



Gwendoline Yeo: Wacky Elegant

Interview and Photography by Ming Lo

*Gwendolyne Yeo is perhaps best known for her role as the temptress maid on the hit show *Desperate Housewives*, where she wreaks havoc upon the home of Gabrielle and Carlos Solis (played by Eva Longoria and Ricardo Chivera). Besides that, she has a long list of credits and achievements that include playing opposite Robert Duvall in the award-winning film *Broken Trail*; appearances on *Chuck*, *Standoff*, *JAG*, *24*, *The OC*, *Grounded for Life* and *General Hospital*; a successful voiceover career; playing the zither; *Miss Asian America* and *Miss Chinatown USA* titles; and *Phi Beta Kappa/Summa Cum Laude* awards at UCLA. With all those accomplishments and serious titles, you wouldn't necessarily know that Gwendoline also has, well, a wacky side. To find out more, read on.*

Asiance: *Hey Gwendoline, how are you, are you tired now after all that shooting?*

Gwendoline: Yeah, I am.

Asiance: *Did you have fun?*

Gwendoline: I had an awesome time, it was very collaborative. I like it when it's truly collaborative. You know, it depends, sometimes it's a crapshoot, but it's the most fun when you actually get to collaborate, when what you have to say counts and people go, "Wow, that's a really great idea."

Asiance: *Yeah, it makes a big difference in the results, too.*

Gwendoline: I did a movie *Broken Trail* with Robert Duvall and I remember doing a scene where he wanted to number us, you know five Chinese girls, and instead of learning our names, he gives us numbers. [In the film, Robert Duvall becomes the reluctant caretaker of five Chinese girls abandoned in the Old West].

Asiance: *And that's in the scene?*

Gwendoline: He improv'ed that [improvised, meaning that the scene wasn't scripted, and that the actors improvised their lines]. And the scene was just, he numbers us, that was the whole scene. But as he came towards me, he was buttoning up his shirt, and he looked like he was coming to rape us. So I looked at him, I didn't understand him and so I started to scream. And then he picked it up, right away [in improv, the guideline is to follow another actor's lead, rather than to challenge or negate an actor's direction]. And so he came over with more aggression, I started screaming, the other girls started screaming, they start crying. He comes over, and I think he's trying to talk to us in a creepy way, and when I finally figure out he's numbering us, there's relief that comes over my face. And it became this beautiful scene that they played at the Emmy's.

Asiance: *I remember that.*

Gwendoline: Yeah, it won a bunch of Emmy's. Robert Duvall, the next day, he pulled me aside and said, "That was f-cking beautiful work. Keep doing it!" So it meant a lot to me that you get to contribute in that space.

Asiance: *So let's start with the basics. Where are you from?*

Gwendoline: I'm from Singapore and I moved here when I was eleven. I skipped the sixth grade and went to seventh grade, a pre-pubescent mess with a weird accent.

Asiance: *Where in the States did you grow up?*

Gwendoline: San Francisco, where else?

Asiance: *Everybody goes to jiu jin san [the Chinese name for San Francisco, “Gold Mountain”].*

Gwendoline: Haha... “Gold Mountain.” [She laughs, saying “Gold Mountain” with a Chinese accent.]

Asiance: *So how was growing up in San Francisco?*

Gwendoline: It as okay. You know, I never really excelled academically in Singapore, it’s a very academically driven place. So I always felt like an unattractive, dark-skinned idiot with lots of societal pressure. My brother and sister both did very well, etc., etc. So we moved to the States, for the first time I felt smart and I felt not fat, because in Singapore I grew up with a curvy figure, and people would say, “she’s fat”, and this and that, they’d call me “spaghetti”, “rolly-poly meatball”, “Ms. Piggy”, it was pretty mean. And when I moved here... in Singapore, it’s cool if you’re smart. In America, it’s not cool if you’re smart. So I suddenly had to re-learn everything. But what was cool was that for the first time, I felt I excelled at something, which was art classes, music class. As you know, because the educational system is a lot tougher in Singapore, I actually really excelled at school [here in the United States]. So for the first time, people were saying “You’re really smart,” and I had never heard that before. So that was really cool.

Asiance: *When did you start acting?*

Gwendoline: I started acting when I graduated from UCLA.

Asiance: *What did you study at UCLA?*

Gwendoline: I studied communications. You know, I came from a very austere family. In Singapore, they have a saying, “Spare the rod and spoil the child” – the “rod” is the cane. So it was a very strict house in a very strict society. In many ways it’s awesome, but for me, I took a lot of pain, I absorbed a lot of pain and loneliness. I used to read under my bed with a flashlight, like Sweet Valley High, which was about Beverly Hills. And so when I came here, I started college really young, I got in when I was 16, so I had just turned 17 and I graduated in three years. So I graduated really, really young, but when I moved, I reset my age - my first year at UCLA when I was 17 - as one years old. That was when I started to know the

American Gwendoline, the independent person who I am [now], I think that's why I still get goofy and all that.

