



## *Landlord of Paradise*

When a talented but shy Chinese student wins a scholarship to attend the University of Southern California, he discovers a different side of America when he lands a job as the building manager of Paradise Apartments in South Central Los Angeles. Despite his dreams to become an architect, his efforts to renovate Paradise lead to his moral decline, until life takes a twist and jolts him back into reality.

## Synopsis

MING ZHAO, a gifted architectural student in China, is accepted into a prominent U.S. university. He has dreams of making his humble parents proud, making his mark on the world, and fulfilling his obligation to his ancestors.

His grandfather was a world-renowned architect who died in one of Mao's "re-education" camps because his work was too Western. The Communists had razed all of his grandfather's structures.

Ironically, Ming's father is a day-laborer who demolishes buildings to make room for skyscrapers. His mother gives Ming his grandfather's architectural tools as a going-away gift.

Ming takes off for Los Angeles with little money. He gets a job as a landlord at the run-down Paradise Apartments in South Central Los Angeles. He assures the property owner, MR. PITTENGER, that he is a serious student and will fix-up Paradise in exchange for free rent.

Although not far from school, it is ground zero in terms of poverty, drugs, gangs, and prostitutes. As landlord, Ming befriends tenants from different walks of life – a transvestite and a former Crazy Ass Mexican gang member.

Ming finds the academic competition is stiff. He becomes enthralled with XANDER, a charismatic poser.

PROFESSOR LUTHER is impressed with Ming's skills and mentors him. She assigns the class a major project – an architectural competition, sponsored by a prestigious architectural firm. Winning is a career maker.

Ming plans to design a modern project to replace Paradise. Professor Luther talks to Ming about the importance of preserving the past and encourages Ming to resurrect Paradise's original character.

When Ming's not studying, he paints and renovates the Paradise units so they can be rented. Ming's attempts to recruit students bomb once they see the slum and low-life surrounding Paradise. During the mid-term, Professor Luther catches Xander copying Ming's answers. Expulsion is in order. Xander intervenes on Ming's behalf and says he'll leave, but that Ming is innocent. Ming is given a harsh warning but can stay in school. Ming feels obligated to Xander.

Mr. Pittenger threatens to evict Ming since he has gotten no new renters. Xander intervenes on Ming's behalf and says that Ming has been promoting Paradise on campus and that he had stopped by to see the units. He wants one and convinces Mr. Pittenger that Ming and he can attract college students versus hookers and the local scum.



## Synopsis (continued)

Xander tells Ming that it's not good for him to study all the time and insists on taking him to a party. Against Ming's protests, he agrees to go. Ming meets RAVEN, whom he finds seductive in her artistic, exotic ways. They hit it off until Xander uses his charm to entice Raven.

Shortly after the party, Raven moves in with Xander at Paradise to offer to help Ming and Xander renovate it. Xander and Raven instead have parties and promote Raven's side business of selling drugs.

Xander plans a party on a night when Ming must study. A student – Jenny, a Eurasian from Hong Kong, attends. Ming has a secret crush on her, but she's dating a suave Aussie upper classman.

Pittenger arrives to collect the rent money from Ming. He's upset when he sees Xander and Raven residing as free-loaders.

Xander comes up with a plan and rents units to local prostitutes. Ming cares about the prostitutes as people and Xander convinces Ming that their lives will be safer if they recruit customers from fraternity row. Xander converts Paradise into a brothel.

Meanwhile, Ming works on his plans for the architectural competition. Raven thinks Ming needs a break and takes him to the night club where she works as a bartender. Ming gets drunk and dances his heart out.

Professor Luther notices that Ming is sloughing off in class. She talks to Ming and sympathizes with the pressures that foreign students face to succeed. She encourages Ming to ramp his project up and redevelop the entire neighborhood with Paradise as the centerpiece. A neighborhood with low acquisition costs and the potential for gentrification might appeal to the firm.

Ming's life begins to unravel. He naively invites an undercover cop to Paradise, which results in a raid and eviction of the prostitutes. The other tenants move out.

Ming is selected as one of the three finalists in the competition. He works hard and finishes his hand-drawn renderings for the oral presentation at the firm.

Xander and Raven's relationship had been deteriorating since Xander "befriended" the prostitutes. They have a big fight. Xander's cruel words about Raven enrage Ming and he starts a fight. In the process, beer spills and destroys his presentation.

