

photos
makeup & hair
wardrobe stylist
photo assistants

Ken Pao, www.kenpao.com
Elle German, www.ellegerman.com
Anna Katsanis, annakatsanis.com
Leo Salvaggio, Noah Ehlert

story

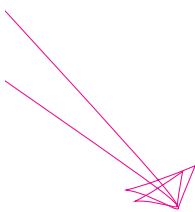
Teena Apeles

Chinese actress **Li Bing Bing** unleashes her star power in auteur Wayne Wang's latest film *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* — a lush visual feast of celluloid based on Lisa See's best-selling novel, revealing a secret language and a sacred bond of sisterhood that gave women a voice and freed their souls.

unbound







It's been a while since a Hollywood-produced film has had so much Asian and Asian American star power behind it like in the upcoming period epic *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which is being released this July through Fox Searchlight. There's Chinese American author Lisa See, upon whose best-selling book the film is based; the powerful Asian American producers behind the film, Wendi Deng Murdoch and Florence Sloan; and the director Wayne Wang, best known for directing *The Joy Luck Club*. Of course, there are also his leading ladies, celebrated Chinese actress Li Bing Bing and Korean starlet Gianna Jun, as well as appearances by veteran Chinese American actress Vivian Wu and Archie Kao, to name a few. Oh, yes, and a little Mandarin with Australian flair is thrown in there, too, courtesy of an actor you may have heard of — Hugh Jackman.

Just as in See's 2005 historical novel, the film takes readers to rural 19th century China, when the practice of foot binding was commonplace and having small, beautiful feet — regardless of how painful it was to achieve — determined the course of a girl's life. Families entrusted matchmakers to find promising partners for their daughters, both in marriage and in friendship. It is in this setting that the audience is introduced to “the strong and deeply emotional relationship” of Snow Flower and Lily, two young girls brought together to become *laotong* (“old sames”), an oath of sisterhood and a commitment to a lifelong bond of companionship, explains star Li Bing Bing by telephone from New York, fresh from a photo shoot for this story.

During a time when women were mostly uneducated and illiterate, once they are married and separated from their families, this bond takes on extreme importance as Snow Flower and Lily are matched with husbands of very different classes — the low-born Lily marrying a man of some wealth and power, while Snow Flower's match is far less prosperous — and both must accept their new roles as subservient wives. To bridge the distance and sustain their bond as *laotong*, the two friends share a

unique correspondence, passing news of their lives and their most personal thoughts in *nu shu*, a secret language known only to women, written on the folds of fans and exchanged in a discreet fashion. “They write some secret words to communicate or connect,” explains Li in her best English (on rare occasion having her translator clarify). “In their own language, they show themselves ... and they can be free in their world.”

From Woman to Woman

Stepping out of the fictional world, enter two close friends: accomplished media strategist and executive Wendi Deng Murdoch, who is of Chinese descent; and writer, children's author and philanthropist Florence Sloan, who is Malaysian-Chinese. If their names don't ring a bell, maybe their high-profile spouses' names will. Murdoch is married to Rupert Murdoch, chairman and CEO of News Corporation, and Sloan to Harry Sloan, former head of MGM and currently chairman and CEO of Global Eagle Acquisitions.

“I was introduced to the book by Amy Tan, who is a great writer and also a good friend,” recalls Murdoch. “After I read *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, I talked to Florence and she loved the book ... because it is about two women in old China, how they struggle and how their friendship helps them to cope with their life challenges.”

Neither women were familiar with the concept of *laotong* before See's book, but they were drawn to the idea of a language shared only among women, and the thought of a bond even stronger than marriage. “In Hunan province, there is a little town. They have a museum and showcase a lot of *laotong* language, which is really amazing,” says Murdoch.

