

words | Lisa Katayama
portraits | Ronald J. Saunders
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Regarding Henry

Family Film Festival

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The first time I saw my great uncle Henry was on my grandmother’s TV. I was 10 years old, and we had just finished a dinner of braised beef and dumplings in her cozy apartment in Tokyo’s government district. As usual, after dinner, my grandmother migrated to her favorite armchair to smoke a cigarette and unwind in front of the tube while my brother and I asked my great-grandmother for preserved plums in broken Chinese. As I greedily picked out the fattest plum from the hua-mei stash, I heard my grandmother yelling for us to come over. I ran to the living room to see her sitting up excitedly in her chair, pointing to an old Chinese guy in a movie. “That’s my uncle!” she said.

Her uncle? I thought. How strange. I knew my grandmother used to be an actress and journalist before she came to Japan, but she had never talked about her life in Shanghai or any of our relatives in China. So who was this guy on the TV screen?

My mom later told me that it was my great grandfather’s youngest brother. He was an actor in a new movie called *The Last Emperor*. Because my great-great-grandfather had his first and last child 26 years apart, she was 5 years older than her own uncle. My grandmother had grown up with him, but hadn’t seen him since they were kids—probably since she left Shanghai in 1949. But here he was, on her TV screen in Tokyo. It must have been a bizarre moment for her.

Henry O is probably the only guy in Hollywood who could tell you what it was like to live under Mao’s China. He is also the oldest Asian man to ever win a best actor award—at age 80, he brought home the title for his role as Mr. Shi in director Wayne Wang’s newest feature film, *One Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

By the time he landed the role in *The Last Emperor*, Henry O had already been acting for over 30 years in the homeland. He had also been detained for being the descendant of a landlord at a time when class status inversely determined fate.

“You can’t show this to anyone,” Henry says as I screw the hi-def video camera into its tripod. We are sitting on a pair of soft floral motif sofas in the modest two-bedroom apartment he shares with his wife in Bellevue, Washington. It’s a warm Sunday evening in May, and Henry has agreed to let me interview him at length about his life.

Henry graciously fills my mug with hot tea every time he sees it empty or cold. For a guy his age, he has an amazing memory and is very resourceful. He holds in his hands pages of yellow lined paper filled with handwritten notes taken while on the phone with relatives in China. We record four hours of conversation over two days. Henry sometimes has trouble hearing my questions, but he refuses to wear a hearing aid. “I need to be able to hear without it when I’m filming,” he says. “This is practice.”

Henry tells me that he and I are descendants of a Muslim clan whose lineage dates back to Silk Road traders from the 1800s. Henry was born in the summer of 1927, the same year that the Red Army was founded. His mother often took him to the cinema to see films imported from the United States—short serials about classic superheroes like the Green Hornet and the Shadow.





Henry O gets the cold shoulder from actress Faye Yu in *One Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

At his university in Shanghai, he joined the drama club and co-wrote farcical plays ridiculing the nationalist government. He learned how to pronounce English words by imitating the dialogue of an old British lady in a 19th century Oscar Wilde play.

After graduating, he joined a government-owned theater in Shanghai. It was here that he would learn the hard way what the consequences of his heritage were under the Cultural Revolution. As Mao's initiatives picked up steam, theater leaders punished Henry for being from a wealthy background by assigning him peripheral, non-speaking roles. Determined, Henry still humored audiences by acting out silent jokes on stage. As the political tension heightened, they cast him as short-lived villains positioned in dark corners. Stagehands were instructed to deliberately lessen his presence if he was too close to the spotlights or center stage. Eventually, they decided that crappy roles weren't punitive enough and detained him in the theater for nearly half a year. (Henry's daughter, Ji-li, has written an account of this period in her family's history in the award-winning memoir *Red Scarf Girl*.)

Henry was eventually released from detention and resumed his acting. When his daughters moved to the United States in the '80s, he visited several times and got small gigs at theaters. In 1994, he moved to the United States permanently to be near his grandchildren, and his career in film picked up. He chose the stage name Henry O—inspired by the 19th century American writer

O Henry—while filming *The Red Corner* with Richard Gere. ("It was a politically sensitive film," he says.) He played various supporting roles in movies like *Romeo Must Die* and *Rush Hour 3* before landing the lead in *One Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

A movie about an old Chinese guy? What was Wayne Wang thinking? *One Thousand Years* is a film about an estranged father who visits his daughter in the United States for the first time after her recent divorce. It's a slow, contemplative look at a man's persistent efforts to better the communication flow between him and a grown-up daughter who has become culturally and emotionally distant.

Wang met and hired Henry while scouting for a set in Spokane, Washington. "Henry survived the Cultural Revolution," the director, who previously shot films like *The Joy Luck Club* and *Maid in Manhattan*, says. "Just knowing what he must have gone through, I knew he was the right guy for the role."

In a way, portraying Mr. Shi brings Henry back full circle. After playing everything from a peasant in rural China to a wizard in Hobbitland, the role of an elderly Chinese father hits close to home. Although Henry claims he is nothing like the controlling, nosy patriarch in the film, family and nationality are recurring themes in his own life. Perhaps as a result, *One Thousand Years* was the biggest winner at last year's San Sebastian Film Festival—it won best picture, and Henry O won best actor.

In China, Henry never got to choose his roles. He was a salaried employee of a government-run theater where roles were often assigned through bribes and favoritism. There may have been a time in Henry O's life when fame and recognition were a motivation to get to Hollywood and succeed there. All that doesn't matter as much anymore. When asked whether he liked the red carpet treatment at a recent film festival in San Francisco, he simply answered, "It's difficult." And then, as an afterthought, he added: "It's embarrassing."

But as unglamorous as it may have been for the veteran actor who had been through so much already, I know I was proud to see Henry—a family member whom I have gotten to know later in life—being recognized for his hard work and extraordinary talent. And if my grandmother was alive, she would probably have jumped out of her cushy armchair and flown halfway across the world just to see the bright Hollywood lights shine on her long-lost uncle. 🐼

Henry gets closer to Lisa in real life.

