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No Happy Endings:

Anna May Wong's American Film Roles from 1931-1942

Kayla G. O'Leary

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

Distinguished Thesis

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No Happy Endings: Anna May Wong's American Film Roles from 1931-1942

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Abstract

In the 1930s and '40s, shifting relations with China, Japan, and the United States drastically impacted American public sentiment towards these Asian countries. US films produced during these decades starring Anna May Wong illuminate how harmful stereotypes about Chinese culture and people were portrayed on screen. I analyze five of Wong's films from this period to examine how the gendered and racial stereotypes within them provide a cultural lens of changing US-Chinese relations. The stereotypical archetypes of her characters, which include the formidable Dragon Lady, helpless American citizen, and Chinese war hero, demonstrate how American perceptions of China and Chinese women, personified global events. In addition to these films, I examine various interviews with and newspaper articles written by Wong to create a fuller picture of Wong's personal views on her career, the US's perception of China, and Hollywood's blatant discrimination outside of these on-screen stereotypes. In looking at Wong's "Oriental" and exoticized image that filmmakers created in the mid-20th century in addition to her various interviews that sharply opposed how she was portrayed on-screen; we can gain an understanding of where and how harmful stereotypes that still exist today originated and what Wong herself thought of them.

Introduction

A woman emerges from all-encapsulating darkness in a broken-down Chinese train station on the way to Shanghai. Light coming through a window illuminates her determined expression as she approaches the man she hopes to kill (See Figure 1).¹ As she moves closer to the man, her full, silhouetted figure is shown as she holds a dagger over her head, stabbing him in the back without hesitation. In the climax of *Shanghai Express*, the inscrutable Chinese prostitute Hui Fei, played by Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, exacts revenge on her rapist- a Chinese warlord ruthlessly seeking leverage over the British embassy in Shanghai. After his death, Hui Fei calmly steps out of the train station she and other passengers of the Shanghai Express had been held hostage at, announcing that they must leave immediately, for she has killed the warlord (See Figure 2).²



Figure 1. Anna May Wong as Hui Fei in *Shanghai Express*.

¹ Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

² Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932.



Figure 2. Anna May Wong in center as Hui Fei in *Shanghai Express*.

Anna May Wong, the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants, was born in Los Angeles during the early years of the 20th century and began her rise as a film star in the early 1920s. Wong starred in numerous silent films in this period, travelling back and forth between the United States and Europe for various films, quickly becoming an internationally renowned actress by the 1930s. Fresh from a successful foray into the European film scene and looking to escape the escalating wartime hostilities of Europe in the early 1930s, Wong starred in numerous films over the next two decades, mostly in the United States, before moving completely to television work in the 1950s before her untimely death in 1961.³ Hollywood was turbulent in the 1930s due to

³ After the conclusion of WWII, Wong did not sign another contract with Paramount, forcing her move to television. While none of my scholars speculate on why this move happened, it could have been for several reasons, which include (but are not limited to) her increasing age, her lack of control over what studios/filmmakers wanted to cast her as, and less freedom to articulate her own views about Asian Americans and China through her work.

the financial struggles related to the Great Depression, however, Anna May Wong's career flourished in this environment, despite the deeply seeded anti-Asian sentiment in the United States that also permeated the film industry. Many scholars consider her the first female Asian American actress to rise to stardom, paving the way for other female Asian American actresses that would follow in her footsteps.⁴

In my research, I have chosen five films spread across the 1930s and 40s during the prime of Wong's film career to analyze and examine how gendered and racist stereotypes within them reflect America's shifting relationship with China and Japan over time. These films, along with reviews from newspapers, fan magazines, and promotional materials from the studios themselves show what stereotypes film producers typecasted Wong as because of her race and gender, therefore degrading Wong and Chinese culture in the process.⁵ While stereotypes of Asian Americans could easily be examined through print media from the mid-20th century such as comics, advertisements, or propaganda, films are a unique way to examine the culture of a specific period. Audiences today can understand material developments through film, such as fashion, hair, and make-up trends, but can also come to understand what stereotypes were deeply integrated into popular culture. Besides the ability to watch history play out before our eyes, films are important primary historical sources because allow us to look at the past that does not exist for any other period in history.

In addition to these films, I have chosen select newspaper articles that feature interviews with Wong or were written by Wong herself. When examined in accordance with the films, we can

⁴ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019), 2-3.

⁵ Janet Staiger notes that fan magazines in the 1920s and '30s operated freely, indicating their widespread and influential nature amongst audiences. From *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2000), 92, n.18.

come to a fuller understanding of what Wong thought about US-Chinese relations, the treatment of immigrants in the US, and Hollywood's toxic environment over the course of her career.

Instead of solely examining her film roles, we can couple film analysis with these articles that help us understand her life outside of film and her personal opinions that often differed from her characters.⁶ These articles mostly come from the *New York Herald Tribune*, which was based out of New York City, and the *Hollywood Citizen-News* from Hollywood, CA, both of which are now defunct. I supplement these findings from US-based newspapers with the *South China Morning Post*, a still-active English language newspaper from Hong Kong that portrayed Wong in a slightly different manner, which emphasizes the racist attitudes of US-based newspapers.

Over the course of her career in the 1930s and '40s, Wong had no other choice to play characters that embodied harmful stereotypes about China and Chinese women if she wanted to remain employed. A seductive dragon lady, unredeemable prostitute, and helpless, fragile China doll were some of the only roles available for Wong in Hollywood at the time because of her Chinese ancestry. Major players that caused Wong to be portrayed in this manner were political events, the press's depiction of Asian immigrants, and the government's relationship with China and Japan that were constantly changing audiences' opinion of these countries. Film studios and directors, who were trying to appease these audiences for financial purposes, made stylistic choices within films that contributed to these harmful portrayals of Wong and reflected audiences' opinions.⁷ One of these aspects alone did not create these stereotypes— audience opinion towards China and immigrants, world events, and directors' choices all coincided with

⁶ It is important to note that this personal perspective from Wong is extraordinarily rare for this time. These invaluable sources give us a very personal look into Wong's life, but they include very specific details about the innerworkings of the film industry during this early period in the Golden Age of Hollywood from Wong's perspective as a Chinese American woman whose opportunities and experiences looked very different from her white counterparts.

⁷ Anthony B. Chan and Brian Taves both talk about Josef von Sternberg (dir., *Shanghai Express*) and Joseph H. Lewis (dir., *Bombs over Burma*) making autonomous decisions about sets, props, characters, etc.

each other, resulting in the mutual reinforcement of these stereotypes. Anna May Wong's portrayals in US films during the 1930s and '40s changed from villain to war hero because of the developing relationship between the US and China. In accordance with this change, Wong's opinions about China and her film career also developed during this period, causing her to dissent subtly from the racist attitudes of Hollywood in newspaper articles. Orientalism and exoticization, perpetrated by filmmakers and interviewers, continually defined her Hollywood career, reinforcing gender and racial stereotypes about Chinese Americans in the US.

Historical Context

The Golden Era of Hollywood began in approximately 1927 with the release of the first film featuring actors' voices, according to historians Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts.⁸ American filmmaking studios were financially dominant during the Golden Era, lasting from 1927 to the 1950s.⁹ Talkies flourished in these decades, which allowed Hollywood to reach the "peak of its narrative and commercial efficiency."¹⁰ As a result of the development of sound in film, audiences flocked to the cinemas, making movies culturally dominant in the US during the mid-20th century. Film historian Robert B. Ray states that American movie theatres averaged 80 million people in weekly attendance, with the film industry attracting 83 cents of every US dollar spent on recreation, demonstrating film studios' ability to have a massive cultural impact on audiences.¹¹ Hollywood's films during this period set the standard for all films that came after, making these movies "the single most important body of films in the history of cinema."¹²

⁸ Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films* (St. James, New York: Brandywine Press, 1993), 15.

⁹ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 25-26.

¹⁰ Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, 25.

¹¹ Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, 25-26.

¹² Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, 26.

There were many different studios that produced films during this time, including bigger companies and much smaller ones. During this period, Wong primarily starred in Paramount-produced films, which was one of the main five studios dominated Hollywood at the time. The two films released in the 1940s I analyze were released by Producers Releasing Corporation, which was a much smaller studio producing B-roll films.¹³ While the films PRC produced were not as commercially successful, they gave Wong greater individual agency in portraying her as a hero instead of a villain or helpless woman.¹⁴ As a result of its lesser known status, PRC could take more risks with its content as well, in ways that Paramount could not.

Film audiences during this time were continually fascinated with the concept of the Orient, which was a vehicle that helped popularize stereotypes about Asian culture. Orientalism and exoticization were the primary tools used in films that attracted audiences to the Orient. Edward Said, a primary founder of postcolonial studies, defined Orientalism in 1978 as a European invention that made Asia into a “place of romance, exotic beings... and remarkable experiences.”¹⁵ Within film, the Orient consistently served as a “contrasting image, idea, personality, [and] experience” to the West.¹⁶ Since films were so easily digestible, the stereotypes that effectively ‘othered’ Asia and Asian people made them seem inferior to US culture. Exoticization was when someone or something, such as Chinese culture, was portrayed as more exotic to be sexually appealing to audiences. This practice allowed audiences to fetishize Asian culture, in making it attractively exotic in comparison with US culture. Another aspect of

¹³ B-roll films were not as highly funded or advertised as much more popular films at the time. The production quality, including the sound, sets, and clarity of the picture were noticeably poorer in these films, making them less popular with audiences and not as financially successful. The lack of success of these films explains why much smaller studios oftentimes closed.

¹⁴ Brian Taves, “Joseph H. Lewis, Anna May Wong, and *Bombs Over Burma*,” in *Films of Joseph H. Lewis*, ed. Francis M. Nevins (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 120.

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.

US films in play during this time were miscegenation laws, which prevented interracial relationships from occurring on-screen. These laws made white audiences' attraction to Asian stars seem illicit, causing various Asian characters to become foreign and forbidden, which, ultimately, was an extremely marketable narrative for Hollywood.¹⁷

Audiences' understanding of the Orient, therefore, was heavily influenced by Hollywood's portrayal of various stereotypes, such as the strong influence of ancestors, the strict rules of Asian culture, and the sexual promiscuity of Asian women. Gina Marchetti, a film, gender, and cultural studies professor at the University of Hong Kong, argues that "Hollywood's romance with Asia tends to be a flirtation with the exotic" as opposed to "an attempt at any genuine cultural understanding."¹⁸ For example, Asian cultures were denoted with similar symbols, such as a dragon or a gong, as opposed to more accurate symbols of different countries. Said argues that film has reinforced Oriental stereotypes, putting Asian countries into strict molds.¹⁹ In film, the exaggeration of ideological stereotypes, such as the strict adherence to obeying ancestors, allowed the United States to place themselves ideologically above Eastern countries and assert a sense of dominance over them. Clearly seen in Hollywood films throughout the Golden Era, Orientalism allowed filmmakers to depict the East as inferior to the US in terms of technology, society, and culture.²⁰

Audience reception was an important aspect of the film industry and the development of stereotypes as well. Janet Staiger, an American film theoretician and historian, emphasizes the importance of audience studies, and that the history of cinema should be examined from the

¹⁷ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁸ Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* 1.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 26.

