

*Breaking the Color Line in Hollywood:
Beulah Ong Kwoh, Actor*

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Breaking the Color Line in Hollywood: Beulah Ong Kwoh, Actor

MARY ELLEN KWOH SHU AND STEWART KWOH

From Invisible to Visible

“There is this myth that Americans aren’t interested in seeing a hero who happens to be an ethnic minority. That’s nonsense! We have to educate the viewing public!”¹

– Beulah Quo (stage name for Beulah Kwoh)

When we were young children growing up in Los Angeles in the 1950s, none of the faces on our television screen were yellow, brown, or black. Nobody looked like us. We were invisible on television, in films, and the mass media. In fact, not only Asian Americans, but African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Chicanos were often invisible as well. If they did appear on screen, they were usually cast in predictable, stereotyped roles of houseboy, maid, laundryman, cook, gardener, driver, or gangster.

1. Beulah Quo. *An Official Biography*, 1983.

“We were invisible on television, in films, and the mass media. Nobody looked like us.”

Fifty years later, Hollywood now has many actors of color, from Denzel Washington to Jennifer Lopez to Jackie Chan. The road from the old Hollywood to the present was not an easy one. It took the courage and dedication of many. Our very own mother, Beulah Ong Kwoh (Quo) helped to break the entrenched “color lines” of Hollywood. In her long and distinguished acting career, our mother became one of Hollywood’s most respected artists, a hero to many not only for her acting ability but also for her selfless determination to see Asians portrayed fairly on the screen and stage. Her efforts and achievements helped widen the door for many others.

A Daughter of Immigrants

Beulah did not plan to become a Hollywood actor. Born on April 17, 1923 in Stockton, California, she was the only child of a Chinese immigrant couple. Her parents were very poor, and Beulah would scrub floors for five cents an hour to help make ends meet. From a young age, Beulah was taught the importance of hard work and education as a means to a better life. These values guided Beulah in her journey as a teacher, a Christian, a producer, a visionary and an activist.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Berkeley, Beulah received a Master’s Degree from the University of Chicago. Around this time, she met and fell in love with a young Chinese student, Edwin Kwoh, who was completing his doctorate at Columbia University and who, like Beulah, was very active in the Chinese Christian movement. They married and, for two years, worked at a university in Nanjing, China where they hoped to help rebuild a country ravaged by war. After the Communist takeover in 1949, however, they fled back to California, bringing with them their infant son, Stewart.

An Actor Who Paved the Way

The family settled in Los Angeles and grew to include a daughter, Mary Ellen. By this time, Beulah was teaching sociology at the Los Angeles Community College and running the local church nursery school. In 1954, a friend referred Beulah to director Henry King who was working on the movie *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* starring William Holden. King needed a dialect coach for Jennifer Jones who was to portray Han Suyin, the real-life Eurasian doctor upon whose life the movie was based. To play her part, Ms. Jones needed to speak with a British-Chinese accent. “Mr. King said that I had a California accent, but wondered if I’d be interested in acting. He thought I was ideal for the part of Miss Jones’ aunt!”²

Recalling this serendipitous beginning of her acting career, Beulah later commented, “I had never acted before, but thought it would be fun. Instead, I fell in love with the profession as soon as I got the greasepaint on my face!”³ At a time when many wives stayed at home while their husbands worked, Beulah received the support of her husband, Edwin, to pursue acting. “His family was less traditional than mine... in the way we Cantonese have a lot of superstitions, a lot of protocol about relationships. Edwin’s family was very westernized. I never had to fight anything at home to pursue my career.”⁴

Beulah continued to land other small character roles. “I kept getting jobs because in the ‘50s and ‘60s, there were a lot more movies and there were not so many young women going into acting. Since I liked

2. Ibid.,

3. Quoted in Elrik Knutzen. “Asian-American Quo Fights the Good Fight.” *Los Angeles Herald TV Weekly*, 1985.

4. Quoted in “Beulah Quo: A Believer in Giving.” AAPAA’s *Inside Moves*, Oct. 1982.



The East West Players gave Asian American actors a place of their own to create full and multidimensional characters rather than the flat, one-sided images of Asians commonly portrayed by Hollywood at the time.

it and felt it extended my sociology, I could do something with it. Having been a teacher you're always sort of a ham!"⁵ Early in her career, Beulah changed her last name, "because I got tired of being asked, 'Is KWOH a radio station?'" To make things easier, she decided to change her stage name to "Quo."

