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FEATURING Angella Cao and Karoline Xu with Owen Connors, Micah Thorpe, Sienna Rivers, Arianny Kim **EXECUTIVE PRODUCER** Jefferson White **LINE PRODUCER** Tiffany Tran
PRODUCERS Karoline Xu, Mia Walker **CINEMATOGRAPHY** Scott Ray **PRODUCTION DESIGN** Daniel Prosky
COSTUME, HAIR & MAKE-UP Gabrielle Ruffino **EDITOR** Julian Muller **SCORE** Hsin-Hua Wang
SOUND Chris Bianrosa **SOUND DESIGN & MIX** Brady Hearn **COLOR** Ayumi Ashley
WRITTEN BY Karoline Xu **DIRECTED BY** Mia Walker

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PIPPI

Written by Karoline Xu
Directed by Mia Walker



2021
6 min. and 40 sec. – 16:9 – Stereo
English and Swedish
With subtitles.

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*“When I hear the phrase ‘Asians are next in line to be white,’ I replace the word ‘white’ with ‘disappear.’
Asians are next in line to disappear.”*

- Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*

LOGLINE

A Chinese-Swedish mother and daughter grapple with their racial self-hatred through their love of Pippi Longstocking.

SYNOPSIS

It’s Halloween.

Jessa, a Chinese-Swedish 8-year-old, has recently started school in the United States. At the end of her first week, she wears her favorite costume: two pigtails and colorful, mismatched clothing. She’s Pippi Longstocking, but no one seems to know it.

As she dangles from the monkey bars, Jessa muses on last week, when a casual comment to her mother led to an unexpected exploration of nostalgia, interpretation, and survival.

Now, in front of her peers, Jessa must decide what part of herself to show – and if there’s anything she should hide.

WRITER'S STATEMENT

From 1998 to 2000, I lived in a municipality next to Stockholm. I loved everything there: underground grocery stores, recess in the woods, dressing up for St. Lucia's Day.

Later, my mom told me that I had a difficult time. The school where I kissed my first crush (a young Norwegian boy) was the same place where other white boys mocked my small "Oriental" eyes.



In 2014, Sweden re-released the 1969 *Pippi Longstocking* television series and removed a few racial slurs, including the phrase "king of the Negroes" and a sequence where Pippi draws her eyes out into the slant eye gesture and sings a mock Chinese song. There was a large backlash; many Swedes believed this censorship corrupted a national treasure and reflected a submission to the "politically correct" atmosphere.

The fusion of these events spurred what would eventually become *PIPPY*. What is our relationship with our past, and specifically nostalgia, as we evolve as a society? At what point does memory become oppressive and selective and harmful? And how do we talk about the past with the people we love?

Aesthetically, *PIPPY* is a horror film. When I wrote the script, I asked myself: what is the scariest thing I could see on screen that I haven't seen yet? I wanted to delve into the racial self-hatred that I, and many other Asians, have been experiencing for a long time.

But *PIPPY*'s beating heart is just that -- heart. A child's love for an icon, a mother's love for her past, and the strong, albeit complicated, bond between them. I think of that scene in *Slumdog Millionaire* when the young boy gets stuck in an outhouse while his favorite idol comes to town. In a moment of desperation and intense longing, he takes the ultimate plunge: into the bath of shit below. Then he runs through the village, down the dirt roads, through the dense crowd, until he's there, in front of the person he wants to see most. Sometimes, the most painful thing is wanting something badly enough.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



When I first read the script for *PIPPi* on March 9, 2020, I knew instantly I wanted to direct it. Karoline’s screenplay celebrates the joy and strength of an iconic “shero” figure, especially as something that bonds a mother and daughter, and when least expected, complicates both. I am drawn to stories with uncomfortable gray areas that force the audience to think beyond its constructed binary of good and evil. *PIPPi* immediately drew me into the mind of 8-year-old Jessa and her experience of this complexity.

Three days after I read *PIPPi*, New York City shut down. At first, it seemed impossible to shoot a film. But as America’s racial wound split open, *PIPPi* felt more relevant than ever, reckoning with racial identity in a way I had not seen on film before. We began discussing how to make the film as soon and as safely as possible. The original script featured a classroom setting. We shifted this to an outdoor playground and limited the number of children in the scene. We embraced these limitations of our situation and invited a COVID-safety certified line producer to join us. We were overwhelmed by the support from our cast, crew, and everyone who rallied behind us, supercharged by the story and its timeliness.

