Yiman Wang

TO BE AN ACTRESS

Labor and Performance in Anna May Wong's Cross-Media World

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This book is lovingly dedicated to my parents
and my spirit Maomao (August 3, 2002–July 7, 2022)

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A portion of chapter 5 is expanded from my article "Playback, Play-Forward: Anna May Wong in Double Exposure," published in Katherine Groo and Paul Flaig, eds., *New Silent Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 106–25.

As a first-generation immigrant to the US who has by now spent half of my life in my adopted country, I ponder where Anna May Wong, a third-generation Chinese American, differs from me, and where our minds meet, on our migratory paths and in our push and pull with our respective families. Wong ultimately called her visit to her father back in their southern Chinese hometown the most meaningful trip in her life. Similarly, my parents in China will always hold up a home for me to return to. To my parents—who know when to guide, and when to let me fly—with all my love.

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Prelude

The completion of this book coincided with a juncture of profound irony. On the one hand, Anna May Wong (1905–61), the pioneering Asian American female performer, received unprecedented recognition not only for her indelible contribution to American cinema, but also as an exemplary woman of color whose face was newly memorialized on a quarter coin issued in 2022,[1] and whose figure found a new embodiment in the red dragon–gowned Barbie doll in Mattel's Barbie Inspiring Women series, released for the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month of 2023.[2] On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic that brought the world to a prolonged halt in 2020 also unleashed anti-Asian hate in Euro-America,[3] resulting in skyrocketing crimes against East Asian–presenting persons and communities who became the easy target of a racist surge. How do we square the enthusiastic media celebration of Wong and other prominent Asian-heritage North Americans with the rampant violence against those who look like them? To put it more bluntly, how did anti-Asian hate become so infectious and egregious even as the mainstream media and popular culture were vigorously promoting Asian North American legacies? Most importantly, what can Anna May Wong teach us regarding her and our never-ending battles against die-hard racism, sexism, and patriarchal nationalism that underpin the exclusionary, hierarchizing system as a whole?

Wong is a prime example for probing these pressing issues, for she embodied the conundrum of being excluded and idolized all at once; and her life-career emerged from tirelessly and resourcefully navigating this conundrum.[4] Nearly one hundred years ago, just nine years after her screen debut in 1919, Wong already felt the frustration of a stalling career in Hollywood due to the latter's discriminatory nature compounded with the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943). In 1928, she made

her first cross-Atlantic trip, landing in Berlin for a one-picture contract, which led to a series of film and theater engagements in Germany, France, the UK, and Austria. Her first European trip from 1928 to 1930 turned out to be a career-defining period that established her international celebrity in interwar Europe and spurred further trips to Europe in the mid-1930s, to China in 1936, and to Australia in 1939. Throughout her peripatetic life-career, Wong crossed nations, oceans, media forms, and technologies in a resilient search for more fulfilling work in a more equitable work environment. She appeared in over seventy films and television shows, in addition to extensive theater work (encompassing Broadway, the British legitimate theater, and vaudeville shows in Euro-America and Australia) and some radio shows. Her work off camera and off stage were just as important, representing her painstaking retraining and hustle in response to changing media terrains and audience expectations, as well as to the dramatically shifting Sino-American relationship from interwar cosmopolitanism through World War II to Cold War.

A globe-trotter *and* a transnational migrant worker during the era of Chinese Exclusion, Wong charted out a cross-media world, fostering and greeting her multinational audiences then, now, and into the future. Her life-career bears witness to the mainstream society's simultaneous discrimination and idolization, both due to her misfit "Oriental" femininity. Furthermore, her cross-media world shows us methods of critiquing and navigating the conundrum of being included as the good object and being excluded as the bad object all at once. My entry point to Wong's brave cross-media world is the glaring gap between her words of barbed humor and the stultifying mainstream media coverage of her. I give two "scenes" below, juxtaposing Wong's voice with the journalistic voice to underscore her engagement with and defiance of the latter's inclusion/exclusion rhetoric. The two scenes are structured in reverse chronological order to mirror my research trajectory of retracing her life-career.

SCENE 1

Wong (shortly before arriving in Australia for her vaudeville shows in 1939):
"People insist on looking at me as a freak—something akin to a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf. I want to be an actress, not a freak. I want to feel that people go to see my pictures because I perform well, not just because I am an Oriental. [Coming to perform in Australia will allow me to find out whether] I have anything really to offer the public or whether I must just go on being regarded as a freak."[5]

Journalist: Wong was "agreeably decorative" except when performing "Half-Caste Woman," which gave her an "opportunity for harsh and intense acting."[6]

Wong returned to Hollywood on September 1, "after a mediocre season for Tivoli Theatres," "not well known Down Under," "not a boxoffice draw."[7]

SCENE 2

Wong, after playing opposite Lon Chaney in *Bits of Life* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1921), announced her arrival as a "considerable spot of yellow that's come to stay on the silver of the screen."[8]

Journalist: Given the newly popular "yellow" added to the "screenland color symphony," there would be "plenty of roles ahead for this little Chinese actress, who brings a much-needed freshness to the screen, a breath of lotus flowers."[9]

FROM STAR STUDIES TO PERFORMER-WORKER STUDIES

These scenes foreground a consistent pattern in Wong's life-career: the ongoing negotiation, contention, and co-constitution between her self-narrativization and journalistic (mis)representation. By constructing scenes such as these, I composite a mosaic and polyphonic portrait of Wong with pieces gleaned from her four-decade-long career (1919–61), which I have assembled, deciphered, reimagined, and reanimated over the course of a decade of my own life-career. Braiding our two disparate yet reverberating lives, I turn to Wong's cross-media world for insights about precarity, labor, subversion, collaboration, and agency in our current media environment and political climate. I ask how we might reenergize her challenges and contributions to Euro-American film and media industries and societies at large, and what strategies we could develop to parse out the irony plaguing her life-career as both a hypervisible icon of "Oriental" femininity and an invisibilized female performer of color.

It is important to note that Wong, now canonized as a pioneering Chinese American stage and screen performer, has received much attention as a darling subject for scholars, documentary makers, and fiction filmmakers alike.[10] Three biographies, one compendium of her oeuvre, and many scholarly works have illuminated various dimensions of Wong's legacy, including cosmopolitanism, costume and fashion, racial stardom, racial modernity, and European reception.[11] Most of this scholarship focuses on a prominent slice of Wong's life-career, without an overarching engagement with her career trajectory across multiple media platforms, geopolitical locations, and historical periods. This book deploys a multidimensional, multi-sited, and longitudinal approach to foreground Wong's physical, intellectual, and affective labor undergirding her agency, which I understand in terms of reiterative authorship. My ultimate goal is to reorient glamour-driven,

hierarchizing star discourses, transforming them into labor-centered, de-hierarchizing performer-worker studies.

Any recuperative celebration of Wong's accomplishments against all odds must stay vigilant to the fact that the "odds" she struggled against are still with us, as amply demonstrated by the vengeful resurgence of xenophobic, anti-Asian violence during the pandemic. Despite the US government's repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, racism, sexism, and other structural hierarchies have continued to fuel patriarchal white supremacism and settler colonialism. My study, therefore, focuses on Wong's travails, perseverance, and resourcefulness as the very foundation that anchors and politicizes her much-adulated, glamorous cosmopolitanism. It is in illuminating her tireless, yet oftentimes seemingly futureless, labor as an itinerant and minoritized cross-media performer that I locate her disruption of the white-male-dominant entertainment industries during and beyond her lifetime.

In this study, I reject both victimology (that habitually nails her as the victim of her times) and triumphalism (that enthuses over her singular and individual victory over the crippling system). Diametrically opposed as they may seem, victimology and triumphalism share the neoliberal presumptions of individualist agency, unilineal teleology, and presentism. That is, they both distinguish Wong through her individual strength and art—which went unnoticed during her conservative times but have supposedly come to light in our more progressive present time. In short, her individual merits are credited for elevating her to a model minority par excellence who finally wins the battle—in our enlightened historical hindsight.

Countering this neoliberal approach, I stress Wong's decades-long labor and paradoxical agency, which fully recognized constraints and precarity and yet persevered in leveraging all resources—not only for career building, but also with the effect of challenging ideologies and practices responsible for systemic inequities and exclusionism. Wong's paradoxical agency stems from her signature meta-performances of gender-race stereotypes.[12] I theorize such meta-performances as "Oriental" (dis)play, which simultaneously flaunts and undermines stereotypes, along with the underlying Orientalism and heteronormative patriarchy. Wong's paradoxical agency is cumulative, interactive, rooted in a cross-media career that was precarious, peripatetic, and labor-intensive. The concept of paradoxical agency provides a generative framework for studying the long-obscured legacy of other minoritized female performers. Indeed, it is only by piecing together such a genealogy that the notion of paradoxical agency can gain traction and become a transformative sociopolitical force.

My study of the exemplary case of Wong, therefore, lays the groundwork for a field of performer-worker studies that builds upon Danae Clark's groundbreaking study of Hollywood actors' "labor power" by "resituat[ing] labor at the heart

of cultural theory."[13] Despite her ambitious efforts to "map the terrain of actors' labor and subjectivity, to locate the various sites in which actors' labor power and subjectivity is constructed, fought over, and played out," Clark admits a lack of integration between her historical and theoretical analysis, due to "the lack of information available on specific actors/stars in relation to specific events."[14] Furthermore, while emphasizing the "actor as worker" as "a prerequisite term in formulating the actor's subject identity," she lumps "race, age, talent, ethnicity, beauty, and sexuality" together as so many "factors" that "enter into a theory of actors' subjectivity as some of the many discourses that circulate around the figure of the working actor."[15] As a result, Clark's theorization of actors' subjectivity remains inadequate for the task of addressing racialized and sexualized performer-workers like Wong and their labor struggles in Hollywood's hierarchizing system.

This book shares Clark's goal of retooling and politicizing star studies. But it does so by using performer-worker studies to amplify marginalized voices, so as to reinsert nonwhite and gendered labor as the very foundation for star glamour. Striving to integrate theorization and historicization, my analysis of Wong's precarious labor conditions benefits from studies of freelance and contract talents in Hollywood's studio era by film historians Kate Fortmueller and Emily Carman. Fortmueller shows that the term *freelance* emerged in 1924 to designate a condition of labor; it "provided a shorthand to distinguish short-term from long-term contracts, . . . also a way of describing how actors navigated their career paths and built their livelihoods by moving between roles on stage to roles on screen and taking on multiple, short-term, project-specific contracts."[16] Both Fortmueller and Carman find that while some name-brand talents leveraged the freedom afforded by freelancing to maximize their career development, many freelancers were extras and working actors. Carman specifically points out that ethnic actresses like Wong and Lupe Vélez rarely enjoyed a long-term studio contract.[17] Throughout this book, I detail the precarity besieging Wong's labor struggles, resulting in no contract, aborted contracts, or short-term contracts with Paramount in the 1930s and with Production Releasing Corporation in the 1940s, both for lower-budget B movies. Her condition compels our attention to the ways in which labor (even when not fruitful in the conventional sense) underpins performer-worker studies.

My performer-worker approach hinges upon Wong's cross-media performative agency—not only in the foreground as the leading lady, but more importantly in the margins and the background as a supporting and ancillary performer, and in her labor-intensive retraining and rebeginning after being excluded from the mainstream film industry. My critical move from the center to the background and the margins is mirrored in the structure of the book, and is grounded in Wong's mosaic life-career. A mosaic is a nonhierarchical composite, each facet being constitutive of the whole, yet not blending into it, contrary to the assimilationist camouflage. This multifaceted and quasi-cubist composite encourages

multiple roaming perspectives, annulling a single fixed, linear perspective and its rigid demarcation of the foreground and the background, the center and the margins, the major and the minor. The mosaic reminds us that every single facet is equally important, for the entire mosaic emerges only as a result of the constellation and co-relation of all facets. And yet the recognition of the entire mosaic does not erase the singular and unassimilable significance of each facet. Thus, the mosaic inspires a method of deconstructing the naturalized media-industrial and social hierarchies—between capital and labor, stars and workers.

My critical move from the center to the background and the margins metaphorically adopts an anamorphic lens that refutes the frontal linear perspective and retrains our eyes for a different episteme of noticing.[18] As we learn to decipher Wong's presence in the face of systemic exclusion and marginalization, we produce a perspectival shift that transforms the very structure of knowledge production. This further enables us to valorize Wong's broad-spectrum labor, including (re)training, collaborating or co-laboring, traveling, waiting, and learning to be resourceful and strategic in negotiating gender-race constraints and other forms of prejudices that underpin the entertainment industries and societies at large.

The other prong of my use of performer-worker studies is to engage with Wong's voices, or what I call her "greetings" to the world. Wong's labor in this sense yields affective politics. As an anticipatory interlocutor, she not only addresses her contemporary audiences and readers across the Atlantic and the Pacific, but also co-labors with her diachronic viewers in fostering race-gender-conscious critical sensibilities.[19] Centering the active encounter between the enunciative film and the existing as well as potential spectatorial positions, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam parse the "question of address" into "Who is speaking through a film? Who is imagined as listening? Who is actually listening? Who is looking? And what social desires are mobilized by the film?"[20] To these I add that Wong's audience address often deviates from and subverts the film's intended audience interpellation. She not only gears her gender-race performances for her real-life audiences that were predominantly white and monolingual, but also mobilizes ironic metaperformances to recruit more discerning and possibly multilingual viewers who might not have been the targeted audience, and who could learn to tune into her subversive *détournement* of stereotypes.

As Wong keeps inspiring new generations of viewers, media makers, and critics (such as myself) in our ongoing navigation of migration and dislocation, precarity and labor, and the creation of lifeworlds on the go, this book emerges from my interlocution with her diachronic greetings. I co-labor with her as my historical "companion" in order to reanimate the "potential history" she embodies.[21] To fully comprehend the impact of Wong's transnational and diachronic audience address, I take into account, but do not limit myself to, empirically documented reviews

and audience responses. That is, I frame historically grounded research with critical interpretation and speculation, as necessitated by the lacunae and ideological biases inherent in institutional archives.

A SPECULATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ANACHRONOTOPE

The majority of documented commentaries during Wong's lifetime came either from white reviewers, who mostly rehashed fetishistic Orientalism, or from Chinese reviewers who tended to evaluate her on the basis of her contribution (or perceived failure to contribute) to Chinese ethno-patriarchal nationalism. Limited coverage could be found in Chinese American and Japanese American newspapers and magazines. The extent to which Wong's films were shown in Chinatown theaters, and how they were received by first-generation immigrants who were not necessarily fluent in English, remains to be investigated.[22] Overall, reviews by minoritized communities are scarce. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Wong's nuanced subversive "Oriental" (dis)play of gender-race stereotypes often went unnoticed; and it is impossible to gauge how effective her meta-performances were, *if* we simply rely on published commentaries.

Such lacunae are symptomatic of the systemic exclusion of misfit voices in institutional archives. To address a similar problem, feminist and critical Black studies scholars have deployed the method of speculative historiography, which is increasingly used to reimagine feminist media studies. I am inspired by Adrienne Rich's call for a "re-vision—the act of looking back" as "an act of survival,"[23] by Canadian novelist and playwright Daphne Marlatt's powerful trope of "a historical leak, a hole in the sieve of fact that let the shadow of a possibility leak through into full-blown life,"[24] by Black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" as a method of producing a "recombinant narrative,"[25] by film scholar Allyson Nadia Field's method of "looking and thinking adjacently" beyond extant cinema so as to reconstruct a lost film and media history "out of surviving archival ephemera,"[26] and by the "Speculative Approaches to Media Histories" special issues of *Feminist Media Histories* edited by Field.[27]

The method of speculative historiography allows me to reanimate what dominant archives have failed to recognize, but also have failed to completely eradicate. It leads me to envision an alternative spatiotemporal ordering, namely the "anachronotope," which works to disrupt and derail the reproductive mechanism of gender, race, and other power inequities. *Anachronotope*, a combination of *anachronism* and *chronotope*, designates disjointed, recursive, and nonhierarchical time-spaces that throw teleological progressionism into disarray, and instead invest in what is rendered passé and marginal. The

anachronotope characterizes three dimensions of Wong's challenge to Orientalist and heteropatriarchal futurism.

First, her reenactment of gender-race stereotypes was inherently anachronotopic in that the stereotypes, preceding her career, were hand-me-down types and were, by definition, out of time-and-place. However, since they were naturalized to typify Oriental femininity, it takes Wong's ironic meta-performances to make the types doubly anachronotopic, thereby to expose their artificiality predicated upon racism and sexism. Second, Wong's famous self-styled "thousand deaths" on the screen should not be simply understood as her victimization by white supremacy that rendered her the disposable femme fatale (although this was certainly true). Viewed from an anamorphic perspective, her histrionic screen deaths could signal an exit from the white heteronormative narrative. Straying from colonialist reproductive futurism, she charted out an alternative spatiotemporality, or anachronotope. Third, the anachronotope helps us understand Wong's authorship as cumulative yet episodic intermedial citation (including self-citation) across decades and continents—a recursive process that defies a neoliberal individualist success narrative and that is intertwined with actual and *anticipatory* audience interactions.

Wong's anachronotopic investment in alternative spatiotemporalities requires a historically grounded speculative approach that is attentive to the potentialities in between the stereotypical images and in between the documented archival voices. I develop the archival-speculative method into a three-pronged semiotic-affective reading strategy to parse out Wong's anachronotope. The three prongs are, respectively, "reparative reading," the Marxist act of politicizing a text, and an affective understanding of the experience of racialization.

Eve Sedgwick proposes "reparative reading" as a corrective to the "paranoid reading" that applies an "x-ray gaze" to anticipate, expose, and minimize surprises, and that merely serves as "self-defeating strategies for *forestalling pain*."[28] Feminist economic geographers such as J. K. Gibson-Graham similarly criticize paranoid reading for defeatist "affirm[ation of] an ultimately essentialist, usually structural, vision of what is and reinforce[ment of] what is perceived as dominant," such as "neoliberalism, or globalization, or capitalism, or empire."[29] "Reparative reading," on the contrary, according to Sedgwick, is "additive and accretive," and "founded on and coextensive with the subject's movement toward what Foucault calls 'care of the self,' the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them."[30] For Gibson-Graham, the reparative approach suggests "a different orientation toward theory," one that "disinvest[s] in our paranoid practices of critique and mastery" and moves toward "an ethical practice" of "co-implication" involving "changing ourselves/changing our thinking/changing the world."[31] "Reparative reading" thus posits an "ethics of thinking" that produces the ground of possibility.[32]

The ethics of reparative reading enables me to recuperate Wong's ostensibly abject reinscription of gender-race stereotypes, recasting it as anachronotopic and paradoxically agential meta-performances. My reparative reading of Wong is akin to Miriam J. Petty's study of 1930s African American performers such as Hattie McDaniel, Bill Robinson, Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington, and Lincoln Perry. As she argues, these performers' stereotype-dominant "problematic stardom" (Arthur Knight's term) actually "expressed agency and negotiated ideas about their lives and identities through acts of performance and discourse that incorporated and exceeded the cinematic frame."[33] Terri Simone Francis studies another "problematic" African American (turned French) star, Josephine Baker, and reaches a similar conclusion regarding Baker's "fractured" authorship through her oppositional burlesque "signification."[34] While building upon Petty's and Francis's work, I also find myself leaning toward a more speculatively reparative reading. Unlike Petty and Francis, who heavily depend upon the African American press to substantiate the "problematic" performers' authorship and agency, I find the Asian American and diasporic Chinese press inadequate due to its overall fragmentary and superficial coverage of Wong and her performance career. My mobilization of these resources, therefore, must (whenever possible) be combined with the methodological intervention of speculative reparative reading that focuses on Wong's paradoxical agency inscribed in her meta-performances as well as obscured paratexts.

This leads to the second prong of my interpretation strategy: the Marxist act of politicizing a text. Tony Bennett describes the task of Marxist criticism as "that of *actively politicizing* the text, of *making its politics for it*, by producing a new position for it within the field of cultural relations and, thereby, new forms of use and effectivity within the broader social process."[35] In film studies, Jane Gaines implicitly mobilizes such critical positioning when she reconstructs Dorothy Arzner as a queer film director "in the name of" Arzner.[36] Echoing Gaines, "in the name of" Wong, my critical repositioning alongside deep contextualization seeks to wrestle her legacy from the overarching power structure and politicize it "within the broader social [and historical] process." Given the die-hard systemic power inequity, the work of political repositioning is necessarily continuous, refuting teleological progressionism. Wong's anachronotope invites precisely such a nonteleological vision of an equitable lifeworld in improvisation.

My reparative reading and political positioning are supplemented by the third prong, which aims at an affective comprehension of Wong's audience address that consciously fosters relational and emotional resonance with viewers. Asian American theater critic Josephine Lee writes that there is a "pleasure" for Asian American actors in reenacting stereotypes; the pleasure lies in "shar[ing] with us as audience the thrill of being inside what is deeply shameful."[37] Through the shared thrill, "even though the role of the stereotype is familiar and detestable, the casting of the Asian body is enough to ensure a kind of welcome disruption,

an *illicit pleasure that sets up a key tension between stereotype and performer*."[38] The "illicit pleasure" catalyzes emotional recognition, bonding, and communion between the Asian American performer and her resonating viewers. Wong's subversive gender-race meta-performances become affectively impactful precisely because they produce the contact realm of shared minoritarian experiences.

Here I draw on José Esteban Muñoz's understanding of racial difference as "affective difference" and, more specifically, the Latina affect of "feeling brown." He writes that "different historically coherent groups 'feel' differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register."[39] And such "minoritarian affect" is always "partially illegible in relation to normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects."[40] Pushing beyond Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" he asks: "How does the subaltern *feel*? How might subalterns *feel each other*?"[41] He further describes the subaltern feeling of/for each other as the dynamic of "recognition [that] flickers between minoritarian subjects."[42] Such inter-minoritarian recognition, or what he calls the "sharing out of a brown sense of the world" beyond the (self-)identified brown community,[43] brings into being a contactive and resonating realm.

Muñoz's affective approach to racial(ized) experiences, crystallized in "feeling brown," echoes Wong's self-positioning as a "spot of yellow" that came to stay on the "white of the screen" (quoted in scene 2 at the beginning of this prelude). Owning the "yellow" stigma enables her to inhabit and feel "yellowness," and to "navigate the material world on a different emotional register," as Muñoz would say. Wong's "feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong" not only echoes Muñoz's formulation of "feeling brown, feeling down," but also foregrounds her constant struggles with her affect of belonging, or, more exactly, impossible belonging—that is, not quite part of a single fold, but always in between. Charged with mixed feelings such as non-belonging, frustration, fatigue, anger, repulsion, and persistence, "feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong" does not suggest self-indulgence in individual experiences. On the contrary, akin to Muñoz's shareable "brown sense of the world," Wong's "yellow" affect lends to a call-and-response between her and other subalternized performer-workers and audiences. Such affective resonance gives rise to a race-gender-informed relational ethics that encourages critical spectatorial sensibilities in viewers in different places and times.

To these (potentially) empathetic audiences, Wong's reenactment of the stereotypes comes across as fundamentally subversively pleasurable, as Josephine Lee argues. It offers inside jokes, invites sideways glances of mutual recognition, and cultivates an ability to discern between images and listen between the lines, even between different languages, dialects, and accents. Such subaltern feeling of/for each other facilitates an interactive and affective political understanding of raced and gendered experiences that is capillary, embodied, performative, complicit, pleasurable, and agential all at once. It is through fostering the potential intra- and

inter-minoritarian rapport that Wong's struggles percolate into an affectively agential authorship.

SITING/CITING AUTHORSHIP: THE CHIROGRAPHIC, THE SONIC, AND THE EPISODIC

Wong declared her authorship as early as 1921, when she defiantly announced her arrival on the scene as a "considerable spot of yellow that's come to stay on the silver of the screen." She transvaluates racial shame into indelible recoloring, even contamination, of the hegemonic whiteness. She flaunts her "yellow" objecthood, converting it into the flamboyant center of white spectatorial attention. Evoking Roland Barthes's concept of "punctum," etymologically meaning "trauma," Wong's "spot of yellow" ruptures the white screen, piercing and wounding the viewer, arresting their gaze, making them aware of "a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see."[44] Fast forward to 1931: three years after meeting with Wong in 1928 in Berlin, Walter Benjamin similarly ponders a beckoning spot from a historical photo to a later viewer. In his 1931 essay "A Little History of Photography," he contemplates photographer Karl Dauthendey's 1857 self-portrait with his fiancée: "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency [*Zufall*], of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the character of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy [*Sosein*] of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."[45]

Miriam Hansen locates this photo's *Sosein* in "the young woman's gaze off, past the camera and past her fiancé, absorbed in an 'ominous distance.'" As her gaze "leaps across time" to meet the beholder's gaze, Hansen observes "photography's constitutive relation to death," for the photographer's fiancée and Benjamin both died by suicide.[46] My study, however, shows the life-giving and life-reviving meeting between Wong's historical *Sosein* and her resonating publics across space and history; and their meeting is mediated by Wong's performative beckoning, as emblematized by her act of rupturing and "searing" the "silver screen" with her "spot of yellow." Wong's beckoning toward what Barthes calls the "subtle beyond" derails systemic objectification of the raced and sexualized "Oriental" woman, semiotically and affectively repurposes the media works despite her ancillary position in most of them, and ultimately creates alternative venues of relation-making with her variant publics.

Indeed, a hallmark of Wong's authorship, as I have suggested previously, consists in her "greetings" to the world through all her activities on and off the stage-screen, in her engagement with media publicity, other media professionals, musicians,

artists, friends, and her international audiences across history. Her greetings take the reiterative form of gifted photos, interviews, contributions to newspapers and magazines, correspondences, and her screen/stage performances. They constitute an epistolary gesture, desiring connections and responses through *distance*, rather than direct contact and intimacy. This distanced yet engaged epistolary stance underlines Wong's life-career as a peripatetic and cross-media performer-worker.

Of special significance is Wong's decades-long correspondence with the New York–based art critic, photographer, and Harlem Renaissance proponent Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff—a Russian-born American actress. Intriguingly, while Wong's letters to Van Vechten and Marinoff from the late 1920s until her death in 1961 are well preserved in the Van Vecthen papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the latter's letters to Wong are yet to be discovered. This half-picture allegorizes the uncertain reception and speculative nature of all of Wong's epistolary greetings. On the one hand, the lack of access to Van Vechten's and Marinoff's letters to Wong echoes our difficulty of second-guessing how her audiences react(ed) to her work, rendering the efficacy of her subversive performances hard to empirically verify. On the other hand, freed from an empirical response, her epistolary greetings in various forms, which have survived and are available for audiences spatially and temporally removed, become essential for shaping critical spectatorial sensibilities. Thus, her epistolary greetings across time-space are inherently speculative and anachronotopic—that is, invested in different spatiotemporalities that challenge Orientalist and heteropatriarchal reproductive futurism.