Recognizing the need for some formal acting training, Beulah became a student of the Desilu Workshop, a theater group started by Lucille Ball for new talent. Beulah studied for three years under the guidance of director Joe Sargent, working with both Asian and non-Asian American actors. "You learn from people who've had a different background from which to pull their gut feelings. There are certain experiences that a non-Asian actor has that we can't possibly have, sometimes because their horizons are wider. Asian Americans still feel somewhat limited, self-imposed or imposed by society, especially in my

day when the restrictions were stronger."⁶ There she met Jimmy Hong and Pat Li who would join Beulah as early Asian American pioneers of the film industry.

The First Asian American Theater Company

Asian American actors needed the opportunity to highlight their talents so directors and producers would cast them. In 1965, Beulah and her friends, including Mako and Soon-Tek Oh, decided to take action. They created East West Players, the country's first Asian American theater company. East West Players gave Asian American actors a place of their own to create full and multidimensional characters rather than the flat, one-sided images of Asians commonly portrayed by Hollywood at the time.

Lacking a theater of their own, these dedicated founders rehearsed and performed in the basement of

5. Ibid.,

6. Ibid.,

the local Presbyterian church in the Silverlake area of Los Angeles and later moved to a store front on Santa Monica Blvd. Beulah served as chair of the board of directors while Mako served as artistic director. This was an especially difficult time for the fledgling organization. According to Esther Kim Lee in her book, *A History of Asian American Theatre*, "...core members such as Beulah Quo and Rae Creevey... willingly spent their personal time and money to get through the tough times. Quo was especially indispensable during this time. Other members relied on Beulah Quo to save the company by finding financial and legal resources."⁷

Through the dedication and personal commitment of Beulah and her colleagues, the little group survived and grew during the first eight critical years. Classes were offered to aspiring and already established actors. Productions such as the classic Japanese story *Rashomon* and Federico Garcia Lorca's *House of Bernalda Alba* gave Asian actors the opportunity to hone acting skills as well as develop self-confidence by portraying non-stereotypic roles. Many of today's successful Asian American actors gained their first experiences performing in an East West production.

Importance of Breaking Media Stereotypes

Entertainment media influences the general public's view of various groups of people. Stereotype — the oversimplified standardized image or idea held by one person or group of another is all too often found in film and television. Stereotypes of ethnic minorities have portrayed them narrowly as servants, laborers, or as criminals. Negative views are supported and the fact that a wide range of differences found in any group is ignored. What are some common stereotypes you have seen?

With the establishment of this theater company, the acting community of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Asian Americans grew. "Beulah treated everyone like family with a warmth that connected people regardless of age, language, and ethnicity."⁸ "Auntie Beulah," as she was so often called, became a vital link between many in the acting community.

Tim Dang, who later became the artistic director of East West Players, commented, "She spread her supportive advice to her extended family of artists about the entertainment business. But I think I got some special treatment from her when I became the artistic director of East West Players, the theater that she helped found in 1965. She wanted me to meet every person she knew or was just acquainted with that could help with contributing to East West Players both financially and artistically."⁹

From bringing Chinese congee soup, a traditional rice porridge dish, to sick friends to mentoring young aspiring actors, Beulah touched many lives. Reggie Lee, the young Filipino Chinese actor who portrayed Vincent Chin in the production *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain*, commented, "When I was younger, I wanted to be blond! Beulah helped me appreciate where I came from, that I am both Asian and American. She also helped me to know that I could make it in this business, too. I was fortunate to be one of her sons!"¹⁰

Playwright Cherylene Lee who worked with Beulah on *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain* acknowledged the influence that her long friendship with Beulah had upon her work as a writer:

"It wasn't until 1982, the year Vincent Chin was murdered, that I suddenly realized that though I've always seen myself as an American, there was a gap in how Asian Americans perceived themselves and how non-Asians saw us. I began to understand why Beulah worked so tirelessly to make Asian Americans more visible in American life. I began to write plays which explored this gap in perception and I tried to find ways in my plays to bridge the gap, to show parallels and contrasts, to use the past and the present, to acknowledge tradition and what is lost in the process of being American — themes which I continue to explore in my plays today."¹¹

7. Esther Kim Lee. *A History of Asian American Theatre*, p. 49.

8. George Takei, Telephone interview, April 4, 2005.

9. Tim Dang, E-mail to author, May 20, 2005.

10. Reggie Lee, Telephone interview, May 5, 2005.

11. Cherylene Lee, E-mail to author, June 7, 2005.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUDREY MAGAZINE

Photo: Above, Beulah Kwoh as “Guard Velie” poses for the camera while shooting *Brokedown Palace* (1999).

“The mission of the Association of Asian Pacific American Artists (AAPAA) was to promote more realistic and balanced images of Asians in the media and to fight against stereotyping in television and movies.”

Breaking Stereotypes and Recasting Our Roles

“Most of the time I would say they are not out to offend. It’s just that they don’t know. I have gone to producers several times and said, ‘Look, you’re going to get calls from the community on this — to say chink or Chinaman is not acceptable.’ And those producers will be genuinely surprised.”¹²

—Beulah Quo

Beulah observed many instances in which people of color were cast in stereotyped roles. Asian women, in particular, were portrayed, more often than not, as prostitutes, maids, and meek, subservient women. She was cast in one such role in the 1966 movie *Sand Pebbles* where she played the role of a Chinese madam named Mama Chunk.

As she began working on the film, Beulah found it frustratingly difficult to play her character because of the common, one-sided nature of the role she was portraying. This experience deeply impacted her and further strengthened her resolve to fight for a more balanced representation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the show business community was becoming slightly more sensitive to

the roles given to Asian Americans, but more change was needed. Beulah and other concerned Asian actors founded the Association of Asian Pacific American Artists (AAPAA). The mission of AAPAA was to promote more realistic and balanced images of Asians in the media and to fight against stereotyping in television and movies. Beulah served as vice-president for several years and helped to lead AAPAA’s fight. AAPAA members organized letter-writing campaigns and held direct discussions to educate Hollywood producers of their concerns.

Portraying the Features and Experiences of Asians

A major source of frustration and anger for Asian American actors on stage and in film was the portrayal of Asians by Caucasians in “Oriental” make-up. Examples are plentiful, from Rob Schneider as an Asian minister in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) to actors Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, Roland Winters and Peter Ustinov playing Charlie Chan in a series of films between 1931-1981. Even well-known actors like John Wayne resorted to this crude technique when playing Genghis Khan in the 1956 film, *The Conqueror*, as did Tony Randall in *The 7 Faces of Dr. Lao* (1964). The “Oriental” make-up that white actors put on their faces was not a new thing; earlier, African Americans

12. Quoted in Crystal Chow, “60 Years on the Silver Screen.” *Rice*, Sept. 1988.

“Most of the time I would say they are not out to offend. It’s just that they don’t know. I have gone to producers several times and said, ‘Look, you’re going to get calls from the community on this — to say chink or Chinaman is not acceptable.’ And those producers will be genuinely surprised.”

on stage and in theater were often portrayed by white actors in “blackface.”

Beulah was an early pioneer in films in which Asian actors portrayed Asian characters. In the film *MacArthur* (1977), Beulah portrayed Ah Cheu while working with her acting friend, film legend Gregory Peck. Because of her association with East West Players, Beulah’s stage involvement was also extensive. Beginning with her role in *Rashomon*, Beulah performed in many productions including *The Chinese Chess Piece* and East West Players’ *Ikebana*, for which she earned a 1996 Dramalogue award for her outstanding theater performance.

