

MOVIES AND TV

## The rise in worldwide recognition of Asian cinema

*Everything Everywhere All At Once* is leading the 2023 Oscars race with 11 nominations. While Asian-led films are more embraced by critics and viewers, there's a long way to go.

BY DANG LE

The Shorthorn editor-in-chief

As two-time Academy Award winner Jane Fonda opened the envelope revealing the name of the 2020 Best Picture winner at the Oscars, she smiled, took a deep breath and paused for a moment. It was almost like she knew the weight of the word she was about to say. *"Parasite,"* Fonda said as the crowd erupted in cheers and applause, followed by a long-standing ovation.

*Parasite* became the first non-English language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. It also brought home three other awards: Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best International Feature Film. But it was about more than one individual film. It signaled the beginning of something fresh — the worldwide recognition of Asian cinema.

Cinematic arts professor Changhee Chun, a friend of *Parasite* director Bong Joon-ho, said when the film crew called him from Los Angeles for the Oscars, they were honored by the nomination but had little expectation of winning the biggest award of the night. "As you know, Academy Awards has not been very inclusive in a way, not just for Asian movies but also African American films or other countries' movies, and so on," Chun said.

He didn't work on the movie, but watching his friends on TV, he said he may have shed some tears.

In the years following, multiple Asian films and filmmakers started gaining critical acclaim and attention for their work. Chinese-born filmmaker Chloé Zhao won Best Director and Best Picture for *Nomadland* in 2021, the same year that *Minari*, a movie about a family of South Korean immigrants trying to achieve the American Dream in the '80s, received six nominations, winning Best Supporting Actress.

Cinematic arts alumna Bri Nguyen, who graduated last fall, said she's excited about the recent recognition for Asian cinema. Growing up as an Asian American in the U.S., she never saw people of her race being featured, but it seems like anyone can now be in a position of success, no matter their origin or ethnicity.

With the growth of hate crimes against the Asian American community following COVID-19, she said it's important to showcase that they're more than just their identity. They are human beings who have daily struggles like everybody else.

"Ever since the '60s up until now, we had a lot of kung fu movies and a lot of Hong Kong movies that made their way into Hollywood. But that kind of was just like, 'Oh, all Asian films are kung fu movies, y o u know?'" Nguyen said. "Now we're going into movies that are not kung fu, and they actually have depth to them."

Cinematic arts senior Than Zaw Oo credited 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians* for changing his perspectives as a filmmaker. He no longer sees Asian characters being portrayed as only nerds or martial artists, but instead, they're gaining respect and power. The movie, which grossed \$238.5 million worldwide, follows a Chinese American professor who travels to meet her boyfriend's family only to realize that they're one of the richest in Singapore. It is the first modern story with an all-Asian cast and an Asian American lead since 1993's *The Joy Luck Club*.

While Nguyen finds *Crazy Rich Asians* does not really tell the story of a normal Asian American family,

she thinks the film "walked" so more in-depth Asian portrayal "could run."

"If you just shoved a movie about Cambodian refugees and a child dies from a bomb in this movie, and you shove it to an American audience, they're not going to be comfortable with it," she said.

Chun said that major film industries like Hollywood perceive films as a business. "We use the term Hollywood Dream Factory, as that name suggested, it's a factory," he said. Unlike Asian or some European film sets where directors are "kings or queens" and have a lot of creative freedom, those in America don't have the luxury unless they're famous.

So in terms of stories, contents or visual style to me? Very repetitive."

The critics and industry are also reacting to Asian-led films with a different approach to storytelling. At the upcoming 95th Academy Awards on March 12, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which centers around a Chinese American family connecting with one another through parallel universes, is leading the nomination tally with 11 nods.

Michelle Yeoh received a nomination for Best Actress for her role in the film, making her the first openly-admitted Asian woman to be nominated in the category.

Nguyen said while she finds it inspiring to see Asian actors and actresses gaining recognition, she finds it sad they only just started

commanding amount of screen time and was credited by its writer-director Lee Isaac Chung as the center of the story, was completely ignored by the Oscars.

In 2020, Awkwafina became the first Asian American to win a Golden Globe award for Best Actress in the musical or comedy category for her role in *The Farewell*, which follows a Chinese American family who scheduled a gathering upon learning that their grandmother only has a short while left to live. However, she was not mentioned for a performance nomination at the Oscars.