²⁰ Fu Manchu was one of the first main villains that embodied toxic orientalism in the 1920s and '30s, existing all the way through the 1980s.

perspective of film production along with their reception.²¹ Film studios would gain an understanding of what their audiences liked and disliked, making more films in the same vein that did well financially. Therefore, if a film featuring an Asian stereotype did well, the film studio would make more films with that element, creating an endless cycle of Hollywood's reaction to audience reception. In this way, film stereotypes could change if audiences wanted something different, but it was difficult to change a stereotype caught in this cycle. When considering audience reception, it is important to understand that simply referring to the US film audience is a large generalization and could be split into many sub-categories based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. For the purposes of my research, I will focus mainly on white US audiences as a whole and how they might have reacted to and perceived Asian stereotypes.

Despite the Orientalism and exoticization present in early and mid-20th century films perpetuated by US audiences, they were also popular way for immigrants in the US to assimilate. Asian immigrants copied looks, styles, and even the English language that they learned about while watching movies. Film studies professor Sarah Berry states that "Hollywood stars represented idealized types" for people in America to emulate, while "[demonstrating] the effectiveness of cosmetic self-transformation," especially in terms of assimilation with American culture.²² If Chinese immigrants physically looked and talked like white Americans, they might have had a better chance of rising above the hate oftentimes shown towards Chinese people. Despite attempts at assimilation, Asian immigrants would ultimately remain 'othered' because of how different they looked when compared to a white American and even European immigrants.

²¹ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 12.

²² Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*, Commerce and Mass Culture Series, v.2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 105.

Anti-Chinese sentiment was deeply integrated in early 20th century US society to maintain Americans' social dominance, which prevented immigrants' full assimilation into society.

Various governmentally enacted laws restricting Asian immigrations fostered hostile attitudes towards Asian people in the US, which was reflected in films at the time. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was an "overtly racist" law implemented to "severely curtail Chinese immigration" while making the Chinese "ineligible for citizenship," effectively othering Chinese immigrants.²³ The 1882 act was not repealed until 1943, and the Immigration Act of 1924 only further integrated anti-Chinese sentiment into the social and governmental fabric of the US.²⁴ The 1924 act further limited the number of immigrants that could come into the US, especially in terms of immigrants coming from Asia. With the sharp influx of Asian people coming into the US, many Americans perceived the immigrants as a threat to their livelihoods and land. The resulting 'Yellow Peril' emerged in the Golden Era of Hollywood, where Asia and Asian characters were often portrayed as villains.²⁵ The villainy was not only due to the opposition towards immigrants, but a result of changing relationships internationally as well.

In the 1930s and '40s, the United States had a fluctuating relationship with China and Japan that lent itself to already existing hostilities towards Asian immigrants. The lead up to Chinese Civil War that began in 1930s which pitted the Republic of China (KMT) against the newly formed Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As the threat of World War II became imminent in the latter half of the 1930s, the United States quickly allied with China in opposition to Japan

²³ Gloria Heyung Chun, *Of Orphans and Warriors: Inventing Chinese American Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 45.

²⁴ Which was during the middle of WWII, when the US was allied with China against Japan.

²⁵ In *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril'*, Gina Marchetti discusses the Yellow Peril fantasy and how it made sexual contact between white and Asian people dangerous. Typically, this is shown through the threat of the Asian male to white women (where the white woman serves as a metaphor for the perceived threat Asian culture presented to Western culture) and is also seen through the power of the Asian woman to seduce the white male (3).

as the Chinese Civil War was put on hold.²⁶ These world events mark big shifts in US films and Wong's films, with China being portrayed in a more sympathetic manner than before the 1930s and Japan becoming the fictional enemy over time, mirroring reality.

Historiographical Context

Since American film history is comparatively recent, all the works written about Wong have been published in the past two decades. None of these scholars have disagreed on different aspects of Wong's career per se, rather, they all focus on various aspects of Wong's career and films through different theoretical lenses. The themes that emerge in scholarly works about Wong deal with the politics surrounding her roles, how her gender is portrayed on screen, and her public image as a movie star, which differed drastically from how she was conveyed to audiences in films.

Some scholars, such as Karen J. Leong and Sean Metzger, focus on relating certain aspects of Wong's career to the broader context of the United States' relations with China at the time. Leong, a professor of gender and Asian Pacific American studies, coins the term "China mystique," which she defines as the "gendered embodiment of American Orientalism" that resulted from the "geopolitical and social changes that the US encountered in the 1930s and 1940s."²⁷ Wong was consistently exoticized and even feminized in the face of changing political relationships mimicked within film, made out to be a sexually appealing feminine commodity oftentimes wearing costumes. For US audiences, since Wong was the sole, unofficial representation of all Chinese culture, the feminization and, supposed weakened state of her

²⁶ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, "The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949" (MA Thesis, Seton Hall University, 2002), 1-2.

²⁷ Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

characters confirmed the “political, social, and cultural superiority of the United States.”²⁸

Performance and Sexuality Studies professor Sean Metzger takes a similar approach in analyzing Wong’s career using a geopolitical frame, but specifically analyzes Wong’s clothing. Metzger argues that Wong was clothed in a very purposeful way so that she became “the fetishistic focus of the camera,” while showing the “larger body politic at a moment of decisive shift in U.S. attitudes towards China.”²⁹

Brian Taves, a former film archivist at the Library of Congress, goes where Leong and Metzger do not, focusing specifically on Wong’s starring roles in her two films released during WWII. Taves indicates that, despite their B-roll status, these were among the first films to positively contribute to the war effort in terms of China and create a positive depiction of the country that did not exist in Hollywood in the previous decades.³⁰ While not massively popular, Wong’s wartime American films contribute to the overall understanding of how Wong’s career changed over time in accordance with shifting US politics. Though Leong, Metzger, and Taves analyze different political angles of Wong’s career, they similarly discuss political context and how it affected Wong’s roles.

The second theme within Wong’s career is how her gender was portrayed on screen, which differed drastically from Hollywood’s portrayal of white femininity. As a Chinese American woman, Hollywood sexualized Wong’s appearance in many of her films to further promote white audiences’ fascination with and forbidden attraction to the Orient. Jean-François Staszak, scholar of cultural geography, focuses on Anna May Wong’s career in America during the 1930s, arguing that her career was founded on the exoticization of her race and, therefore, her

²⁸ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 2.

²⁹ Sean Metzger, “Patterns of Resistance?: Anna May Wong and the Fabrication of China in American Cinema of the Late 30s,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 23, no. 1 (January 2006): 2.

³⁰ Taves, “Joseph H. Lewis, Anna May Wong, and *Bombs Over Burma*,” 130.

sexuality. Earlier in her career, for instance, Wong played the part of the “dominant and sadistic” Dragon Lady, which represented forbidden sexual desire.³¹ Joseph Worrell, another film scholar, agrees with Staszak about Wong’s career in the early 1930s, stating that Hollywood typically cast Wong as the “lethal female/racial other, visually and symbolically” who “entrapped men and destroyed the hapless male with her aggressive sexuality.”³² In the late ‘30s, Wong’s gender moves towards representing the fragile/helpless Chinese doll stereotype, which was passive, obedient, and much more desirable to the dominant male gaze. Staszak and Worrell agree that stereotypes founded in gendered assumptions about Chinese women dominated Wong’s career over time, but most pervasively in the early 1930s.

Wong’s image according to news reporters at the time was very different from how Wong viewed herself and her career, which is the last theme scholars focus on. Outside film, Wong was very careful in crafting her image to appeal to white American audiences. She appeared and sounded very American, which contrasted sharply with what newspapers and magazines emphasized about her and the roles she portrayed at times. Asian American historian Shirley Lim discusses Wong’s Westernized image through her sense of cosmopolitanism, especially as Wong gained popularity in Europe. Lim further discusses how Wong constantly showed her “fluidity with American colloquial language” and physically appeared as a “Chinese flapper,” actively rebelling against the exoticism Hollywood projected onto Wong that separated her from white, American culture.³³

³¹ Jean-François Staszak, “Performing Race and Gender: The Exoticization of Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 5 (May 2015): 634.

³² Joseph Worrell, “On the Dragon Lady’s Trail: Rediscovering the Films and Image of Anna May Wong in Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2003): 15.

³³ Shirley Jennifer Lim, “‘Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business’: Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012): 11.

Audience reception of Wong's films was a vital part of her career because of how the oftentimes negative way audiences saw her on screen contrasted sharply with her various attempts at creating a positive public image. Staiger focuses in general on audience reception during the Golden Age of Hollywood or, as she refers to it, Classical Hollywood Cinema. She states that audiences of Classical Hollywood Cinema viewed the films while "considering compositional features," such as the chronological and narrative chain of events as well as the characters.³⁴ Audiences at the time also made choices and hypotheses about "verisimilitude, aesthetics, narration, and discourse" in any given film from the period.³⁵ For instance, when viewing a film, an audience member might choose to sympathize with one character over another based off of the assumptions they make about their actions or personality, or even how the plot develops over the course of a film. Film scholar Sarah Chow uses these same theories and focuses specifically on how audiences reacted to Wong's roles at the time. White audiences were drawn to Wong's villainous roles because they "fulfilled their vision of Asians as an uncivilized, inferior race."³⁶ Chow even notes that white audiences "never fully acknowledged that she was American" despite being born in California and claims that many saw Wong as "rising above the inferiority of her race" because she embraced American culture.³⁷ Since audiences at the time were primarily focused on plot and characters when viewing a film, Wong's roles that dealt with villainy likely influenced negative stereotypes about Chinese people and culture in the US. What Wong wanted American audiences to see versus what they assumed about her through her

³⁴ Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 33.

³⁵ Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 33.

³⁶ Sarah Kazuko Chow, "Anna May Wong: Navigating Asian American Racial Identity in Early Hollywood." *Film Matters* 11, no. 1 (March 2020): 52.

³⁷ Chow, "Anna May Wong: Navigating Asian American Racial Identity," 52, 57.

various depictions in film demonstrates the influence of Hollywood within public thought and how that influenced the direction of Wong's career.