In *The Children of An Lac*, a 1980 movie-of-the-week, Beulah played the role of Madame Ngai, the determined founder of an orphanage in war-torn Vietnam who saved hundreds of orphans in Saigon with the assistance of two American women. One of Beulah’s memorable moments came in 1981 while working in China on NBC’s *Marco Polo*. Beulah portrayed the empress of Kublai Khan in this major film project, the first of its kind allowed by the Chinese government to be made in China. During filming in the Forbidden City in Beijing, Beulah was carried in an ornate sedan chair by “a number of young men, all Chinese soldiers that had been selected to work in the film. I really enjoyed that!”¹³

Reaching the American Public Through Television

Few people outside of the Asian American community had any familiarity with the long and complex history of Asians in America. *Paper Angels*, a 1985 American Playhouse TV production, was very significant, for it provided an opportunity for Asian American actors to participate in a quality production focusing on the Asian American experience. Beulah portrayed Chin Moo, an immigrant being held in the immigration station barracks on Angel Island, the San Francisco port of entry. Drawing upon her understanding of the experiences of some of her own relatives who passed through Angel Island, Beulah gave an intense performance that captured the determination, hope, and fears of these immigrants. In doing so she educated television viewers to the dehumanizing detention of thousands of Chinese immigrants in Angel Island.

Believing strongly in the power of the media to shape people’s perceptions of Asian Americans, Beulah worked actively behind the camera as well. In the early 1970s, she became the first Asian American to produce a public affairs television program dealing with issues affecting the Asian American community. Aired by KNBC television, *Expressions: East-West* was moderated by her fellow Asian American actor and activist, George Takei. Most well-known for his role as Mr. Sulu on TV’s *Star Trek*, George became a close and lifelong friend.

13. Beulah Quo, Personal interview, 1995.

Beulah was also the first Asian American woman to earn a local Emmy when she created and produced the documentary *James Wong Howe: The Man and His Movies* for KNBC. Until then, few outside of Hollywood knew anything of this gifted and legendary cinematographer whose artistry behind the camera brought life to over 125 movie classics including *The Rose Tattoo*, *Hud*, and *Funny Girl*.

In 1998 Beulah was appointed to the Sesquicentennial Commission charged with the responsibility of organizing the celebration of California's 150 years of statehood. Members of the commission were chosen for their leadership roles throughout the state. Recognizing once again an opportunity to educate the public about the often-overlooked contributions of Asian Americans to the development of our country, Beulah commissioned and helped to raise funds for a musical about the struggles of the early Asian immigrants in California. The resulting piece, *Heading East*, was performed in several venues in California as part of the state sesquicentennial celebration. A traveling exhibition of photos documenting 100 years of Asian Pacific American history in California accompanied the musical as it toured throughout the state.

Seeking Justice on Stage

*"With Beulah, no stone was left unturned. She rolled them with her own energy if they couldn't or wouldn't move on their own!"*¹⁴

– George Takei, actor

Beulah's determination to develop awareness in the community at large about Asian American issues was channeled into several greatly significant projects during the 1980s and 1990s. The first began in 1982 in response to the tragic murder of Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American man who had lived in Detroit. Beaten to death by two displaced white autoworkers on the eve of his wedding, Chin had been mistaken by the angry and frustrated men to be Japanese. The two killers were subsequently only given parole for having committed this brutal, racially-motivated crime.

Beulah and Edwin invited Vincent's mother, Lily, to stay at their home when she visited Los Angeles to



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUDREY MAGAZINE

Various roles: *from top*, Beulah Kwoh as Empress Chabi in NBC's *Marco Polo*, 1982. *Middle*: playing a grandmother in an episode of *Hawaii Five-O*. *Bottom*: Qu as Elvis Presley's adoptive mother in *Girls, Girls, Girls*, 1962.

14. George Takei, Telephone interview, April 4, 2005.

“With Beulah, no stone was left unturned. She rolled them with her own energy if they couldn’t or wouldn’t move on their own!”

