



# CHINA DOLL

TEXT KRISTINA PÉREZ

From Hollywood actress to Beijing club queen, Ai Wan is a trailblazer in China's new creative economy.

Ai Wan dashes into her office at the new ChinaDoll Club in the heart of the Beijing's Sanlitun entertainment district, while trying to get a visa for a New York DJ to play on Friday night. She settles into her chair, graciously apologising for being late. The soft-spoken, Shanghai-born actress radiates an infectious energy as she describes her eventful career. Although most Chinese actresses dream of making the crossover from Chinese-language films to Hollywood

blockbusters, Ai Wan did the reverse: Leaving Hollywood behind after 15 years, with supporting roles in films such as *Rush Hour* and *Death Becomes Her*, to make her mark in China's creative revolution.

Ai Wan first moved to the Los Angeles in 1987 when she was 12 years old and attended a small international boarding school. When she was 18, Ai Wan won the title of Miss Chinese International



U.S.A., and like a scene from a movie, was discovered on Sunset Boulevard by a talent agent. This quickly led to modelling and print assignments that included her first job for the fabled American lingerie company, Frederick's of Hollywood, and a stint as a Playboy Bunny. Soon after, her career in show business took off, with roles in movies and TV series such as ER, music videos like Melissa Ethridge's *Fallen Down*, all the while attending UCLA film school. A decade later, a serendipitous meeting with a Chinese TV producer in Beijing brought her back to China and for the first time exposed her to a Chinese audience.

In three years, she had channelled her success into a number of projects including the founding of an interior design firm, Epic Design. A host at China's International Fashion Week, she is also a well-regarded culture columnist for China's influential *Modern Weekly* magazine and the co-author of *The Madness of Appetite*, along with a number of famous artists, which topped the country's bestseller list for 2005-2006. In 2006, the progressive *Outlook Magazine* dubbed Ai Wan a 'Leader of the new rising creative class in Beijing', in acknowledgement of her many creative ventures. Ai Wan's popular *ChinaDoll* club that doubles as a home for the arts and a nightclub, is a combination of her creative talents and entrepreneurial instincts. The documentary film *Yasukuni* that was produced by her, however, was mired in controversy. On release, *Yasukuni* has met with much animosity in Japan and calls by right-wing politicians for its banning because it explores the Shinto shrine, focusing on Naoji Kariya, the last tradesman alive who forged the swords traditionally used by Japanese military officers. The documentary follows the story of the blades—what they were used for, particularly the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, which is still a bone of contention in Japan-China relations. Ai Wan was present at the film's screening at the Sundance Film Festival, where it received critical acclaim, as it did at the Berlin, Cannes and Hong Kong film festivals. The documentary awaits its international release sometime this year. Ai Wan spends an afternoon with *L'Officiel* talking about her multi-dimensional career and her many creative projects.

**L'OFFICIEL:** Was it difficult to move from Shanghai to California as a preteen?

**AI WAN:** I was around 12 when I moved and went straight to a private boarding school in San Marino—the part of town with a lot of old money. The school was very small with only 140 students and famous for its volleyball team! I thought I already knew how to speak English when I arrived because I was the class representative in my school in China, but actually it was terrible. For example, I tried to make a phone call from a public phone and the operator asked me to dial 1 before 310 (the area code) but I couldn't understand it so I had to run to the study hall to get someone to help me. But you learn.

**What did you learn from your early career in Hollywood?**

I started my early career by taking the challenge of giving thousands and thousands of auditions, hard core training, competing with talented actors for different roles.... A lot of people have a hard

time handling rejection—when they see problems they run away—but I think because of the nature of my job I learned to be very strong and I take rejection very well. For example, if you go to five to seven casting calls a week, every month for years then that adds up to a lot of rejection. You realise that it's not because of you. It's because they decided to go for a different character or a blonde or a brunette. And other times, it helps you to reevaluate yourself and think about what you can do better—and then you learn to be very professional and calm. Belief is also part of the game. And that actually taught me to believe that if I'm fully prepared, if I know what I'm doing, if I understand and learn my skills, I have a fair shot. I think that's what America taught me.

**What prompted your move from Hollywood to Beijing?**

I was a little fed up and disappointed with the kind of roles I was getting from Hollywood. They were very typecast. No matter how hard you fight... you will always just be a martial artist or a mistress character in the movies—it's all about cleavage and legs really. You can compete with Caucasians for better more powerful, smarter projects, and better characters but they are mainly designed for a white, mainstream audience.... Don't get me wrong. At the beginning of my career, I was a Hawaiian Tropic Girl and Playboy Bunny and I have no problem with playing those characters, but after a while you want to play something more interesting.