Xander sneaks out, abandoning Ming and Raven. Ming discovers that Xander was a fake and had stolen the rent money. Raven confides to Ming that she's pregnant and decides to leave Paradise as well.

Ming's exhausted so Raven gives him her specialty – Ritalin with a boost. – before she leaves. Although Ming has used her "gifts," in the past to meet his deadlines, he decides not to use it this time. Ming, exhausted, meets the deadline. When he arrives at the architectural firm, he sees incredible models of skyscrapers in China. Ming defends his project but the firm is not interested in South Central LA – too risky of a neighborhood.

## Synopsis (continued)

Ming “Skypes” his parents and raves about the incredible buildings the firm had designed. – many of which his father had worked on. His father shares with Ming that he was never allowed inside them once built. His parents dream is that he will design great buildings that he can enjoy.

Ming is all alone and upset. Ming had warned Mr. Pittenger about the faulty wiring. In a rage, Ming throws an object at the wall that causes the wiring to spark. Paradise burns down. Ming confesses to Mr. Pittenger that he probably caused the fire. Mr. Pittenger tells Ming not to tell anyone or else the insurance claim might not go through.

Ming, feeling like a failure, bikes around LA and eventually returns to Paradise. Ming has an epiphany – his dream to be an architect. He meets with Professor Luther and vows to change his ways and pursue his original dream of being a great architect, making his family proud.

The film ends with him drinking traditional team with Jenny – hope that he will be making the right life choices..



## Cast of Characters



**Ming**, a well-meaning and gifted architectural student from China. His tale is one of a 21<sup>st</sup> century *Candide*.



**Jenny**, a Eurasian student, whom Ming likes, but feels he is not worthy of her



**Mr. Pittenger**, the unscrupulous owner of Paradise Apartments

### Paradise Tenants and Ming's New Friends



**Paz**, a former gang member who protects and guides Ming



**Charlene/Charles**, a friendly cross-dresser who befriends Ming



**Xander**, a charismatic, but self-centered guy who uses Ming



**Raven**, a free-spirit siren who shacks up with Xander and sells drugs

**Professor Luther**, who teaches architecture and cares about her students, especially Ming

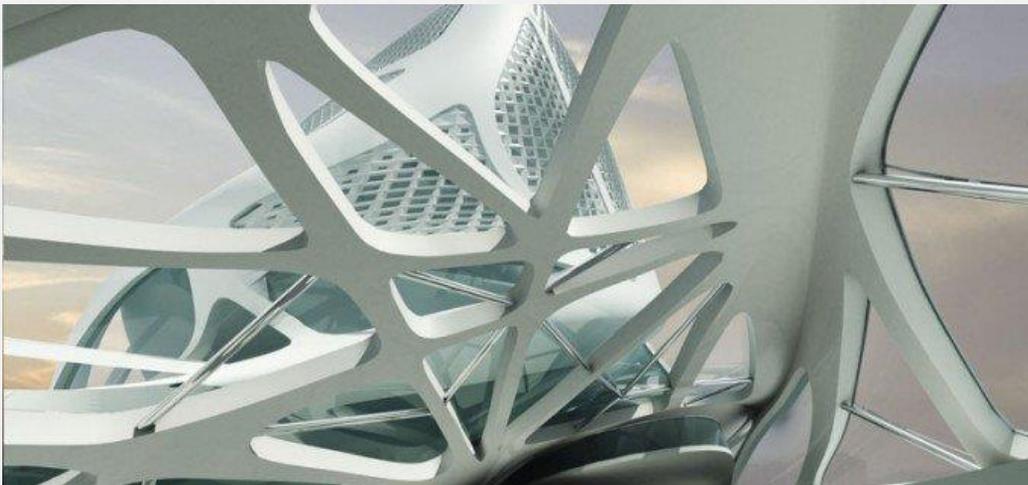


# Audience Appeal

## Audience Demographics

LANDLORD OF PARADISE will appeal to multiple generations.

- o Set in a university setting, college-age students will enjoy the characters and the choices they make.
- o Any parent who has worried about their child going off to college will also relate to the film.
- o Any immigrant who has had to deal with understanding American ways while making a living will also find the story compelling.
- o Finally, it will market well in Asia, given the interesting role of Ming as the protagonist.



# Business Profile

## Budget

LANDLORD OF PARADISE can feature named talent with high-production value for an indie budget of between \$1.5 million and \$2.5 million.

