

In Proximity
Dolly Li
Season 3 Episode 3
Final Transcript

Dolly Li: I remember being asked about these lines about licking.

[DING SOUND EFFECT]

You know, there's so many classic examples of terrible stereotypes. We have come so, so, so, so far.

[00:06 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today we're talking Sinners and history. Dolly Li is a journalist and documentary filmmaker, and her film, The Untold Story of America's Southern Chinese led her to become a consultant on the film Sinners. In Sinners, a Chinese American couple, Grace and Bo Chow, played by Li Jun Li and Yao, own two grocery stores, one that serves Black customers and another that serves white customers.

In the documentary about the Mississippi Delta Chinese, Dolly interviewed 4th and 5th generation Chinese Americans who grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi where Sinners is actually set and also in the grocery stores that are shown in the movie. On this episode, Dolly talks about her work as a historical consultant on the film Sinners and her process as a journalist, documentary filmmaker, and visual artist.

We go deep in this episode. Here's my conversation with Dolly Li.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Paola Mardo: Dolly Li, welcome to In Proximity.

Dolly Li: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: Thanks for being here at our studio at Proximity Media. I'm super excited to talk to you about your work on Sinners and just generally everything that you do. But I want to ask you about Sinners.

Dolly Li: Yes!

Paola Mardo: Because you're here at Proximity. So how did you get involved in the film?

Dolly Li: Yes. So it was—it was a little circular because there was just a random, like, two weeks where quite a few of my friends who were Asian actors, Asian American actors, they all, one by one, reached out to me to say, "Hey, I'm rewatching your doc. I just got a casting call for it. I'm doing this things, and I'm rewatching your doc." And it was uncanny the number of people who were saying, like, "Hey, I'm rewatching. I'm rewatching."

And then, you know, shout out to Jimmy O. Yang, who was like, "I'm doing it too." And he was like, "I'm rewatching the doc for this casting call." And I was like, "What's going on? Like, who is making an indie about my film and not telling me?"

And eventually, someone was like, "It's a Ryan Coogler production," and I was like, "That's not indie! I don't believe you!" Being a journalist, I was like, give me the primary source. Show me the evidence. I don't believe this. I was like, why would—what does this have anything to do with Ryan Coogler, right?

Paola Mardo: Right.

Dolly Li: So a few weeks pass by, and then I do hear from Proximity, eventually. Someone reaches out, and they're like, "Hey, we've been sourcing your doc for inspiration and also, you know, Ryan is very inspired by it and really wanted to include these characters in this film, and we'd love if you could come on as a consultant, and then we can tell you more."

And I was like, "Oh, my god! What? What is he making?"

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Oh, so they didn't even tell you—not even a logline, nothing. Just, "There's a movie."

Dolly Li: It was very—the initial information was very sparse, but it didn't matter to me. I was like, well, I'm going to—I want to be a part of whatever this is, right? If he's remaking the Mississippi Delta documentary or if it's something else.

Paola Mardo: Did you have any guesses as to what it could be?

Dolly Li: I don't think in my wildest imagination, I could've guessed what was going on. But they did mention it was a thriller.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Dolly Li: And, you know, when they mentioned it was a thriller, there are so many things about the South that are so spiritual and then also so many things about, like, the Chinese community, especially the Southern Chinese community like this Cantonese and Taishanese group of immigrants that are very, very religious and spiritual. And they have such a deep belief and fascination with ghosts.

I was like, maybe there's some combination of, like, spiritual beliefs happening in this film.

Paola Mardo: Mm hm. Mm hm. So—so you get the email, and you're interested. And then what—like, what's the process? Because, like, what does a consultant do on a film, and specifically you as a consultant?

Dolly Li: Yeah. That's a great question because, honestly, I've never consulted on a fiction film before. A lot of my work is in the nonfiction space, and given, you know, storytelling is pretty much the same across, but, you know, my background is in nonfiction. And so I was kind of just open to seeing what they needed. So my first conversations were with Sev.

Paola Mardo: Sev Ohanian, producer on Sinners and my boss and founder of the company.

Dolly Li: Shout out to the boss.

Paola Mardo: Shout out, shout out.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: So I spoke to Sev, who gave me, you know, a bit more information about what was happening and what they were interested in doing.

Paola Mardo: Cool.

Dolly Li: And then Ryan and I got to talk, where he shared a lot more about, you know, how he got interested in this story and why he wanted to incorporate it, which honestly was so fascinating but also important for me to understand what my role was and what the purpose of the story was, right?

Paola Mardo: And, sorry to interrupt, but at this moment, had you read the script? Did you know—

Dolly Li: I hadn't read the script. So I just—I only had, like, a general idea.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Dolly Li: But I would say, as the consultant, I'm not reading the whole script, right? I'm knowing the parts that I need to know, which, you know, for better or worse, there were moments where I was just like—

[DOLLY GASPS]

Dolly Li: "What's happening here?" which, you know, we can talk about, like the silly parts where I'm like, "I don't know—I don't know what this is for, but this is—something bizarre is happening."

Paola Mardo: Yeah. So you get, like, pages or excerpts of the script?

Dolly Li: I get, like, concepts of scenes, essentially.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha. Okay.