I had never acted in Chinese, so to actually act in my own language was an exciting thought. When I came back to celebrate my father's 60th birthday, I ran into a TV executive and he asked me where I acted and I said in the States, they thought I was crazy. That was back in 2001. They asked me to send some video tapes, which I did. Later they responded back saying that they can't promise me anything but they wanted to see me one more time. So I packed two suitcases, left my Hollywood home, where from my balcony I could see the sunrise and sunset and the Hollywood sign, and I came back to heavily polluted Beijing. I haven't worn my bikini for the last four years!

**Did you have reverse culture or re-entry shock?**

I came back and immediately I had this television project, *Sha Qing*, playing this heroine whose family had just come back from the U.S. And I was cast, all thanks to my foreign experience! (Laughs) I didn't know anyone and I didn't understand the system, but I knew 'Camera! Action!' A lot of people wondered why I was doing this since I was from Hollywood. They were expecting a drama queen to show up, but I knew I was asking for a different experience so I was prepared.

**What is the concept behind *ChinaDoll Club*? How is it different from other nightclubs in Beijing, or indeed, nightclubs in general?**

The reason that we're different from the others is because the creators are artists. I come from a film background. [It makes] you understand that you have to communicate with people—what's your message to send out? How do you project beauty? It's based



on your imagination and how insightful and sensitive you can be. And if you can have that concept and put that in a space, then that space comes alive. So that space becomes your film script, your film, your stage—everyone who comes to your stage becomes your actors. Hopefully, we'll attract creative people from all walks of life, from all over the world, to build this community together. That's how I see the ChinaDoll Club.

How do you think you earned the title of 'Leader of Beijing's new creative class' in the few short years since you've been back?

I believe there are many, many other talented individuals doing the same thing. I just happen to be in the limelight because what we do is so new to Beijing. Actually, the entertainment business attracts a lot of people's attention. With China's new development everything is going very rapidly and it gives you a lot of opportunities. I would never do so many jobs in the U.S. because there they have very mature industries—everything is fully established and there is a lot of competition. Not to say that there isn't any competition here, but this is my country, my land, my soil...and I have a lot more people here to support me and to support my team. I think part

of the reason why I am in the spotlight is my Hollywood background because not a lot of people can survive in that sector. And then to go and do a 180 degree switch and come back to China! Somehow I have got lucky and each project has created a lot of noise. But it's been a long journey.

How did you get involved with Yasukuni?

At the time Li Ying had just come back from Japan looking for post-production money for the movie. I thought the project was very interesting, very opinionated and very strong. It just kind of landed on my lap since there was no one helping the director because it is so controversial. I just trusted my gut instinct. When I was younger [my career] was more about finding out how to act, but as I matured I realised that film is about helping and inspiring people. It's not just about how well you can act.

Were you surprised at the violent reaction that Yasukuni received in Japan?

I wasn't surprised because Li Ying is challenging the Emperor. He's rocking the whole country's beliefs. Of course, a lot of people won't be happy about it. But it's a documentary; it wasn't a feature—it took him eight years to document. So what can they say? They're speechless. There is no narration, either. It is all just footage. So I think that delivered a powerful message. I feel very fortunate to work with such a tough director. The shrine holds 2.5 million soldiers' ashes from World War II but the problem is that they deny the Nanjing massacre and there is a radio broadcast inside the shrine saying that the invasions were just rumours. The director feels that if you don't acknowledge your past, you can never find a solution to build the future, especially between all the Asian countries. It's not just a problem for China, it's not just a problem for Japan—it's a problem for Asia. If we can recognise our mistakes, admit them, then we can really build a strong bond between the Asian countries. From that point on, we can create a peaceful future. So that is the true meaning behind this movie.

What have you learned from co-producing Yasukuni?

I got very excited because this is my first film project and it shows I have good taste! (Laughs) I have proven to myself that I can do it—not like I can do it without anyone's cooperation or help, but that I have good instincts. If I have creative people to work with and no one tries to stop us along the way, we can successfully put the project together, and then maybe it can be a winner.

What's next?

I've written a screenplay, with one of the co-producers of Yasukuni, called The Phoenix Brazier. And this time, it's a feature film and I created it for a selfish reason—to show that this is the kind of movie that I'd want to act in or produce. It's about a bra sales girl, who worked in a department store in China in 1973, when everyone was wearing the Mao suit and President Nixon came to visit. Obviously, you can see the connection, since I was a lingerie model! It's about a woman who's not afraid to express her sensuality in that confined environment. It's also a love triangle involving a Peking opera singer. Financing is the next thing. So as you can see, I've never left my roots.