One of Wong's most striking epistolary gestures is her consistent tongue-in-cheek signature as "Orientally yours" in her autographed photos. While a photo is not a conventional letter, her gifting of it to a selected recipient makes it a pictorial letter for communication and friendship. Inscribing a mass-reproduced photo with a handwritten greeting ("Orientally yours"), followed by her English and Chinese autographs, Wong combines a commercial image with a personal greeting that itself is reiterated through multiple gifted photos, therefore a-singular. Wong's authorship hinges upon precisely such reiterative self-citation across time, space, and media form, producing a cumulative signature that is self-referential, nonlinear, and anticipatory of anachronotopic resonance.

Here I outline two sites of Wong's epistolary greetings and citational authorship: the sites of the chirographic and the sonic. Chirographically, she handwrote her pictographic Chinese name in film diegesis, and in her gifted photos, work contracts, and travel and immigration documents. The last character of her Chinese name (霜 or "frost") became a decorative detail embroidered in her outfits, hats, clutches, and other accessories. More implicitly, this character, romanized as Tsong, homophonic with Song, doubled as the title and the titular character of her German debut film, *Show Life* (aka *Song*, originally titled *Schmutziges Geld* or *Die Liebe eines armen Menschenkindes*; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928).

Such chirographic self-referentiality literalizes her *signature* performance. Seemingly splicing together her performer-worker persona with her fictional character, Wong's authorship displayed her "Oriental" exoticism while also beckoning the knowing audience to appreciate her double-entendre "spot of yellow" on the "silver of the screen."

Wong's self-citational authorship also found expression in versatile vocal performances. This vocal "signature" stemmed from her multilingual skills and reiterative singing and chanting across different versions of a film, or across film, theater, and television. In her first talkie, *The Flame of Love* (aka *Hai Tang*; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1930), she played the female protagonist Hai Tang, an "Oriental" entertainer, in all three versions of the film (German, English, and French). She acquired German and French to deliver her lines; she also performed the opening song in German and English in respective versions. Thus, Wong engaged in a form of self-dubbing across the nearly identical German and English versions.[47] Her self-citational linguistic versatility debunks the exotic Chinese stereotype, foregrounding cosmopolitanism predicated upon labor-intensive training.

A more extended example illustrating Wong's cumulative vocal performances is her reenactment of a Chinese poem in her ancestral Taishan dialect in different media forms across her career. She learned the poem—"Furonglou song Xin Jian" 芙蓉樓送辛漸 (Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower), written by a Tang Dynasty poet, Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698–757)—early in her career from Kwan Man Ching 關文清 (Moon Kwan) (1896–1995). Kwan was a fellow Taishanese and a film producer-director and poet who studied filmmaking in the US, worked as a technical advisor for Hollywood productions including D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and William Nigh's *Mr. Wu* (1927), and frequently traveled between China and the US for film-related business. Kwan recalled that it was on one of these trips that Wong, "a smart and inquisitive young actress," asked him to teach her Chinese music and poetry so that she could perform them at white parties. Kwan taught her some Tang Dynasty poems, as well as how to play two traditional folk songs on a moon zither (*yueqin*) 月琴.[48]

Wong was to chant the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in Taishan dialect four times, from her first American talkie, *Daughter of the Dragon* (dir. Lloyd Corrigan, 1931), to a TV episode at the end of her career. In *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong played the daughter of Fu Manchu who chants this poem to seduce Sessue Hayakawa's Scotland Yard officer, whom she has costumed in a heavily embroidered "Chinese" gown appropriate for his "Eastern rank" (video 0.1). A year later, Wong reiterated the vocal performance in a short Paramount revue film, *Hollywood on Parade* (dir. Louis Lewyn, 1932), in which she played herself chanting this poem to a bewildered white MC who stood in for the mainstream monolingual white audience beguiled by the "inscrutable Oriental," not only visually, but also sonically (video 0.2).

VIDEO 0.1. Wong, as Fu Manchu's daughter, chants a Tang Dynasty poem, "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower," in Taishan dialect in *Daughter of the Dragon* (dir. Lloyd Corrigan, 1931).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.1

VIDEO 0.2. Wong, as herself, reenacts the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in *Hollywood on Parade* (dir. Louis Lewyn, 1932).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.2

Wong's third iteration of the poem occurred in *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934), a British colonial film in which she played a club owner who takes the law into her own hands in order to rescue her abducted white foster sister. To escape the law's punishment, she commits suicide as an "Eastern" "way out of imprisonment." She cuts her wrist with a poison-laden ring, then retreats to a chair in the background, as the sheriff turns his face away in the foreground. She sits, composed, chanting the poem while waiting for death to descend, as the camera slowly tracks in to reveal her impassive, stony face until she closes her eyes (video 0.3). More than two decades later, Wong reiterated this poem one last time in ABC's Western TV show *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, in which she played the eponymous character in an episode, "China Mary" (dir. Roy Rowland), aired on March 15, 1960. Once again, her Chinatown matron character executes the law (this time killing her own anti-white criminal son instead of letting the legendary Earp handle the case), then chants the poem in front of an altar, facing the camera, as Earp enters the background (video 0.4).

Wong's reiterative vocal performances of this poem in Taishan dialect across three decades illustrate her sustained cumulative and self-citational authorship. That she learned the poem in her early career, then carried it from the big screen to the small screen, both in character and as herself in the behind-the-scenes revue

VIDEO 0.3. Wong, as a club owner, reenacts the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.3

VIDEO 0.4. Wong, as "China Mary," reenacts the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in an episode of the ABC TV show *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (dir. Roy Rowland, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.4

film, suggests her cultivation of a Chinese or "Oriental" female persona that not only caters to Anglo-American audiences, but also accentuates the ironic meta-performative quality.

Crossing three decades, Wong's Taishan dialect chanting of the poem forms a personal archive and a time capsule. Each reiteration is a portable set piece that is out of place and time (i.e., anachronotopic) vis-à-vis its narrative context. Such recursive temporality seems to reinforce the stereotype of the "inscrutable Oriental" and "perpetual foreigner," contradicting the compulsion to become an assimilated Asian American. Yet, by refusing easy alignment with a telos-driven Asian American or diasporic Chinese identity, her anachronotopic vocal performances stake out a recursive and (self-)citational authorship that anticipates Jane Gaines's criticism of the "auteur theory's politically retrograde idealism."[49]

Wong's reiterative and (self-)citational authorship stems from her episodic career—a precarious career that waxes and wanes, puncturing our wish for a success or a victim narrative. The significance of the episodic pattern far exceeds a simple symptom of precarity. Feminist film historian Melanie Bell deploys the term *episodic* to productively revalorize below-the-line women movie workers' shifting and non-continuous life-careers resulting from their obligatory multitasking as wives, mothers, *and* workers.[50] Wong differs from the women workers in Bell's study in that her episodic career had to do with racial as well as gender discriminations; and her

family obligations were toward parents and siblings, while her insistent singlehood was subjected to salacious media scrutiny (more in chapters 1–3). Thus, a different conceptualization of the episodic pattern is in order.

From a white journalist's perspective, Wong's episodic career was flippantly mystified as a unique magic power—a backhanded compliment. In 1939, British film and television commentator John Newnham marveled at Wong's "miraculous Oriental ability to disappear and reappear at will," while "few other actors could leave without having the Hollywood studio doors closed to them."[51] To step back into starring roles, all that the "Chinese puzzle" (i.e., Wong) needed to do was to return to Hollywood and give the producers "one of her bland smiles." Such magic power, Newnham opined, had to do with her unique ability to combine "Western mentality with Chinese looks," earning her "a corner entirely her own," thus enabling her career of "reappearance phases."[52]

Newnham's Orientalist mystification of Wong's peekaboo ability drastically glossed over the reason for Wong's repeated "disappearance" from Hollywood—namely, the racist and sexist ceiling that severely constrained her work opportunities and conditions. He also ignored the fact that Wong rarely obtained starring roles in Hollywood and was frequently passed over for Caucasian actresses made up in yellowface for the plum parts. However, Newnham's flippant narrative did contain one important observation: his acknowledgment of Wong's episodic fading in and out, which countered a teleological success story.

Two years prior to Newnham's article, Wong had already reflected upon the multiple "beginnings" of her career, suggesting her grappling with precarious work conditions. She was quoted in a 1937 article describing her star-making career in Europe from 1928 to 1930 as the "second beginning," after her 1919 screen debut in Hollywood, and her 1937 return to Hollywood as the "third beginning," following her China trip.[53] In another interview two months earlier, Wong explained why she conceived her reappearances as new "beginnings": "Every time I make a new public appearance I regard it as a fresh beginning. I like to approach my work as something entirely new—as though it were all strange to me. Then I get a different outlook and a new interpretation."[54]

Wong's conversion of the precarious situation (that led to her constant traveling for better work opportunities) into vantage points of fresh beginnings bespeaks her perseverance and resourcefulness despite systemic gender-race discrimination. This conversion also hinges upon her labor-intensive retraining, including acquiring new skills in languages, singing, and dancing; adapting to different media forms and technologies; and expanding into performance techniques appropriate for talkies, vaudeville, legitimate theater, and television. As Asian American cultural critic Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu points out, Wong partakes in the "broader history of immigration and labour"; she labors "not as a star, but as a cultural entrepreneur, who, for all her zipping around the globe, was just a worker chasing after better jobs."[55]

Equally important as the hustling to get back into business (or busy-ness) is its flipside, the labor of waiting while keeping up hope—waiting for her Form 430 (Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status) to be approved so that she could travel overseas *and* return to the US (under the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882–1943), waiting for theater producers and studio executives to respond to her inquiries and suggestions, waiting for work opportunities to materialize, and waiting outside of linear and straight time (to borrow a concept from Jose Esteban Muñoz, as discussed in the "refrain" of this book). Waiting emerges as a recurring theme in her thirty-year-long correspondence with Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff. Wong's agency and authorship, therefore, must be understood as being inextricably bound up with obstacles, constraints, disappointments, and being out-of-time-place or anachronotopic—all congealed in the state of waiting. Wong's waiting is not dead empty time. For as she waited, or as she seemingly disappeared from one medium or one country, she often showed up in another country—retraining, venturing into a different medium, consulting behind the camera, orchestrating wartime China-relief campaigns. Such branching out intertwined with waiting, constituting the very modus operandi of Wong's episodic, multi-sited and cross-media career.

To better understand the subaltern affective politics of the episodic, I turn to Lauren Berlant, who describes the episodic as "dissociative poetics" and "a potential hub" that allow "damaged" people of color to navigate systemic negativities, and to bear the unbearable relations. In a study of Black legal scholar Patricia Williams's essay "On Being the Object of Property," Berlant notes that the essay is structured as a series of episodes of Williams's encounter with sexualized racism and racialized sexism.[56] The episodic pattern "dedramatiz[es] narrative into episode, epic into moment, and structure into gestures"; it offers a "cooling chamber" that "give[s] subordinated bodies in the present a shot at *not having the past reproduced in the contemporary nervous system*."[57] "An episode is [also] a potential hub, organizing offerings for *potential lines of flight, social relations, affective structures, and skills at paying attention*."[58] Probing different ways of relating to (and distancing from) the systemic pressure, the episodic allows Williams to experience and address sociopolitical negativities through "dissociative poetics," "as though a circuit breaker within the overwhelmed sensorium is constantly snapping and repairing."[59] Thus, the episodes of alternating engagement and dissociation facilitate a multiperspectival stance, enabling the objectivized Other to carve out a space for "incommensurable knowledges and attachments," which in turn prevents the colonialist objectivizing gaze from becoming the single determining force for the existence of subjects of color.[60] Thus, the episodic makes it possible for a subject of color to "better show up even for these *relations that one also finds unbearable because one must bear them*."[61]

Through this lens, we may understand Wong's episodic, transnational, and cross-media career as encapsulating precisely her efforts to bear and *bare*

unbearable relations and pressures. With the aid of the "dissociative poetics" of the episodic, she simultaneously engaged with and distanced herself from the white-dominant entertainment industries. Dwelling in the elastic tension with these industries, Wong crocheted a peripatetic and precarious career among the US, Western and Northern Europe, Australia, and China.

Importantly, Wong was not the only diasporic and peripatetic Chinese performer who built an episodic career by actively negotiating the uneven terrain of white entertainment industries. Among her contemporaries were the Hawaiian-born Chinese French Etta Lee; the better-known Hawaiian-born Soo Yong; the Philadelphia-born Chinese African American Lady Tsen Mei (aka Josephine Moy); the Missouri-born Olive Young (aka Yang Aili), active in the Shanghai film industry and early Hollywood; the barely documented Bessie Wong; and the Chinese Australian Rose Quong. Wong shared screen and stage with Etta Lee, Bessie Wong, and Rose Quong at different points in her early career, although they did not appear to form long-term relationships. In comparison with these contemporaries, Wong's career stands out with its four-decade *longue durée* and cross-media ventures. Yet, given her and other diasporic Chinese performer-workers' shared experience of marginalization and objectification, Wong's episodic career and reiterative gender-race hyper-performances do not suggest a *singular* case of paradoxical agency, but rather shed light on an obscured yet concatenated history of diasporic Chinese female performances that partook in, challenged, and reoriented the white-male-dominant regime of visibility. This history hovers on the edge of the system, and crucially shapes the center stage—the way a frame delimits and structures a painting.

STRUCTURE: RACKING THE FOCUS

Wong's mosaic, peripatetic, and episodic life-career refutes a teleological narrative, be it rags to riches, anonymity to glamour, victim to victor, or abject minority to model minority. Rather, it is the physical, intellectual, and affective labor that underpinned her work, from her family laundromat to the screen and the stage, and further, off the screen and the stage. Echoing Lauren Berlant's criticism of the genre of bionarrative (or biography) that presumes "a normative notion of human biocontinuity," I bring the important questions Berlant raises to bear on my study: "What does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something? Would it be possible to talk about a *biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences* (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)? Shouldn't life writing be a primary laboratory for theorizing 'the event?'"[62]

Guided by these questions, I devise a structure in this book that mirrors Wong's mosaic precarious creativity, the ebb-and-flow of rebeginnings and interruptions, "reciprocal coexistences" with the media industries, and greetings to the publics. I rack the focus to alternately illuminate her hypervisible *and* invisible work. The

five main chapters unfold in an order that moves from star studies to performer-worker studies, from the foreground and the center to the background and the margins, from appearance through disappearance to reappearance on the screen and the stage, and, ultimately, from the industrial capital-labor hierarchy to multifocal mosaic articulation.

Chapter 1, "Putting on a Show: Anna May Wong's 'Oriental' (Dis)play on the Screen," engages with Wong's most visible agential performances as the leading lady in her Hollywood and European films. The films I study are sampled from her interwar vehicles made in the US and Europe, a Paramount B movie made after her 1936 China trip, *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, 1937), and a wartime Poverty Row film, *Lady from Chungking* (dir. William Nigh, 1942). At the heart of this chapter is a theory of Wong's "Oriental (dis)play," which I define as a mode of ironic hyper-performances that simultaneously displays and dis-plays or deconstructs stereotypical Orientalist femininity. I demonstrate that Wong actively negotiated media techniques and technologies, especially those concerning the production of raced and sexualized bodies. Mobilizing the method of seeing beyond the visible/legible through the anamorphic lens, I decipher punctum cinematic moments where she, through her fictional characters, subtly enlisted her resonating viewers (both diegetic and extradiegetic, both contemporaneous and diachronic) in the act of (dis)playing gender-race stereotypes.

Chapter 2, "Putting on Another Show: Spotlighting Anna May Wong in Theater," extends Wong's leading-lady performances to her theatrical works. These include *The Circle of Chalk* (1929) at the legitimate New Theatre (now Noël Coward Theatre) in London, *On the Spot* (1930) at the Forrest Theater (now Eugene O'Neill Theatre) on Broadway in New York City, *Princess Turandot* (1937) at summer stock theaters including the Westchester Playhouse in New York and the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut, and numerous vaudeville shows throughout the US at different times, in the UK and Northern and Southern Europe in 1933–35, and in Australia in 1939. I study the ways in which Wong's theatrical works were assembled, produced, performed, and received by drawing upon scripts, photographic records, theater producers' accounts, publicity programs, critics' reviews, *and* Wong's own letters and accounts, gleaned from archives and library special collections in the US, the UK, Norway, Italy, and Australia. This chapter also argues for Wong's instrumental role in shaping the visual grammar of glamour photography that was emerging in the early 1930s. While glamour photography has come to be associated with whiteness, especially white femininity, Wong's contribution reveals the raced and gendered bedrock of Western visual modernity. To borrow Wong's words, the "silver of the screen" is predicated upon none other than the "spot of yellow" that she reenacted satirically.

Chapter 3, "Shifting the Show: Labor in the Margins," racks the focus, moving from the hypervisible to the less visible, from the center-stage leading lady to the supporting performer-worker in the margins and background on the big

and small screens. Mobilizing Jacques Derrida's notion of the parergon (i.e., the edge of the frame that defines the painting), I excavate and theorize how Wong's physical, intellectual, and affective labor behind the apparent glamour helped to shape the mainstream entertainment industry. I further argue that Wong's performances in the margins destabilized the central white drama. This chapter fleshes out performer-worker studies. By grounding glamour in labor, cosmopolitanism in migratory precarity, and enduring legacy in anachronotopic, episodic rebeginnings, this chapter insists on understanding Wong's trailblazing significance as consisting in her largely obscured resourceful labor in the margins. This refocus on the margins offers a method for studying the broader landscape of the racialized and gendered work of minoritized female performer-workers.

Chapter 4, "The Show Must Go On—in Episodes (Now You See Her, Now You Don't)," turns to Wong's exclusion from the screen altogether by the yellowface casting of MGM's mega-production *The Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1937), which forced a major career turn *and* enabled two rebeginnings, as illustrated in three media works spanning two decades (1937–57). Here I reject the victim discourse that, while undeniably true, simply states the obvious and reinforces the trauma without offering a constructive perspective. To move beyond this deadlock, I underscore Wong's strategies of converting precarity into growth points of building new skills, venturing into media forms beyond film, and traveling extensively for better work opportunities. At the same time, I do not subsume her precarious work conditions to a teleological success narrative; rather, I emphasize her agency as being imbricated with precarity—hence the importance of attending to her episodic career marked by constant frustrations, disappearances, and rebeginnings.

Chapter 5, "Encore the Performer-Worker: Meeting Anna May Wong's 'Greetings,'" turns to the two-way call-and-response engagement between Wong and her international audiences of different ethnic and lingua-cultural backgrounds, during and after her lifetime. I make a methodological move of going beyond empirical reception studies to focus on the *potential* as well as actual dialogue between Wong's "greetings," on the one hand, and the diachronic audience's critical engagement on the other. The examples I study are three media works produced by contemporary Asian American documentarians and media artists. They are Celine Parreñas Shimizu's and Yunah Hong's documentaries, respectively titled *The Fact of Asian Women* (2002) and *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (2010), and Patty Chang's installation work *The Product Love* (2009). Wong's ability to recruit audiences diachronically demonstrates her sustained inspiration of present-day struggles for a more equitable media and sociopolitical environment.

In writing this book, I consider myself among the many resonating viewers who see in Wong a historical companion; and this book is my response to Wong's greetings, which encourage us to be always gritty and witty, and to envision a concatenated world both here-and-now and elsewhere and in other times. Recalling

Wong's multiple rebeginnings, the book closes and reopens with its own "second beginning," which I call a "refrain." Here I (re)turn to Wong's little-documented and largely truncated career as a comedienne in her early career, imagining that in another time-space, she might just as well come back again as a comedienne.

Flashing back to Wong's hyper-animated youthful body tearing down the white domesticity in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Jackman, 1927), and speculating what she (and we) might have made of the missed musical-comedy opportunity in *Flower Drum Song* (dir. Henry Koster, 1961) at the end of her life-career, this book invokes yet another beginning, the "Wong time"—where what is abject might also be comic, what seems "yellow" might actually be "intersti-racial" (in between "yellow," Black, and Brown), what goes into oblivion might still breathe, and what was out-of-time-place and anachronotopic might just be taking on a new life (again). At the end is another beginning, one that bursts through the seams of the race-gender straitjacket into an unruly life, death, and rebirth again.

1

Putting on a Show

Anna May Wong's "Oriental" (Dis)play on the Screen

This chapter studies the most conspicuous facet of Wong's mosaic career, namely her gender-race performances as a leading lady in selected European and Hollywood vehicles from the interwar and wartime periods. While these center-stage roles have been celebrated as precious moments when she got to "shine," two difficulties remain to be addressed. First, these roles, central as they were, remained stereotypical, projecting reified images of "Oriental" femininity. Wong's seeming perpetuation of Orientalist gender-race stereotypes has caused embarrassment, prompting historians and critics to compulsively resort to the victim discourse, reiterating her lack of choice within an overpowering, prejudicial system. To be sure, Wong herself originated the victim discourse during her 1936 China trip when responding to the Chinese Nationalist government's vehement criticism of her perceived defaming of China.

When she did gain opportunities to play more positive agential roles—following her return from the China trip, and partially due to America's increasing sympathy for China's war against Japanese invasion, which erupted full scale on July 7, 1937—we encounter a second difficulty in appraising her significance. That is, her wartime protagonist roles appear in studio B and Poverty Row productions that command lesser industrial resources, tend to be marginalized as programmers, and thus reduce her "star" appeal as conventionally understood.

These two difficulties—predominantly stereotypical roles and less prestigious productions—indicate that Wong's leading-lady moments could hardly be celebrated as triumphs in the conventional sense. Instead, they evoke what Anne Anlin Cheng would describe as "contaminated desires" that heighten the "vexed problem of locating agency."[1] Studying the African American performer Josephine Baker, Wong's contemporary who similarly made her name in interwar France, Cheng

questions the "redemptive interpretation act" that argues for Baker's "intentional subversion," for, she argues, "subversion replays rather than sidesteps fetish,"[2] and the audience who were enjoying the spectacle too much were unlikely to be "shocked into a self-conscious recognition of their own 'concocted notions.'"[3] Having pointed out the difficulty of locating agency in intentional subversion, Cheng highlights Baker's inhabitation of "the other's skins," or turning the Self into the Other—a process that generates "visual pleasure in the contaminated zone," that is, the "uneasy places of visual exchange where pleasure, law, resistance converge." These "uneasy places" compel us to "go beyond the established terms of racial visibility" that "fail to address the phenomenological, social and psychic implications of being visible."[4] Disputing Baker's agency in terms of "personal intentions," Cheng redefines agency as the racial fetish's residue that exceeds the same fetish's self-renunciation. Her example is Baker's notorious banana skirt that troubles the distinction of whiteness and blackness, the subject and the object, precipitating "the very crisis of differentiation founding that imperial desire."[5] The residue of the fetish, according to Cheng, allows us to "construct a political and critical evaluation of [Baker's] historical performance,"[6] which she elsewhere calls the "ethics of immersion."[7]

Building upon Cheng's emphasis on the residue of the racial fetish, this chapter unpacks Wong's multivalent and excessive embodiment of the Oriental fetish. While cognizant of Cheng's caution against presuming the efficacy of the performer's "intentional subversion," I do think it important that we trace Wong's paradoxical agency through what I call her strategy of "Oriental" (dis)play. Her agency of subversive performance stems not from an individualist free will, but from strategizing her situated position. Mobilizing extensive multi-sited, multilingual archival research, and addressing the lacunae in existent archives through the lens of speculative historiography, I show how Wong's paradoxical and nonteleological agency enables critical interventions, and how such interventions have also been undertaken by other marginalized performer-workers and social actors across history and space.

My analysis, therefore, necessarily departs from mere criticisms of representation, be they debates on positive versus negative representation or the reified identity politics that ascribes to Wong the burden of representing an entire race. Instead, I ascertain what Wong brings to her "Oriental" roles, how she simultaneously displays and dis-plays (or deconstructs) them by nuancing them to address differently positioned viewers in different registers. By "putting on a show" on the screen, Wong's "guilty pleasure" and "contaminated desires" in participating in mainstream popular media culture actually yield an agential politics that is highly cogent for what I conceive as performer-worker studies and for our negotiation with today's inequitable media terrains.

This chapter studies selected silent and sound films that have become or were originally designed as Wong vehicles. My film selections emphasize Wong's

transnational and diachronic spectrum without pretending to be comprehensive. The films come from four phases in her career: (1) *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) from her interwar Hollywood period; (2) interwar European vehicles made during her first visit, including *Show Life* (aka *Song*, 1928), *The Pavement Butterfly* (1929), and *Piccadilly* (1929); (3) her Paramount B movies following the 1936 China trip and before the Pacific War, *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937) and *Dangerous to Know* (1938); and (4) *Lady from Chungking*, one of her two 1942 wartime Poverty Row films.

Wong's oeuvre manifests *intertexuality* and *remediation*, the former through adaptation, remake, and her reiterative chirographic, sartorial, and vocal performances; the latter through crossings among photography, theater, film, and television. Intertexuality and remediation enable her to strategically reenact, refashion, and subvert gender-race stereotypes. Her "Oriental" (dis)play also works to contest the media industry's technological production of race and gender. She critiqued yellowface makeup techniques; participated in Max Factor's development of the "color harmony" makeup kit for different races; and orchestrated lighting, costuming, body language, and multilingual vocal performances to complicate race-gender imaginings across media forms and technologies. This chapter focuses on three dimensions of Wong's "Oriental" (dis)play: signature, costuming, and the death act. All of these also thread through the following chapters as I move from the screen to the stage, from center stage to the background and margins. My driving questions are how Wong orchestrated the (dis)play with an ironic and subversive twist; in what ways her (dis)play addresses diverse audiences on different registers; and, finally, what were/are the political multivalences of her (dis)play.

SIGNATURE PERFORMANCES

Peggy Kamuf defines "signature performance" as "a device *repeatedly* associated with a subject."[8] Somewhat differently, Jacques Derrida links signature and iterability, provocatively arguing that signature and autograph do not indicate singularity. "Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world," he writes. "But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously . . . the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity."[9] The written signature implies the absence of the signer, and its iterability corrupts "its identity and its singularity." Thus, he underscores the signature's inherent tension between presence and absence, singularity and reiteration. Wong's reiterative and intertextual signature performances do not necessarily entail her absence, but could rather suggest her insistent insertion of her marginalized performer-worker persona *and* her signature (literal or metaphorical) back into the "show."

