



Deep Focus

A Beijing-born cinematographer with camera-ready looks brings her uncompromising vision to the big screen. By Tobias Grey

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The clatter of knives and forks ceases the instant Rain Li sweeps through the doors and up to the bar of London's Covent Garden Hotel. It's the kind of showstopping entrance many women dream about making, but Li, whose austere beauty and killer cheekbones hark back to another age, seems utterly oblivious to the admiring glances.

Or perhaps she's just grown used to ignoring them. As a director of photography, it is from behind the camera, not in front of it, that Li is busy making a name for herself. At just 25, she has become one of the most sought-after cinematographers around, working on feature films, commercials, and music videos for such directors as Gus Van Sant, Jim Jarmusch, and David LaChapelle. Like Cartier-Bresson's still photography, her work is all about catching moments of spontaneity. Yet, despite her meteoric rise, the Beijing-born Li has had to fight for recognition in what remains an essentially male-dominated field.

"I got my first job as a cinematographer when I was 19," she says, drumming her long lenswoman's fingers on the bar. "A lot of people had mistaken me for an actress, and I was put in the makeup trailer." Making the rounds of London's agencies didn't help much either: "Every one of them said pretty much the same thing: 'You're too pretty, you're too young, you'd be better off hanging out in a bar and getting chatted up.'"

But Li's persistence and talent eventually paid off, thanks partly to a chance meeting with Christopher Doyle, the Australian cinematographer whose wonderfully fluid style has illuminated the films of Wong Kar Wai. Li and Doyle worked together on several short film projects before Van Sant invited them to team up behind the camera on his skateboarding feature, *Paranoid Park*, out this month. The movie—which combines 35 millimeter and grainy Super 8 skateboarding footage, much of it shot and sent in by skateboarders—was a dream project for Li and Doyle, who were given free rein by Van Sant. "There were only 25 pages of script," Li says. "Chris and I literally made up the look of the film as we went along. The very first day of shooting we decided to play around and just close our eyes and pull out a lens from the lens box, stick it on the camera, and see what happened. That tells you the kind of attitude we had for the whole film." (Li favors a 35-millimeter Arricam along with Cooke lenses, because of their "beautiful flares.")

Paranoid Park's success at Cannes, where it won the festival's 60th Anniversary Prize, was particularly sweet for Li, who left her home in Beijing at the age of 13 after falling out with her parents (they have only recently made up), and who is now able to joke about her fiery reputation. "My agent called me one day and said, half joking, 'We're selling you as a hot and hot-headed D.P.' Somehow I got associated with that image. I am impatient and I know what I want," Li says, the light catching her streaky blonde hair—a throwback to her punk past. "That's how I work. I don't like faffing about."

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