Dolly Li: And so, you know, I got to learn from Ryan why he was so interested, learned that he discovered he had family—his in-laws' family were from Mississippi, and they discovered they had Chinese ancestry. And so that's always been super compelling to him and that's how he wants—that's why he wanted to incorporate these characters and their storyline into the story that takes place in Clarksdale, which is the very place where I shot that documentary.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Dolly Li: Which was so cool. You know, like, eventually, the community I interviewed, they did get to watch the film as well.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh.

Dolly Li: Their reaction was so special. And at first, they were too scared to watch. You know, this is an elderly community now, and I had told them that this film was happening when the—when the information was public enough to tell them.

Paola Mardo: Right, like the trailer is out, people know about it.

Dolly Li: Yeah. Yeah, and sweet Frieda, who just—you know, is like the Southern belle of this documentary, she was just like, "What do the Chinese have to do with the vampires?" I'm not even going to pretend to do her accent.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: I got the vibe. I got the vibe. I love that.

Dolly Li: And so they—they loved the film. But at first, they were, like, too scared, and they're like, "Maybe we should watch it at home in broad daylight."

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: With the windows open. Um, that's hilarious. So—but then they did watch it? And what did they think?

Dolly Li: They did watch it, and I think that because they grew up in Clarksdale, there were all these references that they knew of that I didn't even know of like the—the venue that Delta—Delta Slim? Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Delroy Lindo's character?

Dolly Li: Yes. The venue that his character would usually play music at was actually a real venue from Clarksdale. So they were like, "Oh, my god! Like, I know that spot! They had, like, the best music! We used to go there!"

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: One of—one of the ladies I interviewed who's such—is such a sweet lady, she was like, "Well, I don't know if we would say curse words like that!"

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: I love that.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: I was like, oh, my god!

Paola Mardo: I love that. Oh, my gosh. And then a couple of them grew up in grocery stores, right?

Dolly Li: Yes.

Paola Mardo: So what did they—how did they feel about that depiction?

Dolly Li: Most of them did grow up in grocery stores, and they were—they were delighted and just very—they were so proud, you know, because their—their story is something that their own little community has cultivated and worked on and worked on preserving, right? But—and certainly I'm not the first documentarian to have profiled this community or told their history, but I don't think they—I don't think they ever imagined it would make it into such a mainstream space, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: So just the accuracy of the set design, the dynamics. I mean, after talking to Ryan, you know, talking about the process of working with Proximity, afterwards, I was immediately connected to the people who were working on set. And I worked very closely with their set designer and the people who were actually building out the world.

Paola Mardo: Mm hm. Hannah Beachler's team?

Dolly Li: Yes, yes. And so building out that world I think was so critical, and this is where I think that most of the consulting really did help because I was going back, asking for archival material from the community and pulling reference photos, or as much as I could, to make the feel of it realistic.

[09:09 - CLIP: The Untold Story Of America's Southern Chinese 1]

[VOICEOVER]

Dolly Li: These stores played a uniquely important role in the segregated South: serving the Black community when the White community wouldn't. And this was significant because it meant more than 70% of the population got their groceries and everyday goods from a tiny Chinese community. Frieda's family store, Min Sang, started out in the 1930s as two different buildings across the street from each other, one serving Black people, the other serving white people. Neither Black nor white, the Chinese community found themselves in the middle.

Frieda Quon: It was like a three lane road. There were the whites, and the Blacks, and the Chinese.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[CLIP ENDS]

Paola Mardo: You've done work around the community for so long, and you had told their story in, like, a nonfiction format. So what was it like to see the film for the first time?

Dolly Li: You know, the first time I got to watch the film, I was honestly so nervous. I—because you don't know how things will be portrayed, right? And I do feel a deep sense of responsibility for protecting this community. Even—even being able to do this documentary with them back in 2017, that in and of itself was—it was an uphill battle because they didn't trust a lot of outsiders, right?

And this is, like, a recurring thing with documentarians, but also, if you are a documentarian of minority communities, right? A lot of immigrant communities don't trust media because they feel like the media is always out to get, like, a gotcha moment. So they were—they were hesitant to even make that film, the one with Al Jazeera, the one that I did with them.

So, when I didn't—I couldn't tell them exactly what was happening in the film because I myself didn't know. I was so nervous watching it for the first time. I was like, "Oh, my god! I hope this is okay. Otherwise, it's, like, my name on the line if they're misportrayed. Not that I thought that they would be, but you never know.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Dolly Li: And then, once the scene came where we could see the two stores—the two stores inspired by Frieda's family stores, a store on, like, the white side of town and the Black side of town, I was so relieved, and I was so excited. My fiancé was with me, and he—and I just, like, remember grabbing his arm so hard. I was like, "Oh, my god!" Like, "they did it!" And just seeing some of the work that his—that the set designers had—that I had a preview of working with these set designers, seeing that come to life was so special. It was—and, you know, having worked also with Li Jun Li and with Yao during this process and just talking with them through, like, the mindset and, like, the little details of, like, this is how they would be thinking. What would they be wearing? Is it realistic to wear makeup? And seeing them bring those characters to life—

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Could you talk a little bit more about, like—I don't know if it's, like, funny scenes or moments. I want to go back to that—what you mentioned earlier. You would get concepts of scenes, and then you have to figure something out about it?

Dolly Li: Yes, yes.

Paola Mardo: Can you name some examples?

Dolly Li: I remember being asked about these lines about—about licking.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: And being asked whether those lines—like, what dialect those lines should be in. And I—I was just like—

Paola Mardo: First of all, was this on email, or was this, like, a very important Zoom call where they were like—

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: This was—this first started over email. This is, like, after we had already started working together.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Do you remember who, who emailed you or who contacted you first?