Not long after, Murdoch and Sloan launched the production company Big Feet Productions and optioned *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* in 2008. “All the people around the world right now are so curious about China,” says Murdoch. “Through the main characters the film showed how all women around the world all want the same thing — to feel like we make meaningful contributions to society, to be happy. How friendship helps people to help each other to overcome life challenges, suffering, heartache. It is just a beautiful story to tell.”

The Ties That Bind

So let's take inventory here: famous Asian American author, director Wayne Wang, bestselling novel-turned-movie, multi-generational story. You're thinking the next *Joy Luck Club*,

Doo.Ri silk tiered crop top and silk long skirt, Walter Steiger “Molto” shoes, Van Cleef & Arpels “Vintage Alhambra” bracelet, her own earrings.





“Women had their own space

The men would not understand *nu shu*.

For me, it was very special

then, their own language.

to do a movie about the *laotong* during a

Richard Chai Love sheer top and bandeau, Doo.Ri silk sequined shorts, Walter Steiger “Myrtle” shoes, Van Cleef & Arpels “Magic Alhambra” earrings.



time when men treated

women differently.”

— Li Bing Bing



right? While you can easily draw some parallels — it's true, a few of the same players are involved (Vivian Wu and Russell Wong appear in both films) — *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, at its heart, is truly about the powerful friendship between women, the bond of *laotong*. This is not an Asian American story; it is a love story, one told in three languages at times — English, Chinese, even some Korean. Though what unfolds on screen is only partly the story that Lisa See conceived.

From the beginning the producers had Wang in mind for the film. “He is a great director and he has a good balance between Chinese and Western,” says Murdoch. “This book takes place in China, but its theme is universal. It touches people in the West as well.”

But when she and Sloan first brought the project to Wang, the thought of tackling a period piece didn't interest him. He proposed a parallel story of two contemporary women, descendants of Lily and Snow Flower, Nina and Sophia, who find difficulty maintaining their relationship in the fast-paced and challenging 21st century setting of modern Shanghai, even without the strict cultural codes and responsibilities their female ancestors were required to honor. Nina is an ambitious professional and, on the surface, the more

stable of the two, while her childhood friend Sophia lives more spontaneously.

Murdoch and Sloan say that Wang felt more people in China would be able to relate to these new characters, and Murdoch believes, with this additional storyline, the film shows “the whole story that friendship, no matter in old or new 21st century, it is always the key to how you overcome life challenges.”

With their dream director in place, Sloan and Murdoch sought actresses who could do double duty as their Snow Flower/Sophia and Lily/Nina. They looked to South Korean star Gianna Jun “because she is very well-known not just in Korea, but in the whole of Asia, and she was kind of what we imagined Snow Flower to be,” says Sloan. Jun, also credited as Jun Ji-hyun, rose to fame in the popular Korean series *My Sassy Girl* and recently made her English-language film (and action role) debut in the 2009 cult film *Blood: The Last Vampire*.

Originally, *Memoirs of a Geisha* star Zhang Ziyi had signed on to play Lily/Nina (and was to produce the film as well), but reportedly backed out in January 2010 to focus on a film with director Wong Kar-Wai. This was just a temporary setback. The producers already had their eye on the lovely Li Bing Bing, the popular Chinese actress and singer whom American audiences may remember as the tough female villain in the 2008 Jackie Chan and Jet Li martial arts film *Forbidden Kingdom*. But don't expect to see Jun or Li

demonstrating their fighting skills in *Snow Flower and the*



1. Li Bing Bing as Lily, left, and Gianna Jun as Snow Flower.
2. Li reading the secret fan.
3. Li, left, and Jun.

PHOTOS: SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN IMAGES COURTESY FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES, TM AND © 2011 TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Secret Fan; rather, they convey the full range of human emotions in their dual roles as 19th century rural wives and modern urban women.