Wong's penultimate silent film, *Piccadilly* (dir. E. A. Dupont, 1929), made in London, is literally stamped with her signature. At a key self-reflexive moment when Wong's character, Shosho, signs a contract with the Piccadilly Club, Wong the

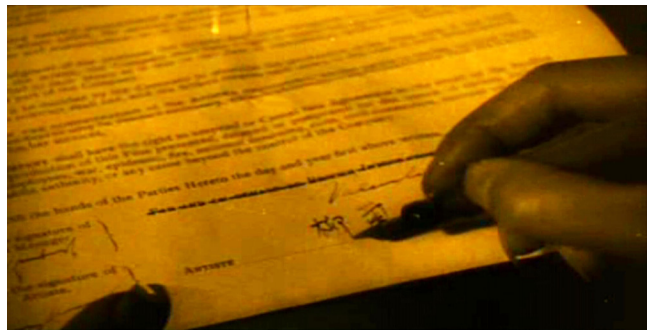

FIGURE 1.1. Wong signing her own Chinese name in *Piccadilly* (dir. E. A. Dupont, 1929).

performer signed her real Chinese name, 霜柳黃 (reading right to left as in the classic Chinese script; figure 1.1). This detail holds special significance since the shooting script did not specify how Wong was to sign the fictional contract. One might speculate that Wong took this opportunity to insert her Chinese name into the fiction, asserting her authorship while camouflaging it in the pictographic script that could be mistaken by a non-Chinese-literate audience as purely an "Oriental" decoration or the Chinese equivalent of Shosho the English name. Another instance of Wong's real signature appears later in the film when Shosho, now a sensational success, sends a greeting card to the dethroned and depressed Mabel (played by Gilda Gray), the club's white dancer who is replaced by Shosho not only in her profession, but also in her love life (with Victor the club manager switching his affection to Shosho). The signature on the greeting card reads "Shosho 霜柳黃," juxtaposing the character's English name with Wong's Chinese name, suggesting a tricky equivalence between the two. It is not without irony that Wong upstaged Gray extradiegetically just as Shosho replaces Mabel diegetically. Intended as a Gilda Gray vehicle, this film turns out to be one of Wong's most well-known and most widely circulated films for today's audience; and her bewitching performance as an "eccentric dancer" (as described in Shosho's diegetic contract) has been the selling point since the film's release in 1929.[10]

Wong's eruption into the diegetic realm via her reiterative Chinese signature suggests distance (despite the seeming overlapping) between the performer and her stereotypical character Shosho (a doomed "Oriental" femme fatale). Reading Wong's Chinese autograph in the contract as indicative of her close alignment with Shosho, Anne Anlin Cheng privileges *Piccadilly* over Wong's other "showgirl" films as exemplary of a cinematic "metareflection of celebrity making" that foregrounds Wong "at her most seductive and im/material self."[11] The "im/material self" refers to Wong's ornamental objecthood that, according to Cheng, challenges the Western modernist assumption of an integral anthropocentric subjecthood. Cheng's focus on Wong's objecthood does not contradict her paradoxical agency

that, I argue, seeps into, coexists with, ruptures, and ultimately decolonizes white-male supremacy. It is the conjugation of the two sides of Wong—ornamental objecthood and agential subjecthood—that enables the enduring affective politics during and beyond her cross-media life-career.

Wong's paradoxical agency hinges upon her distanciation from her characters. Unlike her characters scripted by the white male makers to reinforce Orientalist fantasies, Wong's enactment interjects her own affective and political sentiments, mediated by specific media technologies and sociopolitical circumstances, thereby putting her authorial spin on the script. Her performances appropriate and splinter the stereotypes, upending their objecthood with a critical and sardonic twist.

In *Piccadilly*, Wong's interloped authorship rewrites a stereotype first created by the British novelist Arnold Bennett, then by E. A. Dupont, the German expressionist director working for British International Pictures in the late 1920s. I have argued elsewhere that by smuggling her unexpected and uncannily indexical signature into the diegesis, Wong inscribed her agency into the film in two ways: first by asserting her presence as a historically positioned performer-worker despite the Orientalist fantasy purveyed by the film, and second, and more importantly, by "metaphorically authoring the entire film."[12] More specifically, Wong's Chinese signature rejects Orientalist typecasting that renders her fungible with any "Oriental" female role. By displaying this signature, literally renaming and owning the gender-race fetish, she disrupts the Orientalist illusion and exposes the fetish as an ideological construct. Meanwhile, Wong/Shosho also concocts an Oriental fantasy for the white audience. In the film, Shosho secures the contract *after* she has successfully sold her exotic dance to the club's white and predominantly male clientele, rocking the expensive eighty-pound, two-piece metallic costume she has manipulated Victor into procuring from a Chinese antique store in London's Limehouse area. Wong's "yellow yellowface" performance "camp[s] up" stereotypical Oriental femininity, simultaneously exhibiting and subverting it.[13]

Now, we must ask who were/are the witnesses of Wong performing her Chinese signature in this film; whether they realize(d) her act of interloping into the fictional world; and how this affected or affects the spectatorial appreciation of her subversive agency. In the scene of contract signing, a close-up shot first frames the content of the contract, then tilts down to reveal Wong/Shosho tracing out her Chinese name from the right to the left. Then a cut to a medium shot shows Wong/Shosho finishing the signing and reading the contract again with a smile, then pans right to frame Victor watching her sign and then opening a note that turns out to be from Mabel—an invitation that he ignores for a night rendezvous with Shosho. Importantly, Shosho's double contract—with Victor as her manager and, implicitly, as her interracial love interest—comes at the price of excluding Jim (played by King Ho Chang), her Chinese (boy)friend doubling as her designated dance musician. In this scene, Shosho literally edges Jim (already in the

background) out of the door by slowly pushing the door closed while pretending to move closer to Victor to read the contract. The interracial and triangular tension becomes palpable with alternating close-up shots of Victor's look of surprise followed by a slight knowing smile, Shosho's sideways glance indicating a decision to sacrifice Jim for the illicit romance, and Jim's glare of helpless rage.

This scene reveals two key facets of Wong's signature authorship. First, contrary to Derrida's comment on the signature writer's absence, her presence is clearly demonstrated through a close-up framing of her hand tracing out the Chinese name. Second, her act of contract signing is diegetically witnessed by Victor and, by extension, the audience, emphatically to the exclusion of Jim, the only other Chinese character in the film who could potentially read Chinese. So, does Victor (or did Jameson Thomas, who played Victor) realize that Shosho/Wong has/had signed her real name, not Shosho's? Does it matter? How?

To address these questions, I turn to Wong's *performance* of the Chinese script, a form of chirographic self-Orientalism that evokes what Mary Ann Doane, commenting on hieroglyphics, describes as "like the woman, harbouring a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness."[14] Yet Wong deploys her Chinese signature in multiple contexts, making it highly performative and multivalent, depending on the occasion. In the legal realm, Wong was required to file Form 430 with the US Department of Labor prior to each overseas trip, per the Chinese Exclusion Act. Her Chinese signature in these forms filed through two decades reiteratively confirms her ethnic Chinese identity. Despite the legal weight accrued to her Chinese signature, however, Wong's knowledge of written Chinese was limited. That is to say, when she wrote Chinese ideograms, she put the visual effect on display in order to claim (*without* identifying with or representing) "authentic" Chineseness. Thus, her Chinese signature, legally required to substantiate her racialized identity, doubles as a lifelong strategy of self-branding, a mode of ornamental identity resembling what Béla Balázs calls the "speech landscape."[15]

Besides the legal documents, Wong routinely reenacts this self-Orientalizing "speech landscape" in her correspondence, real-life movie contracts, and gift photos in countries including the US, European countries, China, and Australia. In her decades-long correspondence with Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff, Wong consistently wrote on stationery printed with her Chinese name.[16] On top of her Chinese and English signatures, Wong often added a greeting, "Orientally yours" (figure 1.2), encapsulating the strategy of "Oriental" (dis)play that simultaneously gratifies and mocks the reductive Orientalist fantasy.

To her contemporaneous Chinese public, on the other hand, she performed her signature to pass their scrutiny of her Chineseness.[17] Upon her arrival at the Shanghai port on February 11, 1936, reporters singled out and commented on the detail of her Chinese name embroidered in the collar of her outfit. Later during her meeting with Hu Die 胡蝶 (aka Butterfly Wu), China's movie queen of 1933, and other Star Film Studio personnel in Shanghai, her autographs were sought

FIGURE 1.2. Wong's greeting "for Andrew"—"Orientally yours." Gallery portrait by Ruth Harriet Louise, 1927.

FIGURE 1.3. The Chinese caption reads: "Wong signing her Chinese name with a brush for S. C. Chang," cofounder of the Star Film Studio. Photo by Newsreel Wong (aka H. S. Wong). From "Huang Liushuang canguan Mingxing gongsi" 黃柳霜參觀明星公司 (Anna May Wong Visits the Star Film Studio), in *Dianying huabao* 電影畫報 (Film Pictorial) 30 (1936): 24.

after by journalists and fans. She was asked to write with a pen, then with a brush—a symbol of classic literati education (figure 1.3). The reporter began by sneering at her lack of Mandarin Chinese proficiency, then reluctantly complimented her decent handwriting ("nearly as good as Hu Die's"), yet concluded by mocking her self-titling as "nushi" 女士, or Lady, attached to her Chinese name.[18]

In all these different contexts, Wong *performed* her Chinese signature with a range of effects and purposes. This also meant that her Chinese autograph became widely disseminated and publicized through photos, greeting cards, letters, clothing decoration, and other documents. Consequently, even the non-Chinese-literate audience might come to recognize this "speech landscape" as her icon, although they did not understand the ideograms semiotically. With this in mind, we can now return to Wong's signature performance in *Piccadilly* to address the question of who recognized it and how it mattered. When Wong signed Shosho's contract with her Chinese name, non-Chinese-literate viewers who had followed her publicity were likely to notice the "inside joke" of Wong's self-surfacing and quasi-ventriloquism of Shosho. However, as I stated earlier, the reductive Orientalist perception of Wong as Chinese, or what Anne Anlin Cheng refers to as ornamental "thing-ness," would prevent these viewers from appreciating the irony in her race-gender meta-performances. Thus, their knowledge of the "inside joke" might simply end in the self-reassuring

spectatorial pleasure derived from the exotic writing, combined with "star-spotting" (through the guise of the character). This in turn would reinforce the superficial performer-character conflation—that is, Wong was perceived as authenticating the fictional Chinese character.

To tease out Wong's ironic and authorial agency implicit in the signature performance, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification to underscore her distanciation from her type characters and the resulting multi-registered audience address. Departing from the mainstreaming highway, Muñoz's work draws upon Judith Butler's and Michel Pêcheux's theorization of disidentification to understand the subject formation of minoritized groups that are systemically excluded from the majoritarian world. Muñoz writes that "disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence."[19] Or, as Butler puts it, disidentification makes it possible to politicize "this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong."[20] Disidentification offers "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."[21] Thus, disidentification becomes the minoritized subjects' survival strategy to appropriate mainstream cultural codes and reinsert themselves into the mainstream with subversive effects.[22]

The performative strategy of disidentification locates agency in the amphibious position between the center and the periphery. It is through disidentification that Wong conjoins immersion in and distanciation from her type characters, being simultaneously responsive to and critical of conflicting pressures, while pushing beyond their constraints. This double perspective underpins her Chinese-signature performance. The replacement of Shosho with 霜柳黃 in the contract and the juxtaposition of the names in her greeting card to Mabel literally visualize how Wong the historical figure and Shosho the fictional character converge and collide at the same time. As a result, the fantasy of "Oriental" femininity is denaturalized and deconstructed.

The subversive effect of Wong's signature performance becomes more apparent when we relate the fictional contract in *Piccadilly* to Wong's real movie contracts that bore her Chinese and English signatures. That the fictional contract contains meticulous details, including the date of October 14, 1928, and the terms of a "Chinese dancer" being hired as an "eccentric dancer" at £1,000 per week for a period of one year, makes it almost real but not quite. It mimics Wong's actual movie contracts (possibly the one she signed for *Piccadilly*) even down to the "eccentric dancer" role, one in which Wong excelled in this and many other films. The "eccentric dancer" image underscores the producers' exploitation of the nonwhite performer's exotic appeal, making it a quasi–freak show. By lending her

real Chinese name to Shosho the "eccentric dancer," Wong takes the initiative to "own" *and* subvert this fictional role.

Wong's interloping into the diegesis gains one more dimension when we compare the film with its script. In the script, Shosho negotiates hard for her and her Chinese musicians' wages: "I'd like 25 pounds a week for my two musicians, and 100 pounds a week for myself."[23] This negotiation does not appear in the film, and the fictional contract shows a much higher wage for Shosho. This discrepancy suggests the labor-intensive negotiation that Wong probably had to undertake as a transnational freelance or short-term performer.[24] By superseding Shosho with her own name, Wong the performer injects the issue of labor back into the filmic fantasy. The comparison of the script and the finished film also reveals another glaring omission: the film's erasure of Shosho's political consciousness that would have been passionately voiced by Wong. In her scripted showdown with Mabel, Shosho vehemently condemns colonialism and classism:

> I know you look down on me because I'm Chinese and you're English, and because I was a scullery-maid and because I've lived here in Limehouse and don't talk English like you do and don't behave like you do. And supposing I was a scullery-maid, me a Chinese girl? Why was it? It was because of all that you Europeans did in China. Why couldn't you leave us alone in China? Do you think I don't know what every Chinaman in Limehouse is saying about the English in China? I daresay my family was as good as yours, and better, and lots and lots older too! But my family was ruined, and my father and mother came to England, and when they died I had to be a scullery-maid, and you look down on me! . . . [A]nother thing. You call me a child. I'm not a child. I'm a woman, and don't you forget it. . . . But you ARE old. Look at your skin and look at mine! But I'm a woman and I'm young, and you aren't young, and I don't think I shall ever be old. . . . I knew you'd give yourself away. But I never hoped you'd kiss my hand. You! Kissed a scullery-maid's hand! But she hasn't kissed yours.[25]

This excoriating condemnation did not make its way into the film, possibly because its verbosity contradicts the silent film aesthetic, and perhaps due to the British film censorship of incendiary topics such as colonialism and race war. The film, instead, highlights Shosho's individualist triumph over Mabel. To Mabel's plea for her to leave Victor on account of their age difference, Shosho retorts, "He isn't too old for me—but you're too old for him." The film's focus on Shosho's individualist transgression of the lines of race, class, and age intensifies the melodrama at the expense of the broader colonial power struggle broached in the script. Yet, through Wong's interloping as a performer who struggled with such power disparity in her everyday life, we are led to take a distance from the fictional Shosho and reframe the fantasy from Wong's historical and sociopolitical perspective. In other words, viewers who tune into the diegetic and extradiegetic

cues of Wong's disidentification from her role may learn to critique the colonialist ideology underlying Shosho's doomed femme fatale narrative.

Now I turn to Wong's last European silent vehicle, *The Pavement Butterfly*, to analyze her indirect chirographic authorship and the ways in which she ventriloquizes white male agency. *The Pavement Butterfly* (aka *Großstadtschmetterling*, working title "Die Fremde," or "The Foreigner/Stranger"; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1929) was filmed following *Piccadilly* under Wong's contract with British International Pictures, at a time when Wong's reputation was rapidly growing in Western Europe.[26] A German-British coproduction, this film has two sets of intertitles that contain a telltale difference toward the end. In this star vehicle, Wong played a showgirl, Princess Butterfly, who escapes from a circus and becomes the muse for a poor Parisian painter named Kusmin. When her portrait is sold to a baron, Kusmin asks her to cash the check. However, the circus man who has previously framed her robs her, leading Kusmin to believe she has stolen the money. The jilted Butterfly finds patronage from the baron, who eventually helps clear up Kusmin's misunderstanding. Kusmin, now with an American woman (daughter and agent of an art dealer), invites Butterfly to stay with them. At this point, a three-shot cuts to a medium close-up framing Butterfly in the center and Kusmin's profile in the left foreground; then another cut shows an extreme close-up of Butterfly slowly tearing up, looking aside, then looking at Kusmin off screen, gently but decisively shaking her head and delivering her German line: "Ich gehöre nicht zu euch" (I do not belong to you). In the English version, her line becomes "I don't belong to your world. I belong to the pavements." Both versions end with a long shot, as if from Kusmin's perspective, watching Butterfly walking away, alone, through the chiaroscuro-lit arcade into the dark background.

The ambivalence of Butterfly setting out to a life alone is encapsulated in the subtly different parting line. While her English line indicates self-denigration and resignation, her German line pronounces proud defiance and independence. This divergence endows the last shot with different meanings—her life in the future could be joyless self-exile (for she will never be a legitimate mate for a white man, due to the intractable race line), or perhaps she is now free to author her life beyond the constraints of white heteronormativity. The arcade she traverses is heavily shadowed by colossal columns, with shafts of light coming through, construing the visible-invisible chiaroscuro, visually cuing her unpredictable future. What is certain, though, is that she has chosen to reject Kusmin's offer and charge out on her own (unlike the white woman clinging to her man). Butterfly's de facto self-exile makes her the agent who queers heteropatriarchy.

Butterfly's authorship can already be seen in her inscription on the miniature Chinese folding fans she uses as dance props as a circus showgirl. Having escaped from the circus, she finds herself sheltered and protected by the impoverished bohemian painter Kusmin, who instantly makes her his model. In

between sittings, Butterfly shows Kusmin the folding fans, proudly claiming her authorship: "I myself painted all of these." This assertive claim is followed by her demurely seductive and self-evasive gesture of covering her mouth with a fan. Her authorship claim reminds the audience that at the beginning of the film, she delays her dance number because she is finishing up painting the fans. Since there is no depiction of what she actually paints, the audience is not privy to her drawings. Her authorship is, therefore, reduced to a trivial feminine nicety within the film diegesis.

Kusmin's authorship, on the contrary, is celebrated with multiple close-up shots of his portrait of Butterfly. Upon its completion, Butterfly gazes at her nearly identical life-size replica. Excited, she strikes the same pose (one arm akimbo) as in the portrait on screen left, while Kusmin on screen right also mimics the pose. As she is tempted to caress her picture, Kusmin is tempted to caress her, creating a haptic analogy between the painter's brush and the finger's touch that links the portrait, Butterfly the exotic subject of the portrait, and Kusmin the white male author. The tableau-like visual and haptic analogy between the three also briefly halts the narrative flow, blurring the line between the subject and the object, the author and the work, calling into question the apparent white male authorship. This possibility of authorship reassignment is reinforced by the fact that the film was a Wong vehicle, thus tailored to her acting skills even while cashing in on her exotic image.

Still, the film narrative continues to marginalize Butterfly's authorship. Her attempt to sell her fans to make ends meet fails, implicitly devaluing her painting. On the other hand, Kusmin's paintings get sold—Butterfly's portrait to the baron and a landscape to Ellis, the daughter and agent of an American art dealer, who, unsurprisingly, also wins Kusmin's affection. When Butterfly sees the portrait again, she has already been abandoned by Kusmin and taken in by the baron, who sees her trying, again unsuccessfully, to sell her fans outside a posh restaurant. Recovering from a fever, she ambles into the living room and chances upon her uncanny pictorial doppelgänger. Showing her smiling and sporting a bohemian circus costume (a tight tank top with exotic tassels draping down her bare legs), the beautifully framed portrait now features prominently on the wall, flanked by smaller paintings. Like other "Oriental" ornaments decorating the mantle, the exotic portrait becomes a fetish, put on display for the Western aristocratic male gaze. The real-life Butterfly, forlorn although cloaked in an extravagant, fur-trimmed long coat, walks up close to her life-size image and begins tracing along Kusmin's signature at the right bottom of the painting, as the camera dwells on her placing her face against the painting, tearfully gazing leftward beyond the screen.

In this sequence (and throughout most of the film), Butterfly is simultaneously fetishized and abjected by an objectifying white male gaze. The portrait, created by a white painter, then procured, owned, and mounted by a white aristocrat, is juxtaposed with her own body, now expensively clothed by the same aristocrat.

Butterfly's very existence thus seems to depend upon white male consumption. Her tracing of Kusmin's signature, along with the tearful pining gaze, suggests a parasitic attachment to her image's creator, as if the latter's authorship (through his signature) enabled her existence and identity. And yet, the critical question one must ask is this: What exactly is Butterfly's relationship to her image? And, more importantly, how does Wong the performer reframe the feminine pathos in ways that make possible Butterfly's and Wong's own authorship of their performances and positions?

Introduced as "Princess Butterfly," the showgirl makes a life out of putting on a show, which means that she authors the "Oriental" display by catering to and teasing the Western gaze, as Shosho does in *Piccadilly*. This exotic display includes her skimpy and titillating costume, the miniature folding fans that bear her drawings, and her animated quasi-dance composed of playfully nonchalant arm brandishing and hip swishing that comes to an abrupt stop as she exits the stage. That her deliberately amateurish movements win resounding applause from the white audience indicates her exploitation of her exotic appeal. When Kusmin's paintings do not sell, Butterfly, donning a Western-style skirt suit, puts on an improvised, Charleston-inspired dance on the street, which instantly attracts a large crowd and fetches a handsome price for her portrait. Thus, despite her apparently amateurish dancing skills and trivialized authorship as a fan painter, Butterfly orchestrates her shows both on the circus stage and on the street with great success. Furthermore, as a model and muse for Kusmin, she crafts her own image, confidently smiling at the camera and posing with one arm akimbo. This image drastically differs from and replaces Kusmin's first sketch, for which he coaches her to lower her chin and look away in a conventional demure manner. Thus, instead of Kusmin creating her image, Butterfly uses Kusmin as a mediator to author her public image, which she successfully sells by putting on a show in the street to tease the white male gaze.

The fact that Kusmin's signature marks the painting prominently displayed in the baron's home, while Butterfly's inscriptions/paintings on the fans meet little appreciation, amply illustrates the erasure and marginalization of the latter's authorship. In the commercial economy, in which artists make a name (literally trademarking their autographs) only when their art can be converted into commodity, Butterfly's value remains invisible. Her tracing along Kusmin's signature, therefore, can be seen as symptomatic of the uneven acknowledgment of authorship. Yet it also leads to the paradox that her agency both ventriloquizes and is obscured by the default white authorship. Thus, we must look beyond the dominant scheme of representation to construct Wong's chirographic authorship intertextually across different films.

By 1934, her Chinese autograph had become a brand to the extent that her 1934 British star vehicle *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills) opens with a scene framing her heavily bangled hand inscribing her Chinese autograph 霜柳黃, stroke by stroke, with white chalk on a blackboard, which then dissolves into her English name so

VIDEO 1.1. Wong inscribing her Chinese name at the opening of *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934) (credit: STUDIOCANAL).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.1.1

that the Chinese-illiterate audience could not miss the meaning of her Chinese script (video 1.1). The large script on the blackboard positions Wong as both an author who literally signs the film and a teacher who teaches the audience her Chinese name. With this, Wong's literal signature performance seems to have accomplished the goal of securing and displaying her unique authorial position—after repeated iterations in films, photos, legal documents, and more.

SARTORIAL MASQUERADE

Like her self-citational chirographic authorship, Wong's sartorial masquerade hinges upon borrowing and quoting costumes to strategically refashion stock images. Encompassing both "Oriental" (dis)play and "Occidental" masquerade, Wong's sartorial performances mobilize what Jane Gaines, in her study of Arzner, calls the "costumed costumes—dresses that one would never wear in conventional society," as they insist on artificiality and distance from "clothes."[27] "Speaking in sartorial tongues," Arzner shows how gender and sexuality can be "put on" as an artificial construct (à la Esther Newton's idea of "camp").[28] "Speaking in sartorial tongues" also defines Wong's life-career from the very beginning. The print media harped on her "Cinderella" story as the daughter of a Chinese laundryman.[29] From clothing customers in clean outfits to dressing herself (or being dressed by costume designers) in films, Wong's "sartorial tongue" spoke labor, both physical and affective, distanced and intimate. To recognize the labor-intensive process in Wong's "sartorial tongue," her female spectator cannot narcissistically relate to her as "overpresence of the image," which would play into patriarchy. Rather, the female spectator must "manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman."[30]

Wong's first job outside the family laundromat was modeling fur coats for women's fashion stores. A working-class woman, Wong embodied such luxurious "costumed costumes" without letting herself be reduced to a mere object. She jokingly narrated a story about her father sending a magazine photo spread showing

her modeling a fur coat to her half-Chinese brother in southern China; the brother praised her charm, but quickly switched to make a request for Wong to buy him the wristwatch advertised on the reverse side of the photo spread. Wong remarked, with her usual wry humor, that "a fur coat doesn't tick."[31] This anecdote demonstrates her financial independence and newfound freedom by participating in the commercial culture. She embodied a quintessential "modern girl" of the Roaring Twenties who performed Western feminine fashions to renegotiate her working-class ethnic Chinese status. At the same time, she sardonically reflected on the risk of becoming reified as a quasi-commodity item that had to compete with other luxury goods for a customer's (in this case, her brother's) interest. It is by "speaking in sartorial tongues" that she transgressed class and racial demarcations. Combining performative costuming and inhabitation (in the etymological sense of adopting attire), Wong's fur modeling disrupted "the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely imagistic," and thereby resisted the "patriarchal positioning."[32]

On the screen and the stage, Wong continued to mobilize sartorial performances as a mediatior between her subjecthood and objecthood, between an agential position and the feminine "to-be-looked-at-ness" (à la Laura Mulvey). Her sartorial performances further contributed to her "Oriental" (dis)play of race-gender stereotypes as a leading lady at center stage. In her first European vehicle made in Germany, *Show Life* (aka *Song*, originally titled *Schmutziges Geld* or *Die Liebe eines armen Menschenkindes*; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928), a key narrative moment shows her character, an orphan girl named Song,[33] masquerading Western femininity by donning the fur coat of Gloria, love interest of the white male protagonist, John (played by Heinrich George). "One of fate's castaways," Song is eking out a living in the city of "ancient mosques and palaces" when she is assaulted by local ruffians and rescued by John, with whom she falls in love.[34] John, a circus entertainer who remains blindly in love with Gloria, who spurns him for his poverty, only wants Song to play the human target for his sadistically sensational knife-throwing stunt. Desperately seeking to regain Gloria's love, John attempts a train robbery but fails and is left blinded by the train's steam. Unable to bring Gloria to console the blind John, Song steals twenty pounds from Gloria for his eye surgery and takes the white woman's castaway clothing, including two hats and a fur coat. As Song tries out Gloria's outfit, striking poses and mimicking white society women's mannerisms while laughing at such artifice, John comes back. The blind man's call for Gloria prompts Song to continue the masquerade, passing as the white woman in the latter's coat and hat to offer the white man the familiar haptic pleasure. Thus, she enjoys the white man's misdirected affection mediated by the white woman's fur coat.

