD, Blu-ray, QuickTime and DCP files but no film print.

For *The Red House's* final color grade, Morgan turned to another longtime collaborator, colorist Kevin O'Connor, who worked with Morgan and Lin in a brisk series of color-correction sessions using DaVinci Resolve 11 on a Mac. "We were all really excited looking at the movie during color correction," says Morgan.

"That's the mystery and beauty of shooting film," the cinematographer continues. "No matter how long you've been around, when you see one-light dailies and then you go in and correct them, your dreams really come true. I always have that little voice in the back of my mind that says, 'I hope it looks good.' The mystery is always there, and it's always great."

As she wraps postproduction on *The Red House*, Lin already has another ambitious project in mind. "I've written a period feature script set in the Forbidden City in 18th-century China," she reveals. "I want to shoot on film again and I really think it could be a breathtaking picture. That's what I'm thinking — not just hoping." ●