Dolly Li: Yeah, I believe it was Sev, or it might have been Wai as well.

Paola Mardo: Yes, Sev Ohanian, our founder and a producer on the film, and also Wai Wing Lau, Sev's assistant.

Dolly Li: But I get this email about what dialect this line should be in, and it's something about being licked, right? And I was just like, [GASPS] whose line is this? I was like, what's happening for them?

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: It's, like, a dry email, "Can you please advise?"

Dolly Li: And they're like, "What dialect should this be in?" And I'm like [GASPS].

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: And, and you responded with?

Dolly Li: I responded with that era, most of the immigrants came from either Canton or Taishan. But the early, early immigrants really did come from Taishan. And a lot of them could speak Cantonese. But I was like, "If you want to be super accurate, Taishan. But how many people will understand it? Not that many. You know, you could go with Cantonese and easily get away with it, and maybe a smaller, not-very-big—or, like, a slightly larger, not-very-big community would understand. But I love that they went all the way and chose Taishan.

Paola Mardo: I think I know what this scene is. Taishan and Cantonese, those are the two communities that were of the era?

Dolly Li: The earliest immigrants, most of them were from Taishan or Canton.

Paola Mardo: Canton, okay.

Dolly Li: Or Guangdong now.

Paola Mardo: Oh, okay. Where's Taishan? What part of China?

Dolly Li: It's basically—it's a similar part of China. It's like, within Southern China. It's within the Canton region, but they speak their own dialect.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha.

Dolly Li: And I think—it's a very—it's a very old-school dialect. So, when you hear it, it sounds, like—

Paola Mardo: Formal and—

Dolly Li: It's not even formal. It's so informal. It sounds very much like a village dialect, right?

Paola Mardo: Oh, interesting.

Dolly Li: Almost like a pidgin dialect. So, to hear that on screen is also just so wild and so crazy. And I was like, "You guys really went in for it!" Like—

Paola Mardo: Love the dedication.

Dolly Li: Exactly.

Paola Mardo: Any other scenes whether it's a dialogue or, or details or even character stuff with the actors?

Dolly Li: Yeah. I really—I mean, I—the first time I saw it, I was really impressed by Li Jun Li's work and her acting. Like, I was surprised that she played such a prominent role, not that, you know, I didn't have faith in her, but more like I think I've been so accustomed to Asian characters in movies being a side character or a just, like, kind of superfluous or accessory character. Maybe accessory is really the right word. I'm so used to Asian people and Asian characters in movies being accessories to the plot that I didn't imagine that she would really be part of the plot, right?

And so I was very impressed to see that. I thought her acting was incredible. And I think—of course, it, like, opened up so many conversations, all the think pieces, which—you know, that's the beauty of movies, right? You allow people to have space to really think about what all of these things mean. But I just love that she played such a critical role in the story itself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, very pivotal. I mean, spoiler alert, she—I mean, both of them, Bo and Grace, are quite—I mean, they're part of the community. They sort of help in this grand adventure to build the juke and kind of like, open up for the night. And then, obviously, when things go awry, certain things happen. I mean, most people have seen this by now, so we can talk about it.

Dolly Li: Most people have seen it. If you haven't seen it by now, you need to leave.

Paola Mardo: Pause right here. Pause right here.

Dolly Li: And go watch the film.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Go watch the film and come back. And, yeah, can we talk about that? Because I feel like you've talked about it online, maybe, and then you're mentioning think pieces. Can you talk about—yeah, what was Grace's role, and what are sort of the discussions around that?

Dolly Li: Yeah. I mean, certainly there's, like, Ryan's version of this, right, and my interpretation. And then there's, like, the internet's interpretation, which, you know, you can't stop the internet from interpreting as they please. I think that—well, I'll start with what people online, at least, what the hot-button topic seems to be—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: The hot-button topic seems to be that Grace was the person who, as a character, invited in the vampires, which essentially means that she betrayed the community that was—that had invited her to be a part of this party and this celebration. Right? And so, not only was she betraying them, she also happened to be, you know, someone who was not Black betraying this community.

Paola Mardo: Mm hm.

Dolly Li: But how I really see this film, especially, you know, having translated that line about being licked, and then seeing it all come together, the fact that the vampire, Remmick, that he was—she was the only person that he spoke to in a foreign language. And I think when you're an immigrant in America arriving here and English not being your first language, it made sense to me how that could trigger this, like, guttural, animalistic reaction to wanting to, like, set the place ablaze and, like, do whatever you can to save yourself and your family.

Because when you're an immigrant in America, and you don't speak English, right, and someone speaks to you in your native language, it evokes this emotion in you that is so hard to describe, right? It's not just like code-switching. You're, like, unlocking a totally different side of the brain. And I think—this was why I think the film was also so brilliant in that moment where you have this Irish vampire who's able to, like, embody the soul of her husband to the degree where he could tap into this really deep language to really mess with her and her emotions. I was like, that is—that is some really dark, dark spiritual stuff, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and also threaten, you know, essentially to harm your daughter.