I was very interested in *PIPPi*’s intense psychological elements. I wanted to explore how Pippi Longstocking had been burned into the mind’s eye of both Jessa and her mother. This heroine lived in their psyches, the way that dominant culture so often does. The media and icons we consume as children stay with us and become baked into our consciousness. When discussing the tone of our film, Karoline often had instincts toward objectivity, an observer looking in, wanting to treat the story as an “every(wo)man” narrative. I tended towards the more experiential, wanting the camera to be the character’s eyes trying to understand the characters’ experiences. (Re)watching the original Swedish TV show became a guidepost. Although its main aesthetic is observational, there are moments when the camera enters Pippi’s POV. We were inspired by this stylistic blending, which has contributed to the off-kilter nature and dynamic tension. We’ve leaned into this discomfort, creating a viewing experience that not only reflects the process of racial reckoning but also hints at the nature of transformation itself.

IN CONVERSATION

PIPPi was in pre-production two times before this. How did you overcome unexpected hurdles and eventually find collaboration in each other?

Karoline Xu -- I wrote *PIPPi* in May 2019. While it found a production home quickly, I didn't know what a "good" director could do, because everyone I spoke to commented on the simplicity of the script (and therefore didn't feel the need to delve further), wanted it to be more "Chinese" or more "immigrant," or told me that I was the only person who could direct it. These reasons felt partially true, but partially like projections. When we pulled the plug on a production due to admin hiccups, it was severely disappointing, and I decided to shelve the project. I became one of those voices I had set out to disprove; I sidelined my own experience.

On a whim, I reached out to Mia. Our collaboration began naturally, and soon, it was clear she was the right person for *PIPPi*. She had extensive experience working with child actors and brought an added sensitivity to Jessa's POV. She pushed me to verbalize the why's of my script and showed me that true generosity and artistic rigor can coexist. In fact, a large reason why I wanted an outside director was because I believed that the distance of another person would create interesting juxtapositions. It mirrors the dissonance Jessa has for her new life and the dissonance between what her mother says and how she may truly feel. Mia understood what I had written and more.

Mia Walker -- An unexpected hurdle for us was definitely COVID. But we were so geared up to make the film and wanted to make it soon. Working with Karoline has been the most incredible collaboration I have ever experienced, truly. We push and challenge each other, and we have uncomfortable conversations and reckon with our very different upbringings and experiences. *PIPPi* has certainly been a project of the heart.



It was a great artistic challenge finding the tone, through pre-production to editing. How did you manage to achieve it? What is it?

MW -- From our very early conversations, there were multiple tones discussed. We went from gritty reality to fantasy to psychological thriller to horror to Swedish noir to some combination of all of the above. Karoline suggested I watch *Get Out*, which definitely inspired me in terms of building suspense and scoring possibilities. I still had resistance to the “horror” genre. Perhaps I felt the reality and truth of the story was scary enough, and associated the genre with pastiche. I had to find my own way into the horror of the film. An early impulse included Jessa hanging upside down in the playground, then rotating to “right side up.” At the time, I couldn’t pinpoint why I was drawn to this image, but I think it has to do with Jessa’s isolation, and from the film dealing with two separate worlds that join together in the end.

KX -- I loved it too! It felt jarring and kind of funny. Plus, it was that subliminal something we wanted. In editing, we realized how extensive, and fundamental, this choice was. Our circular motif comes up several times, in ways we hadn’t planned, including the yellow arch on the playground, the mother-daughter dance sequence, and Jessa’s head tilting at the end. In a larger way, it signals both the cycle of intergenerational trauma and the public perpetuating of said trauma.

Can you touch on the casting process?

KX -- I found our lead, Angella, at the West 4th Street Subway Station in Manhattan. It was difficult casting her demographic, but I was set on finding an earnest, complex Jessa. When I saw Angella, I caught up to her and her grandma, hoping they wouldn’t think I was trying to scam them, and like the pro she is, Angella said, “A short film? That’s great. I’m an actress.”

MW -- To cast the school kids, we put out a blanket casting release that welcomed all races and backgrounds. We then focused on which kids we were naturally drawn to, and that helped shape the tone of those scenes. We gave careful thought to the racial make-up of the group, and if any inadvertent harmful statements would be drawn. Angella told us how in her own school, she and her friends (of various backgrounds) make similar jokes -- pulling at their eyes, the slant-eye gesture -- and how this behavior is normalized. We wanted to acknowledge that reality.

How do you hope the audience walks away from the film?

MW -- It depends on who’s watching. I believe that the job of the artist is to expose, and with exposing can come feelings of pain, defensiveness, anger, unsettledness. Overall, I hope the audience walks away with a feeling of discomfort and reckoning, and I hope they choose to stay there rather than escape it. For folks who may identify more personally with the film, I hope they feel less isolated and alone in their experience.