When John regains his vision following a surgery made possible with Song's stolen money, Song has become a star dancer at the Palace Hotel with the help of Gloria's agent. Even with stardom equal to Gloria's and owning costumes even

fancier, Song the "Oriental" woman is considered incompatible with the fur coat and its haptic luxury under the white man's newly restored gaze. The fur that enables her white feminine masquerade now becomes evidence of the low-class nonwhite woman's trespassing desire. In other words, the nonwhite woman disqualifies as "femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely imagistic,"[35] for that image is presumed to be exclusively white. Given her exclusion from the white feminine image, a nonwhite woman like Song, and like Wong herself, must masquerade this image to deconstruct the white patriarchal scopic economy.

Another example of occidental sartorial masquerade could be found in *The Toll of the Sea* (dir. Chester M. Franklin, 1922), Hollywood's first feature-length Technicolor film using subtractive process 2, starring Wong as Lotus Flower, a Madame Butterfly type in Hong Kong.[36] Upon learning of her white husband Allen's plan to return to America, Lotus Flower demonstrates her readiness to travel to "those United States" by donning a dark green "traveling costume" copied from her grandmother's "most *chic* American fashion book." In this dress, she struts with an arm akimbo in exaggerated imitation of American women's mannerism, prefiguring her sartorial performance in *Show Life*. This white masquerade gives way to her "Oriental" sartorial transformation later in the film. Having waited for Allen for years and finally learning that he has returned, Lotus Flower decides to deck herself out in her "bridal robe" made of luscious red and green brocade with meticulous embroidery, layered with elaborate shoulder draping and jewelry. Both instances of sartorial transformation convey intense pathos of failure, be it the out-of-time grandmother's "chic" fashion or the out-of-place, excessively florid "Chinese" robe, especially next to Allen's American wife's simple pale-green dress. Neither her white masquerade nor her performance of aristocratic Chineseness could make her a legitimate mate under white supremacist heteronormativity.

Both *Show Life* and *The Toll of the Sea* portray Wong's female protagonist as the abject "Other woman" who wears the wrong costumes, thus reinforcing her un-assimilability. Yet, if we study Wong's sartorial masquerade independent of the prescribed tragic narratives, such woeful wardrobe mishaps could be revisited as the site where she denaturalizes Western and "Oriental" race-gender-class stereotypes alike. *The Toll of the Sea* offers a fertile example for this inquiry, for it represents a tour de force of techno-artifice naturalized as lifelike verisimilitude now ripe for deconstruction. A historical milestone as Hollywood's first Technicolor process 2 feature film, *The Toll of the Sea* received detailed documentation regarding its complicated production, publicity, and reviews. These primary materials reveal how the "Oriental" femininity on display was technologically produced, naturalized, performed, and ultimately unraveled.

The film began as Technicolor Moving Pictures Corporation's experimental short to test its subtractive process 2. To best take advantage of this new green-red color technology, screenwriter Frances Marion decided to adapt the Madame Butterfly story, resetting it in colorful Hong Kong.[37] The story itself was "of little

importance compared to the widespread interest in the potential of color," according to Marion.[38] Compared to the intense interest in experimenting with the green-red Technicolor, the cast was inconsequential; nor could the experimental short attract bankable stars. Wong as the leading lady was loaned by the Metro Studio for free and was, therefore, a low-stakes choice, which also explains why she and the rest of the cast were not listed in the movie posters or the *Variety* publicity.[39]

Despite the complicated technological production of the "Oriental" visuality, such visuality was touted as natural verisimilitude. Publicity and reviews raved about the unexpected runaway success of the Technicolor experimental short that ended up growing into a sixty-minute feature-length film. Distributors and exhibitors unanimously celebrated the film's "natural colors" in presenting the Chinese garden, costuming, décor, exotic animals (including a peacock), and, importantly, the Chinese characters' complexion. All of these, combined with the praise of Wong's realistic emoting, especially her reported ability to cry without glycerin, emphasized the film's unprecedented chromatic, visual, and emotional realism.[40] In fact, Wong's success consisted precisely in what I have elsewhere theorized as "spatio-somatic isomorphism"; that is, she performed as an ornament, both as a figure in *and* as part of the vibrantly colorful garden background, her costumes camouflaging her as a lotus flower, which doubles as her character's name.[41]

The publicity's naturalized truth claim, however, was disrupted when the purported verisimilitude was exposed as false. A reviewer noted that the flesh color of the characters seemed to "baffle the lens." The complexion of Wong and the male lead "seemed brown, again pink and again a mixture of both these shades." While the close-up views were sharp and clear, the long shots were blurred, "as if the camera had got such an eyeful of blues, greens and reds it had been compelled to blink."[42] The color-shocked camera, unsurprisingly, led to a "freak" error. While celebrating "the natural colors or the coloring in this Technicolor . . . [that] brings out the foliage or strikes the colorful dress of the Chinese," *Variety* founder Sime Silverman also noted a "freak" in the coloring process, as "the pallid color given to the complexion of the Chinese extended to the faces of the Americans as well." Silverman speculated: "Perhaps white cannot be taken by this camera with its pallid shade enveloping all faces, white being open to question as a color or for coloring in specific connection."[43] Couched in terms of critiquing the new color technology, these comments oozed a color discourse suggestive of anti-miscegenationist anxiety, literalized in the fear of treacherous color instability. This racialist color discourse belied the truth claim, betraying its ultimate compliance with the Orientalist imaginary in order to be considered "natural."

As if anticipating such an anxiety-ridden color discourse, Wong was already deploying color-conscious "Oriental" (dis)play. As referenced in the prelude, Wong announced her arrival as "the spot of yellow that has come to stay on the white screen" in an interview shortly before *The Toll of the Sea*.[44] Preempting Silverman's panic reaction to the freaky invasive "pallid" color, Wong flaunted the

"spot of yellow" to mock the racist fear, defiantly converting her racialized double bind into a niche attraction. Her pleasurable power in the margins emerges from the discrepancy between the self-evasive Lotus Flower and Wong's public persona as a daring "Oriental" flapper in the 1920s.[45]

In the scenes of sartorial masquerade described above, Wong the real-life flapper would be fully aware that the "chic American fashion" was the outdated wrong choice.[46] Thus, while Lotus Flower's exaggerated body language in the costume is meant to demonstrate her awkward unassimilability, this same scene affords Wong the performer an opportunity to (over-)perform so as to mock the prudent and arrogant white femininity. Her jesting mannerisms instill pleasure for the audience, who sense her ironic disidentification from the Madame Butterfly type. Similarly, in the scene where Lotus Flower changes into the Chinese bridal robe, two maids bring pieces of the garment, putting them together for the camera as if displaying the vibrant colors and the elaborate embroidery for the camera's and the audience's consumption or connoisseurship. The real-time medium frontal shot of the maids unbuttoning Lotus Flower's layers of tunics also suggests exhibitionist teasing of the white audience's scopophilia about the Chinese costumes and the female body buried inside. The exhibitionist visual presentation, coupled with Wong's jittery excitement, suggests the pleasure of inhabiting an exotic prop that is literally assembled on the site under the audience's amazed gaze.

Wong's sartorial transformations, therefore, playfully quote, assemble, and embody fantastic costume pieces from another era or the Orientalist imaginary. Such meta-performances deflect the melodramatic pathos and mock gender-race stereotypes, be it Victorian white femininity or aristocratic Chinese femininity. Wong, seizing her first leading-lady opportunity, takes advantage of the new color technology to display and animate her objecthood, agentially dis-playing the costumes *and* the associated stereotypes. Similarly, Wong's Western masquerade via the feminine fur coat in *Show Life* asserts her transgressive modern femininity that resists the East-West hierarchy and the normal-exotic binary.

Wong's ironic sartorial transformation after her return from the 1936 China trip becomes more poignant by explicitly engaging the diegetic and nondiegetic audiences. One signal example is *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, 1937), the first of the four studio B films Wong starred in for Paramount.[47] Released on December 17, 1937, this film departed from the abject "Other woman" motif, featuring Wong as the positive agential heroine, Lan Ying Lin, who works shoulder to shoulder with FBI inspector Kim Lee (played by Korean American actor Philip Ahn) to crack a human-trafficking crime led by a white woman pretending to be a Chinese antique aficionado. Moreover, Lan Ying and Kim Lee survive the mission, promising to become possibly the first Asian American romantic couple on the American screen.

Importantly, it was Wong who proposed the exotic-female-detective film series to Paramount, based on the popularity of Warner Oland's Charlie Chan series.[48]

In a letter specially addressed to her "*Picture Show* readers" in Britain, Wong enthused over her new role as the "lady detective" who was "to round-up the villain instead of being the usual victim of the round-up!"[49] Two years later, Wong recalled in an interview with the Chinese American reporter Louise Leung that she liked her role in *Daughter of Shanghai* "better than any I've had before. . . . Not because it gives me better acting opportunities nor because the character has exceptional appeal. It's just because this picture gives the Chinese a break—we have the sympathetic parts for a change! To me that means a great deal."[50] Unsurprisingly, this film has been celebrated by Asian American historians for portraying contemporary agential Asian Americans and their contributions to building a multicultural American society. The depiction of the male protagonist Kim Lee as a government employee further prefigures the Asian American civil rights movement and "model minority" image.

A comparison of the film's script drafts reveals the emergence of a new image of American-born Chinese who actively adopt American values while negotiating the Chinese tradition—reductively labeled Confucianism. This emerging hybrid identity is specifically scripted in Wong/Lan Ying's costuming, visualized through Wong's "authentic" Chinese wardrobe that she had acquired in China the year before. I unpack Wong's subversive virtuoso sartorial performances in three key scenes: her mise-en-abyme modeling of a "princess" costume at the beginning of the film, her exotic dance in a Central American café as a self-appointed undercover agent to collect the human-trafficking information, and her cross-dressing as a male Chinese coolie to escape from the café that doubles as the human-trafficking transit point.

Inspired by Garnet Weston's 1937 script "Honor Bright," based on "Slaughter of Aliens Told," a news report on human trafficking in the *Los Angeles Times*, the script titled "Anna May Wong Story," dated April 28, 1937, describes Wong's character Anna (surprise!) as a "daughter of Chinese merchant [Oriental antique dealer] in San Francisco. American-born, well educated, can wear clothes both American and Chinese."[51] In the September 9, 1937, version of "Anna May Wong Story (Y-4)" by William Hurlbut, Wong's character, now named Mei-Mei (alluding to Wong's middle name May), is described as "beautiful, posed, gracious, with the briskness of her American training overlying like a sparkle the dignity and charm of her Chinese nature. Capable of quick decisions and bravery in the face of deadly danger." The male protagonist was an "American-born Chinese of the Dept. of Immigration and Naturalization. . . . Must be a good actor who can portray courage, humor, sympathy and attractive youth with whom Mei-Mei can fall in love." This version of the script also notes that all Chinese bit characters should speak good English, emphasizing their Americanness.

In view of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that rendered the majority of ethnic Chinese ineligible for legal immigration, *Daughter of Shanghai* makes a striking move to affirm Chinese Americans' successful assimilation through contributing

to the US government's war against human trafficking. Still, "Oriental" femininity as an exotic spectacle persists throughout the script drafts and the film to purvey mainstream visual pleasure. Rather than settling for the scripted image that was bifurcated between assimilated Americanness and exotic Chineseness, Wong mobilized sartorial performances to portray a category-confounding interstitial persona.

In the September 9, 1937, script, Mei-Mei/Wong is introduced as one of three mannequins in the Chinese merchant Quan Lin's antique shop, "posed on tableau to display gorgeous Chinese costumes." Modeling a bridal dress, Mei-Mei stands under a "circle of light, [and] the pearls which compose [the] head-dress (which fits Mei-Mei's face in an Elizabeth Arden oval) scintillate at the slightest move and it is not until she slowly releases her mannequin pose that we realize she is flesh and blood." In her 1937 letter to her British *Picture Show* readers, Wong described her plan to revisit Britain the following April and to engage in theater and film performances, "perhaps in the exciting royal robe of a daughter of the great Ming Dynasty." This royal robe was likely the one she wore for the opening scene in the film.

Renamed Lan Ying in the finished film, she is introduced by her father, the antique-shop owner Quan Lin (played by Ching Wah Lee, editor of the San Francisco–based English-language periodical *The Chinese Digest*) as a "rare treasure reserved for a connoisseur," meaning the store's longtime client—a white woman who later is exposed as the human-trafficking ringleader.[52] At the strike of a desk gong, the drapes in the background open automatically, revealing Lan Ying on a stage in a tableau warrior pose, modeling a full-length warrior costume complete with a headdress decorated with pheasant feathers. As the camera cuts to a tight close-up of Lan Ying's eyes looking toward screen left, the female white client's voiceover marvels, "Oh, perfectly exquisite," and—as the camera cuts back to the client—continues: "The figure—is it also antique?" At that note, Lan Ying comes alive in a full shot, smilingly responding that it's "only a modern copy," then steps off the stage, walking up to the surprised Mrs. Hunt, who has just realized the model is a friend (video 1.2). As Lan Ying takes off the headdress, revealing her trademark China-doll bangs in front and bun in back, Mrs. Hunt, still awe-stricken by the "princess" costume, settles on a purchase price ($2,000) for this antique "from Peking" (according to Lan Ying).[53]

The camera then takes us to an inner room where Quan Lin the store owner meets two smugglers (self-styled "importers") who try to make him hire "cheap good labor" in his "coastal warehouses and factories" at $1,000 a piece. Quan Lin rejects this and strikes a gong; his Black bodyguard, Sam, "the razor man from the south," appears from behind drapes (identical to the drapes that open on Lan Ying's mannequin performance) to "show out" the smugglers.[54] As they pass through the outer room in the background, we see Lan Ying in the foreground, wearing a light-colored, tight-fitting qipao with dark piping, which may or may not correspond with what the shooting script describes as "one of striking lines,

VIDEO 1.2. Wong as an antique-store owner's daughter posing as a mannequin modeling a "princess" gown in *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, 1937).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.1.2

combining modes of East and West." In a later scene when Lan Ying accompanies her father to Mrs. Hunt's home (unaware of this being a trap that costs her father his life), she wears a white fur cape over a different qipao with embroidery, contradicting the shooting script's description of her "Western gown (with a flavor of the East in its conception)" that makes her "lookin' like de Queen o' Sheba" to Sam.

The script-to-film shift is indicative of Wong's agency in shaping the sartorial (dis)play of "Oriental" femininity by leveraging her newly acquired Chinese wardrobe. She performed this wardrobe, reiteratively, in multiple films, stage shows, fashion columns in popular magazines, and public occasions, including the China-relief fund-raising campaigns during World War II.[55] Wong's mise-en-abyme costume modeling at the beginning of *Daughter of Shanghai* not only introduces Chinese sartorial culture, but, more importantly, satirizes the diegetic and nondiegetic white audience's gullible consumption of "authentic" Chineseness fabricated for sale. She puts on a show to play with Mrs. Hunt's Orientalist desire. Evoking her first job as a fur model, she poses as a mannequin (an object) modeling the Peking Opera costume, then transforms into a subject: a Chinese American woman who wittily calls herself a "modern copy" of an antique, thus turning her simulation upside down. She then goes on to authenticate the costume as from Peking (alluding to her China trip), smilingly quoting the "prosaic" price of $2,000 (equivalent to two coolies' prices quoted by the human traffickers). The fact that Mrs. Hunt, who is persuaded into purchasing the "Oriental" ornament, ends up being exposed as the human-trafficking ringleader suggests an ironic connection between the extravagant ornament and the invisibilized illegitimate migrant labor—both up for sale, but with drastically different degrees of agency and price tags. Shuttling between objecthood and subjecthood, authenticity and replication, display and dis-play, Wong exploits and exposes the exploitative economy underpinning Orientalist fantasy while seeking to promote her career with a new profile gained from her China trip (more on this in chapter 4).

Wong further utilizes sartorial performances and identity masquerade to build an interlocutory circle with other racialized performers, both within and beyond the film diegesis. In *Daughter of Shanghai*, the mutual recognition within this circle not only contributes to the emerging Asian American "model minority" image as intended by the script, but also adds a twist legible only to insider viewers. This is illustrated in the scenes depicting Lan Ying's exotic dance in the Central American café and her subsequent escape by cross-dressing as a male Chinese coolie.

The dance costume, like the one in *Piccadilly* and many others she inhabits in other showgirl films, puts "Oriental" femininity on display. Taking an alias, Lei-la Chen, Lan Ying presents herself as a dancer seeking a job in Home Café, the real purpose being to gather information about the café's owner, Hartman, who uses this Central American dive as a clearinghouse for human trafficking. The shooting script dated September 9, 1937, describes her café performance as "a hot number from the far-r-r East!" She wears "a graceful Eastern costume and a gauze veil which falls over her face." She also sings a song about costumed masquerade. The lyrics in the script read: "you are fooled by a dancer's dress. If she wears Eastern dress you think she is the essence of the East. If she wears practically NO dress, you think she is the spirit of little old New York. Really both are the same for East or West, all over the world, it's swing time." The script also gives instructions: "during song Wong illustrates by dropping flowing outer garment, revealing herself in sultan shorts." This scripted performance would look like a striptease with unveiling and undressing that simultaneously titillates the audience's gaze and mocks their gullibility.

In the script dated September 15/17, 1937, this song number and the striptease are replaced with a dance sequence as we see in the film (video 1.3). Shortly after Hartman sits down in the café with the smuggler ship captain and the latter's polyglot supercargo (actually the FBI agent Kim Lee in disguise, played by Philip Ahn), "Miss Lei-la Chen, Daughter of Shanghai" steps on the stage to give a "real treat." As the lighting adjusts to a spotlight on stage right, a cut to a medium shot shows Lan Ying in a black sheer bodice dress, decorated with a studded collar, an oversized hairpin in her low hair bun. The camera holds on her lowering her head coyly, raising right hand to chin as if to cover her face while stepping onto the stage, her enlarged shadow projected on the background drape. As she dances to the sensuous music on the spotlighted but smoke-shrouded stage, the camera assumes different positions from the audience's perspective and from behind her, interspersed with panning shots, taking in not only her dance movements, but also the gender- and race-mixed audience, all entranced by her dance in the sleazy tropical ambience.

Only two characters remain outside the trance: the dancer Lan Ying/Lei-la Chan and the FBI agent Kim Lee. The camera follows a Black waiter approaching Kim Lee's table, showing the latter watching her with concern, as he has seen through Lan Ying's exotic costuming. An eye-line match cuts to Lan Ying/Lei-la

VIDEO 1.3. Wong's character posing as a dancer doing an exotic dance to infiltrate a human-trafficking gang in *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, 1937).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.1.3

Chan, framing her in a bust shot, dancing while looking, cuing reciprocal recognition, then turning around as if to prevent Hartman from noticing. Another cut takes us back to Kim Lee watching, now framed with Hartman and the ship captain flanking him. This is followed by their point-of-view shot of her in medium framing, facing the audience, spiraling her arms downward as she kneels down to just above the audience level, moving ritualistically in sync with the smoke reeling out of an incense burner in the foreground. Next, we see her from behind, perched on the makeshift thrust stage, surrounded by the still-entranced spectators, in sharp contrast to the concerned-looking Kim Lee in the middle ground.

Aside from featuring the sartorial masquerade and dance movements that partially quote Shosho's "eccentric dance" in *Piccadilly*, this dance scene showcases Wong's collaboration with Philip Ahn to create a sideways resonance separate from the mainstream entranced spectatorship. Their sideways mutual recognition indicates the minoritized subjects' tactful coordinated play with hypervisiblity and invisibility, both as characters *and* as minoritized performers. In view of the September 9, 1937, script's indication of the café audience as "nondescript types and men of all nationalities (no orientals [*sic*], either male or female)," Kim Lee/Ahn's presence in the audience is an anomaly that enables the two East Asian–heritage performers to experience racial difference as "affective difference," as José Esteban Muñoz would argue. Muñoz observes that such "minoritarian affect" is always "partially illegible in relation to normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects." Likewise, Lan Ying and Kim Lee's mutual recognition remains illegible to the rest of the audience, conducing to intimate affective politics arising from the subalterns' ways of "feeling each other" in their shared act of going undercover to (dis)play the Oriental image (Lan Ying as an exotic dancer, Kim Lee as supercargo).[56]

This secret pact extends to the realm of alternative reception, where Ahn the knowing co-performer also stands in for a knowing viewer who enjoys a secret resonance with Wong. Like Kim Lee, who is anomalous in the audience, the

knowing viewer was not the film's targeted viewer. The unintended burgeoning subaltern affective politics could arise only from the sideways call-and-response between the performer and her interlocutors (co-performers and viewers), who share the experience of marginalization and understand the risky yet pleasurable subversive act of putting on an "Oriental" show. The shared subaltern affective feeling for each other does not mean homogenization. Wong and Ahn were fully aware of their different ethnicities (one Chinese, the other Korean) and linguistic abilities. So are a knowing audience. Despite the film's publicity that mostly passed off Ahn as Chinese, an insider viewer would call for a more nuanced understanding of the Asian American identity that rejects the film's discourse of homogenization. Also importantly, part of Wong and Ahn's sideways collaboration has to do with precisely their self-aware make-believe performance of the Chinese language.

We see their foreign-language performance coupled with Wong's cross-dressing in the escape scene after Lei-La Chan/Lan Ying/Wong's exotic dance. Upon learning from Kim Lee that a San Francisco–bound ship is trafficking twenty laborers, Lan Ying decides to cross-dress as a Chinese male coolie to smuggle herself onto the ship. When stopped for not matching with the registered coolie, she speaks in Taishan dialect to prove her Chinese identity. Lee, posing as the supercargo, again immediately recognizes her despite the coolie outfit (just as he sees through her dance costume in the previous scene). He facilitates her gender/class masquerade by interpreting her line: "he says he is substituting his brother," and since "we've got the right number," it does not matter if it is the same person—so he explains to the befuddled white assistant.

Here Wong and Ahn ostensibly share the Chinese language, which lumps them together as Chinese and therefore as foreign. Extradiegetically, however, insider viewers know that Ahn, a Korean American, did not understand Wong's line. Thus, their make-believe linguistic compatriotism, while compliant with the studio publicity to homogenize Asian Americans, works as an inside joke—one that eludes the monolingual mainstream audience. In other words, Wong's deployment of Taishanese is performative rather than authenticating; it aligns with her sartorial transformation to put up the strategic "Oriental" (dis)play. This inside joke underscores complex Asian American identities, suggesting that the subaltern affective feeling is based not on a shared foreign language (or homogeneity), but rather on their shared (dis)play of an illusory foreign code served up for the normative audience. When Kim Lee smuggles the Taishanese-speaking, cross-dressed Lan Ying onto the ship in the narrative, Wong and Ahn together smuggle their satire into the studio-scripted film to challenge white America's patronizing assimilationism.

Several years later, in her Poverty Row film *Lady from Chungking* (dir. William Nigh, 1942), Wong's sartorial performance serves an additional function of undermining ethno-patriarchal nationalism promoted by the now-pro-China Hollywood *and* the Chinese government. *Lady from Chungking* and *Bombs over Burma* (dir. Joseph H. Lewis, 1942) were both produced by Alexander-Stern Productions

and released by Producers Releasing Corporation.[57] These Poverty Row films were produced with a low budget, were double-billed in theaters, and received television reruns in the late 1940s and the 1950s. While attracting little critical attention, they are noteworthy for centering China's Anti-Fascist War led by a local heroine (played by Wong), contrary to the A-list war spectacles that privilege American support for China's war.[58] MGM's *Dragon Seed* (dir. Harold S. Bucquet and Jack Conway, 1944), adapted from Pearl S. Buck's novel, did focus on a Chinese family's participation in the war. However, like the studio's previous mega-production adapted from Buck's other novel, *The Good Earth* (1937), which notoriously excluded Wong, *Dragon Seed* again featured a predominantly white cast (led by Katharine Hepburn) yellowfacing Chinese characters.

Compared to the industry's major productions of the same category, Wong's two wartime films stand out due to her nuanced performances built upon her interwar signature style, despite the lesser status of the Poverty Row films in the studio system. Discussing *Bombs over Burma*, film historian Brian Taves argues that Wong learned to work in Hollywood's "sidelines and fissures"; so did Joseph Lewis, a B movie director who became "adept at using the slightly greater freedom found in the margins of Hollywood."[59] I argue that Wong had already learned to work in "sidelines and fissures" long before the 1940s; but the World War II film *Lady from Chungking* offered her an opportunity to further develop her sartorial performance and double entendre, not only to advance the pro-China narrative in the Anti-Fascist War, but also to disrupt ethno-patriarchal nationalism.

By December 1942, when the film was released, Wong was already a publicly recognized spokesperson for China's Anti-Fascist War. As early as January 1932, barely four months after Japan's invasion into northeast China and one month before the Japanese government's proclamation of the Manchu State (or Manchukuo) in the occupied northeast China, Wong penned an essay, "Manchuria," chastising Japan's aggression.[60] With the full-scale outbreak of the war on July 7, 1937, she became more invested in supporting China's resistance. Not only did she play a patriotic surgeon (modeled upon San Francisco–based Chinese American surgeon Margaret Chung) in *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939), she also campaigned for China War Relief. She auctioned off her wardrobe, and in November 1940 served as chairperson for the One Bowl of Rice campaign in San Francisco, with participation from international writers, artists, and musicians. In 1941, Wong wrote a preface for a cookbook, *New Chinese Recipes*, compiled by Fred Wing; the proceeds from its sales were donated to China War Relief.[61] On December 21, 1941, she participated in the China Relief Show in Detroit with Walter O'Keefe and other talents, raising $4,700.[62] From 1942 to the end of World War II, she continued to work for China War Relief and performed for United Service Organizations Inc. (USO).[63]

In all the public fund-raising occasions, Wong's sartorial performance played an important role. In December 1940, Wong attended the Chinese garden festival

at Pickfair—chaired by Rosalind Russell with the Chinese consul, T. K. Chang, as the honorary chair—to raise funds for China's Orthopedic Hospital and Chinese war orphans. Other participants included Hollywood stars and Chinese celebrities such as the female aviatrix Lee Ya-ching 李霞卿 (1912–98) and the Chinese American writer Lin Yu-tang 林語堂 (1895–1976). This event was documented in the short film *Meet the Stars No. 1: Chinese Garden Festival*, produced by Republic Pictures, with commentary by Harriet Parsons, a regular contributor to film magazines.[64] In this film's "novel fashion show" (with fabrics and designs reportedly from the Los Angeles art dealer Robert Gump), Wong models a white "elaborate ceremonial costume," as Parsons described it. Her headdress was the same as the one she wore in the 1937 summer stock play *Princess Turandot* and on several other occasions, which calls into question whether Robert Gump was the sole supplier of the costumes. In 1941, David O. Selznick called a meeting between the motion picture industry's United China Relief committee and the Los Angeles committee, which led to the "Moon Festival" party staged in the old Chinatown, China City, and New Chinatown on the evenings of August 7–9, raising a total of $100,000 for China War Relief.[65] Over one hundred film stars attended the celebration; "silken-banged Anna May Wong . . . rode in the parade with Mayor Fletcher Bowron," wearing a costume that would reappear in *Lady from Chungking* the following year.