These scholars focus on the aspects of Wong's career individually but do not fully show how they intersect, which is what I aim to do in my research. While some sources mention these other lenses at times, none fully analyze all these aspects of Wong's career in conversation with each other. Most of these sources also lack a proper analysis of Wong's WWII films, which, when taken into the full context of her career, demonstrate how certain stereotypes concerning China changed briefly during the war. Within my research, I provide a broader analysis of specific films starring Wong that weave these three viewpoints together throughout the 1930s and '40s while including her WWII films. In highlighting various elements of Wong's films and interviews, such as visual elements of films, language used to describe Wong or her characters, and Wong's own writing, I will show how they all contribute to the reinforcement and the changing stereotypes over time that Wong's characters embodied. The combination of these themes, along with my own analysis of the various primary sources, we can come to a fuller understanding of how global events and stereotypes regarding Chinese American women crucially intersect within Wong's films and how they can be further analyzed in conversation with Wong's opinions.

Villain: Early 1930s

Prior to the height of her film career in America in the early 1930s, Wong faced discrimination from Hollywood when trying to find work based on her Chinese American heritage. As a result of this prejudice, Wong left the US for Europe, gaining film success and popularity there in the late 1920s and early 1930s, before signing a contract with Paramount and

returning to Hollywood. Upon her return, she was cast in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), which began her series of three American films produced by Paramount during the early '30s where she continually played a villainous character, including the critically acclaimed *Shanghai Express* (1932) and the crime film *Limehouse Blues* (1934).³⁸ These films work to establish Hollywood's fascination with exoticizing Asian culture through villainy as Wong portrays sexually forbidden antagonistic characters who have a skewed set of morals.

These roles reflect the fraught US-Chinese relationship due, in part, to the ongoing Chinese Civil War between the US-backed Nationalist government and the Communist opposition. Growing public sentiment against Chinese immigration to the US played a big role in the formation of these characters' stereotypes. The Immigration Act of 1924 fostered US opposition towards Chinese people, as illustrated in the antagonistic aspects of Wong's roles in this era. Wong's characters with evil or suspiciously unclear intentions are physically shown through elements of the mise-en-scene that contrast Wong with other white women in films, therefore working to 'other' her in accordance with public discourse surrounding China.³⁹ These white costars were either morally perfect from the beginning of the film or found redemption, while Wong's characters remained evil or died by the end of the film. Through the comparison to white women, Wong's roles in this era are influenced by the Chinese Civil War, immigration restrictions, and the ongoing presence of Orientalism and exoticization.

³⁸ As a result of the time constraints of this project, I unfortunately could not fully analyze *Limehouse Blues*. The film does, however, fall into place with the characters Wong portrays *Daughter of the Dragon* and *Shanghai Express*, as she is a jealous lover who betrays her partner before committing suicide. This is an area where my research could be expanded upon.

³⁹ Everything that is tangible within the world of the film itself is considered the mise-en-scene, including sets, costumes, hair and make-up, and props.

Daughter of the Dragon

In *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong stars as Princess Ling Moy, Fu Manchu's daughter who, coincidentally, moonlights as a dancer/performer.⁴⁰ Fu Manchu breaks into the Petrie household to avenge his wife and son, who were killed by the former British general, Sir John Petrie, during the Boxer Rebellion. After killing John Petrie, Fu Manchu is fatally shot, after which he orders Ling Moy to kill Ronald Petrie, John's son, to complete his revenge. Over the course of two months, Ling Moy makes Ronald fall in love with her using her attractive looks that separate her from other white women so she can get close enough to kill him. Ronald, who was previously involved with a white woman named Joan, innocently falls in love with Ling Moy, completely unaware of her secret plot to kill him. In the film, Ronald even gets to the point where he asks Ling Moy to stay at his house, which Ling Moy responds by asking that if she stays with him will her hair ever become golden or her skin the color of ivory. Ronald says he prefers Ling Moy's hair and skin, exoticizing Wong's appearance for the audience and showing the attractive, yet dangerous allure of Ling Moy's 'foreign' qualities. Joan consistently sees the two of them together, making her jealous because Ling Moy appears to have stolen Ronald. Growing desperate and failing to kill Ronald at every turn because of her reluctance, Ling Moy ultimately kidnaps Joan and threatens to pour acid on her face to lure Petrie to her house, where she could finally kill him. Ultimately, Ling Moy's plot is uncovered, and she is fatally shot by a policeman. Joan and Ronald then have a romantic happy ending.⁴¹

Ling Moy and Joan are directly contrasted throughout the film, with Ling Moy representing the alluring fascination with the exotic and Joan illustrating the perfectly innocent white woman.

⁴⁰ The opening shot of the film is a poster advertising Princess Ling Moy's performance, featuring a costume made solely out sheer tulle fabric, complete with a hood, exposed midriff, and shorts to expose her legs.

⁴¹ Lloyd Corrigan, dir., *Daughter of the Dragon*, September 5, 1931.

Ling Moy is portrayed as this vengeful seductress who lures the innocent Ronald into her deception, whereas Joan is the innocent bystander who gets swept up into Ling Moy's plot. Ling Moy is a threat to both the innocence and purity of white femininity as well as the dominance of white masculinity. In making Wong a vengeful villain and a seductive performer, the filmmakers successfully take away any sense of femininity that is familiar to white American audiences. The direct contrast with Joan embeds Wong in harmful stereotypes, such as being sexually promiscuous and villainous, that distanced Chinese women in America from white women. This stereotyping made it harder for Chinese women, both immigrants and citizens alike, from assimilating into American culture. Since they were the perceived villains in popular films, Chinese women became 'others' in US society outside of films as well.

Film reviewers of *Daughter of the Dragon* in 1931 only pushed audience perception of Wong deeper into the Orientalist mindset of 'othering' her. While some praise her and others criticize her for her performance, reporters consistently wrote about Wong's appearance. Reviewer Norbert Lusk calls *Daughter of the Dragon* a "throwback to the old school of melodrama," in the Los Angeles times, talking about Wong as an "exquisite figure of oriental loveliness," emphasizing her race instead of her performance.⁴² Mollie Merrick, who also wrote for the LA Times, talks about Wong's "jet-black shining bang of hair-quintessence of the Orient" as her main characteristic while also calling her the "delicate lotus bud of the Orient," despite Wong's American birth and citizenship.⁴³ Another reporter for the LA Times, Muriel Babcock, is critical of the outdated elements of the film, calling it "unimportant," but somewhat praises Wong's performance and her rise to stardom from a "little Chinese girl" to a "sensitive, poised and

⁴² Norbert Lusk, "Last Flight Critics Belied: Anna May Wong Attraction in Old-Style 'Meller,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1931.

⁴³ Mollie Merrick, "Hollywood in Person," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1931.

appealing actress.”⁴⁴ These reviewers use language that emphasize Wong’s differences from white women, which created a discourse around Wong that firmly placed her as an ‘other’ for American audiences.

One reviewer in 1931, however, comments on Wong’s meticulously perfect American accent. Betty Willis, writing for the American fan magazine *Motion Picture*, states that Wong is exactly like “any slightly affected American girl.”⁴⁵ Lim argues that Wong’s performance in *Daughter* demonstrates the “importance of accent” to claiming nationality and modernity.⁴⁶ In the midst of a hostile environment for Asian immigrants in the United States due to the immigration restrictions still in place, Wong’s accent denoted that, although her parents were Chinese, Wong herself was Chinese American, giving her an important connection with the audience. One of Wong’s costars in the film, a Japanese-born film star named Sessue Hayakawa, was heavily criticized for his thick accent. When compared, Wong seems much more American than Hayakawa, who embodies a direct connection to Asia, making him more foreign to audiences. When solely judging her accent, Wong should not be considered foreign, especially when compared with Hayakawa, but was nonetheless exoticized.

Shanghai Express

A year later, in *Shanghai Express*, Wong plays Hui Fei, who is a coaster in China: a woman who “lives by her wits on the Chinese coast,” insinuating that she is somewhat of a con artist mixed with a prostitute.⁴⁷ *Shanghai Express* was Wong’s most popular film, as it was highly

⁴⁴ Muriel Babcock, “‘Daughter of Dragon’ Shown,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1931.

⁴⁵ Betty Willis, “Famous Oriental Stars Return to the Screen,” *Motion Picture* (magazine), October 1931, 44.

⁴⁶ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960*, American History and Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 58.

⁴⁷ Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932.

publicized by Paramount, and the most critically acclaimed.⁴⁸ Shanghai Lily, played by the German Marlene Dietrich, is the main character of the film and an infamous coaster in China. In the film, Wong is portrayed as a dark, heartless vamp further perpetrating the stereotype that Chinese women were a threat to the norms associated with white masculinity, such as dominance over women and the expectation to be intimate with only white women.⁴⁹ There are a wide variety of characters on the train, most of them white men besides Henry Chang, the mixed-race, mysterious passenger who is ashamed of his white roots. The various characters are seen talking about Lily and Hui Fei, grouping them together as coasters, but separating them when someone states that “one is white, and one is yellow.”⁵⁰ Not only does this dehumanize the women, but it strips them down to their race and gender, successfully objectifying them and othering Wong.

Wong is seen as the Asian foil to Shanghai Lily which is demonstrated partially through costuming. As Anthony B. Chan, a biographer of Wong, argues, Shanghai Lily is always dressed in black “to accentuate and contrast her whiteness and blondness” whereas Hui Fei, who embodies the nonwhite world in the film as the only passenger of color other than Henry Chang, is only seen in “light[er] clothing to magnify and differentiate her yellowness and dark hair.”⁵¹ Shirley Lim agrees with Chan’s analysis of Hui Fei and Lily’s contrasting costumes and goes even further to suggest that their hair and makeup “visually accent” the characters’ “analogous dangerous sexuality,” separating them from each other.⁵² Wong’s dark straight hair sharply contrasts Dietrich’s light fluffy hair, demonstrating how different aspects of the mise-en-scene

⁴⁸ The film was nominated for three Academy Awards, winning one for best cinematography. Anthony B. Chan notes that if the category of best supporting actress had existed at the time, Wong likely would have been nominated for this film.

⁴⁹ Worrell, “On the Dragon Lady’s Trail,” 15.

⁵⁰ Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932.

⁵¹ Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow, 2007), 229.

⁵² Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern*, 60.

contribute to the development of Wong and Dietrich's similar yet opposing senses of sexuality based off of their race.⁵³ Wong is ultimately made out to be more exotic than Shanghai Lily not only through her clothes, but in individual frames and plot lines as well.