Dolly Li: Yes, exactly, like threatening their daughter, speaking their native language. I mean, I can't even imagine if someone, like, walked up to my parents when we were children and, like, threatened their family and their children but in their own native language.. Like, that's wild.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah, that would—yeah, that's crazy. Yeah. I mean, I feel like the film itself has—it's created a lot of conversation about so many, like, movie things in general like genre and horror and the genre blend that this movie sort of has, but also, like, the historical stuff like the fact that this is—you know, this thriller/action/horror movie, how do you feel about, like, your work's impact on something like this?

Dolly Li: Yeah. I—it's, it's made me think a lot about the reach of documentary. And I think, for so many people, documentary does not reach them, right? That's—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: That's the facts, right? Like, most of what you make in film is not—is fiction. And I think so much of documentaries, they get, like, siloed in, like, festivals. And this is something that you and I had chatted about previously, about how do people find these stories, right? Like, if my documentary had been—only premiered at a film festival and maybe didn't have a distribution or didn't, honestly, have an online distribution, right? This is a documentary that you can find on YouTube because it was published by Al Jazeera, the Mississippi Delta Chinese story. If that was not so searchable—

Paola Mardo: On YouTube.

Dolly Li: On YouTube—could it have made its way into this universe?

Paola Mardo: Right. Or literally, Ryan Coogler's, like, YouTube search bar.

Dolly Li: Yeah. Whatever, whatever his algorithm, right, could—

Paola Mardo: Or Wai's or Sev's.

Dolly Li: It's made its way to a lot of people's algorithms, and it's ended up on their pages.

Paola Mardo: So true.

Dolly Li: And it's made me think a lot about what is the role of documentary in, like, the future of reaching people, entertainment, media? And I don't think it's just limited to docs, right? It's, it's—things are changing so much in terms of how people get information and get stories now.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: So it's made me think a lot about, like, how the story ended up in Sinners, how I became the person that was the consultant for this film, and accessibility, right? Like, would people know this community so well if their story was not accessible? So it makes me think a lot about, like, the power and the work that still needs to be done among, like, Asian American storytellers and Asian American stories to really get the word out there, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: Because the only way for these stories and these people to be real is when you give them a lot of humanity, which means making them three-dimensional, right? Making them both, like, victims of vampires and mothers and store owners and, like, entrepreneurs, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

[21:28 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I actually wanted to ask you about the film. So it's called The Untold Story of America's Southern Chinese. It's part of a series of stories you did, right?

Dolly Li: Yeah. It's part of a series, yes.

Paola Mardo: Can you talk about the series and how this sort of—the context of it within that?

Dolly Li: Yeah. So the series is called Untold America with AJ+, stories about, like, coal miners in Kentucky and what their lives are like. There's a series that's about the Deaf Community in Texas, and they go to one of the schools in Texas, so like, really meet the people who are students there. There's this story, right, The Untold Story of the Mississippi Delta Chinese, which was part of a greater, like, miniseries within that franchise that looks at Chinese communities from urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Paola Mardo: Did you pitch that series? How did that come about?

Dolly Li: I did. I did pitch that series. I had pitched that series for a long time and probably—I was so annoying, and I think that was probably why they eventually let me do the series.

Paola Mardo: And what interested you in this particular series? And how did you come across the Delta Chinese community?

Dolly Li: Yeah. So, you know, Al Jazeera has been honestly one of the best publications in, like, news awards for telling stories that are often unheard about in mainstream media. And I believed so strongly that there was an opportunity to tell more stories about Asian Americans, especially about Chinese Americans, because there was such a lack of it, right? And people are hungry for these stories because they want to know. It's not just Chinese Americans or Asian Americans who want to know. It's people outside of that community as well. They are just curious because they don't know that much about them, right? And I think that we were in a really good place to kind of feed into that desire.

But I think after, you know, me nagging my editors at Al Jazeera for a while to make the story and also just proving my chops as a producer, it was also a very specific moment in time where the 2016 election just happened. And I think everyone in the country, especially newsrooms, were asking: What did we miss about the South? Like, something happened here where we completely missed the mark on covering Southerners and giving voice to Southerners. And this was something I was so keenly aware of, not that I'm from the South, but I had gone to college in Texas, and I had lived there. So I felt so personally invested in these people that I knew weren't like the caricatures portrayed in media, right? Especially during the 2016 election. So I knew that post the election results, people were really keen on seeing, like, what is the South really about, right?

So part of it was I had already wanted to do these Asian American stories. Part of it was there was this renewed interest in what the South was like, and who were the people who lived in the South? And then, I so happened to—you know, I was part of the Asian American Journalists Association, and—

Paola Mardo: Shout out AAJA.

Dolly Li: Shout out AAJA.

Paola Mardo: I was once a member.

Dolly Li: Truly the best, you know, a wonderful organization for all folks that are in nonfiction, podcasts, docs, journalism. And I was on the board of the San Francisco group, and we had hosted a panel discussion with some new authors. One of the authors, shout out to her, Adrienne Berard, who wrote this book called *Water Tossing Boulders*. And it was actually about the Supreme Court case of *Lum v. Rice*, which took place in the Mississippi Delta. And it was this really old Supreme Court case from the 1920s where a Chinese family sued for the right to attend public school.

And during that time, public schools were only for white kids. That family lost that case, but she—Adrienne Berard profiled, you know, what this family went through, the case itself, what was like—what was happening in the Mississippi Delta and in America during that time to give context. And I found that story so fascinating, and Adrienne and I chatted quite a bit about it, and we—she connected me with the Mississippi Delta community. And I kind of built our pitch and our series around being able to include them.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Dolly Li: I was very keen on the urban, suburban, and rural perspectives because I think that, you know, Chinese communities are often very, like, one-dimensional. Like, they work in restaurants and have Chinese restaurants or Chinese takeout venues.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Dolly Li: And I'm like, okay, that's a very limited perspective. So I think offering these different slices of America was really critical to telling a nuanced story.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And I think you did that really well.