The sartorial performance linked Wong's participation in China War Relief and in the two pro-China war films. In *Lady from Chungking*, she played Madame Kwan Mei, a guerrilla leader disguised as a local peasant woman who then presents herself as an aristocratic lady to entertain a Japanese general in order to obtain military intelligence for the Chinese resisters. Refashioning her undercover role in *Daughter of Shanghai* for the war drama, Wong now avails sartorial performances to inhabit the interstitial position between China, the US, Japan, and other authoritarian forces. Centering a female spy whose portrayal hinges upon the actress's fluid identity, *Lady from Chungking* evokes two pre-Code films: Marlene Dietrich's *Dishonored* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1931) and Greta Garbo's *Mata Hari* (dir. George Fitzmaurice, 1931). All three films revolve around a female spy's double bind, being caught in the war, simultaneously valued and reviled for their sexual prowess. Interestingly, commenting on *Mata Hari*, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist Harry Carr boldly contended that Wong (not Garbo) should have played the female spy role, for Garbo, the "gloomy, solemn Swede," was "as well adapted for vampish parts as the Statue of Liberty."[66] By 1942, however, Wong seemed to have ditched her "vampish" trademark; her character Madame Kwan Mei emerges as an unyielding patriot (virtually a Chinese Statue of Liberty) who fulfills her duty at the price of her life, contrary to Dietrich's and Garbo's spies, who both fall in love with the enemy and abandon their duties. Positively reviewed in China, *Lady from Chungking* suggests Wong's success in appeasing her Chinese critics.[67]

The last scene, of Kwan Mei's execution by the Japanese general, visually resembles Dietrich's agent X27's execution at the end of *Dishonored*. Yet, instead of

displaying her sexuality as X27 does in the pre-Code film, Kwan Mei gives a patriotic speech that continues even after her death. This didactic ending emblematizes the film's navigation through the conflicting demands of wartime pro-China politics, die-hard Orientalism, the Hays Code's strictures, and wartime rationing that curtailed Hollywood's extravagant business model. Joseph Breen, head of the Production Code Administration for the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, requested corrections of the film's "unacceptable points" to ensure that the interactions between the "Jap general" and Kwan Mei were friendly, rather than sexual.[68] Furthermore, the wartime filmmaking regulations urged studios to conserve resources to support war efforts. One measure was that two pounds of women's hairpins were rationed for each studio, suggesting that expenses on female glamour (among other things) were curtailed.[69]

In this spirit, the publicity for *Lady from Chungking* accentuated Wong's and other cast members' participation in wartime campaigns. Wong had a bombproof shelter constructed of corrugated metal salvaged from a junk pile for $8.50 (as it was impossible to buy this material on the Pacific Coast after America declared war on Japan), and had the walls decorated with Chinese matting and a "V" sign. On the other hand, the film demonstrated die-hard Orientalism. Not only did it continue to practice yellowface, casting white actors in Japanese roles, the publicity also hyped Wong's Oriental femininity. Now touted as the "First Lady of China,"[70] Wong reportedly spent hours doing her own anachronistic prewar "authentic Chinese makeup," as it was the "old custom" for an aristocrat to make a public appearance in heavy makeup, which, in the film, served "a double purpose of concealing her real identity from the enemy officer."[71]

Navigating the Hays Code, the wartime regulations, the Sino-US allyship, and the entrenched Orientalist fantasy, the film both exploits and disavows Wong's "Oriental" femininity to maximize its commercial *and* political appeal. Yet Wong's sartorial performance not only fits into the industrial, infrastructural, and political demands, but also undermines the film's desire to update old Orientalism with wartime politics, *and* subtly deviates from its patriotic propaganda and patriarchal ethno-nationalism. The film opens with Kwan Mei the guerrilla leader disguised as a peasant, wearing a rustic dark-colored tunic with traditional Chinese frog closures on the front, matched with wide-leg pants and a straw coolie hat. This unglamorous disguise, however, is betrayed by Wong's trademark long fingernails—mystified as an aristocratic symbol, which gives Kwan Mei an opportunity to "confess" to the Japanese supervisor that she is actually Madame Huang Tai, another guise that gets her selected as the Japanese general's "companion" from whom she wants to gather military intelligence.

As the aristocratic "Madame Huang Tai," Kwan Mei wears a light-colored, tight-fitting, qipao-inspired dress with dragon embroidery, combined with Western-style puffy short sleeves. Impressed by this costume, the Japanese general likens her to the "Great Wall of China" with "fragile and durable beauty." Publicity

FIGURE 1.4. Wong as Kwan Mei, wearing a dark gown embroidered with a large white peony, in *Lady from Chungking* (dir. William Nigh, 1942).

FIGURE 1.5. Wong wearing the same gown in *Limehouse Blues* (dir. Alexander Hall, 1934).

FIGURE 1.6. Wong wearing the same gown in *Ellery Queen's Penthouse Mystery* (dir. James P. Hogan, 1941).

hyped this costume as being made of "priceless material . . . over a century old," acquired from Peking during Wong's China trip, and tailor-made for her role as an aristocratic lady from Chungking, following the "modern trend to economy."[72] Hyperbolic as it was, the publicity confirmed Wong's authorship in fabricating the seductive Orientalist aristocratic myth, now catered to a Japanese general played by a white actor who stood in for the mainstream white audience.

In a critical scene in which Kwan Mei witnesses the general's execution of an elderly Chinese, she poses as his "companion," wearing a dark-colored gown with a large white peony embroidered in the chest area (figure 1.4). She had previously donned this same dress in her Paramount film *Limehouse Blues* (dir. Alexander Hall, 1934), in her Columbia film *Ellery Queen's Penthouse Mystery* (dir. James P. Hogan, 1941), and at the August 1941 Moon Festival organized for China War Relief fund-raising (mentioned earlier; figures 1.5 and 1.6). Wong was also photographed in this dress by Carl Van Vechten on September 22, 1935, in different poses.[73] These reiterative sartorial appearances strengthen her signature performances from screen to public occasions, from the interwar Orientalist fantasy (as in *Limehouse Blues*, which was lampooned in the Chinese press for humiliating China) through the mystery genre (of Ellery Queen) to the wartime spy film.

The apparently ahistorical sartorial self-citation is anachronotopic; it disregards genre differences, temporal and locational specificity, and the shifting political climate. Such out-of-time-and-place-ness undercuts both narrative progression and teleological nationalism, causing tension with Wong's patriot role. Indeed, Kwan Mei's alignment with the Chinese Nationalist government

is held in a tug-of-war with her disidentifying from national allegiance, as indicated in her interactions with Lavara, a Russian American vagabond entertainer in this film. As the narrative goes, Kwan Mei successfully persuades the nonpartisan Lavara into freeing the captured American pilots who then support the Chinese guerrillas in their Anti-Fascist War. Placed in the intertextual context of Wong's oeuvre, Kwan Mei's confidence in Lavara based on a "woman's intuition" poignantly evokes the white wife in *The Toll of the Sea* who uses her "woman's intuition" to make Lotus Flower relinquish her child to the white couple. Kwan Mei's alliance with Lavara, however, repurposes the "woman's intuition" to assert her leadership role as the "First Lady of China." This interracial female alliance eradicates the white male fulcrum in the triangle to subtly undermine patriarchal ethno-nationalism.

Furthermore, the vagabond Lavara is almost an alter ego of the peripatetic Wong. A Russian American who has roamed around in Euro-Asia but has never been to the US, Lavara mirrors Wong, who was of Chinese heritage, born and raised in America, and traveled extensively but visited China only once. Given their shared migratory performer-worker status, Lavara's rejection of side-taking allegorizes Wong's own critical distanciation from homogenizing politics (be it American or Chinese). Thus, Lavara's contingent participation in the guerrilla activity (through alliance with Kwan Mei) could suggest that Wong's patriotism was similarly contingent—that is, supporting China's Anti-Fascist War without subscribing to the Chinese government's ethno-patriarchal statism.

It was bitter irony for Wong that barely two months after the release of *Lady from Chungking*, the real "First Lady of China," Madame Chiang Kai-shek, toured the US to mount a war rally in February 1943, a grand spectacle to which many Hollywood celebrities were invited, but not Wong. In fact, Wong's movie offerings were drying up, forcing her to virtually retire from the big screen until 1949. The arrival of the official "First Lady of China" unmasked Wong as the illegitimate impostor, so to speak. She was once again relegated to the role of an abject Other woman, this time by a woman of her own race, largely on account of her working-class background.[74] In this context, Wong's enactment of the patriot role per se entails transgression and ultimate disappointment. Her reiterative and anachronotopic sartorial masquerade indicates the persistence of her past persona, which in turn undermines the teleological history of modernization as promoted by China's patriarchal ethno-nationalist government.

The consummate anti-teleological move in Wong's "Oriental" (dis)play must be reserved for her obligatory death scenes, however. Commonly construed as symptomatic of her victimization by Hollywood, her death scenes often follow the tearful melodramatic pathos of love's labor irredeemably lost. In the next section, I show that the real impact of Wong's death scenes consists in her physical and affective labor of perfecting the death act, not as a sentimental failure, but rather as a queering exit out of the white-male-centered heteronormative future.

Her simultaneously affective and distanciated death acts release her from perpetual victimhood, giving expression to oblique yet defiant nonnormative and anti-teleological desires.

DRAMATIC TEARS AND DEATH ACTS

Wong's highly fetishized tearful screen deaths were so obligatory that she sarcastically observed that her epitaph should read "a woman who has died a thousand deaths."[75] Addressing her British audience, Wong, already an established, trendsetting performer-celebrity in interwar Europe, explained her 1928 departure from Hollywood: "I left America because I died so often. I was killed in virtually every picture I appeared in. Pathetic dying seemed to be the best thing I did."[76] The death scene persisted as a hallmark of her European vehicles. A British fan magazine contributor, Marjory Collier, marveled at Wong's "forte" of demonstrating "perfectly motionless" passivity in *The Flame of Love* (1930)—Wong's first talkie, produced in German, French, and English—calling this one of Wong's "unqualified attractions," even as she also acknowledged that it was a "grim joke" that a "creature of two such different worlds" should be brought under the klieg lights only to meet her inevitable screen death.[77]

Not only did Wong and contemporary commentators keep returning to the pathos-laden death scene, but Asian American writers also take pains to work through the cinematically imposed death drive. In an unfilmed speculative screenplay, "An Appointment with Sessue and Anna May," New York–based writers Yoshio Kishi and Irene Yah Ling Sun let the fictional Wong bitterly complain about her producers' "death wish—for Orientals" so that the "white girl with yellow hair may get the man."[78] In *China Doll*, playwright Elizabeth Wong dramatizes the irony of Wong losing a Eurasian role to Dorothy Lamour in *Disputed Passage* (1939) only to be hired back to coach Lamour on how to enact the "Oriental" death beautifully.[79] All of these discursive negotiations point to a paradox, namely that Wong's death scenes are simultaneously hyper-performative (hinging upon repeated contrived corporeal practice) and fetishized as essentially "Oriental" (since Wong's "Oriental" origin supposedly guaranteed her authentically beautiful death).

Closely associated with Wong's death scenes is the privileged melodramatic trope of tears.[80] Like death, tearing up also rests upon the paradox of looking spontaneous yet requiring exact acting skills; but the naturalness of tearing is more linked to femininity, while the death scenes tend to be associated with the "Oriental" figure. Constructed as a quintessential female affect, tearing has received much critical attention, especially in melodrama studies.[81] Yet fascination with cinematic tears goes back to the first decades of the twentieth-century, as illustrated in writings by Jean Epstein and Béla Balázs. Celebration of Wong's tearful performance began with *The Toll of the Sea*, in which she became known as an "exquisite crier without glycerin."[82] Wong herself playfully recalled that she

wept so profusely that the assistant director suggested that she stand on a board to avoid wetting her feet.[83] While in Berlin filming her first star vehicle *Show Life*, none other than Walter Benjamin described her weeping as "famous amongst her colleagues. One can travel to Neubabelsberg [the filming location] to witness it."[84] Superimposing Wong's tears on the death scenes, we get melodrama at the acme of pathos, with gendered weeping redoubled by racialized death, all congealed in Wong's reiterative enactment of the abject Other woman in the dreadful, white-male-oriented triangular vortex. The pathos becomes even more impactful as it seemingly mirrors reality, for Wong, bound by the anti-miscegenation law, was rendered an illegitimate mate in the white-dominant love economy (like her abject characters), "the woman not to be kissed."

And yet, feminist scholars of melodrama have taught us the subversive power of excessive pathos, when the feminine emotions become so overblown that they become campy satire of those same emotions *and* the repressive domestic space. To the melodrama scholarship, I add the dimension of labor, both exhilarating and exhausting, that was the very foundation of Wong's "Oriental" (dis)play, complete with sweat, tears, and death acts. Reiterated across so many films, Wong's labor-intensive and hyperbolic tearful death acts work to queer the white heteropatriarchal structure, thwarting its built-in desire to naturalize the Other's death to uphold its own legitimacy. Thus, her death acts hint at defiant nonnormative desires even if they remain unrepresentable in the Euro-American mainstream cinema. Following Sara Ahmed's argument that "queering" means to "move between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line," I understand Wong's nonnormative desires as redoubled social and sexual interventions.[85]

Artist-scholar of theater and performance studies Broderick D. V. Chow offers an important insight into what it means for a minoritized performer to put on a labor-intensive show of becoming dead in an Orientalist narrative. Reflecting upon his own theatrical death act as Thuy—the white man's adversary—in the 2005 production of *Miss Saigon* by the Arts Club Theatre Company in Vancouver, Canada, Chow describes how he "milked [his spectacular death scene] for all it was worth," recalling that "when my labour of rehearsal and training clicked into gear and the note rang out, the feeling of putting on a brilliant show was magical." He lay on the stage in the state of death, "beaming inside at a job well done."[86] Emphasizing the mechanics of theatrics, Chow makes a key distinction between representation and presence, arguing that even representation teeming with pernicious gender-race stereotypes cannot foreclose the possibility of pleasurable subversion arising from the actor's labor-intensive presence.

Chow draws upon the notion of "puro arte" (literally meaning "pure art" in Spanish) as theorized by Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns in her study of Filipino theater. Departing from the Tagalog phrase "puro arte (pure art) lang iyan" ("She's just putting on a show") that originally dismisses attention-seeking theatrics, Burns

revalorizes "puro arte" as an episteme to highlight the superficial yet creative over-performing body. This means to acknowledge "the labor of artful expression [and] . . . the creative efforts required to make something out of nothing." By "press[ing] against the accepted norms of gender and performance," "puro arte" resists one's erasure as a subject.[87]

Building upon Burns's theorization of "puro arte," Chow highlights the "*excessive, mercurial 'eros' in the labour of putting on a show*" as illustrated by his own death act in *Miss Saigon*. He maintains that *Miss Saigon* is "a piece of theatre [that] gave us the gap necessary to distance ourselves from the representation and *identify not with the character we were playing, but with our own labour of mimesis*."[88] "The East Asian body," he writes, "made visible and audible by the theatre, defiantly asserts its unruly presence (which is always in excess of the role played) in the presence of the audience, providing opportunities for the subversion and undoing of stereotypes by both actor and spectator."[89] While *Miss Saigon* is not a "story for us," it is a "story we could *embody*. *Here was visibility*."[90] Thus, the subversive excess has everything to do with "the pleasures of being able to appear, to simply be."[91]

Inspired by Chow's and Burns's theorization of "putting on a show," I ask how Wong fabricates a show of "Oriental" feminine death that appeals to mainstream white audiences while insinuating her bitter satire of Orientalist sentimentality; and how her labor-intensive "perfect" death act derails the hackneyed white heteronormative narrative. Like Chow and Burns, I depart from straightforward ideological criticism of the dead-end narrative to spotlight Wong's reorientation of the racialized woman's overdetermined death. Here I also draw on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological method of "reorienting" to reshuffle the spatiotemporal structures of sexual and racial politics.[92]

Wong's first wildly hyped tearful death act was as Lotus Flower in *The Toll of the Sea*. Ironically, the scene of her suicide has not survived. In the version restored by the UCLA Film & Television Archive, the film ends with the Pacific Ocean, shot with the original Technicolor process 2 technology, followed by a cutout of Lotus Flower's weeping face pasted at the bottom right corner while the screen center is occupied by Frances Marion's closing line: "Oh, sea, now that life has been emptied I come to pay my great debt to you." The use of Lotus Flower's weeping face as a synecdoche of her suicide indicates the linkage between weeping and death. Importantly, theatrical and cinematic weeping is far from unmediated emotional outpour; and Wong was more than just a natural "crier without glycerin."[93] Instead, she studiously engaged with the long history of performing feminine sadness from the stage to the screen. She recalled in multiple interviews how she would watch a movie starring her favorite actors and return home to reenact the scenes with her sisters in front of a mirror. That Wong never received professional training before venturing into acting means that citing and reinventing the existing repertoire of silent film acting styles

VIDEO 1.4. Wong, as Lotus Flower, does copious weeping in *The Toll of the Sea* (dir. Chester M. Franklin, 1922).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.1.4

was pivotal for her own signature performances. More specifically, in *The Toll of the Sea*, the heavy use of close-up framing requires an adjusted acting style. This is akin to the stage-to-screen transition that led to the focus on the face, posing new challenges to a performer's emotional acting, demanding a precise balance between control and letting go. Janet Staiger describes the transition in acting style as "from broad pantomimic gestures, to the face in general and, eventually, to the eyes as 'the focus on one's personality.'"[94]

The Toll of the Sea showcases Wong's emotional acting in the two scenes in which her Lotus Flower is rejected by her white husband (corresponding with the two sartorial performances discussed in the previous section). Tight close-up shots frame Wong/Lotus Flower's face, turning it into a canvas on which blown-up intense emotions morph from ecstasy to grief and dejection (video 1.4). The nearly haptic framing blurs the entire background so that the audience's attention is laser focused on the real-time duration of moisture filming over her eyes and forming clear teardrops that slowly roll down her cheeks, accompanied by the twitching of small muscles across her face. This "film thrill," as Wong recalled in a 1933 interview, entails intense labor of not only performing, but also being corporeally subjected to the camera's scrutiny, akin to a camera study of her ability to emote. The duress was redoubled by the fact that the film was intended to be an experiment with the new Technicolor process that promised heightened verisimilitude in color registration and other visual details. Wong's copious weeping, therefore, did not so much indicate her character's emotional state, as it fulfilled the multiple requirements pertaining to the color technology, the close-up technique, and the predominantly exterior shooting.

Through engaging with film technologies and techniques, Wong's copious weeping responded to contemporary discourses on the "Oriental's" inability to emote. Her expressive weeping overturned the "inscrutable Oriental" stereotype that led to the mysterious and devious East Asian character types, even the assertion that "Orientals" could not act. She also countered the restrained acting of the Japanese-born matinee idol Sessue Hayakawa, whose mask-like face transfixed

European film critics following his spectacular success in *The Cheat* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1915). Despite Hayakawa's inspiring of European critics such as Jean Epstein to develop the concept of *photogénie*, his "incandescent mask"–like face (à la Epstein) carried a racial tone "crucial to his ethnic identity and stardom," as Daisuke Miyao perspicuously points out.[95]

Through a two-step process (first objectifying, then re-enchanting the Oriental Other with the animist camera), European modernist film critics incorporated Hayakawa's racialized difference as the uncanny quasi-life that yanked the Western audience out of their habitual comfort zone. Yet they did not allow such a quasi-life to pose a fundamental threat to the white gaze. But what if the primitivized Other could actually stare back and refuse to offer up some digestible psychic energy? Wong's tearful performance embodies precisely such unyielding opacity. Her recount of how her copious weeping threatened to soak her feet makes it clear that it was not the choking camera gaze that was animist (as Epstein argued with regard to Hayakawa), but her hyper-performance that animated and flooded over the tight close-up. Thus, what appears to be natural emotional expression not only overthrows the "inscrutable Oriental" stereotype, but also flips into excessive emotional display that satirizes the earnest pathos prescribed by the Orientalist Madame Butterfly narrative. This is where her tearful image, ostensibly self-absorbed, actually stares back at the viewer, challenging their Orientalist fetish of an iconic self-sacrificing Oriental femininity.

To push it further, Wong's hyper-performative tearing flips the victim status of Lotus Flower and of herself to problematize the institution of white-male-centered heteronormativity that produces the suffering abject woman in the first place. Pansy Duncan argues with regard to *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (dir. Max Ophüls, 1948) that the heroine's "pulse-like frequency" of hypervisibilized tearing defines the genre of melodrama.[96] The always-missed heteronormative relationship is not the cause of tearing, but rather a *pretext* for tearing for the sake of genre rehearsal. Duncan further contends that the genre-determined deferral of heteronormativity invites a queer reading of melodramatic tears as "a productive switch-point for collapsing the difference between queer and straight viewing practices, between the subversive and the tautly disciplinary."[97] She attributes the possibility of a queer reading to "Ophüls's capacious directorial irony [that] accommodates a subtle reflexive commentary on that [heterosensible] discipline, slyly conceding the non-expressive status of both its own tears and those of the genre in general."[98] I relocate the ironic capability from the director to Wong's campy hyper-performances from a minoritized position. By laboriously putting her tears on show for the camera, and by exposing Lotus Flower's pathos as being overdetermined by the melodrama genre overlayered with racism, Wong deploys campy tearing performance to invalidate the interracial heteronormative desire as the default driving force, problematizing such desire's underlying racial, gender, and sexual discriminations.

Both iconized by the scrutinizing camera and breaking free from its constriction, Wong's tears are engulfing and ironic, creating a zone of osmosis among the character, the performer, and the viewer, soaking the audience in stereotypical pathos while washing away the stereotype of heteronormative, self-abnegating Orientalist femininity. This destabilizing power of excessive tearing reaches a new height in Wong's reiterative "puro arte" death acts that afford an exit from the coercive sexual economy. Thus, even as the diegetic abject Other woman dies on the screen, Wong the performer strays sideways to explore nonnormative social-sexual desires from the margins of the mainstream entertainment industry. Her reiterative death acts across an episodic career of multiple beginnings categorically reject heteronormative teleology.

I illustrate this point by looking at Wong's two death acts, ten years apart, in *Show Life* (1928) and the Paramount B film *Dangerous to Know* (dir. Robert Florey, 1938), both starring Wong in the hackneyed role of the illegitimate mate rejected by white heteronormativity. In both films, Wong's death scenes are highly aestheticized through cinematic treatment. In *Show Life*, after being thrown out by John, the knife-throwing entertainer who sees her as an impostor appropriating his white ex-girlfriend's fur coat, Song drags herself to the posh Palace Hotel for her star dance show. In the middle of her stunt dance on a blindingly glittering, spinning stage studded with a circle of erected knives, the repentant John suddenly appears only to startle her, causing her to fall over and get impaled by a knife. Laid down in the bed in John's shed, the fatally wounded Song slowly opens her eyes one last time. The extreme close-up and soft-focus amber-colored lighting accentuate the moisture filming over her eyes, one drop rolling down her right cheek, as she lifts her hands to touch his eyes, taking satisfaction in his restored vision. Then the glistening in the corner of her left eye gives one last sparkle, her hands drop, and she closes her eyes forever. The camera continued to hold on her face, as if to witness or demand Wong's prolonged performance of life's expiration from the body. The death act becomes enshrined as the film ends with a profile shot of her face and a freeze-frame close-up of the large shadow of her stilled profile on the wall.[99]

The cinematic aestheticization of the death scene with a halo effect conjured through diffuse lighting, soft focus, and haptic close-up serves to gratify the white male's sadism while rendering Song's submission masochistic. By extension, Wong is implicated in masochistic pleasure on account of her participation in manufacturing the Orientalist fantasy. Gaylyn Studlar understands the masochistic aesthetic as a "mutual agreement between partners," a "contractual" partnership "based upon the promise of certain pleasures" that she believes defines cinema.[100] In Wong's case, however, her power disparity vis-à-vis the white film industry rules out a "mutual agreement." Indeed, such drastic power inequity and impossible partnership lead Anne Anlin Cheng to diagnose

the "vexed problem of locating agency" due to the racialized performer's "contaminated desires."[101]

The same "vexed problem" underpins Wong's death act in *Dangerous to Know*, Wong's second Paramount film after returning from China. Based on British writer Edgar Wallace's play *On the Spot*, the narrative centers on the downfall of a Chicago mobster, modeled on the Prohibition-era Chicago gangster Al Capone, who also inspired the 1932 film *Scarface* (dir. Howard Hawks). The play was staged on Broadway in November 1930, starring Wong as the half-caste Chinese mistress of the mobster played by Crane Wilbur—Wong's childhood idol. I discuss Wong's self-authored image in the play in chapter 2. Here, I note that she received positive (i.e., fetishizing) reviews for her suicide scene in the play. One reviewer celebrated her "modest" suicide performance: "When the time comes for Minn Lee to die by her own delicate hand, . . . she employs the paper-knife so modestly and in such good taste that the audience is hardly aware at the moment of the profundity of her sorrow."[102] Debunking such discourses of her natural fit for a suicidal role, Wong recalled that Gounod's "Ave Maria" was supposed to be played for her death scene; but a stagehand mistakenly played some "negro melodies," leaving her "'dead' body convulsing with most inopportune laughter," revealing how the entertainment industry differentially racialized pathos-laden "Oriental" versus burlesque Black cultural expressions.[103]

When Wong reprised this role eight years later in *Dangerous to Know*, she performed the death redux, now aided by cinematic language, especially the close-up framing.[104] Another difference from the Broadway show was that Wong's character transformed from a mistress to a "hostess"—a euphemism used to cover up her sexual relationship with the mobster, in compliance with the Hays Code. Still, the film adaptation trailed a tortuous history. No fewer than six filming requests by different studios were submitted from 1931 to 1937; and each request was rejected until Paramount's script passed the review of the Hays Office.[105] A *Kinematograph Weekly* review pointed out that neither Wallace nor his play *On the Spot* was credited, for censorial reasons.[106]

In the film's first major scene, the birthday party of Steve Recka the mobster (played by Akim Tamiroff, an Armenian American actor trained at the Moscow Art Theatre), the camera close-up and tracking center Wong's character Lan Ying the "hostess," establishing her authoritative position. Elegantly dressed in Western gowns (designed by Paramount's top costume designer, Edith Head), Lan Ying—instrumental for Recka's gangland success, but unspeakable and disposable as a racialized mistress, the abject Other woman—is set up to be a suicidal victim doubling as an avenger when Recka jettisons her for Margaret, a white "blue-blood" society woman. Praising Wong's Western-style costumes in the film, Travis Banton, a leading costume designer, writes: "I think Miss Wong looks superb in her colorful, exotic, Oriental costumes. . . . But for the role of a

VIDEO 1.5. Wong as the "hostess" committing the "perfect" suicide in *Dangerous to Know* (dir. Robert Florey, 1938).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.1.5

dangerous, ultra-sophisticated adventuress it is obvious that her gowns should be those of a reckless, expensively-groomed woman of the world. The Chinese gowns stress a decorative quality, whereas the American gowns which Edith Head is designing for Miss Wong in the film provide the sex appeal men of today look for in women."[107]

Ironically, Wong's "hostess" Lan Ying, who is confined to Recka's mansion, is hardly a "reckless" "adventuress" in the conventional sense. Also, the "Oriental" flavor was not eliminated after all. Another press release, dated January 13, 1938, sensationalized Wong's "whale of a gown" that was made of whale "wool" (whale blubber pressed until dry, then shredded and strengthened with a chemical) brought over from China.[108] The "Oriental" object mixed into the femme fatale imaginary may have led Wong to describe the film as possessing "earmarks of a great success," and a reviewer to dub it a "yellow periler" with Wong playing an "Oriental siren" against the background of the current war.[109]

In the suicide scene (video 1.5), the camera tracks the "hostess" Lan Ying approaching Recka from behind as the latter plays "Handel's Largo" in the background. A cut to the front frames the black-suited Recka in the foreground (screen right), absorbed in the music, unaware of the white-clad "hostess" standing on screen left slightly behind him, watching him intensely. Then the drama intensifies, with cross-cutting juxtaposing their facial expressions in close-up shots. As Wong's "hostess" finally looks into the void with a widened, resolute gaze while driving the dagger into her chest, the close-up shots of Recka's face and fingers on the keys accelerate as if the music were produced to hypnotize her into self-violence, and to shield him from becoming aware of such violence. Finally, the music stops abruptly when he looks leftward and realizes she has collapsed and died. During the entire scene (even after her collapse), the close-up framing highlights tears streaking down her cheeks, as if in slow motion, as she visibly struggles to carry out her victim-avenger act. To avenge

her abandonment by Recka, she kills herself to frame him for a crime he has not committed.

