

FILM

WARLORD: A tale of heroism and villainy

By RAY LUO

There's a reason why Jet Li received \$15 million to appear in *Warlords*, Peter Chan and Wai Man Yip's newest film. For one thing, he plays one of the most conflicted individuals found in Asian cinema—General Pang Qingyun, who appears alternately to be both a rebel and a supporter of the Qing dynasty in China. For another, he successfully captures the persona of a character who is designed to be both hero and villain at the same time. *Warlords* is the study of a leader unable to exert himself amidst social and political pressures in a hypocritical society.

Li first appears in the film as the only survivor of a defeated Qing army, who is nursed back to health by Lian Sheng (Jinglei Xu), the wife of the leader of an army of bandits. Pang shows his valor while serving the bandits, and eventually forms an oath of blood and brotherhood with the leaders, Zhao Erhu (Andy Lau) and Zhang Wenxiang (Takeshi Kaneshiro). The brothers follow Pang to see his Qing empire superiors, who suggest that Pang prove their worth by taking the city of Suzhou away from the Taiping rebels. The year-long siege of Suzhou ends when Zhao enters the city surreptitiously and accepts the rebel leader's surrender and suicide. Instead of freeing the rebel prisoners, as promised to Zhao, Pang orders the rebels to be executed in order to save provisions, causing a rift in his relationship with the brothers. The Qing army goes on to take Nanjing, and Pang is appointed governor by the Empress Dowager. Soon, jealousy arises in the Qing nobility, pressuring Pang to take action against Zhao.

The difficulty inherent in Li's role lies in the fact that his character is, for the most part, downright despic-



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able. He has an affair with Lian, the wife of his own blood brother. He has members of his own army executed for attempted rape of rebel civilians in a mock attempt to restore order. Finally, he commits the ultimate betrayal when he has Zhao killed by hidden arrows. Given these circumstances, it is easy to label Pang as a one-dimensional character. Yet his immorality becomes more complex given Li's acting, which exudes self denial and self importance. Li proves that he is more than just a master of martial arts by giving an underrated portrayal of a conflicted individual. His effectiveness as both villain and hero comes in part from his ruthlessness. He behaves as a realist in an empire filled with hypocritical officials, but in the end, his practical abilities are not able to help him deal with death.

In Asia, Andy Lau is regarded as a bigger star than Jet Li. He usually plays the "good guy" roles, and his character Zhao Erhu is no exception. The scene where he duels the rebel leader in Suzhou before seeing the rebel fall onto his own sword is indicative of his unaltered idealist vision throughout this film. It's an easier role to play than Li's, but part of the effectiveness of *Warlord* comes from portraying the figures around Pang as one-dimensional, thereby highlighting Pang's unique conscience.

Japanese and Taiwan-based actor Takeshi Kaneshiro,

who played the genius tactician Zhuge Liang in the *Red Cliff* films, reprises a similar role in *Warlord* as Zhang Wenxiang. His most powerful scene occurs when he kills Lian Sheng for the sake of saving the relationship between Pang and Zhao. Zhang gets a taste of the conflict of interest that besets Pang when, after killing Lian, he realizes that Pang had already issued the order to have Zhao killed, making the killing obsolete. Rendered powerless after the climactic scene, Zhang learns that the workings of the world rules over the ambitions of men, leaving its inhabitants powerless in its grasp.

Some of the best moments in *Warlords* involve the historical battles and venues it depicts. The battle for Suzhou features strong characterizations of trench warfare, including a scene where Pang is chasing after Lian during her visit. The Nanjing scenes are a tour-de-force sequence involving a quick progression of siege to warfare to division of spoils. Pang's promotion by the Empress Dowager takes place at the enormous Forbidden City, and is visually stunning. The hints of decadence and eventual decline can be seen in the Dowager's manner of speaking, the posture of the out-of-touch advisors, as well as the manner of the trusting General Pang, who ends up ascending the governing throne on a rainy day.