The same goes for *Parasite*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Last Emperor*, *Life of Pi*, *Memoirs of a Geisha* or even *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, in which Yeoh was the lead actress. While their technical merits were celebrated by the Academy, none received a nomination

not just the language."

Oo said many people also don't want to watch Asian movies because of the language barrier and to avoid reading subtitles. "But you miss out a lot. There's like different parts of film exploring Asian culture," he said.

Yeoh also pointed out how Asian actors have long been given stereotypical or inconsequential roles instead of top-billing ones in an interview with *TIME* magazine published in December. She understood how important the nomination and the opportunity this provided for the Asian community.

"I've thought about it," she told *TIME* magazine. "And not just me — I feel like my full Asian community has thought about it. They come up to me and they say, 'You're doing it for us.'"

But even so, in an interview with *The A.V. Club*, she still had to face interview questions such as "Asian stories and storytellers are having a significant moment," and the success is hopefully "not just a phase."

Nguyen said she found it difficult to find a space for herself and when she does, it's because she's a diversity hire, and the crew wants to have an Asian American on the team. Last year, she was hired as a writing room assistant for a project. But when she came to the set, she, a Vietnamese, became a consultant to advise on developing a Chinese character.

She walked away from the project but said the experience encouraged her to fight harder for a better position.

Chun said there's still a long way to go to completely appreciate Asian films. As a professor at UTA, he said that the film program doesn't offer a lot of international cinema classes or Asian cinema classes that often, and most of the film history courses center around American or Euro-centric family history.

"That makes me feel sad because there are a lot more movies produced outside the USA, but why we are still in that little bubble just focusing on American cinema?" he said.

Nguyen said she doesn't think that the Asian community had the space to tell difficult stories on the big screen, such as trauma, refugees and depression, but the filmmakers have now started inserting themselves in the forefront position.

"It gives us a chance to showcase, 'This is the kind of people we are, and these are the things that we want to show,'" she said.

Oo said Hollywood is trying to be more diverse, as Asian filmmakers are getting opportunities to direct Marvel films, which he finds reaffirming.

"It's good to see that Asian filmmakers are getting more recognized, makes me excited about the future of filmmaking in my career," he said.

As someone who moved to UTA after teaching at a predominantly white institution in New York, Chun said he's encouraged his students to find their own stories and to focus on their heritage.

But as a production company owner in Burbank, California, he said the industry has drastically changed in the last 15 to 20 years, where many barriers are gone.

"It's happening," Chun said in reference to Chloé Zhao and other Asian second-generation filmmakers. "They prove that it's not the industry for rich white people. Now, Asian folks can do this even better, because, you know, they have a different story to tell."

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Illustration by Gladys Humphrey

From left to right, top to bottom: *A Separation*, 2012 Best Foreign Language Film winner; *Parasite*, 2020 Best Picture winner; *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, 2023 Best Picture nominee; *Crazy Rich Asians*, 2019 Golden Globes Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy nominee; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2001's Best Foreign Language Film winner; *The Joy Luck Club*, 1993's National Board of Review Top 10 Films; *Minari*, 2021 Best Supporting Actress winner; *The Farewell*, 2020 Golden Globes Best Actress – Musical or Comedy winner.

This commercialized way of producing films has caused audiences worldwide to look for something new, something different, instead of constantly consuming Hollywood content, he said.

"Audiences in states and also audiences in the world, they are tired of watching Hollywood content all the time," Chun said. "Yes, there are still powerful Hollywood movies for sure. But from that production system, the way they create a film to maximize profit, they repeat those things a lot.

getting noticed.

"We've had just so many talented people come in and out of our industry, and it's very sad to see them winning things just now," Nguyen said. "It's very inspiring still, yes, but I'm just also angry at the same time. Like, why did it take this long?"

The history of Asian film role recognition by the Academy has always been complicated. While Youn Yuh-jung was awarded Best Supporting Actress in her role in *Minari*, Yeri Han, who had a

for acting.

Chun said it's time people think about what a "performance" is. Since the actors and actresses don't speak English, some people would say that they cannot evaluate or appreciate their performance since they cannot understand them, he said.

"A performance is not just speaking a line. It's different," he said. "It's their facial expressions, their movements, and all of that subtleties they will deliver in their motion and action. That's a part of the performance. It's