Dolly Li: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: I—I was curious as a—you know, someone who's done this work in podcasting, how did you, I guess, reach out to the community and build the trust, right? Because you were

just mentioning earlier, either they've been burned before, they just didn't trust the media. How did you approach them with this idea of, like, hey, I want to help tell your story, and I want to help tell it right? Like, what was your pitch, and how did you—how'd you gain that trust?

Dolly Li: This is a great question because this is, like, the forever struggle for documentarians. And with, like, every single new documentary I work on, I, like, kick myself asking, why did I do this all over again? Because access is so hard. Access to anyone, really, is hard because it's your real life. It's your personal life. But if you an extra layer of them being Asian, and Asian people just hate talking to media, it adds this whole other difficulty, even if they're, like, Asian Americans, right?

And so it certainly really helped that Adrienne made the introduction, Adrienne Berard made the introduction. So shout out to Adrienne. Her book is—

Paola Mardo: So she knew—she knew a bunch of these folks already?

Dolly Li: Yes. She had done a lot of reporting and research working on her book, *Water Tossing Boulders*. And so she introduced me to some folks in the community. And I had told them, you know, generally what I was working on, but still they were hesitant and it—this was like a stroke of fate. I happened to be in Memphis for a wedding, and Clarksdale's not that far from Memphis.

And so I reached out to them. I was like, "Hey, I'm actually—I'm going to be here this weekend. Do you guys maybe want to meet in person, and then we can talk some more?"

And they were like, "Actually, yeah, let's grab pizza and see what you're like." And so Gilroy, who's really—he's like the ringleader of the gang.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. In the documentary, he's, like, frying rice.

Dolly Li: He's doing—he's making fried rice.

Paola Mardo: Trying to make the fried rice in the 40-plus-year-old wok.

Dolly Li: Yes, yes. On camera, he's more demure, but behind the scenes, he's truly, like, the ringleader and gatherer of the people. So Gilroy was like, "All right, I'm going to round up the friends." And so he brings his posse. It is essentially a posse of Southern ladies with him.

Paola Mardo: Oh, I love it. I love it!

Dolly Li: So Gilroy and the ladies show up to pizza in Memphis, and we just got to talking. And they asked me a lot about my own background and my family's history. We shared a lot about, you know, what we knew of our own heritage. And you have to keep in mind, these people are, like, 4th, 5th generation Americans. Their understanding of, like, Chinese as a language is so removed. Like, they're learning from, like, fortune cookies as much as any American.

Paola Mardo: Oh, so they don't speak—

Dolly Li: They don't speak any Chinese.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Dolly Li: They know a few words here and there because they've heard it from their families, right, but it's so difficult to preserve language over like four or five generations.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Dolly Li: And so they were fascinated by someone that could speak Chinese, right?

Paola Mardo: Okay, you can speak?

Dolly Li: Yeah, I can speak Chinese.

Paola Mardo: Oh, cool. Cool.

Dolly Li: So they were very fascinated by that, and they wanted to know more. And, you know, since my family, they came from China in, like, Southern—like, in the Hong Kong area, they wanted to understand what that was like, to be, like, a newer wave of immigrants.

Paola Mardo: So it sounds like, you know, the way you built your trust was you just—I mean, treated them like people, not just quote/unquote "subjects."

Dolly Li: Certainly.

Paola Mardo: You opened up to them as well.

Dolly Li: And the—the in-person time matters a lot. I would say that across the board for every documentary I've worked on, which, you know, yeah, you can make some things over Zoom, but there's nothing like showing up and building that connection and sharing a meal because people need to see that you're real and—yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, pizza or fried rice.

Dolly Li: Yes, pizza or fried rice.

Paola Mardo: Must-haves. I wanted to ask about, as a documentary filmmaker who tells stories about, you know, your own community but also, like, race and social justice and just current events and issues like that, you sort of briefly touched on this earlier, but I wanted to ask you a bit deeper about it. You know, do you ever watch movies that have maybe characters or issues

that maybe you've done stories about, and they just, like, don't get it right, or it's totally misrepresented? And like, I don't know, what's your reaction to things like that? Because I know not every film is as detailed as, like, a Sinners.

Dolly Li: Yeah, yeah. Frankly, you know, nowadays, it happens less and less, which is great. I think that it's evolved so much where people are more thoughtful of including voices from the community, right, including consultants. And it's truly not that hard. It makes for a richer story. But I think, you know, there's so many, like, classic examples of terrible stereotypes, right? Everything from—I think it was, like, EuroTrip, right, the early Ken Jeong characters or, like, Long Duk Dong from Sixteen Candles or, you know, Mickey Rooney portraying a Chinese landlord in Breakfast at Tiffany's, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Dolly Li: We have come so, so, so, so far.

[31:05 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So we've come to the part of the show where we want to go through a little bit more of your process. But before we start, I have a little surprise question.

Dolly Li: Oh!

Paola Mardo: We reached out to someone in your community to send a surprise question for you to answer. So I'm going to play it.

Dolly Li: Okay.

Paola Mardo: You're going to learn who it is, and then you will answer the question. Are you ready?