KX -- As we’ve worked on *PIPPY*, we’ve realized that our film can do more than “raise awareness.” There’s too much theoretic understanding of something as intimate and visceral as racism. I am more interested in implication, denial, and unease. During a test showing, a viewer exclaimed that she got goose bumps, and I thought, “Yes! That’s it!”



CREDITS

Executive Producer
Jefferson White

Produced by
Karoline Xu
Mia Walker

Cast
Angella Cao
Karoline Xu

with
Owen Connors
Arianny Kim
Sienna Rivers
Micah Thorpe

Playground Students
Payton Garcia
Raegan Garcia
Aiden Kim
Eres Kim
Evan Kim

Written by
Karoline Xu

Director of Photography
Scott Ray

1st AC
Julian Muller

Gaffers
Greg Tango
Agustina Biasutto

Production Design
Daniel Prosky

Sound Recordist
Christopher Bianrosa

**Costume Design &
Hair and Makeup**
Gabrielle Ruffino

Directed by
Mia Walker

Line Producer
Tiffany Tran

Composition
Hsin-Hua Wang

Sound Mix
Brady Hearn

Colorist
Ayumi Ashley

Production Assistant
Giani Suarez

Editor
Julian Muller

Poster
Version Industries

BIOS

KAROLINE XU

Karoline was born in Shanghai, China. There was no air conditioning in her mother's hospital, and she was ten days late. She studied English at Harvard College, and acting at Atlantic Acting School and Actors Theatre of Louisville. Off-Broadway: *The Hard Problem* at Lincoln Center Theater, and the world premiere of *[Veil Widow Conspiracy]* at Next Door @ NYTW, for which *The New York Times* singled her out as “terrific.” TV/FILM: *Lincoln* (NBC), *Evil* (CBS), *PIPPY*, *Kiss* (Means of Production), music video for Softee’s “Oh No.” Her writing has been a finalist of the FOFIF Fund, WAVE Grant, Outfest, and Orchard Project. She has published with *The Establishment* and was a writing assistant for *Race in America* (Norton) and *The Written World* (Random House).
karolinexu.com



MIA WALKER

Mia is an NYC-based director who works in multimedia from film and TV to theater and live arts. She was selected as TV Directing Fellow by the Drama League, for which she shadowed Director/ Executive Producer Tom Verica on the Shondaland/ABC show *For The People*, and is currently developing a new musical digital series. Mia directed the short film *Not Cool*, which premiered at Soho Film Fest. Broadway/National Tour credits include: Associate Director, *Jagged Little Pill* (on Broadway); Tour Director, *Finding Neverland* and *Pippin*; Assistant Director on *Waitress* (music and lyrics by Sara Bareilles), *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*. B.A. Harvard University, Concentration in Film Studies and Production (Magna Cum Laude, John Harvard Scholar, Louis Sudler Prize Talent in the Arts for Directing, Women's Leadership Award, Carol Pforzheimer Fellowship). At Harvard, Mia founded On Harvard Time, the first student-run digital TV news station, that still exists today.
www.miapwalker.com

TIFFANY TRAN

Tiffany is a Queens-based Line Producer. She is currently a line producer with Complex Networks. Previously, she was a commercial and reality TV line producer, collaborating with agencies and companies such as Anomaly and Havas to produce content ranging from long-form episodes to out-of-home advertising campaigns to Wiebo posts with 200 million impressions. She worked at MTV/VH1 as part of the team that launched seasons 9 and 10 of the Emmy winning series *RuPaul's Drag Race*. She has worked as production coordinator for Viacom, A+E, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Powerhouse Productions. B.A. Emerson College.

SCOTT RAY

Scott is a Brooklyn-based Cinematographer. He was raised in the rural flats of central Texas, which deeply informs his unflinching style of photography. He studied at Emerson College and holds a Master's from The American Film Institute. *Spiral Farm*, his first feature film, premiered at Slamdance Film Festival and was acquired by Indican Pictures. His films have screened at LAFF, Outfest, AFI Fest, Short of the Week, Nowness, and many more. He loves to re-watch the same ten movies over and over and is an okay cook.

ANGELLA CAO

Angella is a model and actress. Her credits include commercials and a short film called *Orchid*, which recently won 2nd place at the NYU New Visions and Voices Festival. Her hobbies include singing, dancing, listening to music, and drawing. When she grows up, she hopes to be a movie star or a teacher.