The compositional framing of individual shots throughout the film even lends to how Dietrich and Wong's characters are separated based on their respective races, despite their similarities. Dietrich is often placed in front of the camera face-on, which could allow the audience to feel as if they are more attached to her, as opposed to the detached Wong, who is rarely seen in a close-up shot with her face looking at the camera. In one frame of *Shanghai Express*, Wong sits at an angle, her face half hidden in shadow because of the low-key lighting on her half of the shot, which is coincidentally framed by the train car's window, effectively boxing her in and away from her counterpart (See Figure 3).⁵⁴ Dietrich, who half-sits, half-stands, leaning against the table in the train car, faces the camera more directly, her face fully lit. Chan notes that, in the film, Wong's profile is often framed in shots that stress her "angular features" while suggesting that she "has something to hide," therefore portraying a sense of inscrutability as opposed to the more appealing Dietrich often seen head on.⁵⁵ Their positioning in the frame indicates that Dietrich is the more conventional white actress oftentimes seen in Hollywood, whereas Wong is a separate, rare, and exotic enigma, whose hair, makeup, and clothes are purposefully different than the white protagonist's. These subtle alterations within the shots ultimately suggest that, while both these characters are morally ambiguous, Hui Fei is even more sinister than Shanghai Lily because she is shown in such a way that detaches her from the audience, giving the character a more devious appearance.

⁵³ Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern*, 60.

⁵⁴ Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932.

⁵⁵ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 229.

Wong and Dietrich's characters are further separated in the latter half of the film because of their sharply contrasting endings. On their way to Shanghai, the train is stopped twice: once by Chinese government soldiers to capture a rebel spy, and again because of Henry Chang, who reveals that he is a powerful warlord in charge of the resistance, wanting to hold one of the other passengers hostage in exchange for the rebel spy.⁵⁶ He makes sexual advances on Shanghai Lily, offering to take her back to his home, but Dietrich's character is successful at declining his offer without getting assaulted. Once he is rejected by Lily, Chang turns to Hui Fei, Wong's character, and rapes her. Because Hui Fei is the sole Chinese woman in the film, she can be easily taken



Figure 3. Anna May Wong as Hui Fei in *Shanghai Express* alongside Marlene Dietrich as Shanghai Lily.

⁵⁶ In which the 'Chinese government' represents the Nationalist Party in China, and the rebel spy represents the Communist opposition.

advantage of by the Chinese warlord, even though she was previously seen as undesirable to the other white, male passengers. Shanghai Lily's dignity, even though other characters in the film talk about her scandalous way of life, remains intact because she is not raped by a Chinese man, where Wong's character is much more able to be violated by Chang.

Hui Fei is seemingly unaffected by this shocking chain of events paints a cynical, heartless picture of the Chinese woman. When Hui Fei stabs Chang in the back with a dagger, she barely seems fazed, which Lily comments on, not knowing whether to be grateful to her or not for stabbing Chang. Hui Fei responds, "It's of no consequence. I didn't do it for you. Death canceled his debt to me."⁵⁷ While Shanghai Lily appears to be somewhat shaken by Chang's murder, Hui Fei feels nothing. The film ends with Lily reuniting with her love interest in the film, whereas Hui Fei walks away alone from reporters questioning her about the murder. Ultimately, Wong is stripped of her femininity because she, in the end, lacks stereotypical qualities American audiences might look for in a woman in the 1930s. Wong's character does not get a happy ending or romantic kiss: she gets raped, kills Chang, wins a cash award, and leaves the train station alone. Dietrich, on the other hand, prays to God for the first time in years to save her love interest, which ultimately works, resulting in a happy ending that has reformed the dubious morals of her character. The sharp contrast in the endings for these characters demonstrates how Wong had to play a role that dehumanized and 'othered' her, making her exotic through her clothing and hair to be mysteriously attractive to US audiences.

Ultimately, *Daughter of the Dragon* and *Shanghai Express* make the exotic in these films sexually desirable through Wong's characters. Exoticization plays a large role in these early talkies in Wong's career, fetishizing Wong's race and gender to appeal to US audiences'

⁵⁷ Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Shanghai Express*. February 12, 1932.

fascination with the exotic. Wong has no happy ending in these films that would endear her to US audiences, rather, she is 'othered' and sexualized to the point where she is only seen as an attractive sexual object. The stereotypes of the cynical Dragon Lady and prostitute in these films contribute to the already existing perception of Chinese immigrants and Chinese American citizens in the US, adding to the public discourse that ruthlessly 'othered' Chinese culture, and made it seem inferior to US culture in terms of traditions and even technology.

Wong's Obstacles in Hollywood

In opposition to Hollywood's tendency to sexualize and villainize Wong based on her race; she often spoke out against what ideas her roles conveyed to US audiences. In various interviews throughout 1931-1933, Wong discusses the unfortunate parts she had to play in Hollywood and her opinion of them. She also explains more about Hollywood's prejudice against her in these primary sources, including how producers and studios prevented her from acting or auditioning for roles that were not created for actors of Asian descent.

Wong was constantly unhappy with the film roles offered to her in the US during the early 1930s and the negative Chinese stereotypes embedded within them. In an interview with the British fan magazine *Film Weekly*, Wong stated that she was "so tired of the parts [she] had to play" in Hollywood films, referring to the cynical, heartless villain of the early '30s, as depicted in *Daughter of the Dragon* and *Shanghai Express*.⁵⁸ Wong questioned why the "screen Chinese" was "nearly always the villain of the piece," who was "crude... murderous, treacherous, [and] a snake in the grass."⁵⁹ These stereotypes cast a shadow over Chinese Americans in the eyes of white Americans, which Wong challenges in this interview by openly

⁵⁸ Doris Mackie, "I Protest," *Film Weekly*, August 18, 1933.

⁵⁹ Mackie, "I Protest," *Film Weekly*, August 18, 1933.

questioning why the Chinese still had to be portrayed in this light. In this interview, Wong also brings attention to the consistency of Asian stereotypes in film in the early 1930s. Wong likely wanted to play other parts but could not, as she was only allowed to act and audition for roles that were specifically written for Asian characters.

Further along in the article, however, the opinions of Wong and the interviewer differ regarding on-screen Asian stereotypes. The interviewer suggests that Chinese characters provided a “picturesqueness” that was “very desirable in the villain of a screen romance,” aligning with Hollywood’s exoticization and othering of Chinese people at the time.⁶⁰ Wong harshly objected to this assumption, stating:

But we have our virtues too! And they are picturesque virtues. We have our rigid codes of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show there on the screen? Why should we always scheme---rob---kill? I got so weary of it all--- of the scenarist’s conception of Chinese character, that I told myself I was done with the films forever. You remember ‘Fu Manchu’? ‘Daughter of the Dragon’? So wicked.⁶¹

The questions Wong pose expose the intent of Hollywood producers and how they portrayed Wong, and therefore China, as a villain without morals instead of having any of the virtues Wong mentioned. Instead, audiences received Hollywood’s filtered, negative perception of China and even newspaper articles and interviews such as this one. The interviewer’s opinions of Chinese characters as villains could have reflected public sentiment, and how audience knew no better than to classify Asian actors as villains because that was all they had been shown in film or newspaper cartoons previously.⁶² Even though Wong was publicly speaking out about her opposition to these stereotypes, they were still surrounded by the thoughts and opinions of the

⁶⁰ Mackie, “I Protest,” *Film Weekly*, August 18, 1933.

⁶¹ Mackie, “I Protest,” *Film Weekly*, August 18, 1933.

⁶² Although *Film Weekly* was British, meaning we do not know how widely this source was read in America at the time, the source is still extremely important because it gives us a closer look into what Wong thought about this phase in her career and insight into Hollywood’s treatment of her.

interviewer, which might have overshadowed the true meaning of Wong's words with opinions that were likely popular with film audiences. In terms of Wong's changing point of view during her career, the interview further demonstrates how opposed Wong was to these roles and her awareness of the stereotypes she was pigeonholed into during her Hollywood career.

Despite Wong's opposition to being cast as hyper-sexualized, exoticized villains, Wong had to accept the roles to remain employed. In a 1933 interview with the *New York Herald Tribune*, Wong discusses her struggles within Hollywood and being at the mercy of producers looking to appease US audiences. Wong stated that since "last summer in Hollywood," she had only made one film, because it was "difficult when there [weren't] stories that producers [thought] suitable" for her especially because she spoke "better English than many other Chinese players."⁶³ Wong also stated that film producers felt that if they surround her with "American players the effect would [have been] too theatrical."⁶⁴ This confirms that numerous producers and directors in Hollywood felt the need to treat Wong's characters differently based off race to cater to what they thought US audiences would receive best. Hollywood's actions were, of course, partially dictated by what US audiences wanted to see, which most often with the national sentiments related to current world events at the time. Audiences' demands of the film industry were driven by what newspapers' opinions were, which were, of course, impacted by the government, which affected Wong.

As a result of this need for studios to make profit, Wong had to continue auditioning for stereotypical parts during her early career but continued to express her unhappiness with Hollywood's continual typecasting. Wong said she "made tests for all sorts of exotic parts, "that may have made her play a character of the wrong race or could have scantily clothed her, like

⁶³ Marguerite Tazelaar, "Film Folk in Person: A Chat with Miss Wong," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1933.

⁶⁴ Tazelaar, "Film Folk in Person: A Chat with Miss Wong," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1933.

when she played a Mongol slave in the 1924 *The Thief of Bagdad*. She did not “want to play” these parts because she was tired of playing only “one type of role” that did not express her heritage properly or favorably.⁶⁵ Because of her race, however, Wong was likely only optioned for parts that racially profiled her, which, earlier in her career, were roles that villainized Wong. In the early 1930s, Wong was more willing to accept these roles that exploited her race and gender, but as she gained popularity, she felt that she “earned the right to have a little choice in the parts [she] play[ed]” instead of continually having to accept roles that portrayed Chinese people and Chinese Americans in a negative light.⁶⁶

Even though Wong always played some sort of villain or prostitute, she was nonetheless proud to represent China in films, both in this early period in her career and later on. Wong stated that she “couldn’t give up [her] career” even though she felt compelled to at times because she felt like it was “really drawing China nearer... making it better understood and liked” amongst US audiences.⁶⁷ Not only was Wong becoming closer to China, a country that, at the time, she had never visited, but through her critiques of the film industry in the US, Wong was working towards the eventual acceptance of China and Chinese Americans in the US.⁶⁸ Without her rise to fame and prominent roles, many Americans likely would not have been exposed to China or Chinese culture outside of news reports. Even though what they were seeing about China through Wong’s early roles was very much through the lens of villainy, Wong’s

⁶⁵ Tazelaar, “Film Folk in Person: A Chat with Miss Wong,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1933.