The claustrophobia present in *Warlords* mimics the inevitability conveyed by the film's focus on a general who ends up being used by the court nobility, turning an idealist into a realist consumed by the world around him. *Warlords* will be released in the U.S. in April 2010.

LITERATURE

THE QUINTESSENTIAL LIST

Everything you need for your Asian American literature crash course

By SHIRLEY MAK

Chang-Rae Lee | NATIVE SPEAKER

A tale of cultural alienation, *Native Speaker* follows Henry Park, a Korean American spy who's never quite sure what side he's on, both in terms of his ethnic identity and his professional versus private ambitions. While *Native Speaker* is primarily a spy novel, focusing on Park's experience trailing a prominent Korean American politician, the undercurrent of the story deals closely with Asian American identity, namely how to reconcile growing up in a foreign country that you want desperately to feel at home in.

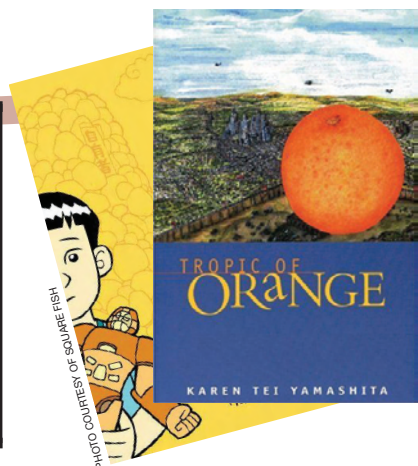


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Jhumpa Lahiri | INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 2009, Lahiri's debut collection of short stories, chronicling the lives of different generations of both Indians and Indian Americans, is the very definition of poignant. While each story has its individual moments of breathtaking clarity, Lahiri's talent for depicting genuine loss and emotional disconnect—whether it concerns a significant other, a marriage or a country—is particularly apparent in "A Temporary Matter," a story about a deteriorating relationship that reaches its climax in the midst of a blackout, and "Mrs. Sen's," whose protagonist's pangs of homesickness for her native country are far too memorable, a vivid representation of the Asian American diaspora.

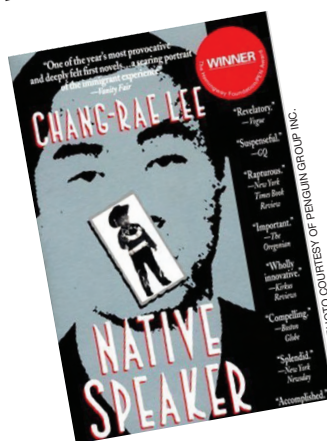


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Gene Luen Yang | AMERICAN BORN CHINESE

A finalist for the National Book Award in 2006, *American Born Chinese* is a tour de force graphic novel that intertwines three stories about the age-old paradox of assimilation into the U.S. while staying true to one's roots. The novel consists of three tales—the first following the adventures of the famous Chinese folk hero, the Monkey King, the second of a second-generation Chinese immigrant and the third of a boy named Danny, who represents the ultimate Chinese stereotype.

Maxine Hong Kingston | THE WOMAN WARRIOR

Best described as creative non-fiction, *The Woman Warrior* is Kingston's own autobiography blended with tidbits of different Chinese folktales. The stories focus on five women—Kingston's long-dead aunt, "No-Name Woman"; a mythical female warrior, Fa Mu Lan; Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid; Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid and finally Kingston herself—told in five chapters. Taught in universities across the U.S. and named one of Time's top non-fiction books of the 1970s, *The Woman Warrior* captures an authentic Chinese American experience that will still be relevant for years to come.

Karen Yamashita | TROPIC OF ORANGE

Fans of magical realism will appreciate Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, a story centered on the poor and often wacky characters of urban Los Angeles. Filled with references to the father of magical realism himself, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Tropic of Orange* unconventionally intertwines the lives of several different characters—a single mom raising her young son in the humidity of Mexico, her offbeat landlord Gabriel, a reporter trying to fight social injustice, Emi, an outspoken Japanese American and the omnipresent Archangel, who carries a mysterious suitcase that, like Yamashita's novel, is filled with fascinating surprises.