But I realized when I was in Singapore, there was one moment when we were doing a music class, and we were doing [she sings] "What'd you do with a drunken sailor" and we all had to walk down the hall playing drunk. And I was the only one that fully committed to it. And I got laughs for the first time in my life, being animated and funny and committing to characters. That was my first glimpse [of performing] when I was nine years old. So cut to at UCLA, I thought I was going to be a broadcast journalist.

Asiance: Did you always want to be an actor?

Gwendoline. No, I didn't know. I didn't think it was a possibility. I didn't even know what it was. I always knew I had a lot of pain inside, I had a lot of energy I needed to get out. And I really think a whisper from God, probably.

What happened was that when I was 16 and a teenager, this geeky gawky nerd, a neighbor came over and said do you want to do the Ms. Teen Chinatown San Francisco Pageant. And so I ended up auditioning for it, I ended up winning it. I won that in '94, and I ended up winning Ms. Asian America, and I won the biggest Asian pageant, Ms. Chinatown USA. So out of those, I started doing a year of modeling, commercial contracts and things like that. So I realized how I like to talk in front of the camera, I enjoyed that. And I realized that broadcast journalism wasn't my cup of tea because I didn't like reading other people's copy, and I didn't like driving to Cerritos Mall to talk about the latest bra from Victoria's Secret. I think I'm much more a person who likes to hide, likes to change. I'm not a "personality" that's 100% consistent - you know, I'm moody. So I like being able to play different people and not having to apologize for it. So after college it all just funneled in instinctively from winning those pageants, doing commercials, I got commercial agent, and then I just started taking classes and started working in it. And I think I finally matured at it, two or three years in, when I realized that I could funnel my emotional scale through a certain piece of work that I would get, a certain piece of dialogue or what have you. And to not apologize for that "wacky elegance" that I had.

Asiance: So by the way, what do your parents do?

Gwendoline: My father is an endocrinologist, specializes in diabetes and thyroid. And my mom is a dental assistant. It's funny, because when he first moved here – he was the medical director of the National University of Singapore, he was the head honcho over there – he came over here and he was making \$29,000 a year, *gross*, for a family of five, three of us who went away for Catholic school. So you know, a lot of people assume that I grew up white collar, but we had a white collar mentality with blue collar pay.

Asiance: *Are you oldest, youngest, middle?*

Gwendoline. I'm the youngest.



Asiance: *What do your siblings do?*

Gwendoline: My oldest brother is a molecular geneticist in Cambridge. He discovered one of the new obesity genes and he worked with Sydney Brenner, who won a Nobel Prize. So he's doing research in obesity now. He's married with a kid, and with the cutest nephew ever that's [she switches to a British accent] half-English and half-Chinese. And my sister is a pediatrician married to another pediatric neurologist. And I'm the crap leftovers [she says jokingly, with a big laugh].

Asiance: So how do they feel about your acting?

Gwendoline: I think at first I was a scab to the family, but I think now I'm very much a novelty, like a mole [she laughs again], like a signature. Because I think in the beginning, I don't know, I can't get into their heads, but it was a pretty traditional response to the girl, an Asian child doing that thing. My mom was like, "Oh my God, you're gonna go to LA and become a whore." And I was like "No, I'm just going to UCLA" [she laugh]. And I'm *Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude*, like [to mom], "I think you can relax." And I think, once they start reading about you in the paper, or once they start looking at you on the TV, they're like, "Oh, well, that's okay, now we approve." You know I've been self-supporting since I left home, so that's the road that I chose.

Asiance: Was it hard to get started? How was getting into the business?

Gwendoline. You know I was different six, seven years ago. I was kinda like an idiot.

Asiance: We all are, when we start.

Gwendoline. Yeah, it was like, "Oh my God, this is gonna be great, I'm gonna be a big star!" And "I don't have to waitress, I have a degree from UCLA, I'm an alumni scholar." Cut to, I'm waitressing at Formosa Café, and going to bartending school [she laughs], temping for \$6 an hour. And I can't believe how much I wanted it. I didn't even know what I wanted, but I know I wanted *it*. And I think acting does two things to a person, either you can turn into a big crazy bitch, a diva; or you can turn into a deeper, authentic person. And I think it chiseled me into the latter, thank God. So it took me a few years to mature and say, "I'm doing this because I f-cking love it, I'm doing this because... it's not red carpet events, it really is about the joy of going to set. To go to work and play, that its really not work at all, the autonomy of a schedule. On a Monday I can get up at 4pm if I don't have to go into set. Or if I have to get up at three and shoot on a Saturday, I get up beaming. I just never wanted to have a real job, and this is so perfect.