Dolly Li: I love this. Yes.

Paola Mardo: Okay, here we go.

[VOICE MEMO]

Jun Stinson Yamagishi: Hi, Dolly. This is Jun Stinson Yamagishi calling from none other than Oakland, California, and I have a question for you. Do you remember when we were working on our story about Chinese grocers along the Mississippi Delta, that as we were driving up and down in the Delta in the sweltering heat, we ended up needing to stop off at quite a few corner stores in search of something? Just curious if you remember this and if you remember what we were looking for.

[CLIP ENDS]

Dolly Li: Oh, man. Oh, I love that you guys got Jun! Oh, my god, love Jun so much.

Paola Mardo: Can you—I guess, for those who don't know, who is Jun to you?

Dolly Li: Jun was one of the producers on this series about the Chinese American communities in the U.S. that I did with Al Jazeera. And one of those episodes was about the Mississippi Delta Chinese, which eventually made its way into Ryan Coogler's brain space. But Jun was such an important part of that story. I mean, like, Jun had just had a baby at that time and was just, like, pumping and being a mom and doing all of this stuff while on the road. That's the first time I've ever experienced someone, like, pumping on the road and learning all about it.

But, oh, my gosh, the corner stores. I have to confess I don't remember what we were looking for. I'm, like, wracking my brain for what we were looking for.

Paola Mardo: You kind of got close to it. She did send me the answer.

Dolly Li: Oh, good. Okay. I got close.

Paola Mardo: She says—yeah, very close. She said, "We were stopping off at corner stores in the sweltering heat looking for ice cubes, bags of ice, because I was just back from maternity leave—

Dolly Li: Yes!

Paola Mardo: And was pumping milk in the backseat of our production van. And I had no clue what I was doing because it was my first production shoot as a pumping mom, and I essentially had a cheap, freezable lunch bag for pumped milk that didn't do a great job insulating the cold, and since it was really hot, we kept having to restock it up with ice. Fortunately, my liquid gold made it back to California for my daughter." There you go.

Dolly Li: Oh, my god.

Paola Mardo: You remembered part of that.

Dolly Li: Yes, I 100 percent—I included a photo—I have a photo of Jun, you know, doing the boom pole from our interview from that shoot, and sometimes people see, like, the finished product of things, but they don't know the amount of labor and love that goes into making it. And it's not just, like, the people who are on set. It's, like, the people that—who are on set and the people they have to leave behind to be on set or to be in-field. And it just goes to show, like, it's never just—it's never just, like, a one-man-band or, like, a small production. There's, like, all this network of people behind making something happen.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah, and how big was your crew specifically on this shoot?

Dolly Li: Our crew wasn't even that big. Like, in-field, it wasn't that big. It was myself, our senior producer, it was Jun, and it was our DP. So we kept it pretty small. You know, all of us did a little bit of everything from, like, boom, DIT, searching for ice cubes. It's hard when you do, like, field-based documentaries to have a big crew because, one, with docs, you never want to overwhelm a subject.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Dolly Li: So you don't want to bring in, like, an entire—

Paola Mardo: A giant crew.

Dolly Li: Yeah. You don't want to bring in an entire situation because that really changes the vibe for how people feel and how they think of themselves and their presence. But also, it's just so much easier: one van. We can all go together.

[35:05 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I want to go through a little bit more of your process as a filmmaker and journalist. And you sent some clips and photos. So I wanted to take some time to play those, and then we'll talk a little bit about it. So the first clip is a clip from your documentary. And actually, I'll let you—can you share a little bit about this moment of the film? And we'll talk a little bit more about it after, but can you sort of set it up for our audience?

Dolly Li: Yes. This is probably my favorite moment from the documentary. And everyone has their favorite moments, of course, but this is my personal favorite moment because, one, there's this, like, really sweet and funny misunderstanding that happens. And, two, after—you know, during—at the point in which we hear this sound bite, I had been talking to Frieda probably for already like 45 minutes, right? And so she kind of—it's not even something so much I prompted her to say, but it's, like, a thought that she comes to herself, questioning what it means to be American, essentially.

And bringing up the question of, like, "Why not me?" Right? And I think, in that moment, it's—when I'm doing these interviews for docs, I try my best not to, like, interject them too—interject into them too much. But it really stood out to me in that moment because here's a woman who is, you know, a few decades older than me, many generations of American history over me, probably over most people, to be honest, right? How many people can say that they're, like, 4th, 5th generation Americans today, right? Like, that's—so she is still—you know, she is sitting there thinking about this and proposing this question. And I'm thinking about how I ask myself the same thing despite the huge gap between us, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: And I'm like, this question just doesn't go away, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Let me play it, and then we'll talk more.

[37:08 - CLIP: The Untold Story of America's Southern Chinese 2]

Jean Maskas: I had an occasion to where I was walking into an office building, and some dear little lady said, "Honey," she says, "are you ornamental?"

[LAUGHTER]

Jean Maskas: And I didn't quite know how to answer. And I said, "Sometimes."

Frieda Quon: It happens to me all the time, you know? Like, "How long have you been here?" or, "Who taught you English?" Because—are we the—are we always foreigners?

Dolly Li: I mean, that's a great question. I think about that myself all the time: Are we always foreigners?

Frieda Quon: Because of our—because of our appearance. Because of our appearance, we just look like we just got here? I mean, we don't look like American people?