⁶⁶ Of course, this interview only scratches the surface of the troubles Wong faced in Hollywood with getting cast in roles, especially as her career approached its twilight and she became less sexually desirable.

⁶⁷ Betty Willis, “Famous Oriental Stars Return to the Screen,” *Motion Picture* (magazine), October 1931.

⁶⁸ In her article, “Anna May Wong Tells of Voyage on 1st Trip to China,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1936, Wong stated that she considered the US as her “native country,” but she stated that she was “always... aware of another country, in the background of [her] mind” just as she never forgot that her real name was “Wong Liu Tsong.” She even stated that she was “brought up on stories of tree-shaded villages at the edge of old canals; of Buddhas seated on gold-leafed lotus flowers...” by her father and his friends, who “passionately loved their native country.” These quotes indicate how these stories endeared Wong to China before her visit in 1936, resulting in her efforts in interviews outside of film to portray China in a positive light.

interviews, where she's talking favorably about China, were still published. From these interviews, we could conclude that Wong felt as if she was countering negative stereotypes about Chinese culture that existed amongst US audiences.

About a year after these interviews in *Film Weekly* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, an article featuring an interview with Wong was written for the *Hollywood Citizen-News*, revealing that Wong did not play into Hollywood's misconception of Chinese people outside of film. The author, Robbin Coons, asserts that Wong was a "companionable young woman who devotes no time to being what Hollywood calls 'exotic.'"⁶⁹ Even though we can clearly see how Hollywood exoticized Wong today when looking back in history, Coons states that "a dozen years" prior to the interview, Wong could have created an "aura of glamour" around herself outside of film, using "theatrical 'props' of mysticism" while being "aloof...inaccessible... and capitaliz[ing] on an incense-laden, artificially created atmosphere."⁷⁰ Instead, Wong preferred just to "be herself," stating that they "have so little time to live reality" as actors.⁷¹ She also said that she could not have fooled anyone with portraying this mystic Asian woman off-screen because "everyone knew [she] came from Los Angeles."⁷² Instead of becoming an enhanced, offensive caricature of herself and her culture, Wong consciously chose to look and sound like an American outside of film, even stating that she only ever wore clothes that expressed herself—"a combination of east and west."⁷³ As a result of this interview, we can further understand how Wong was consistently trying to reverse the exoticized narrative surrounding Chinese people and Chinese Americans, even though, as Coons indicates, she could have easily capitalized on her race for her own gain,

⁶⁹ Robbin Coons, "Chinese Film Star Scorns Mystery Pose," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 30, 1934.

⁷⁰ Coons, "Chinese Film Star Scorns Mystery Pose," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 30, 1934.

⁷¹ Coons, "Chinese Film Star Scorns Mystery Pose," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 30, 1934.

⁷² Coons, "Chinese Film Star Scorns Mystery Pose," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 30, 1934.

⁷³ Coons, "Chinese Film Star Scorns Mystery Pose," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 30, 1934.

which only would have further alienated Chinese Americans. Moving into the late 1930s, the Orientalist aspect of Wong's career does not drastically change: she is still a foreigner in the United States who is seen, at least in part, as an exotic sexual commodity. Wong does, however, land roles in the US that do not overtly villainize her in the late 1930s.

Helpless: Late 1930s

Upon the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the mid-1930s, the United States grew sympathetic towards China, resulting in more favorable portrayals of Wong in US films. In 1937, the Japanese began invading China as they tried to expand their empire, which signified the start of the second Sino-Japanese War. As Japan became more aggressive, the United States grew more sympathetic for China, despite the continued enforcement of the 1924 Immigration Act in the States. This shift in the US's opinion of Chinese immigrants is reflected in US films, which is best seen through the film adaptation of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*. In this film, Chinese farmers and their struggles were shown and very well-received by US audiences, who could relate to the characters, because of many Americans still struggling with the financial fallout of the Great Depression.⁷⁴ Anna May Wong attempted to get the lead role in this film, but was passed over in favor of Luise Rainer, a German actress. Even though Wong did not get this role which signified a definite shift in the portrayal of China at the time from evil to a hardworking, poor peasant, Wong's characters in other films became more sympathetic and, crucially, more American.

⁷⁴ *The Good Earth* (1937) was released by MGM and won two Academy Awards, one of which was won by Luise Rainer for Best Actress. Some scholars, such as Chan, note that this was devastating for Wong, who should have gotten the part. At the time, it was more widely accepted for Occidental (European) actors and actresses to play Asian characters due to miscegenation laws.

Through Chinese characters interwoven with strictly American values, Wong's characters and storylines changed slightly due to the larger shift in political alliances and positive audience sentiment fueled by the government. Despite this positive shift, however, Wong's characters were often rendered helpless without the help of white, American men. Some roles during this period that favorably feature Wong are *King of Chinatown* and *Daughter of Shanghai*, both released by Paramount.

Daughter of Shanghai

In the 1937 *Daughter of Shanghai*, Wong's gender portrayal goes from an evil villain and vengeful vamp to a pure, helpless Chinese woman. Like her character in *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong plays the part of a daughter, Lan Ying Lin, trying to avenge her Chinese father, who gets killed in the film. This time, however, her father in the film is a protagonist, helping the police take down smugglers illegally trafficking Chinese immigrants into the US. Lan Ying Lin comes up with a plan to avenge her father's death and finish the work he began by travelling to the leader's secret base at a dance club to get information about the band of smugglers.⁷⁵ The vital change in her parentage allows Wong's character to be viewed positively from the outset of the film, unlike the immediate negative portrayal like in *Dragon*.

Even though Wong's character pursues the noble avengement of her father, she is still sexually exoticized in the film. Wong poses as a dancer in her attempts to get close to the leader of the smuggling ring, which, of course, gives the film a chance to exploit her gender. The dance itself is set to slow music, with Wong even performing behind smoke at one point, emphasizing her mysterious and captivating presence to the men at the club. White men ogle her during this

⁷⁵ Robert Florey, dir., *Daughter of Shanghai*, December 17, 1937.

performance, with the camera even cutting to close-up shots of individual men's faces looking at her in a predatory manner, as the crowd erupts in applause when she finishes her routine. Some men even make inappropriate comments about Lan Ying Lin, emphasizing her sexual appeal.

An aspect of *Daughter of Shanghai* that contributes to the exoticization and sexualization of Wong is her clothing. Throughout the film, Wong wears several qipaos, many of them white, giving the audience the sense that she an innocent, pure woman, wanting to solve the smuggling ring case and nothing more.⁷⁶ Metzger discusses the importance of her traditional Chinese dresses in the film, stating that they demonstrate the use of costuming as an important part of the narrative dealing with "human value and sartorial performance."⁷⁷ Further along in the film, when Wong poses as a dancer, she is outfitted in a dark, strapless "clinging bodice with a sheer skirt" featuring large hair pins and elaborate necklace.⁷⁸ While the purposes of her donning this outfit are more noble than in times before, the result of this outfit is the same: Wong is sexualized for the benefit of the audience.⁷⁹ Paramount even exploited this scene in their marketing strategies for the film. In this publicity still, Wong is shown fully in her costume on display for US audiences, with her sexuality being used as a marketing tool for the film (See Figure 4).⁸⁰ After her performance, Lan Ying Lin leaves the club, realizing that the leader there is simply following orders from someone even higher up in the ring. Lan Ying Lin, in pursuit of the true leader, then gets captured.

⁷⁶ In "Patterns of Resistance," Metzger states that this dress is a qipao, which was a Mandarin style dress that was very popular in 1920s Shanghai. Metzger goes on to state that Wong got this dress from her visit to China in the mid-1930s, so the costuming is authentic instead of a recreation.

⁷⁷ Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), 113.

⁷⁸ Metzger, *Chinese Looks*, 116.

⁷⁹ Like the outfit at the beginning of *Daughter of the Dragon* that serves no purpose in the film other than to make Wong sexually appealing.

⁸⁰ Paramount Productions. *Daughter of Shanghai*. Publicity Photo of Anna May Wong dancing. 1937. <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/anna-wong-original-1930s-photo-1726155601>.

Despite her heroic attempts to avenge her father and continue his work, Wong's character in this film needs the help of others to complete her revenge mission. Wong's plan goes awry, like in *Daughter of the Dragon*, but this time, instead of painting her as an incapable, evil Chinese woman, the audience could feel sympathy for her helpless state when she gets captured. Wong is helped by government agent Kim Lee to escape the clutches of the smugglers, but he ultimately gets captured as well. The two are saved by a white, sympathetic smuggler who suddenly switches sides instead of being able to rescue themselves. The police force Lan Ying Lin's father was working with also heroically come to the rescue in the end. Wong's character is a well-intentioned, sexually appealing protagonist in this film, as opposed to a sexually forbidden antagonist. Lan Ying Lin demonstrates slightly more independent agency as opposed to Ling Moy as well, despite needing ample amounts of assistance over the course of the film.

While she may be objectified throughout the film and rendered helpless without the aid of white men, Wong's character embodies the perfect, law-abiding, American citizen in *Daughter of Shanghai*, whose heroic qualities are rooted in opposition towards Chinese immigrants. Lan Ying Lin is this semi-Americanized go-getter- if the police are not going to listen to her and get the information, then she will herself, using her femininity to weaken the resolves of various men. Lan Ying Lin's US citizenship is also made very clear from the outset of the film, especially after the opening sequence, which features a montage of newspaper clippings mentioning foreign hoards that flood the US. One of the characters even notes that this smuggling ring is helping the Chinese "sneak in Uncle Sam's back door," creating a negative connotation around illegal immigrants coming from China, throwing them into sharp contrast with Lan Ying Lin's legal and accepted citizenship.⁸¹ Lim confirms this, arguing that the film

⁸¹ Ironically, Wong had trouble numerous times proving her American birth and citizenship, which raises questions about how Chinese Americans were seen in film versus real life.

underscores the “the admirable deployment of American citizenship” while “enforcing American immigration laws.”⁸² The Immigration Act of 1924 was still firmly in place in the mid-1930s, resulting in the prevention of many Chinese people from migrating to the US, making Lan Ying Lin’s citizenship stand out even more. Wong’s character’s anti-immigration stance would have further endeared her to US audiences in the mid-1930s, who were still wary of Asian immigration.

