

the princess of nebraska

a film by wayne wang



the match factory presents a film by wayne wang
"the princess of nebraska"



TORONTO
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION
2007



DONOSTIA ZINEMALDIA
FESTIVAL DE SAN SEBASTIAN
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

ZABALTEGI

synopsis

"The Princess of Nebraska" follows twenty-four hours in the life of Sasha, a young Chinese woman who is four months pregnant as a result of a fling back in Beijing. Interrupting her first year of college in Omaha, Nebraska, she travels to San Francisco to abort the child and confront her lover's male friend.

Sasha is pregnant as the result of a one-night stand with Yang, a "nan dan," or male actor who plays female roles in the Beijing Opera. Yang also had a liaison in Beijing with Boshen, a white American who was deported back to the United States by the Chinese government, presumably for helping a Western journalist on a story about AIDS. As a result of this scandal, Yang has been thrown out of the opera troupe and onto the streets of Beijing, where Boshan has heard he now makes a living by hustling. Although Sasha is constantly text-messaging Yang, and Boshen is desperately trying to send him money, Yang has cut off all communications with both former lovers.

Sasha first arrives at the Oakland International Airport, where her friend doesn't come to pick her up as promised. She takes the local railway to downtown San Francisco, and there meets Boshen, who is concerned about the fate of the child. She has come to San Francisco ostensibly to get an abortion, but starts to consider the myriad of options available to her in America. Boshen has motives of his own, and wants to convince Sasha to keep the baby and start a three-member family in hopes of baiting Yang to America.

San Francisco is a city full of paradoxes. It is poised between the East and the West, male and female, past and future, real and unreal. It is a city infamous for its ever-changing morals, and most important for Sasha, its ever-shifting identities.

Sasha befriends X, a karaoke bar-hostess who reminds her of Yang. As a romantic tryst progresses, Sasha proposes to X that they travel the world together, but like so many of Sasha's relationships, this one too crumbles in disappointment and despair. Struggling to comprehend the growing life inside her, Sasha's conviction starts to deteriorate, and she embraces an American concept she has just picked up, "moving on."

Finally we never see the most important image that Sasha sees: the baby's ultrasound. But clearly it is what propels Sasha to her final decision, whether or not we know what it is. Sasha's unborn baby has taken her on a daring journey from Beijing to the backstreets of America, and the untold sequel to this umbilical film is an American tale of a stranger in a strange land, all promise and potential.