But it was tough in the beginning, I just can't believe... I wouldn't want to do it all over again.

Asiance: *It's very hard.*

Gwendoline: It's so hard. And I look at how far I've come, and I feel so, you know what Suzie Orman says, "You're not on sale." Really knowing that this is my quote for TV, this is my quote for a voiceover job, I don't work for scale for this or that. People listen, and now people know me in the business. It feels good.

Asiance: *What were your first breaks in the business?*

Gwendoline: [She laughs]. One of the most embarrassing things I ever did... I guess one of the funniest was Lockheed-Martin, I did an industrial – you know when you actually auditioned for industrials back when you started. And [in the industrial] I was being sexually harassed by somebody. The guy comes up and puts his hand on my shoulder, and I start blinking, because I had these lashes, and I say, "He made me feel uncomfortable." [She says her lines like a shrinking violet.] So that was pretty funny, doing an industrial was one of the funniest things I ever did.

Asiance: *What about film and TV?*

Gwendoline: The first job I ever had was *Grounded for Life*, I played a waitress – based on a true story [she laughs, referring to her own waitressing "career"]. And there were two words "fifteen open" – table fifteen is open. And they pre-read 30 of us, and went to producers', ten of us, and I got the job [a pre-read is a first interview with a casting director, the producers' session is usually the second interview with the decision-makers]. And then it became a recurring role. And for me, I emailed like 500 people, and I said, you have to watch me on *Grounded for Life* [she laughs again].

Now it's like, top of show, guest star [in other words, much larger roles than two words], "Eh, I'm not a series regular, don't bother tuning in." Back then I was like, "I have two words, you better tune in!" So it just shows the maturation, and you know, never let the joy escape you. So now for me it's like, "Oh you're on *Desperate Housewives*? Wonderful. Oh it's a big arc? Great. Now your quote's higher? Terrific. Movie with Duvall, got submitted for an Emmy nomination for *Desperate Housewives*? Yay!" So I think the joy now, you start to salivate for more. That's maturity, I guess, evolution.

Asiance: *So what do you think of going forward?*

Gwendoline: I'd like to, if I chose to, go to work everyday in this business. Whether it's having my own series on a network, having created input. I'm getting my one-woman show up. I didn't know I was a good writer, but I'm now represented for writing with my new managers. I think as long as I'm constantly creating in some fashion. But I really do enjoy television, I'd love to go on vacation once a year. And I still have my voiceover career. So I think everything I have now is fairly satisfying, but just more. So instead of renting a beautiful apartment that I have, I'd want to own a beautiful home with that same view. Instead of this one photo shoot, I'd love to have a team of fifteen people and let's go on location and do it somewhere else. So I think that paradigm is already set down, just more. Bigger scale. And maybe like Selma Hayek doing *Ugly Betty*, start designing a move behind the camera at some point. But I think right now I probably have ten years left on the face.

Asiance: *Oh I'm sure more.*

Gwendoline: Oh, and I'd really like playing closer to the chest, who I am. You know on *Desperate Housewives* I played a maid who spoke with a Chinese accent, I had a blast and most people know me from that job. And as I said before, being on an Emmy ballot for that was amazing. And for *Broken Trail*, working with Robert Duvall, again, I was playing an Asian character. You know, the next breed, like a Lucy Liu, or a Lindsey Price, or even Tamlyn Tomita or a Kelly Hu, Rosalind Chao, who I love, you know, where the Asian-American breed is pushing forward. I think people like Julie Chen, or even Wendy Deng [the wife of Rupert Murdoch] - she's not really Asian American - but these bright women who are savvy, who are Americanized, hosting *Big Brother* or whatever, I think people get it. I think people get that you can be beautiful, smart, funny - you can have the whole thing. So I really think that a pretty, funny Asian woman is hard to come by. And I would hope to make that a little bit more of a niche.



Asiance: *How would you do that in Hollywood, which I would argue is fairly resistant to change?*

Gwendoline: Hm... you know, I don't know. I've worked with Daniel Dae Kim, who's now on *Lost*, I've worked with Masi, who's now on *Heroes*. A number of my Asian friends have been on and off series, and I myself was on and off a series. I really think that the shot of me getting a job as an Asian woman is the same as a white person, because its proportionately the same difficulty. I just try not to worry about it.

And I don't know if Hollywood is resistant to change. Sometimes I feel like you have to get... you know Nancy Kwan, who's a friend and mentor of mine, she broke through that door, she was the one who basically started the stereotype of the beautiful hot Asian woman, and from there it mutated to something really beautiful and something really sad, in terms of how people push it to the degree. But I think get into the door first and then tweak.