[CLIP ENDS]

Paola Mardo: So that was Frieda and Jean, right?

Dolly Li: Jean was the one who was talking about being "ornamental."

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Actually, when you were talking about characters in film, Asian characters in films being accessories, I immediately thought of the "ornamental" comment. And I actually wrote this down. I wanted to ask you about this scene, so I'm glad you picked it. Yeah, what's it like seeing that right now?

Dolly Li: I think the question still doesn't go away, right? I think there's still so many people who—especially Asian Americans—who are struggling with that question. And certainly, seeing yourself onscreen is just one aspect of feeling seen or feeling accepted, but I think that it has to go beyond that, right? Like, something being onscreen is still a fictionalized version of the world, right? Like, seeing an Asian Marvel character doesn't, like—

Paola Mardo: It's not going to solve all the problems.

Dolly Li: It isn't going to solve all the problems.

Paola Mardo: But it's awesome.

Dolly Li: It's cool, but, like, what—then you still have to enter your real life, and you still have to enter, you know, a world that sees you a certain way, right?

Paola Mardo: Right.

Dolly Li: And so I love that moment because it's a question that never goes away. And, like, despite that doc being made a few years ago, like, that's still such a prevalent question. I think one of the reasons why people still come back to this documentary and why it was so viral the first time it came out and, like, viral again since *Sinners*, is that the—there are ideas in it and questions in it that remain steadfast in America, right, like: Who gets to belong? Why people of a certain face or a certain ancestry aren't necessarily a part of the idea of the American fabric. I think there's, there's just still so much in this documentary that brings up the points of, like, who do we perceive to be Asian, to be Southerners, right?

And honestly, I think the fact that people are so shocked by these accents brings it to this one point that—the fact is that everyone is a little bit racist. And if the accent is shocking to you, it's because you're a little bit racist because you can't realize—you don't comprehend the fact that there could be Chinese people with a Southern accent, right? We think that Southern people should only look and sound one way, and I think it unifies us all because we're all a little bit racist.

Paola Mardo: There's that. There's that. What is this? [POINTS TO TABLET]

Dolly Li: I thought this was such—this is—as I was going through my archives and just seeing—trying to find things from that moment of shooting, this was a map that I found so startling that I had to take a picture and kept it because you can see this concentration of a community, the Chinese community in the Mississippi. And they're all concentrated in this one area around Clarksdale and, like, slightly beyond. But it just goes to show what a phenomenon it was, right?

Like, something that I never got to talk about in the documentary is that they used to have their own dances, right? Their own juke joints, essentially. They called—their group was called the Lucky 11. It was like this underground club they organized for dances. And it was basically hosted once a year around Christmas, and all of these, like, Chinese teenagers knew that there were other Chinese people, but they didn't—it's not like they were calling. Like, even calling people was quite rare back then, right? So they would send snail mail and send these invites to attend the Lucky 11 Dance.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh.

Dolly Li: And it was, like, the one—

Paola Mardo: Flyers.

Dolly Li: Yeah. Flyers. The one time a year where they could meet the other Chinese people in this, like, community.

Paola Mardo: At the Lucky 11.

Dolly Li: At the Lucky 11, yeah.

Paola Mardo: I love that. I love that. And then, for listeners, you'll have to check this out on our video podcast on YouTube, but essentially, it's like a map of Mississippi, and it says "Chinese in Mississippi in 1960." Wow. And it's like, there's dots sort of signifying where they are, and each dot is three—like, three Chinese people. Is that right?

Dolly Li: Yes. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Wow. There's a total of 1,244 people that year. I'll play this next video. Why don't you just talk us through what this is?

[DOLLY SHOWS PAOLA THE VIDEO WITHOUT SOUND]

Dolly Li: So this is, like, many haircuts and, like, a few perms ago.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: So I'm seeing some watercolor.

Dolly Li: Yes.

Paola Mardo: You're at a desk nearby a computer. And what are—what are you painting here?

Dolly Li: Yeah. So, you know, in this conversation of process, you know, I think part of the conversation of process is also the process of arriving to your career, right, the process of arriving to being a documentary filmmaker. So, when I first started working as a journalist, I was actually hired as a news illustrator, which meant that I was doing a lot of portraits and drawings for news, right? If there was, like, a report or if there was, like, a big case that happened, I was doing these illustrations.

And naturally, because I worked at Al Jazeera, they were like, "Great! Make it move." And I was like—I didn't learn that in art school, right? I didn't learn how to make it move.

[CLIP ENDS]

But I became friends with this incredible motion graphics designer. And she's still one of my besties. We have matching tattoos. Like, we're all the way. And she was one of the first people to show me the mechanism of motion, which just opened up my world to be able to make documentaries.

And so my very, very first videos were all fully illustrated. And this one that we see here was the first illustrated video I did. It was about this woman's experience in solitary confinement, and she had given us a really incredible audio story, and she wanted to remain anonymous. Totally understandable, but we're like, "man, what—like, how can we tell her story? We're not an audio platform."

And so we worked together, to—Marissa and I—shout out to Marissa, my friend who's a motion graphics designer—we worked together where she essentially taught me how to storyboard so that she could put the motion to my artwork, right? And so here you can see some of the scenes that we started storyboarding based on this woman's interview. And Marissa really walked me through, like, what I needed to give her so that she could do her work, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: And this is, like, so foundational to my learning how motion, film, video worked because I didn't really know until making this piece, like, oh, you need to transition from scene to scene, right? You need to think about how things transition. And, ideally, there is a smooth transition, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, I see some fade to blacks, some zoom out.