director's statement

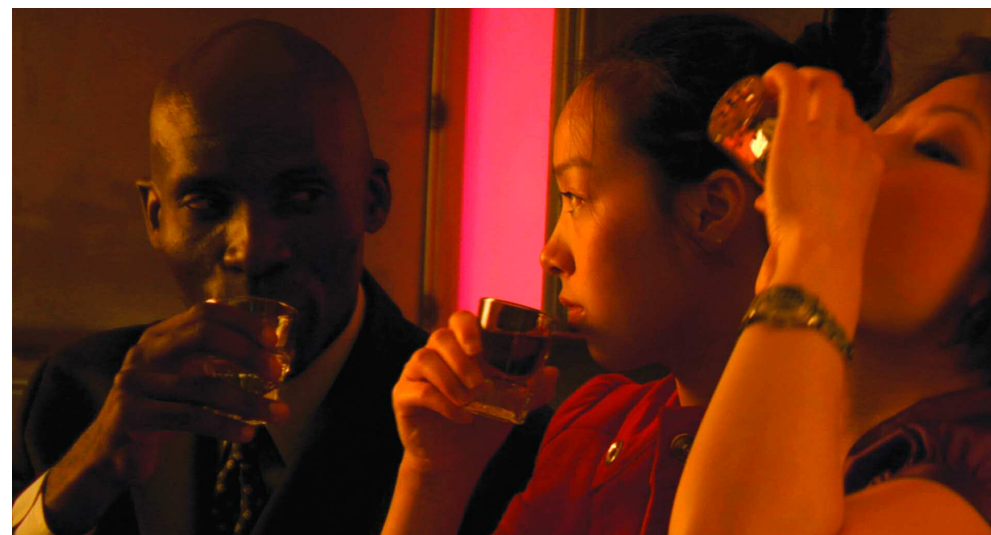
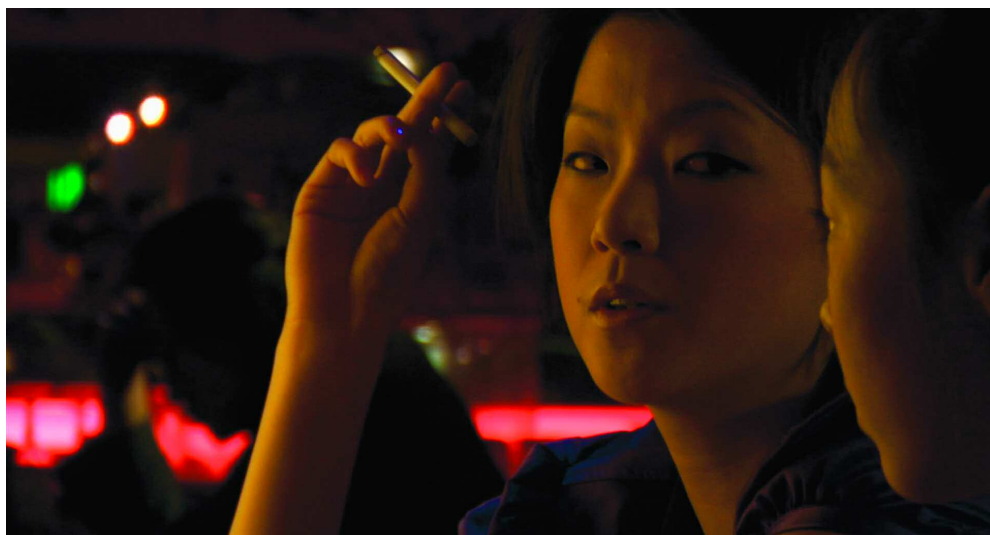


Wayne Wang

Upon finishing "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," I decided, as I often have with my independent features, to bookend it with an edgier low budget companion. I had done this previously with "Eat a Bowl of Tea" and "Life is Cheap," as well as "Smoke" and "Blue in the Face." "The Princess of Nebraska" would become the companion film for "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers."

A few particular moments inspired me to pursue "The Princess of Nebraska." I had always been intrigued by Yiyun Li's original story of a young Chinese woman in America, faced with the very lonely decision of whether to have an abortion or keep her baby. But I wanted to alter the approach just slightly, making Sasha the most current representation of new China, part of the young, brash, and fearless generation.

Although both born in Beijing, the fifteen years that separate the two protagonists in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and "The Princess of Nebraska" couldn't make them more different. Yilan in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" is burdened by the constraints of her family and cultural history. Sasha, on the other hand, is totally unencumbered; no history, no moral guideposts and no spirituality or religion. Quite the opposite, nothing restrains her, and this is what drew me to the story.



production notes

In February 2007, Wayne Wang returned to San Francisco after shooting “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” a film based upon a short story by Yiyun Li about a father and daughter who’ve become familiar strangers as a consequence of the censorship of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. As Wayne considered subsequent projects, he was hearing accounts of more current casualties of this legacy of Mao’s China—a young adult population in China illiterate to its own history, twenty-year-olds who know nothing of the man who tried to stop a tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989. He remembered another story by Yiyun, “The Princess of Nebraska,” in which a young Chinese woman walks the streets of Chicago while debating whether to abort the baby she’s carrying. Wayne was compelled by the story’s potential to provide one very personal perspective on an increasingly world-relevant question: Who is the young generation of the new China?

Westerners, Wayne Wang says, have very fixed notions of the 21st-century Chinese woman. They might point to a retro Gong Li in “Raise the Red Lantern”—cold, calculating and uncomfortably close to the Dragon Lady stereotype. Or Ziyi Zhang’s characters in “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” and “House of Flying Daggers”—lightning quick, tight-lipped martial artists. Or in the present day, Maggie Q, the actress (Biracial Vietnamese American in fact) who has appeared in “Mission Impossible III” and “Live Free or Die Hard” as exotic, brainy Chinese hackers and operatives. But in recent years, Wang had been observing a dramatic change in the young women arriving from China. A combination of research, meeting a number of recent arrivals, and the casting process confirmed his assessments.