Giving Voice

Li has already received much acclaim for her dramatic work, having won accolades for *The Knot* and *The Message* in her

“The movie shows how the power of women, in terms of relationships, transcends everything — transcends race, transcends your station in life, where you live, how much money you make. It shows how strong women can be and how much our friendships and our relationships mean to us.” — Wendi Deng Murdoch, producer

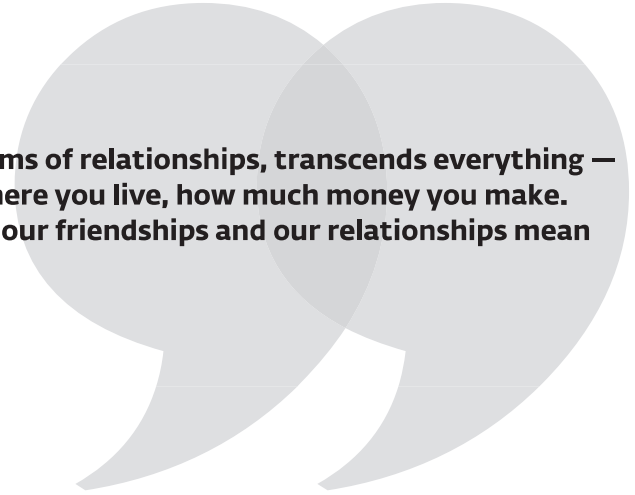
home country, news of which reached stateside. “We heard about Bing Bing because she is a very well-known actress in China, and she had just won the Golden Horse for *The Message* ... the equivalent of the Oscar here,” says Sloan.

While Li was certainly an accomplished actress, she hadn’t studied English since middle school. (Half of the film is in English.) But the hardworking Li wasn’t going to let that stop her from this important opportunity. “I heard [of] this novel before, that it was very popular, so when they found me, I accepted immediately,” says Li. “The chance to do *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* was a big pressure. I am like a soldier, I practiced English every day ... because we needed to do the ancient part and the modern part.”

While improving her English to play Nina was a matter of intense practice, the greater challenge facing Li was offering insight into the secret world of 19th century Chinese women. “In China, in the global world, the woman in the ancient [times] is really different than now. ... The woman’s position is different from men. It is more intense in this movie,” she says, alluding to the fact that Snow Flower and Lily had little control over their circumstances, their parents and their husbands determining their every move. “Women had their own space then, their own language. The men would not understand *nu shu*. For me, it was very special to do a movie about the *laotong* ... during a time when men treated women differently.”

A Tale of Many Friendships

Working on *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* was an extremely moving experience for Li, having to depict each character’s deep connection and longing to be with her *laotong*. “I in-



vested a lot of my energy and feeling into Lily and Nina. Playing both these characters made me feel emotionally stronger,” she says. “[The *laotong* bond] is more than friendship — almost like love, but not quite. I think that people, especially for women, they are going to have the same feeling that I have. Because this movie doesn’t physically show the characters’ intensity; it is more subtle, even restrained.”

Friendship wasn’t just a theme in the film; the set itself fostered close relationships among the cast and crew, adds Li. “The atmosphere on set was really cozy and free ... like family, like friends. Gianna Jun was very, very open. I used to watch her movies and when I got a chance to work with her, I feel very different. Because we are *laotong* in the movie, we have a very special relationship. I think that I will always see her as some kind of *laotong*. [And the producers] Wendi and Florence really put a lot into the movie, spent time on the set ... talking about our characters.” Li now calls them “good friends.”

That a film about the intense bonds between women would cultivate such bonds among its cast and producers is a credit not only to the individuals involved, but also to the message of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. “The story of the women in the film or in China today or the Western world is universal,” says Sloan. “Life’s challenges are always overcome by self-improvement, through education, for example, or by the relationships that you have with others around you. ... The relationships around us hold the key to human progress.”

Sloan’s friend and collaborator Murdoch echoes the sentiment. “The movie shows how the power of women, in terms of relationships, transcends everything — transcends race, transcends your station in life, where you live, how much money you make,” she says. “It shows how strong women can be and how much our friendships and our relationships mean to us.” ❀