The film's publicity sensationalized the suicide-revenge as "a startling ruse which *only an oriental mind could devise*."[110] The "reckless, expensively-groomed woman of the world" imagined by Travis Banton was thus summarily reverted to a scheming and inscrutable "Oriental," an image that also graced the cover of the March 1, 1938, issue of *Look, The Monthly Picture Magazine* (figure 1.7).[111] Here, Lan Ying, dressed in a green gown, leans into the frame from left, her eyes lowered and peering rightward, her right hand clutching her chest, her left arm raised, holding a blood-stained dagger, suggesting it has just been pulled out of her chest. The caption reads, ironically, "World's Most Beautiful Chinese Girl, see page 36," evoking Wong's election as the "world's best dressed woman" in 1934 by the Mayfair Mannequin Society of New York.[112] The sensational conjoining of death and beauty, both shrouded in "Oriental" mystery, rehashed Orientalist fetishism.

Still, some publicity did call attention to Wong's intensive labor in her tearful death act. Noting Wong's "distinction of being Hollywood's 'most murdered' actress," a publicity article sarcastically praised the film for at least allowing Wong "the satisfaction of committing suicide instead of being murdered."[113] Another publicity article detailed how, after eighteen imperfect self-stabbing attempts, Wong finally accomplished an "almost perfect" suicide when director Florey played a record of Grieg's "Faces Death" (*sic*) to make her face death more resolutely.[114] Wong's labor-intensive rehearsing for a perfectly pathetic and aestheticized death exceeds simple gratification of the Orientalist fantasy. Recalling Broderick D. V. Chow's reflection upon how he "milked" his death scene for maximal "presence" in *Miss Saigon*, what matters for the marginalized performers and their co-laboring audiences is not the clichéd death per se, but the "excessive, mercurial 'eros' in the labour of putting on a show."[115] The East Asian performing body's "unruly presence" (in excess of the role) "distance[s] ourselves from the representation," thereby subverting the stereotypes.[116]

Wong's screen death acts require a more nuanced understanding of her "unruly presence," however. Different from Chow, who could directly perform his labor on the stage and engage with on-site minoritized viewers in co-laboring, Wong must struggle with the cinematic apparatus that scrutinizes and fixates upon every detail of performance, while depriving her of a live audience. This medium-specific constraint makes it an imperative for us—Wong's diachronic audience—to learn to discern between the images in order to reactivate her subversive "puro arte." Three considerations are critical for this task. First, we must go beyond the victim discourse to refocus on the laborious affective intensity of Wong's tears, gaze, sorrow, and collapse, on top of what Lucy

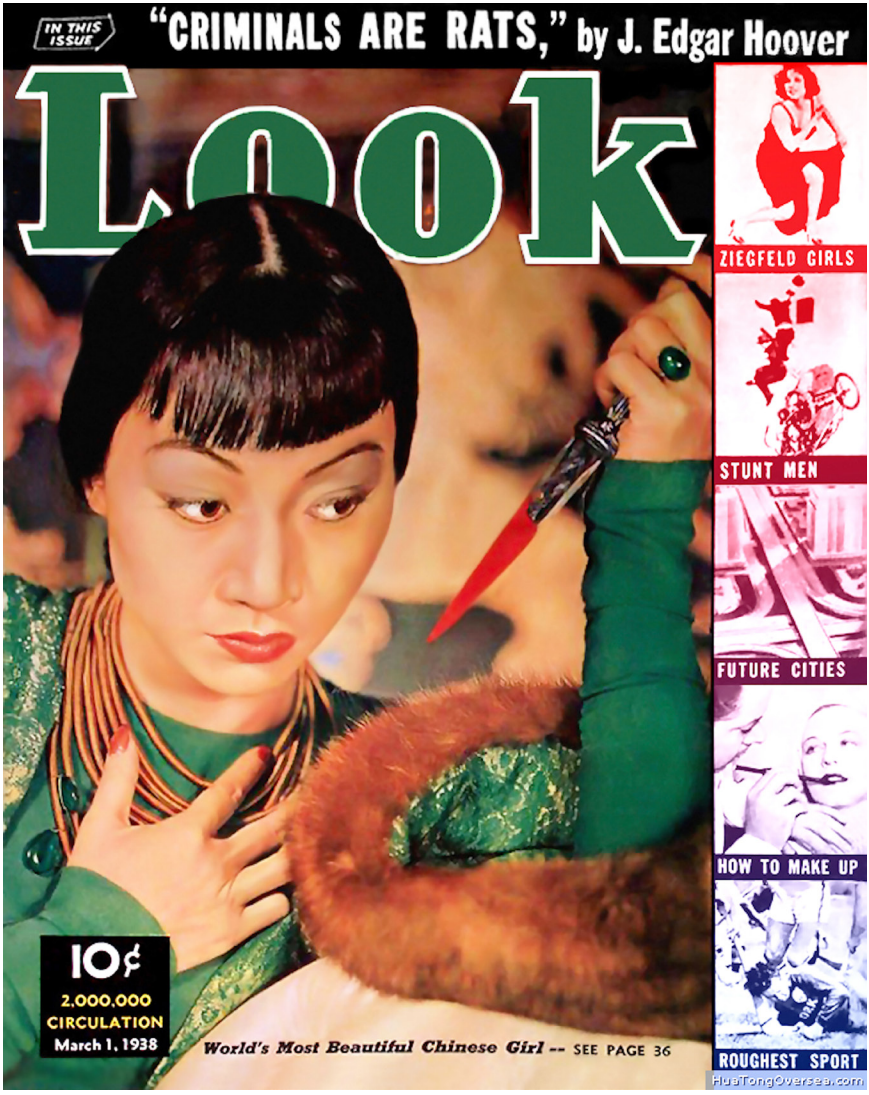

FIGURE 1.7. Wong as Lan Ying, the mistress, after executing her "perfect" death act in *Dangerous to Know* (dir. Robert Florey, 1938)—a scene presented in color on the cover of *Look, The Monthly Picture Magazine* (Mar. 1, 1938).

Burns calls "the gall, the guts" as part of "the sheer efforts needed to put on such a display."[117] In seizing the opportunity to display her "puro arte," Wong resists her erasure, hijacking the Orientalist expectation for her perfect screen deaths, thereby performing agency and desires beyond what is sanctioned by white heteronormativity.

This leads to the second consideration, namely, the calculated precision in her perfect death acts facilitates disidentification from the white-male-centered heteronormative narrative. "A strategy that works on and against dominant ideology," as Muñoz argues,[118] disidentification, or the delicate balance between embodiment and critical distanciation, is crucial to Wong's subversive "Oriental" (dis)play. This strategy similarly characterizes the performances of singer-actress Lena Horne, the highest-paid Black entertainer in the early 1940s and Wong's contemporary. According to Shane Vogel, Horne's vocal performances in Hollywood films demonstrate agency through citational "impersonation," that is, quoting a character's feelings and emotions without becoming that character.[119] By "remain[ing] outside any forced structure of representation," Horne creates "a space of provisional subjective agency for herself."[120] Differentially racialized, yet similarly subjected to the white representational scheme, Wong, Horne, and Muñoz all practice and/or theorize disidentification to survive, subvert, and sustain engagement with their publics in other places and other times.

In Wong's case, survival paradoxically takes the form of a perfect screen death act. To borrow Pansy Duncan's observation, her death act constitutes "a productive switch-point for collapsing the difference between queer and straight viewing practices."[121] Even as it seems to serve the white-male-centered interracial melodrama, it also sabotages Orientalist heteronormativity by exposing doomed female pathos as a symptom of white colonialism and patriarchy. If her characters die to exit the white heteronormative structure, then Wong laboriously fashions her perfect death act to refuse to conform.

The third consideration of Wong's subversive death act has to do with her nuanced audience engagement. Unlike Chow, who can own the stage, hope to reach a resonating live audience, and share with them what Josephine Lee calls the "illicit pleasure" of "being inside what is deeply shameful [i.e., participating in reenacting stereotypes],"[122] Wong's outreach to a like-minded film audience necessarily takes an anticipatory stance—for an audience-yet-to-be and an audience elsewhere. This means that Wong's labor is speculative, investing in interlocution in a different time-space and generating a sideways life and an afterlife beyond the exclusionary social-sexual institutions.

Evoking her self-declaration as a "spot of yellow" that has come to stay on the "silver of the screen," Wong's chirographic signature performances, sartorial masquerade, and tearful death acts all simultaneously flaunt *and* reverse-contaminate the contaminated Orientalist desires. Her "Oriental" (dis)play,

combined with engagement with variegated spectatorial desires, makes Wong an agential interlocutor with her multi-sited and diachronic audiences (including myself). The next chapter takes up Wong's "Oriental" (dis)play as a leading-lady on the international stage, engaging with live audiences, critics, interviewers, and international artists. Drawing upon multilingual and international archives, I reveal Wong's collaborative authorship in building her repertoire, contributing to early 1930s glamour photography, and to wartime campaigns through theater work.

2

Putting on Another Show

Spotlighting Anna May Wong in Theater

In a letter to Carl Van Vechten dated September 21, 1932, Anna May Wong wrote: "I feel so fit I could tackle most anything, and even any possibility of doing vaudeville doesn't frighten me as it did before." This energizing statement followed on the heels of her thwarted attempt to obtain the lead role in an MGM-produced China-themed film, *The Son-Daughter* (dir. Clarence Brown and Robert Z. Leonard, 1932).[1] Wong had actually already performed in vaudeville shows for several years, all around the US, in the 1920s. Trade magazines such as *Variety* and *The Billboard* advertised her regular stage appearances in eye-catching costumes, often with other performers.[2] In December 1926, Wong was celebrated as "the first Oriental woman to do a playlet" (the following January), thus different from others who were confined to singing and dancing.[3] By the end of 1927, Wong planned to perform in *Living Buddha* by Gilbert Miller on Broadway.

Wong was not the only East Asian–heritage performer to shuttle between the screen and the stage. Hawaiian-born American French-Chinese performer Etta Lee, her contemporary, did the same. A journalist surmised that these performers understood that "screen Oriental roles tend to go to non-Oriental stars and featured players who could be made up to play the parts." It was hoped that the stage turn would enhance their credentials in the film industry—for example, that Wong's "Broadway success would give her the chance to play the princess in [a] Marco Polo film, or the American college life of a Chinese-American co-ed (Wong's pet idea about a modern Chinese-American girl)."[4] That is, the stage experience was desirable in that it could make up for missed film opportunities while boosting her value to the film industry.

Although the Marco Polo film did not happen,[5] shuttling between theater and film was to become Wong's key strategy for sustaining a performance career across several decades and multiple continents. Stage provided a crucial venue for her to obtain new skills, to adapt to different entertainment forms, to maintain visibility in between film opportunities, and to interact with her international publics. The two realms of stage and film acting often facilitated each other. During her first European trip from 1928 to 1930, her first star vehicle, *Show Life*, won her fame and success. Her original one-picture contract in Germany thus turned into an eighteen-month contract with British International Pictures for four films to be directed by Richard Eichberg, who was on lease from Germany's Sudfilm.[6] This newfound leading-lady status on the screen further led to starring roles on the stage, including *The Circle of Chalk* in London and an operetta, *Tschun Tschi* (Springtime), in Vienna. Her success in interwar Europe not only catalyzed her first Broadway show *On the Spot* in 1930, but also paved the way for her later European and Australian stage tours through the 1930s.

In this chapter, I study Wong's leading-lady performances on the stage in the British legitimate theater, American Broadway and summer stock theater, and her variety shows in Europe and Australia. Three considerations shape my approach to her stage performances as continuous with, but also different from, her screen acting. First, unlike her surviving films that afford close analysis, Wong's theater works have survived only in print records, and often sparsely. Second, while the film medium entails a spatiotemporal distance between the performers and the audience, live performance brings them into a shared (though not necessarily equitable) space. Such in-person and on-site setups facilitate more immediate and situation-specific interactions, which are also ephemeral, dispersive, and difficult to retrace. Third, each fictional role on the stage could be filled by multiple performers, beckoning a comparison of Wong's signature performances with her (oftentimes white) counterparts' acting styles in the same roles. I try to conduct such comparisons here, especially in costuming, but a systematic study will have to wait until more documentation becomes available.

These three factors pose challenges to reconstructing Wong's live performances in Euro-America and Australia. However, by assembling a plethora of multilingual and multi-sited primary materials—including Wong's own writings, interviews, and photographs documenting her performances—I piece together her collaborative authorship in repertoire building and glamour photography. I further consider how her stage activities interconnected with those of her contemporary border-crossing, minoritized female performers to form an understudied genealogy that challenges race-gender hierarchies in the settler-colonial entertainment industries in the US and Australia. This genealogy,

I argue, prefigures, but is not identical with, a collective minority rallying call that arose with the civil rights movement.

SPEAKING LIKE A "LADY PROFESSOR": INVENTING MULTILINGUAL ETHNO-COSMOPOLITANISM IN THE BRITISH LEGITIMATE THEATER

If Wong's signature performance in silent cinema rested on the visual register, the stage offered a different channel for her to mobilize vocal and linguistic versatility to speak "English like a lady professor as well as French and German," that is, to produce a multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism, which troubled the ocular-centric Orientalist imaginary.[7] Wong first created this multilingual-ethno-cosmopolitanism following her theatrical debut in *The Circle of Chalk* in London in March 1929.

The Circle of Chalk came at the tail end of Wong's silent film acting, offering her a timely opportunity to train for vocal performance. This experience facilitated her transition into the sound era, when a number of silent-era megastars were phased out due to their voice quality, accent, or ineffective elocution. *The Circle of Chalk* stemmed from the thirteenth-century Chinese vernacular play *Huilan Ji* 灰欄記 by Li Qianfu 李潛夫 (thirteenth to fourteenth century), which was freely translated into German in 1925 by Klabund (real name: Alfred Henschke) as *Der Kreidekreis*, and later staged by Max Reinhardt in Berlin on October 20, 1925, with a white cast.[8] Before morphing into Bertolt Brecht's famous 1944 play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Klabund's German version was translated into English by James Laver, who had recently published *Design in the Theatre* (1927). It was in this version, produced by British theater and film director Basil Dean, that Wong starred as the teahouse girl Hi-Tang, playing opposite a novice Laurence Olivier as the Prince—Hi-Tang's husband later in the play.[9] The play opened at the New Theatre (now Noël Coward Theatre) on March 14, 1929, achieving a run of forty-eight performances.

Besides Wong, another Chinese-heritage actress in the play was Rose Quong—a Chinese Australian playing the Prince's first wife, who schemes against Hi-Tang, the second wife. In her study of chinoiserie and modernity in Dean's staging of *The Circle of Chalk*, Ashley Thorpe notes that both Wong and Quong were subjected to racist and sexist objectivization in a play that exploited Chinese elements in costuming, set design (both by Aubrey Hammond), and pentatonic music (by Ernest Irving). The skimpy costume Wong/Hi-Tang danced in echoed and capitalized on her exotic image in *Piccadilly*, released in the UK only a month earlier in February 1929. Still, Thorpe maintains that Wong's and Quong's appearances in the play "associated Chinese opera with actors of Chinese descent for the first time on the West End stage," thus demonstrating the possibility of "access[ing] new levels of visibility, and limited amounts of cultural agency through an alignment with the contemporary fashions of the period."[10] Thorpe does not spell out how

exactly Wong and Quong accomplished "limited amounts of agency" at a time when Chinese-heritage residents in the Limehouse area of East London were facing increasing stigmatization.

I tackle this issue by unpacking not only what Wong did on the stage, but, more importantly, how she approached the play and how she responded to the critics' scathing and sometimes unfair criticism of her vocal performance. Her resourceful strategies and labor investment facilitated her emerging multilingual ethnocosmopolitanism, which would characterize her enduring cross-media career. A high-profile production riding on Wong's soaring fame in interwar Europe, *The Circle of Chalk* ignited intense interest even before it hit the stage. In an interview in her hotel room between rehearsal sessions, Wong declared her dedication to her role through "liv[ing] the part I'm playing all the time."[11] To demonstrate her Chinese knowledge and enhance the English rendition's authenticity value, Wong described the play as "true to the Chinese originals" that she had studied at the British Museum upon arriving in London. Wong also introduced hallmarks of Chinese theater, including a male actor performing female roles in a falsetto voice, the use of make-believe props to suggest a mountain or a horse, and the ubiquitous audience noises (from chatting to snacking). The interview ended with Basil Dean showing up with a prompt book, sweeping Wong away for another round of rehearsal. The interview set up Wong's UK stage debut as a highly anticipated event, given her Chinese knowledge, celebrity status, and studious preparation.

This appreciative tone yielded to a more critical voice following the opening night, however. A number of theater critics (including Basil Dean himself) damned Wong's vocal performance even as they celebrated her visual performance. Hubert Griffith's review in *The Standard* was symptomatic of this bifurcated evaluation. He wrote:

> There was one moment in the evening when Miss Wong touched perfection—when she goes back to her own art, that of movement, says, as a dancing girl trying to charm her master: 'I will now dance for you,' and gets up and *silently* does a long, slow dance. I have rarely seen anything more completely beautiful. Rhythm, gesture, the expressiveness of motion—she is mistress of them all. It is at first a shock to hear that the accent that falls from Celestial lips is a highly Americanised one, and then, when one gets over this as unimportant to find that it is further an undistinguished one, clipping words leaving many of them almost inaudible. She got no variety into the long speeches, and, generally, if I may say so without unpardonable rudeness, was at her *most effective when silent*.[12]

Basil Dean echoed this Orientalist criticism. He initially decided to cast Wong in the play upon seeing her publicity photos from *Piccadilly* during its filming in Berlin. His vision of the ideal actress was unsurprisingly clichéd: "almond eyed, . . . able to impart some degree of atmosphere into the part of Chang Hi-Tang, meaning the Flower. She would be called upon to sing and dance, as well

as to play emotional and dramatic scenes." Over four decades later, he recalled his casting of Wong as an "unfortunate" and "desperate gamble": "But oh! that California accent! as thick as the smog that now smothers their cities." He also lamented Wong's inability to barely sing four notes correctly, forcing him to adopt a simple score, regretting that "any English ingenue with good voice and gesture might well have carried the production to success."[13]

The Observer's drama critic, Ivor Brown, opined that the play suffered from "productionism," or the "producer's theatre," which prioritized "ballet effects, grouping silhouette and a visual rhythm" over the words and voice. A contributing factor to the "dumb show" was Wong's lack of "knowledge of the speaking stage," thus "[throwing] away the vocal side of her part," although she was "delicious, as one would expect of a kinema actress, in her presentation of a pose or holding of an expression."[14] *New York Times* theater critic Charles Morgan similarly criticized the play's productionism, a flaw worsened by Wong, whose "intonation is a handicap," even though she was otherwise "quiet, gentle and in movement, exquisitely graceful."[15]

These critics denigrated Wong's vocal performance for a lack of theatrical training, ineffective elocution, and her American accent, deemed a crass mismatch with her "Celestial" or "Oriental" looks. At the heart of such criticism was Wong's disruption of the critics' theatrical illusion about the "Oriental," which prefigures what Mary Ann Doane would describe, decades later, as the rupture of the illusory unity of the "phantasmatic body." This illusory unity in film, according to Doane, is predicated upon three coordinated spaces: the enclosed space of the diegesis, the space of the screen naturalized through synchronized sound, and the quasi-realist auditory ambience in the movie theater that "envelops" the spectator in sound.[16] The "quasi-realistic auditory ambience" is key to maintaining a unified "phantasmatic body," which in turn secures the spectator's individualistic subjecthood and agency.

The live stage features actual material bodies, musical instruments, and props that produce synchronized sounds, and thus seemingly has no use for the illusory "phantasmatic body." Yet theatergoers do entertain illusions that could be ruptured by perceived discordance. The British critics' disenchantment with Wong's American accent suggests an alienating experience akin to the out-of-sync effect that disrupts a cinematic "phantasmatic body." This alienating experience stems from the critics' inability to reconcile Wong's "Oriental" looks with her American accent—hence, her perceived vocal-visual mismatch or out-of-sync-ness. Further compounding this alienation effect was Wong's lack of legitimate-theater acting experience, which violated yet another expectation of the theater critics.[17]

Ironically, although the critics and Basil Dean decried the disillusion caused by Wong's perceived vocal-visual incongruence, *The Circle of Chalk* appropriated the very idea of counter-illusion characteristic of classic Chinese opera. Dean directed set designer Aubrey Hammond to dress the proscenium stage as a black, red, and gold lacquer box. He also borrowed the Chinese opera's make-believe techniques

that Wong talked about in her 1929 interview quoted above, such as "throw[ing] white confetti up in the air to represent the snow."[18] Dean's selective deployment of the alienation effect suggests that the criticism of Wong fundamentally had to do with her violation not of the illusion of realism, but rather of another illusion fetishized by the critics: that of an antiquated Oriental femininity free from New World contamination.

This Old World Orientalism also partially explains why Rose Quong, the Chinese Australian who played the scheming wife in the play, received overall positive reviews despite her Chinese ethnicity. Quong's performance fit with the British critics' expectations in three aspects. First, she apprenticed herself to the British progressive theater performer, director, and writer Rosina Filippi to learn stage acting in 1924, which enabled her to easily follow the legitimate-theater acting style. Second, Quong's scheming-wife character represented the "dragon lady" stereotype. Ivor Brown, who lamented Wong "[throwing] away the vocal side of her part," praised Quong's "subtly virulent" performance.[19] Commentators also went beyond Quong's professional training to link her success with her character—citing the "Chinese racial characteristics" of the "wicked wife," which Wong's more sympathetic second wife lacked.[20] A third factor in Quong's positive reception had to do with her Australian English, which would have been considered part of the Commonwealth family and therefore not disparaged as New World "vulgarity" as Wong's Californian accent was. All of these suggest that the critics' seemingly neutral professional judgment implicitly perpetuated stereotypical "Oriental" femininity and received theater-acting conventions.

Wong's response to the critics demonstrated her strategic negotiation with their covert Old World Orientalism. She took the opportunity to cultivate a multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism that not only expanded her skill set, but also mocked Old World Orientalism. She acknowledged that the legitimate theater allowed her to learn a new craft: acting on the stage without a director's presence: "When the performance came, he [Dean] was not there at the front of the stage, and I was lost for a time. Acting before an audience puts a person on her own, and in time I became used to being alone."[21] Such venturous labor investment in acquiring new skills enabled her to rise to new challenges at multiple transitions and new "beginnings" throughout her career. One such major transition, following on the heels of her London stage debut, was venturing into the talkie era with *The Flame of Love* (1930), a film shot in English, French, and German.