In addition to Lan Ying Lin’s pro-immigration stance that was in favor of US policies, the production of the film itself reflected changing attitudes in the US towards China. Originally, this Paramount-produced film was supposed to be the first in a trilogy about Fu Manchu, which was abandoned when war between the Chinese and Japanese broke out. In the *Hollywood-Citizen News*, however, it was reported that the war and American sympathy for China were a “boon” to Wong because it gave her the opportunity to portray a Chinese American woman in a positive light.⁸³ This article further confirms the changing US sentiment towards China that, in this case, positively impacted Wong’s career and the film industry, giving her a film role that allowed her to break away from the villain stereotype. The impact of US-Chinese relations clearly impacted Hollywood, as further demonstrated in this topical film.

Within five years, Paramount went from *Shanghai Express*, where Wong is a foreign, Chinese woman with questionable morals, to *Daughter of Shanghai*, which, amongst others, features Wong as an exemplary Chinese American citizen. The change in stereotypes Wong had to portray was influenced by the shifting sympathies for China in the face of Japanese invasion. We can continue to see how the stereotypes in US films are reinforcing the US public’s views

⁸² Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 66.

⁸³ Elizabeth Yeaman, “Anna May Wong Set to Team with Tamiroff in Chinatown Movie Story,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 12, 1937.

and are releasing in tandem with world events that are contributing to the change seen in film stereotypes.



Figure 4. Anna May Wong as Ling Yan Lin in a publicity still for *Daughter of Shanghai*.

Wong's Turning Point

Not only did the stereotypes Wong portrayed in the films themselves change from negative to slightly more positive, but Wong's understanding of China changed in accordance with her film roles, which can be seen through her interviews and news articles she wrote. In 1936, after not receiving the lead role in *The Good Earth*, Wong traveled to China for the first time, writing a series of four articles for the *New York Herald Tribune*. These articles are invaluable, not only because Wong wrote them herself, but because, we can truly understand her point of view for the

experiences she had in China that made her reconsider her preconceived notions about film. Anthony B. Chan wrote that Wong's "sojourn in China was a defining moment" for her, and that it almost felt as if this "profound encounter with China" was where Wong "understood the purpose of living and what her role in life was really all about."⁸⁴ Wong's changing mindset about China can be seen through these articles, as she begins to realize deepen her understanding of her heritage, which can be seen in *Daughter of Shanghai*.

Immediately before her arrival in China, Wong did not know how she was going to be received by the people. Wong "never supposed that [her] cinema work had made any great impression on [her] own people," and was shocked to find out that six British guards had been sent to protect her from a "terrific mob of admirers" assembled at a dock in Shanghai.⁸⁵ After disembarking and making it through the crowd, Wong states:

I finally reached the Park Hotel, breathless, somewhat disheveled and without baggage, but prouder and happier than I've ever been in my life. This tumultuous greeting from my own people touched me more than anything that ever has happened to me in my motion-picture career. Incidentally, I wonder how the idea got abroad that the Chinese are always stolid and without emotion!⁸⁶

Experiencing the unaltered excitement of the Chinese people upon her arrival made Wong question her old roles as a villain in a new way. Before, she was dismayed that she was always the villain because she was tired of consistently being typecast as the exoticized villain, but once she got to China and met the people there, Wong's outlook changed because of the emotion and excitement she saw from them. Ultimately, this shows how the Chinese people defied Wong's expectations of what she thought they would be like. As a result of the negative stereotypes Wong had to portray in American films, the Chinese people could have been offended by

⁸⁴ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 126.

⁸⁵ Anna May Wong, "Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1936.

⁸⁶ Wong, "Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1936.

Wong's visit to this country, but they were decidedly not. This reception resulted in Wong's astonishment that Chinese people would ever be portrayed in film in the way that they had been—stoic and unfeeling. Wong's emotional reaction to this reception helps us understand her new awareness of the stereotypes she had to play on camera and possibly even shame she felt going to China having played these roles that villainized her own people to US audiences.

At that point, numerous Chinese critics had condemned Wong's work thus far, while other Chinese newspapers wrote about Wong favorably. Multiple critics stated that Wong was unwilling to “project the state-sponsored image of modern China,” while he was “conflated with and reduced to her screen roles.”⁸⁷ Wong's Chinese identity was even rejected by Chinese reporters, and described Wong as “straying to a foreign land” and losing her “national soul,” therefore “no longer qualifying as Chinese.”⁸⁸ For Wong to find out that the residents of Shanghai were thrilled to see her and excited about being represented in Hollywood was shocking because she was not expecting this level of excitement and acceptance from the Chinese as a result of these negative reviews.⁸⁹ The *South China Morning Post*, however, favorably reported on Wong throughout her career and especially during her trip to China, stating that Wong was the “idol of thousands of Chinese cinema fans” and that only a few admirers from the crowd were “lucky enough” to meet Wong when she got off of her ship.⁹⁰

Unlike the other reviews of Wong, this newspaper depicts her as an idol for many in China,

⁸⁷ Yiman Wang, “Watching Anna May Wong in Republican China,” in *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, edited by Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 174.

⁸⁸ Wang, “Watching Anna May Wong in Republican China,” 174.

⁸⁹ As Wong moved about in Chinese society, there was some tension concerning her amongst the Chinese people because of her Chinese American status. One female reporter born in the US approached Wong in China, telling her that there was some hard feeling between those born in China and those in America. Wong noted that she wanted to investigate the situation, but there were no other mentions of this tensions in interviews or Wong's articles she wrote that I found in my research. Found in Anna May Wong, “Anna May Wong Finds Shanghai Life Glamorous,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 14, 1936.

⁹⁰ “Anna May Wong: Mob Meets Chinese Film Star at Shanghai,” *South China Morning Post*, February 17, 1936.

instead of someone who is capitalizing off her race and choosing to spread a negative image of China internationally.

Wong continued to express her surprise with Chinese culture as she experienced more of Shanghai, further rewriting what she previously understood about China. The evening of her arrival, Wong attended a party thrown in her honor, then went to an afterparty that lasted until about 5am. She remarked on the quick pace of Shanghai's nightlife particularly, stating that it was the "gayest city [she'd] ever been in, not quite excepting the more brilliant cities of Europe."⁹¹ As a result of this, Wong indicates that she was constantly "blinking with astonishment" as she "hastily revis[ed] [her] early mental pictures [of China]."⁹² In a subsequent article, where Wong was invited to another dinner held in her honor, she stated:

Nothing surprises me anymore. So many of my preconceived ideas have been upset that I feel like a Chinese Alice who has wandered through a very strange looking glass.⁹³

After experiencing Shanghai society and nightlife, the vibrant, modern culture surprised Wong so much so that she had completely readjusted her previous perceptions of China. The US-sponsored image of China was that of a third-world country, lacking modern technology and society. We can see this image reflected in Wong's previous assumptions of China. Not only does this expose the US's backwards assumptions about the primitive state of Chinese society and technology, but it marks a major turning point for Wong herself.

Experiencing Shanghai allowed Wong to bring her new mindset to subsequent films, which we can begin to see in *Daughter of Shanghai*, which was filmed and released the year after she returned from China. *Daughter* was when Wong wore authentic qipaos she bought in China, where she portrayed a woman (somewhat) capable of handling herself, and even when the

⁹¹ Wong, "Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1936.

⁹² Wong, "Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1936.

⁹³ Anna May Wong, "Anna May Wong 'Amazed' at Chinese Appetite," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 7, 1936.

US's political relationship with China began to change, making Wong's enthusiastic portrayal of what China and Chinese people was really like a little more realistic. Chan agrees, stating that Wong's films in this post-China period not only reflect the changing US-Chinese political relations, but aligned with Wong's new outlook on Chinese culture and society, stating that they show a "self-contained and self-confident Chinese American woman" as opposed to a dependent, illegal Chinese immigrant or villain.⁹⁴ When taking Wong's voyage to China into account when viewing this film, we can understand why it was so important that Wong's roles changed for her personally in accordance with the larger political-historical implications of the time. Not only did Wong's preconceived understanding of China itself change when she visited the country, but her thinking about citizenship changed as well, as she began to revise her previous understanding of her own heritage.

In the series of articles Wong wrote about China, along with a feature in the magazine *Pictures* (also written by Wong), we gain an understanding of what citizenship in the US meant to Wong both before and after her trip to China. When Wong sailed to China, she stopped in Hawaii, where she saw Chinese people living in harmony with people of other races, unlike the continental US. Wong was so moved in seeing this, after facing so much prejudice in her childhood and throughout her film career, that she felt as if "both [Americans and Chinese people were] losing something by not knowing each other."⁹⁵ Wong even went so far as to criticize how the Chinese are treated outside of film, stating:

In America the Chinese often are isolated, not because of any deep prejudice, but because Americans regard them as a dark, mysterious race, impossible to understand. They do not realize that, despite important differences, the Chinese are closer to Americans in mental make-up than any people of the East. They are both ambitious, home-loving, anxious to

⁹⁴ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 125.

⁹⁵ Anna May Wong, "Anna May Wong Relates Arrival in Japan, Her First Sight of the Orient," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 24, 1936.

give their sons and daughters every educational advantage and blessed with a strong sense of humor.⁹⁶

Wong's very American portrayal of Lan Ying Lin in *Daughter of Shanghai* makes more sense within this context—Wong could have been trying to show white US audiences how similar Chinese Americans were to them to help try make US society more like the peaceful coexistence she witnessed Hawaii. This voyage could even explain why Wong only starred in roles that portrayed Chinese people in a sympathetic light after she returned to Hollywood. This trip to China has a positive impact on Wong because it not only made her realize what Chinese people were really like, but it caused her to look back on her opinion of race and citizenship, especially in the US.

Wong grappled with citizenship of Chinese Americans and their subsequent Americanization meant to her as early as 1926 at the very beginning of her career. In the 1926 edition of *Pictures*, an American fan magazine, Wong laments on how “Chinese girls in this country try to be American on the outside,” wearing “short skirts” and bobbing their hair while those same women looked at her “in a strange manner” because she kept her hair long.⁹⁷ When she was younger, Wong recognized how other Chinese Americans changed their looks and ways of life to be more American but stated that “they cannot change the inside.”⁹⁸ Wong even talked about how, when she went to the movie theatres as a child, the audiences were “composed largely of Mexicans,” further indicating how Wong saw the impacts of the US film industry on the assimilation of immigrants, including those from China.⁹⁹ This early article from Wong ultimately demonstrates

⁹⁶ Wong, “Anna May Wong Relates Arrival in Japan,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 24, 1936.

⁹⁷ Anna May Wong, “The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl,” *Pictures* (August/September 1926). Found in Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow, 2007), 34-35.

⁹⁸ Wong, “True Life Story,” *Pictures* (August/September 1926). Found in Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 34-35.