The modern-day Chinese woman just out of her teens is a unique being: free of moral, religious or historical trappings. Unmoored from the Chinese past, she searches the world over for the best she can find, material or otherwise. Her older sisters bear scars from the Cultural Revolution and the Communist past, but the 21st-century Chinese woman is free to a fault. Her purportedly Communist world is dominated by capitalistic aspirations, and she has a clear-eyed sense of her own value in the scheme of things. She is no longer the Confucian ideal of daughter, wife, and mother. She is that rare thing: a prized commodity with the awareness of her worth.

Modernizing the story

Wang initiated discussions with first-time screenwriter Michael Ray about a treatment that would modernize Sasha from a child of the Cultural Revolution to an offspring of the new capitalist China, transplant her to the Chinese way station of San Francisco, and manifest the extensive backstory in Yiyun’s original narrative with new characters in the adaptation’s present.

Part of a generation raised on reality television, instant messaging, and YouTube, Sasha and her contemporaries are perpetual chroniclers of their own experience, dispatching video diaries and text messages to friends on the other side of the world just as readily as speaking to those physically present. Wayne Wang, Rich Wong and Michael Ray intended to document that hyper-linked

socialization by inter-cutting the digital video with footage Sasha shoots on her cell phone and text messages she sends to her former lover in Beijing, varying the film's aesthetics of communication.

Thus the fundamental aesthetic of the film would be that of a modernist documentary, employing the technology of the young—cell phones and digital video—to depict them. In many ways, this project would represent a return to Wayne's seminal feature film, "Chan Is Missing," made in 1982 for a budget of \$20,000 and answering another question of cultural identity.

[A great space for creativity and spontaneity](#)

For the production, Wayne turned to Donald Young, director of programs at the San Francisco-based Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), to assemble a small production crew of young local filmmakers and to instill in them a spirit of experimentation, resourcefulness, and flexibility that would reflect the themes of the film. Don drew from the temporary staff of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, forming whole departments in a matter of hours. A few months prior, CAAM Executive Director Stephen Gong had introduced Wayne to Richard Wong, whose recent directorial debut with the micro-budget indie musical "Colma: The Musical" had earned him a nomination for a 2007 Independent Spirit Award as a filmmaker to watch. Wayne invited Rich, also a talented director of photography, to shoot the film. With the principals in place,

Entertainment FARM was brave enough to invest the necessary financing to support the production and final delivery of this creatively risky project. Preproduction required only three weeks; the film was shot in eighteen days—and in sequence, whenever possible, to aid the understandings of the inexperienced cast.

Wayne wished to shoot the film in real locations around the city, relying on primarily natural lighting, wireless microphones, and a portable, unobtrusive camera with a memory card for high-quality digital images that could be downloaded and edited relatively immediately, allowing them a quickly comprehensive understanding of what they were capturing as they set plans for the subsequent shoot. This process would allow Wayne tremendous flexibility to adapt the narrative to chance discovery, the innate talents of his instinctual cast, and the unforeseen challenges of an independent production.

Ensuring the film's authenticity

To further ensure the film's authenticity, Wayne decided to cast in its most important roles nonprofessional actors who shared similarities of experience with the characters they were to portray. Hundreds of interested actors applied to play Sasha, yet none was quite right. Only less than two weeks before the first scheduled day of shooting the cast for Sasha was found: Ling Li.

Like Sasha, Ling was a person in flux: at eighteen, no longer a child however not yet an adult; unaware of China's even recent past but hyper-engaged in Western celebrity culture, admiring Paris Hilton for her ostensibly intrepid disregard for convention. And dangling from Ling's cell phone were the elaborate trinkets Wayne and Michael had imagined when conceiving of the fashion typical of the character. Many of the other Chinese actors—Wolf and Gene, among them—were later cast from Ling's acquaintances.