For her first talkie, Wong studied German and French not only to deliver the lines, but also to perform a German song, "Einmal kommt das Wunder der Liebe" (music by Hans May and lyrics by Fritz Rotter). Her work ethic was repeatedly emphasized by herself and praised by journalists.[22] While reporters evaluated her level of proficiency differently, her polylingual ability and expanded acting skills undoubtedly boosted her popularity in Europe.[23] In August 1930, she was invited by Viennese authors Fritz Grünbaum and Dr. Hugo Jacobson to perform at the

Viennese Playhouse (Wiener Schauspielhaus), starring in an operetta, *Tschun Tschi* (Springtime), later known as *The Chinese Dancer* (*Die chinesische Tänzerin*), for which she wrote and performed the Chinese songs. By September 1930, Wong had emerged as "the most popular stage star in years" in Vienna, according to Jameson Thomas, who played the club owner opposite Wong in *Piccadilly*.[24] Wong's fame in Europe continued even after her return to the US. In a 1931 photo book, *Tänzerinnen der Gegenwart. 65 Bilder erläutert von Fred Hildenbrandt* (Contemporary Dancers: 65 Images Explained by Fred Hildenbrandt), Wong's photo depicting her in costume, holding a large scimitar horizontally, carries this caption by German playwright and critic Hildenbrandt: "diva in film, well-known across the country, Chinese, your body bespeaks dance-like superiority."[25]

Shuttling between exotic visual performance and versatile vocal performance, between film and theater, and having successfully transitioned from the silent cinema to the talkies, Wong fashioned multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism on the stage and the screen alike. Boasting versatility and cosmopolitanism, she told *Los Angeles Times* writer John Scott in 1931 that "my film experience led me to the stage and now the stage training makes it possible for me to appear in talking pictures." She confidently envisioned "divid[ing] her time in the future between screen and stage."[26]

Not only did Wong forge a multilingual and cross-media cosmopolitan authorship, but she also mocked Old World imperialist Orientalism. On the surface, she yielded to the London theater critics (quoted above) by deciding to "meet them on their ground."[27] She spent two hundred guineas hiring a Cambridge University tutor to coach her in King's English so that she would not "offend their ears." Yet in another 1931 interview, with the *Los Angeles Evening Herald-Express*, she mocked the critics' self-contradiction, observing that "since the play [*The Circle of Chalk*] was Chinese, even an English accent would have been out of place."[28] She further stated her intention to protect her "investment"—that is, "200 guineas' worth of English"—to boost her future career.[29] Borrowing the language of financial speculation, she simultaneously appropriated the cultural capital of this colonialist language *and* mocked this symbol of imperialist pride as no more than a piece of commodity. With this, she deflated the critics' Orientalist fantasy and imperialist arrogance in one stroke.

Furthermore, Wong leveraged her newly minted multilingual cosmopolitanism to both claim her American identity and denounce New World racism. The interviews quoted above were widely syndicated in American newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, suggesting that she specifically addressed her American public. By narrating how her American accent was called out by the British critics as uncultivated, Wong asserted her American identity (talking just like her white American compatriots) and lampooned New World self-complacency all at once. She further projected herself as more and better than just an American, laying claim to cosmopolitanism that

transcended national, linguacultural, and media boundaries. Thus, she undermined Orientalism and racism from both the Old World and the New World, exposing them as imperialist and colonialist gatekeeping designed to maintain race-gender inequity.

Wong developed multilingual cosmopolitanism in tandem with "Oriental" (dis)play, adding a wry ethnic twist. Judging from the photographic records of *The Circle of Chalk*, her dancing style noticeably drew upon her "eccentric dance" in *Piccadilly*. She also construed a self-Orientalizing environment off stage, socializing with British performers, socialites, and the royal family, which in turn reinforced her ethno-cosmopolitan celebrity status. Florence Roberts, a regular contributor to *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, described such a fanfare following the show, painting an opulent picture of Wong's offstage entertainment of her lady guests.[30] Following Wong's performance that left the audience's "ears and eyes" "equally delighted," Roberts took the reader into Wong's dressing room, adorned in a "Chinese" style, including her Chinese name written by herself (evoking the Chinese signature in *Piccadilly* and on her gifted photos). Now Wong had changed into her offstage costume—a heavily embroidered robe of lacquer red satin—to entertain her equally luxuriously dressed special guests, including Lady Mercy Dean (Basil Dean's wife), Mrs. Edgar Wallace (whose husband was to write the play *On the Spot* in which Wong starred on Broadway in 1930), and several British actresses.[31]

The Wong sensation quickly spread across the Atlantic to her home country, reverberating in the fan magazine *Picture Play*. In its gossip column "Over the Teacups," a fictional "Fanny the fan" tells the column writer, "a bystander," that Wong "is a big hit in pictures all over the Continent, but her social triumphs almost top her professional ones." She was an "inevitable" guest at all functions *and* "one of the sights not to be missed" by tourists. "Fanny the fan" clearly enjoyed Wong's vindication in Europe, for she was "too chic," "too poised and gracious" for Hollywood, which only wanted "cut-and-dried" types.[32]

Wong's success, from screen and stage to social gatherings, partially hinges upon her self-exoticization as a curiosity piece, evoking what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the "ornament"—a descriptor of "the yellow woman" frequently used in Western colonialist discourses. Wong the self-fashioned ornament, however, gazes and talks back, similar to her mannequin-costume show in *Daughter of Shanghai* (analyzed in chapter 1). Thus, her fetishized Oriental objecthood and her versatile self-positioning are the two sides of one coin. In a 1931 interview with *Motion Picture Magazine*, Wong described her strategic shuttling between objecthood and subjecthood to harness all possible resources in the face of structural inequity: "Some famous people say: 'Oh, I'm just invited because I'm so-and-so. They don't like me for myself.' I know they are asking me because I'm Anna May Wong, but I turn the tables on them—I go, and I enjoy myself."[33] What she enjoyed was "the fame and the fun" that "may not last long."[34] Still, they were not simple frills, but

rather laboriously wrung from the exclusionary system, signaling her resilience and resourcefulness.

In the same interview, she also leveraged her (self-)racializing "Oriental" brand to ethnicize cosmopolitanism. As she stated, "I believe the mind and spirit show through the features. My face has changed because my mind has changed."[35] The interviewer, Betty Willis, concurred: "After brushing against the most famous people of all nations, . . . [she] is self-sufficient and intelligent and has an air of being too sure of herself to feel ill at ease in any situation or any company."[36] These seemingly deracinating claims flipped what Frantz Fanon criticizes as the "racial epidermal schema."[37] Countering the naturalization of cosmopolitanism as a white privilege, Wong's success demonstrates that a racialized person could ethnicize cosmopolitanism, and confound racial categories altogether. Compositing antiquated exotica and worldly-wise cosmopolitanism, she returned to the US in October 1930, and immediately entered a contract for her first Broadway show, *On the Spot*, through which she forged ethnic glamour, shaping the emerging photographic construction of sophisticated femininity.

GLAMOUR *ON THE SPOT*: PREFIGURING 1930s WHITE GLAMOUR

On the Spot, a melodrama authored by the British mystery and crime writer Edgar Wallace, was inspired by his short trip to Chicago. The male protagonist was modeled upon the Prohibition-era Chicago gangster Al Capone, who also inspired the film *Scarface* (1932). The play was first staged in London in August 1930, starring Charles Laughton and Gillian Lind, which Wong attended with Wallace.[38] Its Broadway run at the Forrest Theatre in New York lasted from October 29, 1930, to March 21, 1931, totaling 167 shows. Directed by Lee Ephraim and Carol Reed, and produced by Lee and J. J. Shubert, the Broadway version starred Wong and Crane Wilbur—her childhood idol.

Wong's recruitment for the Broadway show was widely publicized to cash in on her new, European-minted celebrity clout. She was welcomed by Lee Ephraim, the director of the cast, upon arriving in New York on October 17, 1930, and signed the contract while going through customs. Wong's recruitment for the "half-caste" Chinese mistress role came after three actresses had been tested and were found to be insufficiently "Oriental," prompting "the idea of obtaining a player who was really Chinese."[39] Wong replaced Marie Carroll at Windsor Theatre in the Bronx, where the play was trying out prior to opening at the Forrest the following Wednesday.[40]

Well received for her performance in *On the Spot*, Wong gained the opportunity to revisit her role in *The Circle of Chalk* in special matinees at the Shubert Theatre in December 1930.[41] Yet a widely syndicated Associated Press article in December 1930 announced that she had two jobs lined up in Europe after finishing *On the*

Spot. She was to play in *Turandot* and *East Is West* in Germany and make two talkies in Poland.[42] It is possible Wong sought these overseas projects because of lack of work (again) in the US. It was not until late March 1931 that Wong obtained a "long term contract" with Paramount.[43] In May 1931, she left *On the Spot* to play in the Paramount film *The Daughter of Fu Manchu* (later retitled *Daughter of the Dragon*); her stage role was filled by Irene Homer.[44]

Wong returned to the play when it ran on the West Coast in August and September 1931 at the Belasco theater in Los Angeles (and in La Jolla). This stage commitment caused the filming of *Shanghai Express* to be postponed from October 1 to 12.[45] In 1932 and the first half of 1933, Wong toured extensively in the US with other actors such as George Sidney and Una Merkel, doing variety shows in multiple languages, taking advantage of her multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism. She also tried to revive *On the Spot* in Honolulu, but it "fell through, but I might do it later."[46] By mid-1933 she was back in Europe, busy making films and giving vaudeville shows for a year before returning to the US in mid-1934 for a Paramount contract. In 1938, she starred in *Dangerous to Know*, the film adaptation of *On the Spot* (discussed in chapter 1).

I have traced Wong's extended but episodic engagement with *On the Spot*, interlaced with her film and vaudeville gigs and with other, unrealized plans, in order to underscore her persistent efforts to shape and own this stage role while negotiating volatile work conditions (despite her recent success in Europe). Her two key strategies for shaping the role were costuming and off-stage publicity photo shoots. In *On the Spot*, Wong wore at least two costumes, both attracting enthusiastic reviews and reused later on multiple occasions. One was an oversized brocade gown with elaborately embroidered patterns of clouds and waves, suggesting a Qing Dynasty official gown.[47] The other was a midi-length slick gown made of shimmering, silky white fabric with a lining that draped into a foot-length pleated trail, which was iconized through her photo session with Edward Steichen, commonly recognized as a founding figure of glamour photography.

The embroidered gown resembles the costume designed by Hélène Galin for the British actress Gillian Lind in the London staging of *On the Spot* (figures 2.1. and 2.2). Wong modified it by adding a large embroidered dragon in the chest area, mimicking a Chinese emperor's imperial gown. Thus, she not only reenacted a chinoiserie invention, but also mixed in a royal male icon. Wong "owned" this sartorial symbol of imperial male authority by reinhabiting it in the Paramount short revue film *Hollywood on Parade* (dir. Louis Lewyn, 1932; video 0.2) and in her British film *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934).[48] All of these bespoke her conscious (self-)citation of a performative and anachronotopic "Chinese" image that defied authenticity.

Wong's creative self-fashioning became more obvious in her second costume in the play, possibly of her own design. Unlike the oversized imperial-looking embroidered gown, this costume was streamlined, loosely form-fitting, evoking a

FIGURE 2.1. Wong in *On the Spot* (1930) on Broadway, wearing a heavily embroidered dragon-pattern costume suggestive of a royal gown.

FIGURE 2.2. British actress Gillian Lind in the London staging of *On the Spot*, wearing a similar gown (sans the dragon pattern) designed by Hélène Galin, on the cover of *The Play Pictorial* (Jan. 1, 1930).

traditional Chinese long tunic dress combined with flapperish elegance. The only decoration was an embroidered symmetrical swirl pattern in the neck and chest area. This costume reappeared in *Tiger Bay*, with a slight change to the embroidered applique (video 0.3). It was in this costume that Wong collaborated with Edward Steichen to accomplish a set of early glamour photos, a few of which were published in the September 1930 and January and April 1931 issues of *Vanity Fair*—the high-society fashion magazine for which Steichen served as chief photographer from 1923 to 1936.

Before diving into Wong's contribution to glamour photography, a short account of the emergence of glamour aesthetics is in order. The Broadway staging of *On the Spot* coincided with two seismic shifts: the onset of the Great Depression, which was to deeply impact theater and cinema alike; and the codification of glamour photography, which was to transform Hollywood's star publicity machine and retrench white femininity in American society.[49] Wong's Broadway performance, therefore, partook in the historical, political, and aesthetic transformations as the Roaring Twenties yielded to the tumultuous third decade of the twentieth century.

Commentators and critics have noted connections between the Great Depression and the reemergence of "glamour." In 1932, *Vanity Fair* editor Clare Boothe

Brokaw observed the phasing out of 1920s American ingenue icon Mary Pickford and the rise of glamorous femininity as personified by the "sullen and exotic Swede" Greta Garbo.[50] Film historian Patrick Keating linked this shift to "the decline of American sentimentality in the wake of the Great Depression."[51] Other film scholars attribute the new sexually assertive femininity to the studios' efforts to stay solvent during the Depression, before the Hays Code was formally implemented in 1934. Jerold Simmons and Leonard Leff, for instance, identify the studios' turn to "sex pictures" following the banning of gangster films in September 1931.[52] The shift to sophisticated femininity boosted the stardom of Garbo and made the newly imported Marlene Dietrich her stiff rival, prompting *Photoplay*'s Hilary Lynn to espouse an "elusive mysterious power 'X.'"[53]

The ascending female power was fueled by the new glamour photography created by two male photographers, as Liz Willis-Tropea argues. Edward Steichen, a former aerial reconnaissance photographer during World War I, first deployed the commercial Ektar lens to achieve a sharp focus. George Hurrell replaced Ruth Harriet Louise in October 1929 as MGM's chief portrait photographer and was subsequently dubbed the "father of glamour photography." Departing from the pictorialist convention characterized by soft focus and other hazy, ethereal effects, glamour portraiture used simple backgrounds, sharp focus, and intense lighting (often from the top). It played a crucial role in constructing an "all-American mode of white femininity," according to Willis-Tropea.[54] Patrick Keating finds that readers of popular magazines were made aware of the technical construction of glamour, and they were encouraged to replicate this look.[55] Notably, the readers who were considered capable of replicating the glamour look were predominantly white women.

This association of glamour with whiteness is problematic, though. Starting in 1930, Wong collaborated with Steichen to coproduce glamour publicity and fashion photos surrounding *On the Spot*—and later, in 1938, she collaborated with Hurrell for the publicity of *Dangerous to Know*. During these photo shoots, Wong actively cocreated the basic idiom of glamour photography through her costume selection, body language, *and* navigation of the racial trope. Her photos shot by Steichen demonstrate an emerging aesthetic of sharp focus, sculpturesque delineation, stark chiaroscuro lighting, and geometric composition, which would characterize the glamour shots of white stars such as Garbo and Dietrich. In all her photos with Steichen, except for a couple of cropped head shots, Wong presented her sartorial authorship of the shimmering white gown.

In a photo taken in 1930 and published in *Vanity Fair* in September 1931 (figure 2.3), Wong is seated in the center, her body turning slightly frame left while her face and left shoulder are facing front, her eyes slightly narrowed, peering to frame right with a hint of a cold sneer. Her right hand is raised, gently resting on the raised left hand, right fingers delicately curled and pointing up. On the right edge of the frame, to the upper right of her head, is a prop of a white chrysanthemum in full bloom, its dark stem merging with the dark panel in the shallow

FIGURE 2.3. Wong's glamour photo by Edward Steichen, featuring her shimmering white gown from *On the Spot*, in *Vanity Fair* (Sept. 1931).

background. Interestingly, in a 1907 photo of Mrs. Condé Nast, Steichen had already used a dimly lit chrysanthemum bouquet to set off her luminescent whiteness.[56] Four years after Steichen's photo shoot with Wong, Carl Van Vechten (for whom Wong was the first photographic subject), used an almost identical prop in photographing Hedda Hopper, an actress and Los Angeles gossip columnist. In the self-citation and mutual citation across three decades, the prop chrysanthemum recurred, but signified differently.

In Steichen's photos of Wong, the globular chrysanthemum visually resonates with Wong's face contoured by her flawlessly smoothed lacquer-black bangs and short side fringes that create a circular frame. Yet they also set each other into relief through color contrast. The flower is emphatically whitened by the top right lighting, while Wong's face and body are precisely sculptured by the chiaroscuro effect, which is modulated and softened by her light-diffusing dress. The resonance and contrast between the prop flower and Wong also play out between the figure and the background. Just as the chrysanthemum flower stands out against the dark background while its dark stem merges into the background, Wong's background is light gray, which simultaneously complements her dress and throws into relief its soft shimmer. The white fabric with the dark-colored ornamental embroidery at the neck and chest area further strengthens the layered, sculpturesque visual effect. Finally, the top-right lighting exaggerates the shadow that Wong's eyelashes cast on her cheeks, prefiguring Garbo's accentuated long eyelashes in a photo portrayal by MGM still photographer Clarence Sinclair Bull, published in the November 1932 issue of *Vanity Fair*, one year after Wong's.[57]

The Wong-chrysanthemum counterpoint was reinforced in another Steichen photo shot in 1930 and published in the January 1931 issue of *Vanity Fair*. In this cropped head shot (figure 2.4), Wong's head, framed and rounded by her black hair, is juxtaposed with the white globular flower. They both rest on a dark reflecting surface that also reflects the black-and-white color-block background. Wong's eyes are closed, the top lighting picking out the right side of her face while obscuring the left side. Her background is split in black and white, creating the illusion of her head emerging out of darkness on the left into the white zone on the right, approaching the white flower set against the white background. The head-flower counterpoint is redoubled by their reflections on the dark surface.

Nestled in the meticulously choreographed elements of shape, position, posture, color, (a)symmetry, reflection, and lighting, Wong's head seems de-animated and objectivized into a darker variation of a super-white fake flower. Or, it turns into just another prop for the male photographer's aesthetic experiment. That these photos were published in a fashion magazine for high society's visual consumption seemed to clinch Wong's object-commodity position under the white gaze. Noting her silence on Steichen's photos, Shirley Jennifer Lim argues that Wong fell victim to Steichen's Orientalist gaze, contrary to her agential cocreation of her photographic images with Carl Van Vechten by voicing which ones she liked and disliked.[58] This understanding of Wong's victimization by Steichen forecloses an opportunity to explore Wong's more nuanced articulation of agency beyond explicit discursive comments. We find such agency quietly potentiated in her body language, costume, and makeup, which combine to constitute an indispensable contribution to Steichen's experiment with the modernist glamour idiom. Wong, therefore, marks glamour aesthetics indelibly with her "Oriental" signature. Her choice of the silky white gown, which she most likely designed for *On the Spot* and would reuse in *Tiger Bay*, shows she was responsible for a major visual and tactile component of the emerging glamour photography. By reiterating the costume across different media forms and occasions, she converted an attire (the original meaning of *habit*) into a dwelling (the original meaning of *habitation*). Her sartorial signature for photo shoots was, therefore, not just a surface appearance or an ornament, but rather a crafted, embodied environment that shaped her cocreated glamour photography.

Besides the sartorial signature, Wong also lent the very corporeal basis (her face, bangs, physique, and minute expressions) to Steichen's experiment with glamour photography. She enacted a racialized image, making it fundamentally constitutive of such glamour, thereby belying its naturalized whiteness. As described above, this racial imaginary was registered in the counterpoint arrangement of her shaded visage and the super-white chrysanthemum prop. A comparison with Man Ray's 1926 photo "Noire et blanche" further clinches this point (figure 2.5).[59] Steichen's and Ray's photos bear uncanny similarities, including streamlined composition, color contrast of black and white, and counterpoint

FIGURE 2.4. Wong's glamour head shot by Edward Steichen in *Vanity Fair* (Jan. 1931).

FIGURE 2.5. "Noire et blanche" by Man Ray (*Vogue*, May 1926).

arrangement of the female subject (especially her decontextualized head) with a prop. "Noire et blanche" juxtaposes the face of a white French woman (Man Ray's mistress Lee Miller) with an ebony mask from the French colony Ivory Coast, both resting on a table on which their shadows are cast. Both Wong's and Miller's faces are framed by black hair, their eyes closed as if caught unawares, suggesting their arrested objecthood.

The key difference, though, is that Miller's whiteness is set into relief by the ebony mask, whereas Wong is the dark twin of the super-white prop chrysanthemum. Her position vis-à-vis the flower is equivalent to the ebony mask vis-à-vis the white female. The colonialist racial imaginary in Man Ray's photo thus resurfaced to structure Steichen's glamour experimentation.[60] Recognizing Wong's enactment of this racialized image means that Steichen's racializing gaze (which Lim correctly criticizes) was not simply tolerated or even suffered by Wong, but rather was subtly remediated and reappropriated by Wong to cocreate her newly minted glamour image following her cosmopolitan fame in Europe. Wong's collaboration with Steichen shows that the racial imaginary is built into glamour photography despite its disavowal.

On the Spot not only marked Wong's first and only Broadway performance, but her performance also made her an early model and collaborator for glamour aesthetics at its formative stage. If *On the Spot* shows that "it has remained for an Englishman [Edgar Wallace], who writes unskillful melodrama, to see through the sham of [American] racketeering,"[61] then one might argue that it takes Wong, an interstitial ethnic cosmopolite, to reveal glamour aesthetics as premised upon nonwhite female performers' labor and paradoxical agency.

Eight years later, Wong collaborated with George Hurrell on the publicity photos for *Dangerous to Know*, adapted from *On the Spot*. This time her sartorial

signature was carried over from *Princess Turandot*, Wong's 1937 summer stock theater show shortly after her return from China; and Wong would reinhabit this costume in 1939 during her Australian vaudeville tour, thus solidifying her intertextual, self-citational, and cross-media authorship *and* her continuous participation in glamour photography. The next two sections turn to Wong's *Princess Turandot* and Euro-Australian vaudeville tours to trace her cross-media signature performances in relation to her difficult Chinese affiliation during World War II.

PRINCESS TURANDOT'S GLAMOROUS "ROBE OF JOY": "GOVERNMENT OF WOMEN" VS. PATRIARCHAL ETHNO-NATIONALISM

The year 1936 saw Wong's first and only visit to China. Seven months after her return to the US in December 1936, China's Anti-Fascist War, commonly known as the Second Sino-Japanese War, broke out in full scale, making patriarchal ethno-nationalism the rallying call for diasporic as well as domestic Chinese. Wong's reckoning with nationalist interpellation, however, started earlier, during her China trip. Chapter 4 addresses how she strategically responded to her Chinese critics during this trip. Chapter 1 shows that some of her films made after the trip feature her in more righteous, pro-China roles, indicative of her efforts to update the image of Chinese femininity for her American audience. However, neither Wong nor her characters during the war completely aligned with Chinese patriarchal ethno-nationalism, as I have argued with regard to *Lady from Chungking* in chapter 1. Furthermore, given her precarious work conditions as a racialized freelance performer in the US, she had to seize any available opportunity to sustain her performance, including "plan[ning] to auction off her wardrobe and effects to work in Chinese film."[62]

Before her Paramount film contract solidified in the latter half of 1937, she toured her vaudeville shows in Washington, DC, New York, and Philadelphia in May, scheduled by her agent, Batchelor Enterprise.[63] Her most important theater work during this period was touring *Princess Turandot* in summer stock theater in August 1937, one month after the Second Sino-Japanese war broke out. As Chinese nationalism strengthened in response to Japanese invasion, Wong's racialized identity came under intense and bizarre scrutiny in both American and Chinese press, illustrating the global climate of heightened political tension that Wong was wading through while doing the seemingly irrelevant and antiquated *Princess Turandot*.

In the US, the inaugural issue of *Look, The Monthly Picture Magazine*, published in February 1937, featured a sensational article, "Parted by a Nation's Hatred . . . and Hitler . . . Hitler Won't Like This Picture—It Can Never Be Taken Again."[64] The picture referred to is a 1928 photo portraying a female trio—Wong, Marlene Dietrich, and Leni Riefenstahl—at a ball in Berlin.[65] This photo was re-presented in *Look*, the title implying Hitler the dictator-patriarch's violation of the female trio's homosociality (figure 2.6). As film scholar Patrice Petro argues, this article

Women in the News

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Parted by a Nation's Hatred . . . *and Hitler*

. . . Hitler Won't Like This Picture—It Can Never Be Taken Again

Marlene Dietrich

When Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong and Leni Riefenstahl posed together for this remarkable photo a decade ago, Adolf Hitler had not yet come to power to tear apart their friendship. Today he hates two of them, bestows his favors on the third.

Miss Dietrich and Miss Wong, almost unknown when this picture was taken, are now Hollywood stars, while Leni has become Hitler's favorite.

In 1933 the Nazi government ordered German film artists abroad to return home to assist "in the great cultural upbuilding of Germany," by working for German film producers. Marlene declined to return, although Hitler warned German artists they would be regarded not only as unpatriotic but as actual traitors if they ignored the edict.

Since then Marlene has never returned to Germany, because she says, "They don't like me." She insists she is Aryan. Her picture, "Song of Songs," was banned by Germany in 1934. Although Marlene was born and reared in Germany, she has sent her daughter to school in England.

Anna May Wong

Anna May, recently received most hospitably in the Orient, would not be allowed on a Berlin stage because she is not "Nordic." Hitler regards "non-Aryan" blood as a menace to Germany, but this does not worry Anna May. She once turned down a plastic surgeon who offered to operate on her nose to make her look "more Nordic."

She ran into the same prejudice which Hitler holds, however, when she was making pictures in England. In spite of her good acting, British censors ruled that the lips of an English actor touching the mouth of a Chinese woman would offend the British public. All scenes of Anna May kissing were cut out.

Leni Riefenstahl is Hitler's ideal of pure German womanhood: energetic, good at sports and mannishly attractive. She had his permission to make exclusive cinema recordings of the 1936 Olympic games and with this power made herself unpopular with foreign cameramen. They would be all set to take certain pictures, then receive orders that it was forbidden by Fraulein Riefenstahl.

Leni Riefenstahl

She is 28, the daughter of a Berlin plumber. She began her career as a ballet dancer in Munich in 1923, progressed to the movies where she refused to have a double for dangerous film sequences. Fond of mountain climbing, she is nicknamed, not to her prettily, "the Oily Goat."

Hitler liked her screen work, engaged her to advise him when he posed for photographs. On Leni Hitler has showered countless special privileges enjoyed by no other woman.

Berlin gossips talked about her when she lived six months on Mount Blanc unchaperoned with eight men in a movie cast. She taught the men how to ski.

Of her relationship with Hitler, even the most skeptical quote an article on "Hitler's Love," which a Paris newspaper published, to the great annoyance of the German dictator. The article quoted Miss Riefenstahl as saying, "The Realmleader could not love except platonically." The paper was banned immediately from the newsstands.

FIGURE 2.6. A 1928 photo of Wong, Dietrich, and Riefenstahl re-presented in an article, "Parted by a Nation's Hatred . . . and Hitler . . . Hitler Won't Like This Picture—It Can Never Be Taken Again," in *Look, The Monthly Picture Magazine* (Feb. 1937).

indicates that the interwar Weimar-era cosmopolitanism characterized by "multiple and flexible attachments to more than one community" was replaced by "an era of intensely nationalist rhetoric" in the late 1930s.[66]

Of particular interest to me is the article's emphasis on Wong's "non-Aryan" racial identity and her rejection of a plastic surgeon's offer to make her nose "more Nordic," which cost her a stage-act opportunity in Berlin.[67] The scrutiny over Wong's "non-Aryan" looks recurred on the Chinese side in a 1939 article, which claimed that according to news from Berlin, Wong actually did have a nose job done *and* a Aryan blood transfusion in order to return to the Berlin stage as the "film star endowed with a high nose and Aryan blood."[68] A nearly perfect point-by-point negation of the *Look* article, the Chinese article panicked about Wong's fluid identity, seen as indicative of her racial-national disloyalty. It rehashed crude biological determinism, linking her identity to physiognomy and, literally, her blood. Whether her Chinese ethnic-racial identity was reaffirmed (as in the 1937 *Look* article) or negated (as in the 1939 Chinese article), Wong's racial-national allegiance became a new site of contention due to wartime intensification of a duo of essentialist discourses, that of racism and that of patriarchal ethno-nationalism.