For example, when I got onto *Desperate Housewives*, there was a fortune cookie scene, that I thought just kinda walked the line a little bit, and I mentioned it to one of the writers, and they changed it. You know, I don't think Hollywood is as small minded as we think they are, I think that its because of the levels of transitions to the top, through network, etc. Its almost as if we're dealing with something amorphous, we don't even know who we're dealing with, but we're dealing producer to producer, writer to writer, everyone's bright, smart, savvy, well traveled and contemporary. So it's hard for everybody, it's just the business.

Asiance: What do you do when you're not working?

Gwendoline: I really like simple things, the older I get, the more I realize the less I need. I love sleep, like I love the art of sleeping. I love traveling, and the most important part about traveling is the hotel, and the sheets [she laughs]. Like the Four Seasons is terrific. Like Bali, wherever you travel, the hotel is a really, really big deal. It doesn't have to be really, really expensive, but it has to be a place where I can rest and sleep.

And I eat out pretty much everyday. I love food. I grew up in Singapore, where it's really diverse, so I love all cuisine – Indian, Chinese, Japanese, hotdogs off the side of Maple and 11th [We're shooting in my studio, which is near Maple and 11th St. in downtown Los Angeles. We took a lunch break and had hot dogs, and Gwendoline liked them so much she got another one after we were done shooting], or wherever – but I really love dining. And I really love dining with a friend, or a friend or two. That's the wet dream, where there's just one other person and we're just kicking it, having a glass of wine and just chatting about whatever. That's to me is the ultimate satisfaction.

[Note to editor: The following photos should be together, perhaps side by side.]





Asiance: *So this last picture we took, with the fan and the hair dryer or the fire extinguisher, you have to explain that a little bit, how you came up with that idea.*

Gwendoline: Well we finally got into this overdone, Jean-Paul Gaultier kinda dress, and with the red lips, kinda like the hoochie mama lips, big lashes. And so we got behind the camera, and we talked about it, and I thought it'd be funny to play a caricature of trying to be a supermodel, taking myself way too seriously. So we went back, added a mole, made the hair a lot bigger. I grabbed a fire extinguisher, and then you came in

and grabbed the hair dryer and the brush and the fan, and it looked like a caricature of a Revlon ad, or Cindy Crawford in and '80s video.

Asiance: It is kinda you, though, something about making fun of things, it says something about your sense of humor.

Gwendoline: Thank you, thank you.

Asiance: So I guess I wanna ask, how would you describe your perspective?

Gwendoline: You know, I don't know quite how it happened. I think I told you the title of my one-woman show I'm toying with is "*Laughing with My Mouth Wide Open.*" Because growing up, my grandmother would always say, when you laugh, cover your mouth, it's rude, cover your mouth. And I would just throw my head back and go, "HA-HA-HA-HA". And people would look down on that, people thought I was a bit of a hyena. Or in my dialect, not obedient, not reserved. And I think because I reset my age to counter one when I was in college, I think I'm like 15 years old right now, I'm a 'tween. And I think there's that girl in me, that spirit in me, that wacky girl in me, that I didn't have a chance to express when I was younger, so I like doing that now. There is that side of me. I also feel, because I've been a social pariah all my life, I don't care what people think. I'm okay being alone, I'm okay being myself. I never want to do what's "right", I'll do stuff that is moral, according to my constitution, but I always wanna push the boundaries, have fun, laugh, be in the moment, and make fun, you know, without people being offended. Like I love Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Richard Pryor, Jeff Foxworthy, Dana Carvey – these guys who really push the envelope, who went to the point of ridiculous so that people get uncomfortable. Maybe it's a combination of growing up being so reserved and everything bottled in and having that pain, but then also being able to express it now, it just came out with humor. I don't how I got chiseled away, but it came out funny.

Asiance: Well, thanks Gwendoline, I think that was pretty interesting, I learned a lot about you today.

Gwendoline: You're welcome, my pleasure.

***Photo Credits:
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About Ming Lo:

Ming Lo has been a fan of the moving and still image for as long as he can remember. He shoots headshots, portraits, fashion, beauty and corporate work. More detail on his work can be found at www.minglo.com.

Like many in Los Angeles, Ming wears several hats. He is also an actor, director and investor. His latest acting credits include Pursuit of Happyness; Jarhead; Million Dollar Baby; Dirty, Sexy Money; Private Practice; and Navy NCIS. Prior to working in entertainment, Ming employed at McKinsey & Co. and at Goldman Sachs & Co. Ming has a MBA and MA Political Science from Stanford University and an AB in Government, cum laude, from Harvard College.