

After a year of long overdue Hollywood love, actor James Hong is still having his moment

By Terry Tang
The Associated Press

Greeted with a standing ovation at the Screen Actors Guild Awards, James Hong could easily have just basked in the applause and moved on. But for the 94-year-old, the mostly Asian cast of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* winning best cast seemed like an opportunity for a stark reminder that Hollywood wasn't always so open.

"It just came out of me that after all these years of working with producers and directors, and they were always saying, 'Oh the Asian, the Chinese, are not good enough to play the leading role,'" Hong told The Associated Press recently. "But look at Michelle (Yeoh) and all these colleagues now coming forward to be recognized ... You can't help but say 'Look at us now.'"

Looking at Hong now, you will see perhaps the busiest nonagenarian in show biz. The last year for him has been a wild ride. A year ago he finally received his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Shortly after, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and the overwhelming response propelled the actor into every major awards event. He got to see the movie collect seven Oscars, including a historic best actress win for Yeoh. Host Jimmy Kimmel even took a moment to pay tribute to him.

Viewers will soon be able to hear Hong in *Gremlins: Secrets of the Mogwai*, an animated prequel series of the movie franchise. Episodes began streaming in May on Max (formerly HBO Max). He also appears in an episode of the new Disney+ show, "American Born Chinese," which also premiered in May and is producer on the upcoming movie *Patsy Lee and the Keepers of the 5 Kingdoms*.

It's as if the universe is trying to make up for all the racial discrimination the Asian-American icon endured over the years.

Born in Minneapolis, Hong originally studied civil engineering in college. After serving in the Korean War, he decided in 1953 to move to Hollywood. He got his break on Groucho Marx's quiz show, "You Bet Your Life." Small film roles opposite



actors like Clark Gable followed. But so did roles that were racist tropes.

In the series "The New Adventures of Charlie Chan," Hong played the son of the titular Chinese detective. He had to stomach watching a white lead actor "put on fake eye pieces" so that his eyes would look more "Asian."

"Then he would just talk in a very stoic pattern that's supposedly Chinese," Hong recalled. "That irritated me for many, many years."

A lot of his early roles reflected the limited options for Asian actors at the time: workers in laundries, restaurants, or railroad lines.

Those "Asian clichés" are far behind him now. He is also helping to revisit some and flesh them out.

Sam Register, president of Warner Bros. Animation, had the idea to do a prequel to *Gremlins* and gave showrunner Tze Chun the reins to come up with ideas. Chun wanted to expand on the family history of Mr. Wing, the store owner played by Keye Luke who houses original Gremlin Gizmo in the 1984 flick. In this animated take, viewers will see Mr. Wing as a little boy in

1920s Shanghai encountering the furry creatures who shouldn't eat after midnight. Hong, who was actually friends with Luke, voices Sam's sly and spunky grandfather.

Hong's "iconic voice" was at the top of the show's wish list. There's something about his delivery that is "equal parts gravitas and incredible humor," Chun said.

"It's never what you think it's going to be, which is what's so exciting about it," Chun said. "It's like you can try to hear it when you're writing it on the page. But then when he does it, he brings that like unique spin to it that is just out of left field. And, frankly, just makes it better."

Secrets of the Mogwai, which retains some of the dark and funny elements of the movie, also serves as a *Mulan* voice cast reunion. Ming-Na Wen, BD Wong, George Takei, and Hong were all part of the 1998 Disney animated feature. The *Mulan* connection was a complete coincidence.

"We just kind of went out to our first choices," Chun said. "These are people that I've looked up to like for my entire life."

Chun is one of several Asian-American film directors and showrunners who have

STORIED CAREER. Actor James Hong poses after being honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles, in this May 10, 2022 file photo. Hong has a starring role in the new *Gremlins* animated prequel, *Secrets of the Mogwai*, and pops up in an episode of "American Born Chinese" on Disney+. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill, File)

gotten emotional seeing Hong celebrated. Melvin Mar, one of the producers of "American Born Chinese," teared up when he spoke to him right before his Walk of Fame ceremony.

"That guy is a legend beyond legend," Mar said. "He was just so funny and quick and just a pleasure to have on set. Just the sweetest guy."

Gene Luen Yang, author of the *American Born Chinese* graphic novel and also a producer on the show, says Hong's life epitomizes Asian-American history.

"His journey in Hollywood really is symbolic of us as Asian Americans. The kind of roles that he was offered in the beginning to now having his own Hollywood star, it shows the kind of progress that we've made," Yang said.

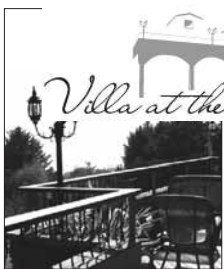
Hong is grateful that he has been around to witness how anti-Asian discrimination and whitewashing are no longer tolerated. With new attitudes and new technology like streaming services, there are also more acting gigs than he thought possible.

"I'm going to be thinking of another project to do. Why? Because online and all these streaming things have created a whole new different field," he said. "You don't have to make a whole feature. You can make something 10 minutes or half an hour or hour long and still get it so-called displayed."

With more than 650 acting credits including 200-something voiceovers, is there anything Hong wants to conquer? Yes, but not in acting. He fantasizes about a James Hong comic book series with his brand of sarcastic humor.

"We'll see," Hong said. "I'm not going to stop working. My wife wants me to go to a retirement home soon, but I don't think I'm fit for that. I wouldn't know what to do."

Terry Tang is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team.



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5	7			9	4
	9	7	1	2	
6		3		7	
8		7			9
	3	1	4		
9		6			8
4		2		9	
	2	5	8	6	
9	6			7	8

Difficulty level: Easy

#57949

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue's puzzle

Puzzle #49534 (Hard)

All solutions available at www.sudoku.com.

4	1	8	6	3	5	7	2	9
5	9	3	4	2	7	8	1	6
7	6	2	9	8	1	5	3	4
9	7	5	1	6	2	3	4	8
1	3	4	5	9	8	2	6	7
2	8	6	7	4	3	1	9	5
3	5	9	8	1	6	4	7	2
8	4	1	2	7	9	6	5	3
6	2	7	3	5	4	9	8	1