The centerpieces of the film are the performances of these nonprofessional actors, anchored by the riveting Ling Li. The story requires her to compel sympathy from the audience despite some rather despicable actions, and her abilities to ground that conflicted relationship are undeniable. She fulfilled Wayne's ultimate hopes when he cast her in the role, incrementally imbuing the character with her own experience and personality. The diary from which she reads in the hotel is her own inspiration—one she began writing as Sasha soon

after meeting Wayne, to assist her understanding of the character. Wayne spied the diary on set one day and immediately incorporated it into one of the film's apex moments.

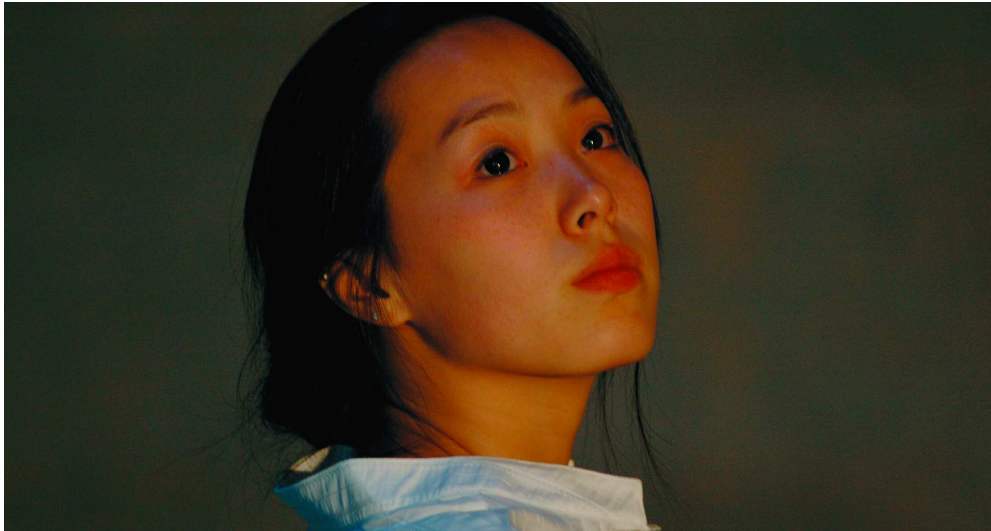
With "The Princess of Nebraska," Wayne Wang aspires to answer a new question of identity—Who is the young generation of the new China?—by speaking in their parlance and through their technology, by configuring production practices that permit him the greatest flexibility to authentically document a personality unmoored to history and in constant flux.



the cast

Ling Li – Sasha

"The Princess of Nebraska" is 18-year-old Ling Li's acting debut. Born in Liaoning, China and raised in Shanghai, she auspiciously studied modern dance at the same school as Ziyi Zhang. Ling immigrated to the United States just 4 years ago, and in her short time in San Francisco, learned Spanish quickly enough to tutor students in it. In June 2007, Ling graduated from John O'Connell High School as one of its top students. Ling has participated in and won prizes numerous Asian talent and beauty contests. In fall 2007, Ling will begin her freshman year studying Animal Sciences at the University of California, Davis.



Pamelyn Chee – X

Pamelyn Chee has a penchant for playing slightly off kilter, wayward characters. She is also completely fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese. Her first major role was in Jerry Allen Davis' "The Shanghai Hotel," alongside Cheng Pei Pei, Eugenia Yuan and Hill Harper, where she plays a girl pretending to be a boy. Pamelyn can also be seen in Dolly Parton's music video "Imagine," a John Lennon cover, playing a young Yoko Ono.



Brian Danforth – Boshen

A high school teacher and native San Franciscan, Brian Danforth auditioned for the part of Boshen when he heard that Wayne Wang was searching for a 40-ish non-Asian who spoke Mandarin fluently. He learned Mandarin during college and mastered it while living in Taiwan, earning a Master's Degree in Chinese, and working for several years in sales and marketing for a China-based manufacturer. "The Princess of Nebraska" is Brian's first film.



