



Photograph by Phyllis Christopher

# Another Walk on the Wild Side

**She may be over 40, but to her lesbian fans, actress Joan Chen – who stars in the first feature-length Asian-American lesbian film ever released in the United States – is still the next big thing.**

**By Malinda Lo**

**J**OAN CHEN HAS NEVER SHIED AWAY from unconventional roles. After she trained as an actor in Shanghai, Chen's second film, *Little Flower*, garnered her a best actress award in China (that country's Oscar equivalent), and the international press dubbed her the "Elizabeth Taylor of China."

In the years since, Chen has become a fixture in Asian and American films and television shows. She has played an opium-addicted empress in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, an enigmatic mill-owner in David Lynch's cult series *Twin Peaks* and a bisexual lawbreaker opposite Anne Heche in the controversial lesbian film *Wild Side*. She has also taken on the role of director, most notably with *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl*, which she filmed illegally in Tibet, and the Winona Ryder weeper *Autumn in New York*.

Today Chen shows little concern for Hollywood's obsession with youthful perfection, arriving for our interview at San Francisco's Miyako Hotel trailing a makeup assistant who is still applying the finishing touches to her flawless features. For several years, Chen has made her home in San Francisco, where, she admits, she enjoys being out of the Hollywood spotlight. "I'm totally removed. I've always been like that; I enjoy that," she says.

She's been removed from the big screen, too, for almost five years, choosing instead to spend time with her family (especially two young daughters, Angela and Audrey). But this year Chen can be seen in three

films worldwide, including *Jasmine* (a Shanghai family saga with Zhang Ziyi), *Avatar* (a futuristic sci-fi thriller set in Asia) and *Saving Face* (the first feature-length Asian-American lesbian film ever to be released theatrically in the United States). *Saving Face*, lesbian filmmaker Alice Wu's debut feature, has earned accolades (including the Audience Award at the 23rd San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival last spring) and created a surprising amount of Hollywood buzz.

In *Saving Face*, Chen takes on a role that many Hollywood actors would likely avoid: that of a middle-aged mom.

"I don't mind playing older," the 44-year-old Chen insists when asked whether she had any qualms about playing a character older than she is. "I feel very comfortable being a mother."

Indeed, Chen's love for her daughters was one of the major reasons she was attracted to the role of Ma, a 48-year-old widow who shames her traditional Chinese parents by becoming pregnant while unmarried – and who refuses to reveal the identity of the baby's father.

"I don't think there is any bond stronger than [the one between mothers and daughters]," Chen says. "And I have never had an opportunity to play that."

She also credits her daughters with helping her to realize her identity as an Asian American. Born in China and cast in her first role by Jiang Qing – Chairman Mao's wife herself – Chen came to the United States at 17 to attend college in 1981. Although she has lived here ever since, it wasn't until her daughter Angela returned home from school at Thanksgiving, having just learned about the pilgrims and the lyrics to "America the Beautiful," that Chen realized she was the mother of an American daughter.

"I used to be kind of distant from all the Asian-American groups or organizations, because I didn't feel a part of it," she says. "I have just [recently] kind of turned into an Asian American."

When she first read the script for *Saving Face*, a thoroughly Asian-American story set in the New York community of Flushing, Queens, Chen admits, it wasn't quite what she expected.

"Usually, when people write about Chinese families, it's kind of boring, you know, and this was nothing boring," she says. "This was very exciting and funny and touching."

The film revolves around the relationship between Chen's character and her daughter, 28-year-old medical resident Wil Pang (Michelle Krusiec), a closeted



lesbian who falls in love with the decidedly uncloseted Vivian (Lynn Chen). As Wil and her mother come to terms with their secrets and the consequences of revealing them, they forge a new, stronger mother-daughter bond.

Chen has nothing but praise for first-time director Alice Wu and her fellow cast members. "[Alice] was a good presence on the set, and the two girls [Michelle and Lynn] are fantastic. ... They're both really good

acting is perfect. Acting really gives me the channels to work it out."

One of her greatest departures from real life came in *Wild Side*, when Chen played a sexy businesswoman-turned-con-artist who seduces a previously straight call girl, played by Anne Heche – long before Heche rocketed to fame on the arm of Ellen DeGeneres.

"She's a great actress, a beautiful actress," Chen says about Heche. "We worked really well together. ... I don't remember a single moment of, 'Oh, this is uncomfortable' – everything just seemed very natural and organic with her. ... She's very special. She has this softness that's very very soft, but at the same time she has bone in it, you know."

Chen, too, has a certain quality about her that suggests steely resolve clothed in velvet. Her decision to film *Xiu Xiu* in Tibet without the permission of the Chinese government resulted in her being banned from working in China for several years.

"I paid my fine," she states wryly. "I paid my 50,000 U.S. dollar fine and I can work there now."

Chen doesn't have another role scheduled for the near future, but

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actresses, and so we had a lot of fun. We had a lot of laughs on the set."

Krusiec, who plays Wil, agrees: "It really was kind of like Joan was our mom and she had two really different daughters. That kind of familial bonding ... translated into the film."

*Saving Face* also marks the fourth time that Chen has appeared in a film with lesbian themes.

"It's not a political choice," she emphasizes. "It's for myself; it's a personal choice. There is no final challenge if I just play a mundane, something-I-do-everyday [character]."

She also admits, "It's aesthetic; it's probably a fantasy."

Chen enjoys acting because of the freedom it gives her to explore different worlds.

"I'm totally wild in my head, but my behavior is conservative, and so

she's not planning to retire anytime soon.

"I've played some good roles; I've played awful roles," she acknowledges. Although in the past she felt the need to take on mediocre roles just to be continually working, she no longer feels the "constant buzzing and pressure" of the L.A. entertainment industry.

Chen muses, "The part that I really want to play probably hasn't been written yet. You only recognize it when you see it; it's like falling in love. You will only know it when you see it, when you experience it."

Her next project, a film that she will write and direct, will be filmed in Shanghai, Chen's hometown.

"It's a film noir ... set in today's Shanghai," she explains, "which is ever-changing and very exciting, and drips with greed and desire."

She adds coyly, "So it can be a very sexy movie." ■