The project can take advantage of available tax incentives in the United States or funding opportunities in Asia.

- o The most authentic setting is South Central Los Angeles, but any urban slum area can work, such as Detroit, MI, or Chicago, IL.
- o The opening scenes take place in China but, again, a variety of Asian settings can be adapted.

## Distribution Companies

### Target U.S. Distributors/Producers

- o Fox Searchlight Pictures
- o Escape Artists
- o The Weinstein Company
- o Sony Classics
- o Roadside Attractions

### Target UK/European Distribution

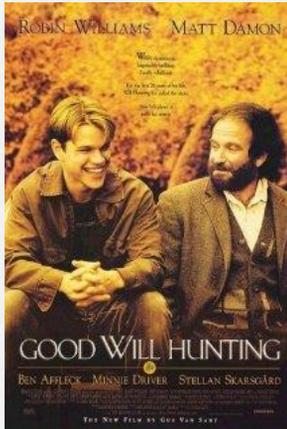
- o Studio Canal
- o Wild Bunch – UK
- o Pathe' Films – Paris/UK



## Distribution Channels

- o U.S. distribution
- o Foreign distribution
- o Pay TV (e.g., HBO, Showtime, Starz, or other pay networks) – The income generated from this licensing can be proportionate to or greater than the theatrical success and subsequent audience interest in the film.
- o Television and Syndication Licensing to basic cable stations (e.g., Spike, TBS, or Bravo).
- o Netflix, Amazon, and Home Video/DVD – This market can exceed theatrical distribution revenues. Success at the box office will impact home viewing performance.
- o Non-theatrical rentals (i.e., revenues collected by the distributor from film rentals to universities, colleges, and other institutions) – There is minimal income generated from such markets.
- o Digital rights (e.g., SVOD)

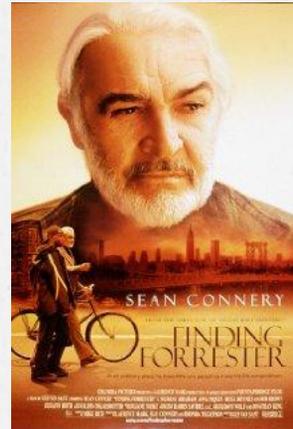
## Comparable Films



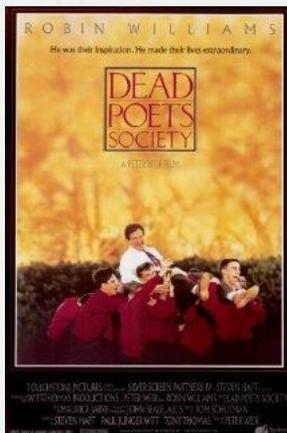
- o Director: Gus Van Sant
- o Stars: Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, Robin Williams
- o Grossed: \$139 million



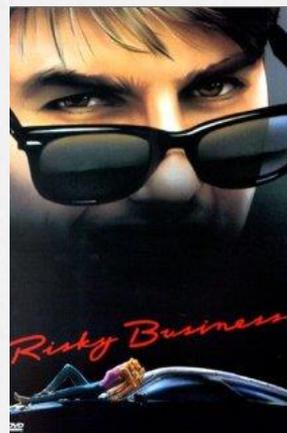
- o Director: Clint Eastwood
- o Stars: Clint Eastwood, Bee Vang, Christopher Carleysed:
- o Grossed \$148 million



- o Director: Gus Van Sant
- o Stars: Sean Connery, Rob Brown, F. Murray Abraham
- o Grossed: \$52 million USA



- o Director: Peter Weir
- o Stars: Robin Williams, Robert Sean Leonard, Ethan Hawke
- o Grossed: \$96 million



- o Director: Paul Brickman
- o Stars: Tom Cruise, Rebecca De Mornay, Joe Pantoliano
- o Grossed: \$64 million USA

## Screenwriter/Producer



### **Gayla Kraetsch Hartsough, Ph.D.**

Gayla Kraetsch Hartsough, Ph.D., Writer/Producer, has written award-winning feature screenplays and has written/produced three short films. ***Two of her feature scripts, including LANDLORD OF PARADISE, made the finals for the Sundance Writers' Lab.***

Her first short, A PIG'S EAR, is set in Appalachia in 1970 and deals with racial relations. It has been accepted at 15 festivals, including the LA Short Fest and Cannes Short Film Corner.