Patrice Lukulu Binaisa – James

Patrice Binaisa was born 1961 in Kampala, Uganda. He attended school in Uganda, Kenya, and the United Kingdom before he came to the United States where he attended high school and college. Patrice started acting in 2000 and was formally trained at the Berkeley Repertory School of Theatre. He last appeared on stage as Escalus in Impact Theatre's production of William Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure." He lives in Berkeley, California.



the crew

Wayne Wang – Director

Wayne Wang is a key figure in the development of independent filmmaking, alternating major Hollywood studio films such as “The Joy Luck Club” with smaller, independent work like “Smoke.” Continuing to work in the two different worlds, Wang directed an independent digital film, “The Center of the World,” with Molly Parker and Peter Sarsgaard, followed by Sony/Revolution’s hit comedy “Maid in Manhattan” with Jennifer Lopez. “Because of Winn-Dixie” based on the children’s novel by Kate DiCamillo, opened in 2005. His latest Hollywood film, “Last Holiday,” with Queen Latifah and Gerard Depardieu, was loosely based on a 1950 J.B. Priestly film of the same name.

Richard Wong – Director of Photography, Co-Director

Richard Wong is a native of San Francisco, California. “Colma: The Musical” was his feature directorial debut. The independent feature film was nominated for an IFP Gotham Award and Independent Spirit Award. He broke in as a video engineer on episodic television, most recently on the Emmy Award-winning comedy “Arrested Development.” He has served as cinematographer for a slew of short films and pilots and is a 2005 International Cinematographers Guild Film Showcase Award Honoree for his cinematography on the film “Surfacing.”

Michael Ray – Screenwriter

Michael Ray is editor of Francis Ford Coppola’s literary and arts quarterly, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, a finalist for the 2007 National Magazine Award. In 2005, he was nominated for PEN’s biennial award for magazine editing. “The Princess of Nebraska” is his first screenplay.

Yiyun Li – Author, “The Princess of Nebraska”

Yiyun Li grew up in Beijing, China and has lived in the US since 1996. Her debut collection of stories, “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” has won the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the Guardian First Book Award and other prizes. She has received awards and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation and Whiting Foundation, and was chosen recently by Granta magazine as one of the Best Young American Novelists. She lives in California with her husband and two sons.

Deirdre Slevin – Editor

Deirdre Slevin has been working in feature film editing since 1996. She assisted on such films as “Copland,” “K-Pax,” “Maid in Manhattan” and “A Map of The World.” Her first feature was the independent movie, “Gaudi Afternoon,” starring Judy Davis and Marcia Gay Harden and directed by Susan Seidelman. This is her fifth collaboration with Wayne Wang. She previously edited “Because of Winn-Dixie” with Anna Sophia Robb and Jeff Daniels for 20th Century Fox and “Last Holiday” starring Queen Latifah for Paramount Pictures.

Yukie Kito – Producer

Yukie Kito started her career at JVC Entertainment Inc. in Los Angeles. In 1999 Kito joined the Tokyo-based Media Suits Inc. and was involved in a development project where she began working with Wayne Wang. In 2004 she joined Entertainment FARM as the Head of International Division and brought in “The Namesake,” “The Hottest State,” “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” and “The Princess of Nebraska.”

Donald Young – Producer

Donald Young is Director of Programs for the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM). He supervises CAAM’s national programming activities including CAAM’s funding, national PBS programs, and original productions. Donald’s most recent production was “Searching for Asian America,” which aired nationally on PBS and was called “Engaging, smart, and insightful ... Grade A” by “Entertainment Weekly.” “The Princess of Nebraska” is Donald’s first feature film as producer.

Yasushi Kotani – Executive Producer

Former investment banker, Yasushi Kotani joined Japan Digital Contents in 2000 where he started to work on entertainment financing. He participates extensively in working groups and research studies related to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in the areas of contents financing. He established Entertainment FARM in 2002.

Taizo Son – Executive Producer

Taizo Son is the founder and CEO of Asian Groove Inc., a broadband entertainment enterprise holding company that manages and incubates new venture companies in Japan. Mr. Son is an experienced habitual entrepreneur in the information technology field, whose latest passion is creating broadband and content-related businesses. Though he maintains independence from larger companies, Mr. Son built several alliances with key strategic partners around the world.