Dolly Li: Some zooming out, some fade to black, like, certain color matching of scenes, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: This is all—this is, like, the very early days of learning how to make a film.

Paola Mardo: Amazing.

Dolly Li: And having not gone to film school, having not actually gone to journalism school, either, so much of what I had to learn was from amazing people I worked with including Jun, including Marissa, including everyone that I've had the opportunity to, like, work with and make videos with.

Paola Mardo: So cool.

Dolly Li: And I—and I love sharing this. Even though, like, I don't make fully animated illustrative videos anymore, you know, I still make art. I still draw. But even in the Ghosts of

Chinatown documentary I worked on last year, many of the scenes are actually illustrated. So, when I was working with the illustrator on that, it was such a seamless collaboration because I already understood what he needed to do his part of the job. So...

Paola Mardo: That's cool. So this one's kind of a selfish question for me because I think it's been—it's so—it's just been really cool to see you sort of—your work as a journalist; you're a producer, a director, but also, like, on-camera host, as someone who is shifting to doing more on-camera stuff, how do you kind of balance that, you know what I mean? How did you get ready to be on camera having worked behind the scenes first and then jumped in front of it?

Dolly Li: I had my first on-camera experience because I was forced to.

Paola Mardo: Okay. So not by your own will, got it. Okay.

Dolly Li: So there was a story I really wanted to do with Al Jazeera, and I was pitching it, and there was just not enough bodies available. So they're like, "Great. You do it."

[LAUGHTER]

I was like, "You want me to write it?"

And they're like, "No. Go—go get the story."

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow. And were you like, "Ugh, no!" or—

Dolly Li: I was like, "Oh, okay?" I wasn't—I mean, granted, you obviously evolve as you're on camera, and you learn so much more, and the more you do it, the easier it gets. But, yeah, it's always, like, a scary experience, and I think especially as a woman on camera. People are so much more critical. Every little thing, every little hair, every little you-name-it, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Dolly Li: So I think that part is intimidating. But I also know the value of being, like, not just an Asian face but an Asian female face, someone who is taking you through a story that is relatable and can kind of be your guide. It's so helpful. It's so helpful to, like, get to know the person hosting the show, get to know their quirks, the things that they're interested in. And then people come back for the show not just for, like, the guests but also to, like, know about your life and what you do and what interests you.

Paola Mardo: Oh, man. I'm not ready. No, I appreciate that. Do you have a piece of advice?

Dolly Li: I would say—it helps me, personally, when I can do—and when I get to know as much information as I can about the person as possible, and I, like, read up on them. It's super stalker-y, I know, but that's just, like, doing your homework and your research.

Paola Mardo: Got to, yeah.

Dolly Li: But once you're, like, sitting down with them, I love just having a casual conversation first and just, like, going right into it. And sometimes you just realize that some of the things you had planned may not fit the conversation. But, you know, having, having plans certainly helps because it allows you to cancel parts of it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, which I have done all throughout this conversation.

Dolly Li: Yes. Yes, absolutely! Absolutely.

Paola Mardo: Cool! Thank you for that.

[47:56 - Prox Recs Theme by Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: We've come to the end of the show. But before we say goodbye and thank you, we call this our Prox Recs segment. We ask our guests to recommend something. Really, it could be anything you want. Most of the time, folks recommend something to do with their work, whether they're a filmmaker or a journalist, whatever it is. It could be a book, a movie, quote, piece of advice.

So we've talked a lot about your work and your different mediums. So feel free to recommend something there or just something fun. But, yeah, what would your Prox Rec be?

Dolly Li: This may be a little bit out of—out of what's expected, but I wanted to recommend, actually, a book that I read recently, which, honestly, has nothing to do with Asian American anything. But I wanted to recommend the book *The Wager* by David Grann. So why I'm recommending this book is because there's—David Grann is an incredible writer. He actually wrote *Killers of the Flower Moon*. I'm sure *The Wager* will also become a movie, a blockbuster movie eventually.

But the way that this book is written—it's nonfiction, but the way the book is written is written like a really epic fiction narrative. And I think, for people who are interested in the world of documenting and archive and finding a story by piecing together evidence, this book is such a masterful work in how to source real information, right, how to source truth and add narrative to it. And so I've been—I've been recommending this book quite a bit to other friends who are just, like, interested in reading, but I find this—like, the book itself is such a great study of nonfiction. And David Grann spent years researching this book. The story is about a shipwreck that took place in the 1800s, right? So it's so far back.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wow.

Dolly Li: It's so, so far back, and as a documentarian, I have such admiration for someone who can go into the 1800s, piece together the crumbles of information to tell this great epic of a story, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Dolly Li: And, yeah, so I, I love consuming stories in all forms, be it fiction, nonfiction, book, documentary. But this book in particular has been so compelling and such a masterpiece.

Paola Mardo: I love that. I never would've expected the setting. I was like, it sounds like a thriller. Oh, the 1800s.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolly Li: There's certainly thrilling moments.

Paola Mardo: I don't doubt it. Very cool. Thank you for that rec, Dolly, and thanks for coming to In Proximity. Really enjoyed talking to you today.

Dolly Li: Thank you for having me.

[50:46 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme Song and Additional Music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our Co-Director and Director of Photography.

Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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