Her second short, SLAP, stars Clancy Brown and Mel Rodriguez and is directed by Grant Barbeito. SLAP has screened at more than 40 festivals, including Palm Springs International Short Film Festival, LA Shorts Fest, New Orleans, Sedona, Houston, Newport Beach, Phoenix, and Denver Starz. SLAP has won festival awards, audience awards, and best of fest awards. SLAP was on tour with Tribeca's American Now+Here project, where it screened in 5 cities.

Because of her first short, she obtained a grant to write/produce her third short, HELOISE, based on the two French lovers, Heloise and Abelard. HELOISE has screened at several festivals already. Her research for this short script enabled her to write the feature script, HELOISE+ABELARD.

Today, because of the success of her short films, she has had three of her features optioned by different producers: 1) YEAR OF THE CATERPILLAR, a coming-of-age story, which Alison Eastwood will direct; 2) HELOISE+ABELARD, an historical romance, which CAA gave a "Recommend" to; and 3) BLOOD AND WATER, a political thriller set in Guatemala.

She was accepted to the Squaw Valley Writers' Conference, Screenwriting Program (2011), where she worked on a new script. This lab experience was a special time because she had never taken time off from work to focus solely on her screenwriting. During the week, she was mentored by AFI faculty and could absorb herself in totality into her script.

She is a Women in Film (WIF) member and served on the Northwestern University Entertainment Alliance (NUEA) Board. She has been a Judge for the Spirit Awards, Big Bear Lake Film Festival, Lunafest, and Zealous X in London. She's a Screenwriters' Group member with the University of Virginia Entertainment Los Angeles (UVELA). She has also been on a number of film panels with UVELA, NUEA, and the Global Social Change Film Festival – Bali, Indonesia.

She is also an entrepreneur as President/Founder of KH Consulting Group (KH), a management consulting firm that has served 200 clients in 25 states and 9 foreign countries. At KH, she has worked in an array of fields – academia, government, healthcare, utilities, bioterrorism, airports, and seaports. These experiences help her tell realistic stories in believable settings with characters people care about.

She has a BS degree, Northwestern University, School of Communication; a Masters degree, Tufts University; Ph.D. and Masters degrees, University of Virginia; and a post-doctorate fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Program. She earned a Feature Screenwriting Certificate through UCLA Extension. She is also Adjunct Faculty at the University of Southern California.

## Story Inspiration

By Gayla Kraetsch Hartsough

I've been traveling to China since the early 1980s and have always found the culture a sharp contrast to American life. My son spent 11<sup>th</sup> grade at age 16 in Beijing, China, and lived with a family. It was a hard adjustment to have my only child become an adult in a foreign country and to adopt a new family and culture.

My son told us about how his Chinese brother and he would both study hard but that he would eventually get tired and go to bed. He'd find his Chinese brother the next day asleep at his desk. My son explained the big difference between the two of them was his Chinese brother's belief in filial piety – that his performance would reflect on not only him but also his parents and his ancestors.

During the last few years, I've been an adjunct faculty member at the University of Southern California (USC). All of my students are international graduate students – mostly from China. Again, I've been struck about how they approach their new lives in Los Angeles and misinterpret whom to trust and what to believe.

On the basis of these experiences, I developed LANDLORD OF PARADISE about a young Chinese student who comes to the U.S. to pursue his dreams and go to university, but instead becomes corrupted by American influences.

Ming's life journey follows the philosophy of Confucius.

*“Three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the most bitter.”*  
– Confucius

Ming's life experiences are bitter but life transforming.

The film starts in China where Ming lives with his working-class parents who have dreams of a better life for him. The opening scene involves Ming sketching an incredible skyscraper as an old tenement is dynamited. His sketch is his vision of what should be built on that land. We learn that his father works on the demolition crew.

Through these imageries we see China's past being demolished and transformed into cities of the future. The Chinese people are respectful, appreciative, and humble.

Ming arrives in Los Angeles and is enamored with the glitz until he realizes that his only option is to work as a landlord in a run-down tenement in South Central Los Angeles. The Americans he meets are loud, flamboyant, and iconoclastic. It is in this new context that we follow Ming's journey – his downfall and his rebirth and renewed confidence to be a great architect.

# Contact Information

## Script Rights

Gayla Kraetsch Hartsough is the sole writer of the script. LANDLORD OF PARADISE is registered with the Writers Guild of America.

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