– George Takei, actor



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUDREY MAGAZINE

speak at one of the many rallies that were being organized around the country in the wake of her son’s murder. Beulah grew increasingly outraged over the unjust outcomes and became convinced that Vincent’s story needed to be told, but from his mother’s point of view. Lily Chin, too, was desperate to “do everything I can to make sure that no other mother goes through what I went through.”¹⁵ Lily had become an initially reluctant but increasingly influential and powerful activist. Trusting Beulah to help her in this cause, Lily Chin gave the story rights of Vincent’s case to her.

Armed with her characteristic energy, creativity, and determination, Beulah contacted Yang Xie, a Chinese film director, and Cherylene Lee, a Chinese American playwright and former child actor whom she had known for many years. The two collaborated on a screenplay called *And Justice for All*. Then in 1997, Cherylene was asked by the director of the Contemporary American Theatre Festival to write a play based on the screenplay that she and Yang Xie had written.

Thanks in large part to the fundraising efforts of Beulah and Cherylene, the resulting play, *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain*, premiered on July 10, 1998 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, with Beulah playing the lead role of Lily Chin, Vincent’s courageous mother. “I think Beulah and I shook hands with every possible donor in West Virginia, Virginia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.!”¹⁶ Through their efforts, the play and theater became a line item in the governor of West Virginia’s budget and part of the governor’s policy for his statewide Initiative on Race.

Carry the Tiger to the Mountain went on to be performed in New York at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre and in Los Angeles at East West Players. There, Beulah recreated her role as Lily Chin, her moving, anguished performance a fitting tribute to the courageous mother who sought justice for her murdered son.

Exclusion Leads to Unity

In a favorite recollection that Beulah liked to share, she and some of her fellow actors, comprised of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and other minorities, were on a sightseeing trip in Salt Lake City and went to visit the great Mormon

15. Quoted in Daniel Yi, “Beulah and Stewart Quo” *A. Magazine: Inside Asian America*, April 1996.

16. Cherylene Lee, E-mail to the author, June 7, 2005.

“Beulah was an actor in the true definition of the word — a person who takes action.”

— George Takei, actor



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUDREY MAGAZINE

Tabernacle. However, before they could set foot in the tabernacle, they were told that they could not enter. Though they found out later that it was because they were not of the Mormon faith, they initially joked amongst themselves. Had they been denied entry because of the African Americans? The Asian Americans? The Latinos among them? This early sense of exclusion left a lasting impression upon Beulah, for she and her friends found not only comfort in the shared experience, but feelings of unity and solidarity as well.

That Beulah believed strongly in the importance of bringing people of all colors together was reflected in her extensive service to the Los Angeles community. She served on the Los Angeles City Human Relations Committee, on the board of directors for United Way, El Nido Services (a family counseling agency) and many others. In recognition of her dedicated service, she earned a place in the California Public Education Hall of Fame. And in 1999, she was selected to be the 45th Assembly District’s Woman of the Year by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa who was then Speaker of the California State Assembly.

Acting for the Future

“Beulah was an actor in the true definition of the word — a person who takes action.”¹⁷

— George Takei, actor

The fight to portray Asian Americans and other ethnic groups accurately and to open up opportunities for actors of color has continued since our mother’s passing in 2002. Asian Americans are still underrepresented on TV and in movies.¹⁸

But compared to fifty years ago, significant progress has been made, in large part, due to the selfless work of our mother. Asian Americans are no longer the invisible, stereotyped characters of our childhood; they are emerging as multidimensional individuals — doctors, artists, detectives, parents, and children — all members of today’s rich and colorful American landscape. Early in her long and illustrious career, our mother recognized the enormous potential to use the silver screen as more than a means of entertainment. In her tireless and courageous efforts to break down barriers and seek justice through the medium of film and stage, her dedicated service to the community, and her sensitive portrayals of a myriad of characters, our mother’s heroic legacy lives on.

17. Quoted in Sara Ki, “The Many Splendored Facets of Beulah Quo.” *Audrey*, March 2003.

18. National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, *Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Lights, Camera, and Little Action*, 2005.