⁹⁹ Wong, “True Life Story,” *Pictures* (August/September 1926). Found in Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 34-35. For further reading on Mexican American film audiences in Los Angeles during the first half of the 20th century, see historian Vicki Ruiz's works.

that, while Wong did change her appearance at various points in her career to appear and sound more American in opposition to her film roles, she still believed that even she could not change on the inside. When looking at the article in the context of *NYHT* articles, we understand Wong's fraught relationship with citizenship, how others learned to be American, and how this relationship ultimately changed.

Because of her changing outlook on citizenship and China, Wong was successful in reclaiming and redefining her Chinese heritage both in her personal life and on-screen. In 1932, Wong told a reporter in the *New York Herald Tribune*:

Naturally I am more American than anything else. I was born here and educated here. But slowly I am finding my way back to the Chinese philosophy. The reason I allowed myself to become so Americanized was because it seemed to me the only way I could cope with life in this Western civilization. But I find the lack of serenity and calmness in even every-day things here wears one out. The other way, the Chinese way, I can do twice as much and not feel it... One can't allow disturbances to get under one's skin, to use a colloquial expression.¹⁰⁰

However, in 1936, she talks at length about her US citizenship, stating that she was "going to a strange country" but, in a way, "she was going home."¹⁰¹ Wong even stated that "Chinese in the US suffer from a lifelong homesickness, and this somehow is communicated to their children, even though the children know nothing about their ancestral homeland."¹⁰² These statements run parallel to Wong's prior statements about being born in the US and her citizenship, demonstrating how the way she thought of her Chinese American status changed to be more in favor of China, rejecting what she had previously thought was right. Even though questions of her independence as a woman arise in *Daughter of Shanghai*, these interviews and articles from

¹⁰⁰ Marguerite Tazelaar, "The Occidental Anna May Wong is Found in Oriental New York," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1932. The title itself of this article is fascinating because it refers to Wong as European instead of American or Chinese.

¹⁰¹ Wong, "Wong Tells of Voyage," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1936.

¹⁰² Wong, "Wong Tells of Voyage," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1936.

Wong's point of view allow us to see the greater sense of agency and confidence Wong had because of her trip to China that contributed to her changing roles. The film industry's response to constantly shifting geopolitical relations coincide with Wong's changing mindset, as both (for a short period of time) aligned, as Wong was able to portray Chinese Americans in a somewhat more positive light in film.

Hero: 1940s

When moving into the 1940s, and, therefore, WWII, there is a sharp positive turn in the types of characters Wong played as she became a Chinese war hero. *Bombs Over Burma* and *Lady from Chungking*, both released by the Producers Releasing Corporation in 1942 portray Wong as a hero saving American soldiers and supporting the Allies' war effort in China. These films came out mere months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, so Americans had something in common with the Chinese: they are both the victims of unwarranted attacks from Japan. In contrast to the US's previous stance on China, which was tedious at best due to the ongoing Civil War and threat of Communism, we see the relationship turn from wearisome to sympathetic almost overnight, as demonstrated through Wong's roles.

Bombs over Burma

In the opening sequence of *Bombs over Burma*, Wong stars as Lan Ying, a teacher in Chungking, who begins the film speaking entirely in Mandarin.¹⁰³ She then receives a secret message about a mission to ensure the safety of a food supply truck during class and, upon hearing Japanese fighter planes, escorts most of the Chinese children to safety after teaching

¹⁰³ Not to be confused with Lan Ying Lin from *Daughter of Shanghai*.

them how to sing Yankee Doodle Dandy in English. What follows is a drawn-out montage of planes bombing Chungking and people frantically running to shelter, during which Wong is almost shot down while trying to save a student who mischievously did not follow Wong into the shelter. The student she was trying to save, who was no more than 7 or 8, gets shot down in the first ten minutes of the film at the hands of the Japanese. From the outset of the film, the audience understands that Wong will become a hero because of this traumatic event. While she couldn't save her student, it is implied that she will go on to perform heroic actions. We even get a clear symbol of American might and dominance in Yankee Doodle and even in the Chinese children understanding English. These elements allow US audiences to connect with this heroic teacher, Lan Ying (and Wong) on a level they have not related to her before.¹⁰⁴

Unlike the helpless but well-intentioned daughter in *Daughter of Shanghai*, Wong's character in *Bombs Over Burma* is intelligent and perceptive. A specific frame before the climax of the film exemplifies how her heroic character is best shown in the film. Wong, standing between the undercover German spy and red-blooded American bus driver Slim, looks between them with a small smirk on her face, centered in the frame covered in high key, high fill white lighting (See Figure 5).¹⁰⁵ The two men in the shot are left in shadow, their full faces not seen, further juxtaposing Wong's heroic intentions with the dubious morals of the spy and Slim's cluelessness to her plan to expose the spy. At the end of the film, Lin figures out who amongst the passengers on the bus she was taking to Burma is a German spy, who initially gave away their location and effectively destroyed the road Lan Ying was supposed to protect. Lin then challenges Roger, who she knows is the spy, to a game of chicken, both riding in the first truck in a convoy, understanding that if the truck was attacked, they would be killed. Roger leaps out of the truck at

¹⁰⁴ Joseph H. Lewis, dir., *Bombs Over Burma*. June 4, 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph H. Lewis, dir., *Bombs Over Burma*. June 4, 1942.

the last second because he believes their convoy will be bombed by planes circling above, revealing his true intentions. Wong's character is extremely successful in completing her mission while risking her life to expose the German spy, showing how clever she is when she reveals that the planes above them were US fighter pilots the whole time. She even asserts her agency within China by calling a group of Chinese peasants over to beat the spy to death. The sequence at the end of the film shows the aptitude of this character, which is a sharp turn away from the clueless villain in *Daughter of the Dragon*, the rash prostitute in *Shanghai Express*, and the helpless US citizen in *Daughter of Shanghai*.

Lady from Chungking

Bombs Over Burma is unique in Wong's filmography because she portrays a true hero, helping both the American and Chinese war efforts, and does not die in the end. In *Lady from Chungking*, Wong plays a somewhat similar role of a Chinese hero helping the war effort, but dies in the end, instead of being clever enough to escape death. Wong's character Kwan Mei rescues American pilots after their plane crashes in Japan, where she is located to learn about Japanese troop movements. Since Kwan Mei moonlights as the leader of some guerilla Chinese forces working against the Japanese, she ultimately helps the pilots escape their eventual Japanese capture with their lives instead of being killed. Along the way, Kwan Mei earns the pilots' trust, after helping them kill Japanese soldiers, but is still ordered to be executed by the Japanese.¹⁰⁶ Wong's survival in *Bombs Over Burma* as opposed to *Lady from Chungking* is due in part to Joseph H. Lewis, the director of *Bombs*. According to Taves, Lewis wrote and directed

¹⁰⁶ William Nigh, dir., *Lady from Chungking*, December 21, 1942.



Figure 5. Anna May Wong as Lan Ying Lin in *Bombs Over Burma*.

Bombs specifically for Wong, and he was continually aware that this film was culturally significant for Wong herself as she was representing her ancestral land.¹⁰⁷

These films, while important, were not produced on the same level as films previously discussed because of the change in studio, resulting in an uneven recognition in scholarship about Wong. These two PRC films have poor sound and camera quality, cliched writing, and sub-par sets that are very amateur when compared with the detail of Paramount's *Shanghai Express*. As a result of their lower status in cinematic history, especially when directly compared with Paramount films, many scholars that study Wong completely ignore the films, either mentioning them briefly or not at all. Shirley Lim does not mention these films in her biography on Wong, likely because these films, as Chan notes, were not "film vehicles that enhanced Wong's career" despite her starring role in them.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Taves, "Joseph H. Lewis, Anna May Wong, and *Bombs Over Burma*," 118.

¹⁰⁸ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 149.

The films' importance lies in their symbolic nature because they allowed Wong to forcefully express her personal opinions about current politics. These two films were "public expressions of her political convention" she did not have the agency to express in her other films with Paramount.¹⁰⁹ Taves agrees with Chan's assessment, arguing that despite their B-roll status, these films are massively important not only because they allowed Wong a certain type of freedom in how China was portrayed through her roles, but these two films were some of the first to show a sympathetic portrayal of China. When analyzed in contrast to her other films in the 1930s where Wong is undoubtedly the villain, these films mark a massive turning point in Wong's career. These films present a new way of "recogniz[ing] an alternative" to the exotic villain for audiences, but only if we accept B-roll films made by lesser-known studios as important as their big-budget counterparts.¹¹⁰ Despite their lack of financial success and popularity compared to Paramount's films, understanding a broad cross-section of Wong's work is important to be able to track the change over time in her roles.

The promotional materials released along with *Bombs Over Burma* demonstrate that, while Wong was portrayed as a hero in these films, the publicity materials outside of the film still focus on her physical appearance as a Chinese American woman. One brief article talks about how her new hairstyle in this film and how it mimics "two muffins" on top of her head behind her "Chinese bangs" in a distinct hair arrangement that is both "striking and exotic."¹¹¹ Another article touches on her hairstyle again, and how the "unique coiffure" was retrieved from a "style worn centuries ago in her native China."¹¹² The intense focus on her new hairstyle and its exotic

¹⁰⁹ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 149.

¹¹⁰ Taves, "Joseph H. Lewis, Anna May Wong, and *Bombs Over Burma*," 130.

¹¹¹ "New Coiffure for the Ladies Created by Anna May Wong," *Bombs over Burma* Publicity, Producers Releasing Corporation, 1942. (Accessed via the University of California Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive.)

¹¹² "New Coiffure," *Bombs over Burma* Publicity, Producers Releasing Corporation.

nature still 'other' Wong for the American public consuming these materials, despite the positive messages within *Bombs* that contradict prior depictions of Wong. For the role, it is stated that Wong had to learn Mandarin instead of her "native Cantonese," again ignoring her US nationality.¹¹³ These publicity materials refer to China as Wong's native land despite her birth in California, ignoring her American citizenship. Despite her heroic role in *Bombs* and changing US sentiment towards China because of their new alliance in the face of the Japanese, Wong is still 'othered' in materials US audiences read, keeping her separated from white actresses.

These WWII-era films mark a brief shift to a sympathetic portrayal of how Wong's gender is perceived and portrayed as a Chinese woman. Instead of being shown as an exotic threat to white masculinity, Wong is seen as a hero who can bridge the gap between cultures and save the lives of white American men without degrading their sense of masculinity. She also represents the different form of femininity that developed during WWII as American women entered the workforce. Men were not seen as any less masculine because they were off at war, while women were no less feminine for working in factories and helping drive the war effort on the home front. This important shift in femininity reflected in Wong's films is important because Wong embodies this movement in white femininity instead of a white character, giving US audiences something else to relate to in her character despite the 'othering' of her race. Wong's personification of the increased independence of American women does not sexualize her for the benefit of the audience, as opposed to her prior films. Wong is still exoticized, however, especially when examining the promotional materials for the film, but any sexual appeal for the audience in these films would have to come from her heroism and support of the Allied war effort, instead of through promiscuous costumes or performances.

