

Yang finds way on road to Ixtlan

By Kirk Honeycutt

Film executive Janet Yang asked "What's a Nice Chinese Girl Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?" at Wednesday's Women in Film executive luncheon and came up with at least a partial answer.

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Admitting she has never had an adequate answer to the question, Yang, who serves as president of Oliver Stone's Ixtlan Prods., told the assembled audience, "When I met (author) Carlos Castaneda, who wrote 'Journey to Ixtlan,' I asked him what 'Ixtlan' meant. He said the word meant a place you are always attempting to define but never quite get to."

That, she said, seems like what she does at Ixtlan and what she has been doing throughout her career in the film industry — "inventing each day as it goes and finding jobs that didn't exist."

She said that while she has overcome the "double whammy" of being a minority woman and of having no role models or network to look to for support, it is "too convenient" for people of color or women to complain about abuse and prejudice in the entertainment industry.

"It exists everywhere, but we must avoid sweeping generalizations and drawing sharp lines," Yang said.

"I vehemently disagree with Spike Lee who said only black directors can do black films," she said. "He underestimates the hu-

man condition."

Yang traced her rise in the film industry, where her heritage helped land her a job in San Francisco as a distributor of Chinese films and later with MCA-Universal as its liaison with China, as the studio attempted to break into the Chinese market.

"I had to interpret Hollywood to China and China to Hollywood, which is not an easy task," she said. "But I was proud to be Chinese."

Working in China on Steven Spielberg's "Empire of the Sun" paved the way to Universal hiring her — at Spielberg's suggestion — as a production executive. She initiated "Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story" prior to her departure.

"In the Black Tower I was not using my Chinese-ness, and my womanhood was out the window," she said of the mostly male environment.

When she heard Stone was forming a production company, she said she was like a "rabid dog" in her determination to convince Stone that she should have a job with his company.

She joined Ixtlan in 1989.

Since then, Yang has worked on "JFK," "South Central" and "Zebrahead."

More recently executive pro-

duced "The Joy Luck Club" and "Heaven and Earth."

"Oliver has been extremely influential on me," Yang said. "Oliver made me realize being an outsider has less to do with skin color than state of mind."

Being an outsider means questioning and challenging, disagreeing and debating, she said.

Thus, Stone "didn't bat an eyelash" when she brought to him Amy Tan's novel "The Joy Luck Club" to make as a film. This was a seemingly uncommercial project she could not get off the ground at Universal.

"We figured eight rules (of filmmaking) were broken by 'Joy Luck Club,'" Yang said. "Asians don't sell and neither do females. You can't have subtitles, flashbacks or voice-overs. You must have a clear protagonist and antagonist, and a clear linear structure."

Later during a question-and-answer session, the Ixtlan Prods. president admitted that she has become a role model "because of who I am.

"Connie Chung told Asians they, too, could be on TV and I tell them that it's possible to work in movies.

"I am happy to share my life experiences with others and if I inspire people, that's great." □