



## Esther ENG 伍錦霞 (1914–1970)

### Director, Screenwriter, Producer

Esther Eng was born to a family from Taishan, Guangdong in the US city of San Francisco, where her father ran a business. As a lover of drama and opera from a young age, she invested in the founding of Guangyi Film Company with some friends, and co-produced the patriotic film *Heartaches* (1935). In 1936, she promoted the film in Hong Kong, officially releasing it to the public under the name *Iron Blood, Fragrant Soul*, which caught the eye of the local industry. In the following year, she directed her first film, *The Heroine* (1937), independently and became the first female film director in Hong Kong.

Eng stayed in Hong Kong to cultivate her career afterwards and joined Grandview Film Company Limited in 1937, directing *Ten Thousand Sweethearts* (1938), and later directed films for other companies, such as *A Night of Romance, a Lifetime of Regret* (co-directed with Leung Wai-man and Wu Pang, 1938), and *The Two Sisters* (1939). Among her films, the ground-breaking *The Women's World* (1939) was co-written and co-directed with Lo Si, and for the first time ever, featured 36 female stars in an all-female cast, which can be seen to be a statement of women's independence. Eng returned to the US in 1939 as the Second World War intensified and later co-directed *The Golden Gate Girl* (1941) with Moon Kwan Man-ching, who was staying there temporarily.

After the war, she came to Hong Kong for film opportunities but the industry remained in dire straits, so she returned to the US to shoot Cantonese films and directed *A Fair Lady by the Blue Lagoon* (1949) for Grandview Film's US studio in 1947. Later she self-funded and directed *Back Street* (1948). During a stay in Hawaii, upon the invitation of local overseas Chinese, she brought her own equipment and actors to film *Mad Fire, Mad Love* (1949, screened in Hong Kong in 1950). After the 1940s, she ran Ngong Kwong Film Company and purchased the rights to dozens of films from Nanyang Film Company and distributed them all over the Americas, with a distribution network extending all the way to Cuba. Eng moved to New York in 1950 and operated Central Theatre with some friends, screening Cantonese films and staging Cantonese opera performances. At the same time, she invested in restaurants and made a name for herself in the catering industry, with one of her restaurants becoming a gathering point for opera and film stars visiting the US.

In 1961, Eng took part in the filming of *Murder Case in Chinatown* (1961) at the invitation of Siu Yin Fei, who invested in the film. Eng was in charge of directing the scenes shot on location in the US, while Wu Pang shot the studio scenes in Hong Kong. This became her final film. Eng's accomplishments were remarkable in the male-dominated filmmaking industry of the time. Eng often wore gender-neutral outfits and was respectfully nicknamed 'Big Brother Ha' by people in the industry. She died of illness in the US in 1970.

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