¹¹³ "Anna May Wong Speaks Cantonese in New Picture," *Bombs over Burma* Publicity, Producers Releasing Corporation.

Wong's Wartime Actions

After her return from China, pre-WWII tensions quickly escalated in the late 1930s, and Wong's response to the conflict was to use her fame to support the Chinese war effort against Japan. Much like her on-screen characters, Wong championed sympathy and alliance with the Chinese on the US home front, participating in many festivals, tours, and fundraisers to help China fend off Japanese aggression. While Wong did not complete many interviews in the 1940s with *NYHT* and *HCN* (likely because of her lack of film roles), her actions were still reported on, which can give us an inside look at her true thoughts and opinions. The 1940s demonstrate how the war affected Wong's career, not just in what parts Hollywood cast her in but in what parts she was willing to accept and how she utilized her status as a celebrity figure to influence public opinion.

When Wong landed the contract with Producers Releasing Corporation in 1941 for two films, her career and life outside of film finally intersected. When she was filming *Lady from Chungking*, Wong said she “derived much pleasure from the fact that the first time she ever handled a gun on the screen she had to shoot a Japanese general.”¹¹⁴ She was even sworn in as an air raid warden in Santa Monica during this same year, stating that it was “a privilege to be able to do my little bit.”¹¹⁵ Wong was clearly concerned for China's wellbeing, along with the Chinese people she had grown to appreciate during her visit to China. In the 1940s, Wong finally got to use her seniority and fame in the film industry to play characters that reflected her personal values.

¹¹⁴ “Anna May Wong Shoots a Japanese--- in Film,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, December 26, 1942.

¹¹⁵ “Anna May Wong Sworn in as Air Raid Warden,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, December 8, 1942.

Additionally, instead of talking only about herself and her career during this period, Wong used her fame to spread awareness about China's struggles during the war. In 1939, as WWII was beginning in Europe and continuing in Asia, the *Hollywood Citizen-News* reported that Wong made a personal appearance in Australia, where she found people sympathetic with the Chinese and their conflict against Japan. She toured around Australia, where she held lectures, showed movies of war scenes, and raised money for China.¹¹⁶ In 1940, Wong continued her efforts to support China, participating in a festival to raise money to help Chinese hospital and Chinese war orphans.¹¹⁷ She even participated in a Christmas parade, where she expressed "with confidence" that right will prevail in China and in all countries of the world which are at this moment suffering the pangs of warfare."¹¹⁸ Wong has a new sense of purpose because she was motivated by her trip to China, not concerned with the well-being of her career, rather, focused solely on doing her part in trying to ease the pains of war for China.

The 1940s were unique for Wong because her film roles, actions, and opinions about China all coincided with one another. In the early '30s, her true opinions and her roles were juxtaposed, but films during the '40s mirrored what she wanted to convey. This shift demonstrates how Wong had a greater sense of agency and control over the films she was in, specifically choosing to represent China in a positive light, instead of taking other roles that would have followed stereotypes that were similar to the villains she used to play. In one of her 1936 articles where she wrote about her trip to China, Wong stated that she felt "more than ever like a person moving between two worlds," which is reflected in her actions during WWII, as she truly acted as a semi-ambassador for China in the US, uniting the two cultures in a time of

¹¹⁶ "Chinese Actress Ends Australian Tour," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, September 5, 1939.

¹¹⁷ "China Aid Festival Raises \$6000," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 7, 1940.

¹¹⁸ "Appeal for Peace Keynotes Last Lane Float Parade," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, December 25, 1940.

hardship.¹¹⁹ After her visit from China, we see how she's upholding her new perspective of the country and of her people. This shift in Wong's outlook on her career and fluctuating priorities, however, likely contributed to the slow decline of her career. Since she was unwilling to portray harmful stereotypes like she was before, Wong probably only wanted to accept roles that showed her and China in a positive light.¹²⁰ These positive roles were very likely few and far between with bigger studios reluctant to put out pro-Chinese films starring a Chinese American actress, especially as Wong grew older.

Conclusion

In one of Anna May Wong's obituaries, she was quoted, having said that her epitaph should be "I died a thousand deaths."¹²¹ Over the course of her career, Wong's characters died at least five times in just her American films, demonstrating the lack of happy endings in Hollywood for the characters Wong portrayed. Passed on to audiences, this sense of fatality in film perpetrated a negative perception of Asian characters and, therefore, Asian immigrants and Asian American citizens, especially those from China. Over time, Wong's portrayals in Hollywood films changed due to the constantly fluctuating political relationship between the US and China, as she played the villain, a hapless woman in need of help, and a war hero. While Wong's roles were different across her career, they all posed a threat to white masculinity. Whether Wong was trying to entrap and kill a white man or do a man's job for him, she served as a groundbreaking alternative to the dominant white masculine mindset of the mid-20th century. Continually the victim of

¹¹⁹ Wong, "Anna May Wong Tells of Voyage," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1936.

¹²⁰ When Wong visited China, she notes that the Chinese Film Censorship Bureau wanted to meet with her, but she did not know what the meeting was about. While we will probably never be able to know what was discussed in that meeting, one could speculate that they told Wong not to take any more roles that would incriminate or villainize the Chinese people. This could help explain why Wong only took the roles she did in the 1940s, amongst her motivations to help China during the war and her dwindling film career.

¹²¹ "Anna May Wong Dies at 54; Was 30 Years in the Movies," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1961.

Orientalism and exoticization, Wong had a landmark career that broke racial and gender boundaries for Asian actors today, the positive effects of which will continue to last for generations. Through her interviews and autobiographical newspaper articles, we can also see how Wong was a pioneer in trying to change US mindsets at a time that villainized Asian people, despite her lack of opportunities in Hollywood.

When looking at the stereotypes displayed specifically in films from the 1930s and '40s that pigeonhole Chinese culture into a specific mold, as Said asserted, we can come to understand how stereotypes in popular culture have developed over time into what we see today. The dragon lady and fragile China doll developed in the birth of modern Hollywood, where these stereotypes were popularized and spread to the masses. Old films maintain significant cultural relevance because we can see where harmful stereotypes came from and how they developed over time, culminating with various films released in the past five years that celebrate Asian culture. To understand why the new, all-Asian casted and Asian-led films are important for the film industry, we need to understand how few roles were available to Wong as an Asian American in the mid-20th century and how those roles have changed over time.

In terms of historical development past what I have discussed throughout my research, when we look past the '40s, stereotypes within film, and now television, potentially turned negative again. Despite the Immigration Act of 1924's repeal in 1943 and eventual rights for Asian immigrants in the 1960s, the Chinese Civil War, functioning as part of the Cold War, caused US public sentiment to turn against China. In 1949, the Communist Party won the Chinese Civil War, pushing the Nationalists out of the government. As a result of the US's newly declared war against Communism, especially in Asia, Chinese stereotypes in US film likely turned negative again, to reflect and support the massive ideological change. Unfortunately, this change cannot

be examined through Wong's career. Her sole project in the 1950s, the television show *Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, has been lost.¹²² The development of Chinese American stereotypes could still be traced through other Chinese American actresses, but the prime of Wong's career ends in the 1940s.

Upon Wong's fatal heart attack in 1961, many obituaries were published about her in the US and abroad, some of which still featured orientalist attitudes, further demonstrating the exoticization that permeated her career, even after her death. In the *New York Herald Tribune's* obituary for Wong, she was physically described within the first four short paragraphs, identified as an "Oriental temptress in exotic thrillers" and a "sloe-eyed beauty" who typically wound up "shot, knifed, or poisoned."¹²³ The obituary credits her as the "most famous American-born Chinese actress in motion-picture history," but not without stating that she had "high cheekbones, heavy-lidded eyes and horizontal bangs."¹²⁴ Forty years after the height of her career, Wong was still identified by various characteristics she had that separated her from white audiences. In the *South China Morning Post*, however, Wong was called a "still beautiful actress" who was once a "symbol of Oriental mystery in a long string of Hollywood films."¹²⁵ Unlike the *NYHT*, the *SCMP* only calls Wong beautiful instead of detailing her various characteristics, which emphasizes the US's continued attraction to her heritage and femininity as her defining traits into the 1960s, instead of talking about her unwavering representation, support, and advocacy for Chinese and Chinese American people. Wong's positive impact on

¹²² Produced by the now defunct DuMont Television Network, the only existing copies of the show were thrown into the Hudson River in the 1970s because of their apparent lack of value. For further reading, see Nicole Chung, "The Search for 'The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong,'" *Vulture*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/09/the-search-for-the-gallery-of-madame-liu-tsong.html>.

¹²³ "Anna May Wong Dies at 54," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1961.

¹²⁴ "Anna May Wong Dies at 54," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1961.

¹²⁵ "Famed actress Anna May Wong Dies Suddenly," *South China Morning Post*, February 5, 1961.

film and the Chinese American community that was barely touched on in her obituaries remained largely unacknowledged until recently.

My research surrounding older films and Wong remains relevant because of a resurgence of scholarship and increased public awareness of Wong and her career. As more films and television shows featuring Asian actors are released, historians, film scholars, and members of the public have begun to look to the past to see how this representation has developed over time. My secondary sources that focus on Wong have been published in the past two decades and she will even be on the US quarter in 2022, signifying her growing importance in modern society as an underappreciated, groundbreaking film star who was the first of her kind.¹²⁶ Anna May Wong is a massively important part of the US film industry because she paved the way for others and continues to do so, which justifies her recent rise to prominence in our culture today. Wong's mid-20th century films also remain relevant despite their age because they can be used as a tool for us to examine the culture and stereotypes of that specific time. Films are living primary sources that can function as a window into the past, giving us a first-hand chance to see what Wong looked and sounded like in her films. Not only do we get to see Wong in action in these films and read her own thoughts that supplement her career in Hollywood, but we can understand the historical implications of these films, what stereotypes were portrayed in them, and why they remain important when examining US culture. Wong's characters in film died numerous times, but Wong herself lives on because of her indomitable spirit that changed Hollywood and the US forever.

¹²⁶ "Anna May Wong Quarter," United States Mint, last modified October 6, 2021, <https://www.usmint.gov/coins/coin-medal-programs/american-women-quarters/anna-may-wong>.

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