

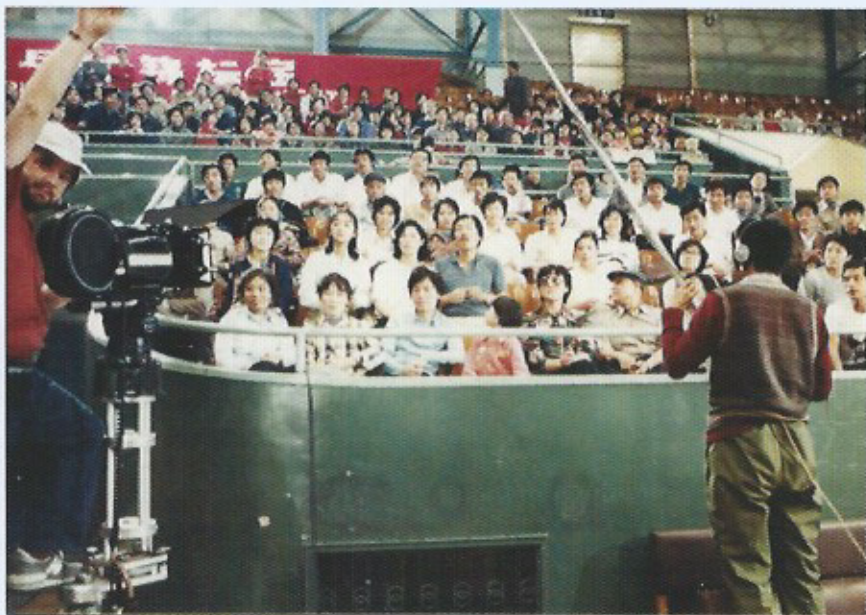
# AHEAD OF ITS TIME

A GREAT WALL

BY OLIVER WANG

SKETCH BY PRODUCTION DESIGNER WING LEE





## "TWO THUMBS UP."

Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel, *At The Movies*



I never saw *A Great Wall* during its original theatrical run in 1986 but if it's any consolation, I did see it reviewed on Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel's *At the Movies* television show. In fact, of all the movies I ever saw discussed on that long-running program, the *Great Wall* review is the only one I distinctly remember. Even if I failed to actually go see the film itself back then, *A Great Wall* somehow still left an indelible impression upon my then-14-year-old psyche.

On some subliminal level, I must have realized how unusual it was for a film to depict a Chinese American family not unlike my own. In fact, director Peter Wang followed a similar life path as both my parents: born in China, raised in Taiwan following the 1949 Chinese Revolution, emigrated to the US as a graduate student. Moreover, like the patriarch (Leo Fang) that Wang plays in the film, both my parents had been separated, for decades, from relatives living in mainland China.



In the film, Leo takes his family on a sojourn to Beijing to visit his sister for the first time in years and this wasn't merely a narrative device: it reflected the experiences of tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants.

Those transnational dynamics have always been central to the film's historical import. As Wang's was one of the first "Western" film crews allowed inside the Forbidden City post-Revolution, *A Great Wall* was more than just a family melodrama but also, to quote Siskel, "a travelogue" and "sociological investigation of East and West." Ebert likewise mentioned how "I didn't know what Peking looked like" and that's partially why he found "everything in this movie [to be] interesting." China has long loomed as an exotic, inscrutable specter within the American imagination and even as recently as the mid-1980s, the only aspects of "China" most Americans had ever seen originated on a Hollywood set. *A Great Wall* may have been a fiction but it's clear that Wang, along with co-writer Shirley Sun, took pains to present a realistic and relatable portrait of a Beijing family, with glimpses of the larger society behind them.

This all said, when I finally had a chance to see the film, the trip to China was ancillary to my personal interests. This was now in the 1990s and I watched *A Great Wall* as part of an Asian American Studies class at UC Berkeley. As an ABC – American-born

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"AN ENGAGING AND WRY COMEDY."  
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David Ansen, *Newsweek*

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"HUMAN,  
FUNNY, OPEN,  
WARM-HEARTED...  
I LIKED THIS  
MOVIE FROM  
BEGINNING  
TO END..."

Roger Ebert,  
*At The Movies*  
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Chinese – I was fascinated with its depiction of the ABCs in the Fang family: Leo's wife, Grace (played by Sharon Iwai) and son, Paul (played by Kelvin Han Yee). Suffice to say, as a '70s baby, I didn't grow up watching many Asian Americans, let alone ABCs, on television or in cinema. It didn't matter that I didn't have much in common with Paul – a swagadocious jock attending (ugh) Stanford – but I

knew guys like him in high school and college. He, along with Grace, felt... familiar and that was extraordinary enough in a Hollywood movie. Even though most of the film takes place in Beijing, the story both opens and closes in the Bay Area and this is where Wang explores provocative tensions around race and identity. Part of the reason that Leo decides to visit Beijing is because he's quit his middle



management tech job after being passed over for promotion by a less experienced white colleague. There's not much made of the issue in the film – it's a plot device rather than central theme – but Wang was ahead of his time in depicting a phenomenon that, years later, became known as "the bamboo ceiling."

In hindsight, it's easy to see how Wang tried to work in any number of leading Asian American socio-political concerns. At one point, Grace's white colleague is surprised to know she doesn't speak Mandarin and Grace replies, "Don't you know? I'm American!" Likewise, before they leave for the trip, Leo and Paul get into a fight over the fact that Paul's girlfriend isn't invited and Paul accuses his father of disliking her "just because she's white." However on the nose these dialogue examples are though, it's not as if they were conversations happening elsewhere in mainstream American culture. (Sadly, I'm not sure if the past 30 years have seen enough change to make it seem all that archaic now.)

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**"ABSOLUTELY  
TERRIFIC...ONE  
OF THE BEST  
PICTURES OF  
THE YEAR."**

Jeffrey Lyons,  
*Sneak Previews/INN*

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To be clear: *A Great Wall* is hardly a jeremiad of Asian American racial grievances. It's mostly a gentle comedy of (cross-cultural) manners. If anything, Wang and Sun did a tremendous job in layering the film with an impressive number of subplots that included China's test-taking pressures, classic parent-child generation gaps, and the use of table tennis as a way to settle international (and quasi-romantic) rivalries. It's also

a charmingly funny film. One of my favorite scenes involves Leo's brother-in-law, Mr. Chao, trying to make sense of the leather elbow patches on Paul's sports coat. In Mandarin, Mr. Chao asks if the patches were meant to repair a ripped jacket and Paul tries to explain, without much success, "This is the style...you know, fashion. This is the best, really! Pierre Cardin!" (The irony is that, in today's Beijing, a middle-class Chinese person is likely more global fashion brand-conscious than his or her American counterpart.)

For all this though, what *A Great Wall* will always make me think of first is how it presented something as simple as a Chinese American family to someone who'd never seen that in pop culture prior. To return, one last time, to that memorable *At the Movies* review, Gene Siskel remarked that he would have been happy to see the entire film devoted to just the Fangs: "that could be expanded into a whole movie by itself: a Chinese American family in America." The media landscape has changed a great deal over the past 30 years – we now have a primetime television show (*Fresh Off the Boat*) devoted to such a family – but I still feel that same pull to see more families like this reflected back to me, to my peers, to my daughter. *A Great Wall* was ahead of its time but that doesn't mean we've caught up yet.

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**DELIGHTFUL  
AND ORIGINAL...  
VERY FUNNY."**

Desmond Ryan,  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*

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