Stephen Gong – Executive Producer

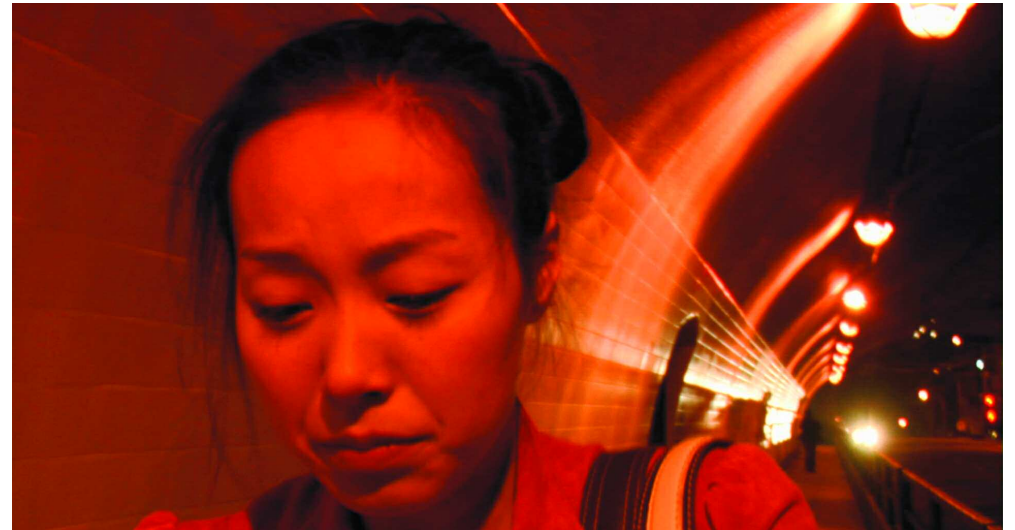
Stephen Gong is Executive Director of the Center for Asian American Media. Previously, he was Deputy Director of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Before that, he held positions at the National Center for Film and Video Preservation at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles and the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. He has also been a lecturer in the Asian American Studies program at UC Berkeley, where he developed and taught a course on the history of Asian American media.

Entertainment FARM Inc.

Entertainment FARM is a Tokyo-based financing and production company. In the past five years the company has been involved in six American films including “The Namesake” by Mira Nair and “The Hottest State” by Ethan Hawke which premiered at the 2006 Venice International Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. The company has financed ten Japanese films including the J-Horror Theater franchise films whose worldwide distribution rights is handled by Lionsgate, as well as “Retribution” by Kiyoshi Kurosawa which screened at the 2006 Venice International Film Festival. The company has also two development projects with Wayne Wang. Entertainment FARM pursues cultivating entertainment and working with quality filmmakers.

Center for Asian American Media

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a non-profit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible through funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. CAAM has funded many acclaimed films including three Academy Award winners: “Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision” by Freida Lee Mock, “Days of Waiting” by Stephen Okazaki, and “Visas and Virtue” by Chris Tashima, and multiple Sundance Award winners including “Picture Bride” by Kayo Hatta and “Licensed to Kill” by Arthur Dong. “The Princess of Nebraska” is CAAM’s first feature film production.



The Princess of Nebraska

A film by Wayne Wang

Feature Film / 77 mins / USA, JP / 35 mm / 1:2,35 / colour / Dolby Digital

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ENTERTAINMENT FARM PRESENTS: A CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA PRODUCTION: "THE PRINCESS OF NEBRASKA". LING LI. BRIAN DANFORTH. PAMELYN CHEE. PATRICE BINAISA. CASTING BY: HEIDI LEVITT, CSA AND SARAH KLIBAN. ORIGINAL MUSIC BY: KENT SPARLING. SOUND RECORDIST: JIM CHOI. SOUND RE-RECORDING MIXER: LORA HIRSCHBERG. COLORIST: PATRICK LINDENMAIER. EDITED BY: DEIRDRE SLEVIN. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD WONG. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: YASUSHI KOTANI, TAIZO SON, STEPHEN GONG. PRODUCED BY: YUKIE KITO, DONALD YOUNG. BASED ON THE SHORT STORY "THE PRINCESS OF NEBRASKA" BY YIYUN LI. SCREENPLAY BY: MICHAEL RAY. DIRECTED BY: WAYNE WANG.