It was under such sociopolitical duress, combined with her precarious job prospects, that Wong undertook the summer stock performance in *Princess Turandot* in 1937. This show opened on August 2 at the Westchester Playhouse in Mount Kisco, New York, in support of the Mount Kisco Hebrew Sisterhood. On August 9, it moved to Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut, cofounded by Lawrence Langner, who also cowrote the script for Wong. By August 13, the show had closed with Wong's chop suey party.[69] The opening nights in both the Westchester Playhouse and the Westport Playhouse were attended by full-house audiences who were feted with Wong's spectacular visual performance in exotic costumes.

The reviews were generally positive, but reinscribed exoticizing essentialism by harping on Wong's natural fit for the "Chinese" role by dint of her Chinese heritage. "Her breeding . . . lends a touch to the portrayal which no American actress could ever hope to duplicate," opined one reviewer.[70] Photographs by Carl Van Vechten suggest that *Princess Turandot* presented antiquated and exoticized femininity, contradicting Wong's promise to her Chinese critics that she would promote a positive image of contemporary modern China to the West. Yet Turandot's Chinese identity, like Wong's own, was a construct; and its transformation through multiple reiterations allowed Wong to fine tune her "Oriental" (dis)play (including repurposing the death act) so as to articulate a sentiment of proto-feminist independence and self-governance within the narrative. This in turn allegorizes Wong's own defiance of patriarchal heteronormativity and ethno-nationalism. Also importantly, as her first major performance after returning from China, *Princess Turandot* jump-started what Wong called the "third beginning" in her episodic career, which enabled her to "approach my work as something entirely

new—as though it were all strange to me. Then I get a different outlook and a new interpretation."[71] Such rebeginning and reorientation make her authorship cumulative yet episodic and anachronotopic.

The Turandot story originated in the epic *Haft Peykar* by the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami (ca. 1141–1209). The name Turandot meant "daughter of Turan," a Central Asian princess. The story was transformed into a comedy by Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) in the eighteenth century. German playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) made Turandot Chinese in his 1802 translation of the play, retitled *Turandot, Prinzessin von China*. This Central Asian–turned–Chinese princess then became legendary through Puccini's opera, posthumously completed in 1926 by his student. A popular opera on the Euro-American stage, *Princess Turandot* typically featured a white actress until Wong took up the role in the 1937 summer stock production.[72]

In the narrative, Wong insists on Turandot's single-womanhood, teasing out the queering potential in a familiar story. As in previous versions, Wong's Turandot rejects marriage by challenging suitors to solve three riddles; after having a number of failed suitors decapitated, Wong's Turandot eventually marries the successful suitor. The critical difference, according to Lawrence Langner and John Gerard's extant typescript, is that Wong's Turandot espouses female self-governance not to avenge an ancestor who was abducted and murdered by a prince (as in Puccini's opera), but rather to implement a "government of women" not to be shared with a husband.[73] Such female self-governance flies in the face of patriarchal ethno-nationalism, leading her emperor father to urge her to wed the prince to regain the love and loyalty of the people of China. Wong/Turandot's rejection of this plea compels a rereading of her apparent conversion to Chinese nationalism during and after her China trip. Wong further stamped this version with her established signature performances, such as threatening suicide by "drawing a dagger from her robe," vowing to "die a thousand deaths" rather than wed the prince.[74] In linking suicide with a single woman's independence, Wong used the play to channel her singlehood and agency, on and off the screen and stage.

Wong's Turandot does conform to a heterosexual marriage in the end, as in previous versions. Yet the wedding scene, according to the script, suggests not so much outright compromise as playful and sly subversion of the heteronormative ritual, thanks to Wong's self-reflexive sartorial performance and shapeshifting power. Wong/Turandot enters the stage all veiled in black as if in mourning, then takes it off to reveal a colorful "robe of joy" celebrating her "splendid solitude." Reversing Wong's reiterative death acts, it is the prince who now resorts to suicide to demonstrate his unwavering love. This makes Turandot the savior, halting the prince's dagger in midair, agreeing to the marriage, and begrudgingly allowing him to "share equally in the government of my realm."[75] The hasty surprise turnaround relieves the patriarchal anxiety with her self-governing "splendid solitude." At the performative level, however, Wong maneuvered her iconic dagger as a versatile prop, reorienting

her death act to flip her role from a victim to a savior. Thus, she exercised a queering move by humoring a man on her terms through her self-citational authorship.

Not only did Wong reenact the antiquated tale to articulate a proto-feminist queering sensibility, but her visual portrayal of Turandot also challenged clichéd Orientalism. She fashioned Turandot with wardrobe acquired from China, possibly mobilizing her Peking Opera knowledge gained during a highly publicized visit to the Peking Dramatic School (see chapter 4). In an interview during her rehearsal for *Turandot*, Wong eagerly displayed the Chinese costumes she planned to wear. She told the interviewer, Gladys Baker, about her postretirement ambition of opening an "exclusive shop selling Chinese gowns" along with fans, jewelry, and the "efficacious oils" used in Chinese cosmetics.[76] By visualizing a distinct Chinese feminine style constructed out of costumes, makeup, accessories, and other ornaments in combination with specific body language, Wong created a niche position for herself on stage and screen.

Carl Van Vechten's photographic records of *Princess Turandot* show Wong wearing two spectacular Peking Opera costumes. One was a fitted, armor-like, woman-warrior gown that she likely used to portray Turandot defending her self-governing singlehood. She reused the same costume in the "mannequin" scene at the beginning of *Daughter of Shanghai*. As discussed in chapter 1, her character poses as a mannequin in this costume to trick the white customer, then takes it off, jestingly revealing herself as a "modern copy" of a Chinese princess (video 1.2). The other costume from *Princess Turandot* was a loose-fitting, butterfly-embroidered Peking Opera gown with a white train and long voluminous sleeves known in Peking Opera as *shuixiu* 水袖 (lit., water sleeves), which could be the "robe of joy" that signaled Turandot's "splendid solitude" before she flipped it into a wedding gown (figure 2.7).[77]

Wong reused the "robe of joy" twice, first for a publicity photo shoot with George Hurrell for *Dangerous to Know* in 1938, and again during her 1939 vaudeville tour in Australia. As discussed in chapter 1, Wong wore floor-length Western gowns designed by Paramount's Edith Head throughout *Dangerous to Know*. This ultra-sophisticated look was diametrically opposite to some of this film's publicity photos, shot by Hurrell. In one portrait "for Robert Florey's *Dangerous to Know*," Wong, costumed in the feminine Peking Opera gown from *Princess Turandot*, strikes a pose against a white background. The low-key lighting from in front and below casts a looming shadow of her on the background (figure 2.8).[78] A year later, during her 1939 vaudeville tour in Sydney and Melbourne, Wong reinhabited this loose-fitting gown both on the stage and for a photo shoot by Athol Shmith, a Melbourne-based fashion and commercial photographer. Known for portraying visiting theater performers and celebrities, Shmith's fashion photography developed in tandem with professional modeling in Australia. Among his five photo portraits of Wong, three depicted her in the Peking Opera outfit, one being a tight, frontal framing of Wong's forward gaze, the other two capturing her performing with an unfolded paper fan, seemingly oblivious to the camera's presence (figure 2.9).[79]

FIGURE 2.7. Wong as Princess Turandot in the "robe of joy," with Vincent Price as the Unknown Prince. Photo by Carl Van Vechten, August 11, 1937 (No. IV L 10; credit: Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 371, Folder 5285; © Van Vechten Trust).

FIGURE 2.8. This publicity photo for *Dangerous to Know* (dir. Robert Florey, 1938) shows Wong reusing the "robe of joy" costume from *Princess Turandot*. Photo by George Hurrell, 1938 (*Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits: The Chapman Collection*, 114, plate 154).

FIGURE 2.9. Wong reinhabiting the Peking Opera gown during her vaudeville tour in Australia, 1939. Photo by Athol Shmith.

From Peking Opera costumes acquired in China to the summer stock *Princess Turandot* to *Daughter of Shanghai*, then *Dangerous to Know* publicity photo shoots, and finally to vaudeville in Australia, Wong reiteratively inhabited costumes of her own choice for different characters, narratives, media forms, and occasions. She constructed a cumulative and composite "Chinese" persona with her own signature, even in collaborating with a preeminent glamour photographer such as Hurrell. She staged newly acquired material resources, Chinese knowledge, and acting skills to stake an authoritative claim on modern as well as premodern Chinese (American) roles. This did not make her "Chinese" performance essentialist, however. Rather, her reiterative sartorial performances extracted the Peking Opera costumes from their contexts, freely repurposing them for any occasion and media form to posit another fantasy about China—one authored by herself—to reinvent her stage, screen, and public personae after the China trip. Such anachronotopic performances across time, seen on stage, on screen, and in photographs, addressed American and Australian audiences. In doing so, Wong designed and enacted her brand of "Chinese" femininity by mobilizing transnational cultural, material, industrial, and media technological resources.

However, it is through Wong's evolving vaudeville shows in Europe and Australia that we gain a fuller understanding of her collaborative, multifaceted, virtuoso performances of ostensibly incompatible personae in variegated costumes. In the next section, I turn to Wong's vaudeville shows in the mid- to late 1930s to track her migratory labor that pivoted on skill expansion, cross-media engagement, location-specific improvisation, audience interactions, and tireless traveling and seeking out of new opportunities. I situate Wong's vaudeville shows in a thus-far-obscured genealogy of minoritized female performers who built their careers in defiance of gender-race prejudices and other social hierarchies. Reactivating this concatenated genealogy reveals how gendered, racialized, and casualized performers have shaped *and* problematized the white-dominant entertainment industries in different locales.

FROM AN "ORIENTAL" "FREAK" TO A MIGRATORY PERFORMER-WORKER

Before arriving in Australia for her vaudeville show in summer 1939, Wong described her motive:

> "People insist on looking at me as a freak—something akin to a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf. *I want to be an actress, not a freak*. I want to feel that people go to see my pictures because I perform well, not just because I am an Oriental."
>
> The Australian vaudeville opportunity would allow her to find out whether "I have anything really to offer the public or whether I must just go on being regarded as a freak."[80]

The sentiments of frustration and sarcasm mixed with hope and persistence, so palpable in this statement, had been driving her transnational traveling in search of better work conditions and a more appreciative audience. Her travel to Australia only two years after her "third beginning" in the US following her China trip represented yet another such attempt. Recognizing her dilemma of being fetishized and trapped as an "Oriental" "freak," Wong was acutely aware that her ironic Oriental (dis)play tended to be received at face value by the Euro-American audiences. In urging the Australian audience to appreciate her as an actress, she sought to foster more discerning spectatorship. The impact of her audience address is not confined to the empirical then-and-there; rather, it anticipates what might become possible in another time and place. I delve into Wong's anticipatory audience address in chapter 5.

In this section, I reconstruct Wong's evolving vaudeville repertoire, publicity, and reception in mid- to late-1930s Europe and Australia. In this process, she collaborated with local artists and engaged with audience and journalists, and her career path paralleled that of other itinerant nonwhite female performers. The vaudeville platform, therefore, enabled an expansive interactive authorship beyond the performance per se. Furthermore, the constellation of early twentieth-century nonwhite female performers forged transnational life-careers and battled gender-race prejudices to shape American vernacular performance culture for global audiences.

Wong's first extensive European vaudeville tour took place in the UK from 1933 to 1934, in between making three films in London (*Tiger Bay, Java Head*, and *Chu Chin Chow*). During this period, she developed song-and-dance numbers in collaboration with musician and Arabist Henry Farmer and singing teacher Parry Jones. Wong's busy performance itinerary was vividly documented in a lithographic pictorial map that shows her arriving in Southampton in May 1933, then traveling and working extensively until 1934 (figure 2.10). The map's thumbnail pictorial sketches depict her activities at different locations, offering a unique glimpse into how she perceived herself on stage and on other social occasions across the UK as well as in France and Spain. I have argued elsewhere that this lithographic map, stamped with Wong's seasonal greetings and bilingual name, served to promote and publicize her UK tour, boosting her reputation as a cosmopolitan performer-worker.[81] One indication of the map's wide dissemination was that Wong sent a copy to Mr. Chen Binghong 陳炳洪, coeditor of a Shanghai-based film magazine, *Xiandai dianying* 現代電影 (Modern Screen), in which the map was reprinted along with the Chinese translation of her article "My Film Thrills."[82] This instance shows Wong's savvy mobilization of the lithographic printing technology to reproduce and circulate the map, making it her greeting card to the international publics.

One key stop on Wong's UK tour was Glasgow, illustrated in the map by a thumbnail sketch of her appearing in a skirt suit. Her performance at the Glasgow Empire Theatre held special significance for her repertoire building, as

FIGURE 2.10. Wong's lithographic pictorial map, showing her busy performance tour in the UK in 1934, accompanied by her signature and New Year's greeting at the bottom (credit: National Portrait Gallery, Picture Library, London).

it was here that she started collaborating with the musician Henry Farmer, who specialized in Arabic and Islamic music. Commencing in the week of August 28, 1933, Wong's act at the Glasgow Empire was introduced by Farmer's music; and her performance in "tuneful songs and intriguing costumes" was accompanied by Gordon Whelan at the piano.[83] Wong subsequently corresponded with Farmer, repeatedly inviting him to help her develop song-and-dance numbers for films and stage acts.

In her September 5, 1933, letter to Farmer from her stop in Edinburgh, Wong first thanked him for arranging the musical introduction that was "more interesting to [*sic*] what I had before," then expressed interest in working with Farmer when "a play or a picture necessitating Oriental music turns up." Her December 11 letter asked if Farmer could rearrange her song number "A Jasmine Flower," a Chinese folksong and a standing piece in her repertoire, "more authentically, since you, yourself are so familiar with the Oriental music." She mentioned that her singing teacher, Parry Jones, suggested cutting out all the flute parts and maximizing strings in this song, and that if possible, she would like to use Farmer's new orchestration for this number in her stage act at the Finsbury Park Empire Theatre in London in the week of December 18. She further invited Farmer to "set to some Chinese music" the lyrics newly written for her by Edward Knoblock, the screenwriter for *Chu Chin Chow* (dir. Walter Forde, 1934). In a letter dated February 18, 1934, written while making *Chu Chin Chow*, Wong discussed Frederick Norton's lack of a "brain wave" for her dance number, even though he composed the music for the original *Chu Chin Chow*. She encouraged Farmer to write a dance number for her so that she could try to get him on board for this film; or, failing this, she would incorporate the dance into her future vaudeville tour. In a May 23 letter, Wong promised to read the booklet Farmer sent her, *Reciprocal Influences in Music 'twixt the Far and Middle East*, while getting ready to rehearse a couple of new numbers for her Blackpool stage act starting on June 11.

While it is unclear whether Farmer obliged all of Wong's requests, his written note (possibly referring to Wong's act at the Glasgow Empire Theatre) retroactively stated that he "recorded all of her music" and wrote additional items for her, and that he was excited by Wong recommending him to "write the entire music for her next film" (i.e., *Chu Chin Chow*). He commented with succinct enthusiasm, "It was big a [*sic*] job, and I was immersed in Arabic Studies."[84] It is clear Farmer played a critical role in transforming Wong's "Oriental" numbers on the stage (and possibly also on the screen) *after* Wong had started her vaudeville tour in the UK. Conversely, Wong's cosmopolitan reputation opened up opportunities for Farmer—a musician based in Nottingham—to work in film in a metropolitan city like London. Their collaboration held twofold significance. It helped Wong to adjust, expand, and best enact her repertoire for the British audience. And it helped to cross-fertilize stage and screen by tapping into talents outside the metropolitan center and the studio system.

Aside from Farmer, Wong also worked with other artists, including her teacher Parry Jones, a Welsh operatic tenor, on her "A Jasmine Flower" number; Anton Dolin, "Britain's greatest ballet dancer," on her dance act in *Chu Chin Chow*; and Katherine DeMille (Cecil B. DeMille's adopted daughter), who choreographed a dance for her stage act in early 1934.[85] With these efforts, Wong ventured into a domain that she had not been professionally trained for, and that was perceived as atypical for her ethnic background. Katherine DeMille voiced blatant discrimination: "[Wong] can't dance and she can't sing. But she has the world's most beautiful figure and a face like a Ming princess, and when she opens her mouth out comes Los Angeles Chinatown sing-sing girl and every syllable is a fresh shock."[86] In the face of such discrimination based on her race, gender, and class background that was already apparent in the London theater critics' disparagement of her American accent in 1929, Wong remained unfazed. She recognized her limitations, yet still pushed on with continuous training.

She admitted to not being a dancer, but decided to step up to the challenge because the audience expected it of her. Dolin, who coached her dance in *Chu Chin Chow*, praised her "supreme gift of knowing her limitations" and admired her patient efforts to memorize and imitate the difficult steps.[87] Through collaborating with artists in the UK, Wong expanded her skills and repertoire, and constantly adapted her song and dance numbers for both stage and screen. Her labor-intensive collaboration and training made it abundantly clear that her "Oriental" vocal-visuality was carefully assembled, choreographed, and executed for the white British audience, rather than a simple expression of certain essentialist Chineseness.

From the end of 1934 to 1935, Wong further expanded her repertoire and studied more languages for her Southern and Northern European tour. She returned in August 1934 to Paramount for a single film, *Limehouse Blues* (dir. Alexander Hall), which features her striking apache dance with George Raft. A behind-the-scenes Paramount publicity photo shows Wong rehearsing the movements under the guidance of choreographer LeRoy Prinz. But Wong's enhanced dance techniques acquired through stage and film acting in Britain likely also contributed to her apache dance.

Wong came back to Europe in November 1934, embarking on what she playfully dubbed the "Anna May Wong Spectacle," including two Chinese songs, two in English, and two in French, with dances previously done in London.[88] Her programs show song numbers in Chinese ("A Jasmine Flower"), French ("Parlez-moi d'amour"), English ("Half-Caste Woman" by Noël Coward), dance numbers, and a monologue she created for her courtesan character in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932), all performed in different costumes.[89] In addition, she regularly incorporated numbers created by local artists, such as "Før vi skilles" ("Before We Part") in Denmark, which she performed phonetically in Danish. She also performed a repertoire song in different languages for different audiences, as suggested by its title shifting from "An Italian Girl" to "A Swedish Girl" to

"A Norwegian Girl." Wong conscientiously embraced the challenge of linguistically going native to address the local audience. In a January 26, 1935, letter to the American dramaturge Lawrence Langner, Wong wrote about her extensive tour in Italy in late 1934, saying she did half of an act in Italian toward the end of the last few weeks, which imbued a "new life for the act" for her.[90]

Wong's active training in multiple languages, combined with impromptu adjustment and self-engineered sartorial parading, led her to create a spectrum of dramatic personae that composited into her multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism. Her labor investment and creativity, however, often became invisibilized under the European Orientalist gaze that freak-ified her through fetishistic racialization and sexualization. The Italian press, for instance, tended to resort to superlative mystification of the exotic "yellow" Other.[91] Shortly before her arrival, the October 1934 issue of *Excelsior*, a Milan-based movie magazine, featured a profile photo of Wong on the front cover, against a patchwork background of a dragon and a Chinese painting. The one-line caption reads: "the Chinese American actress that has renounced for the love of Art to change her eyes into European style," implying that Wong's appeal depended on her non-European, exotic eyes and, by extension, her racialized persona.[92]

Upon her arrival in Turin, reporter Luciano Ramo fetishistically described Wong as the "*star* of the Celestial Empire," the "guest of color" and the "yellow star" who was "tall, willowy, very elegant, beautifully modeled, and exquisitely, fully, hopelessly (at two thousand per thousand) a hundred percent female," and whose upcoming stage act in Turin would be "yellow for sure." Ramo specifically drooled over Wong's "hypnotizing" eyes, the "most beautiful hands in the world," and the mascot live snake that traveled around with her in her handbag.[93] More stunningly, Wong's early life was fictionalized, depicting her as a runaway who was kidnapped by a German circus and forced to perform stunts "taught to people of the Orient"—a mashup of scenes from her films such as *Show Life*. The only cosmopolitan feature the reporter acknowledged was Wong's multilingual ability; she supplied all her film titles in German, and "more than once expresses herself in proper Neapolitan."[94]

Similar fetishization governed Wong's reception in Northern Europe during her tour in early 1935.[95] On February 13, 1935, a report in the Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten*, "Anna May Wong Is Coming on Sat.," described the elaborate set design for Wong's show: director Paulsen "[remade] the Mill [Røde Mølle in Oslo] into China. From the door and all the way in, it'll be China, spectacular decorations." Paulsen called this makeover "the finest and most authentic frame around Anna May Wong." A director and impresario named Woronowsky described Wong's performance as "Sing, dance, reenact excerpts from her movies, change costumes, one more delicious than the other. The best of all is perhaps her excerpts from *Shanghai Express*. You remember that—where she plays a half caste. Then she sings a Chinese song with Chinese music with Chinese dress, all genuine, all authentic,

absolutely. Then some English songs, then a little in Norwegian. Practiced for the occasion."[96]

The day following the opening night, a detailed report was published in *Aftenposten*, accompanied by a photo showing Wong performing in a white Chinese-style gown, juxtaposed with another photo showing the Chinese chargé d'affaires with his wife attending the show.[97] The reporter indulged in a detailed description of Wong's stage show, spiced with backhanded admiration presented as general audience reception. The show began with the Norwegian orchestra's Chinese drum-beating, followed by Woronowsky's introduction, then a "Chinese" melody, thereupon "in through director Paulsen's rose portal, built for the occasion, glides the Chinese guest from Hollywood up on the stage." Wearing "a spectacularly colorful Mandarin gown and decorative headdress," she was "lovely to behold."[98] She addressed the audience in Norwegian, which to the reporter's ear was "mutilating our language in the most adorable manner: Laddies and gentleman, ei am delited"—so adorable that the reporter believed it already won her the victory that her singing would not. She then sang in English and Norwegian, now changed into "shining white pajamas and is even more lovely than before." As she segued to the French song "Parlez moi d'amour," "fold[ing] her beautiful hands with crimson nails," the reporter frankly pointed out that "we are still focused only on looking at her. The song makes absolutely no impression either on Miss Wong or on us."

As Wong carried on singing in Norwegian, Danish, and English, doing dances and sketches of film personae, while changing into various costumes (a colorful kimono, an "eel-thin" dress in black and gold, and flaming red ostrich feathers around her neck), the reporter commented with fetishism ("We're still just infatuated with her appearance") alternated with sarcasm (she did the Danish song "Før vi skilles"/"Before We Part" "so lovely that she almost makes us believe she has a soul").[99] Ultimately, the show ended and "one returns to the more pedestrian joys like eating, drinking, and dancing."[100]

Both the publicity and the review dismissed Wong's multilingual vocal performance as artless even if "adorable." Wong's value, therefore, remained fixated in her racialized "Oriental" femininity, which was destined to fade once her curio appeal wore off. Unsurprisingly, her scheduled repeat performance in Gothenburg in March 1935 was canceled due to low ticket sales.[101] According to the Swedish reporters, Wong—the "yellow rose from Sung-Kiang-Fu, daughter of the morning light" that should have been found "under the cherry tree or in the bamboo forests of her motherland"—had lost "the rush of blood in [her] young heart," depleted by the American brand of "tame and unintelligent entertainment."[102]

Butting up against such entrenched Orientalism and the resulting failure to appreciate her multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism in Euro-America, Wong, unsurprisingly, hoped that her 1939 Australian vaudeville tour would foster a new audience that could appreciate her as an "actress" rather than a "freak." Wong arrived in Sydney on June 4, 1939, beginning what was planned to be a twelve-week

tour as part of the "Highlights from Hollywood" ensemble, arranged by Frank Neil, the general manager of the Tivoli Circuit since 1934.[103] Shirley Jennifer Lim understands Wong's Australian tour as an opportunity to enact glamorous "settler-colonial racial modernity" that made her the de facto cultural ambassador for China, which in turn facilitated Chinese Australians' struggle for "cultural citizenship."[104] Building upon Lim's argument, I ask: What enabled Wong to project modernity and glamour? How might we historicize her modernity and glamour by taking into account not only her popularity (as Lim emphasizes), but also the challenges she encountered in Australia? How did she calibrate the ambassadorial gesture, given her ambivalent relationship with China? And, finally, in what ways did her Australia tour partake in the broader landscape of border-crossing popular-cultural production enacted by nonwhite female performers in the first half of the twentieth century?

I begin with the last question by placing Wong in a constellation of early twentieth-century nonwhite female performers whose long-obscured border-crossing performances shaped popular entertainment, calling us to reorient media studies from the ground up. These performers include mixed-race entertainer Lady Tsen Mei, who performed in Australia in 1916–17; Black American singer-actress Nina Mae McKinney, who toured Australia in 1937; and Chinese Australian Rose Quong, who traveled to London to study stage performance in the 1920s and actively promoted Chinese poetry and philosophy in the UK and the US from the 1930s on.[105]

Lady Tsen Mei (aka Josephine Moy) was a Chinese African American vaudevillian who also starred in two China-themed films, *For the Freedom of the East* (dir. Ira M. Lowry, 1918) and *Lotus Blossom* (dir. James B. Leong and Francis J. Grandon, 1921), and was possibly the first Chinese-heritage American entertainer to tour Australia. Wong's own Australia tour, over two decades later, built upon Lady Tsen Mei's legacy; and they both confronted the same "white Australia" policy that was implemented in 1901 to forbid immigration by Asians (especially Chinese) and Pacific Islanders. Thus, Wong's reception in Australia must be understood through the historical lens of undervalued labor and precarious work conditions. At the same time, Wong's high-profile Australian tour also helped illuminate the legacy of Lady Tsen Mei and, more broadly, that of all pioneering border-crossing Asian American performers.

Wong's Australian tour also paralleled the transnational tour of Rose Quong, a former member of the Melbourne Repertoire Society who migrated to London and whose stage success there was favorably covered by the Australian press as early as 1925. In 1929, Quong shared the stage with Wong in *The Circle of Chalk* (discussed in the first section of this chapter); and they crossed paths again in July 1934 at the Ritz Hotel in New York, at an event that one reporter described as "Occidentals Feast[ing] on [the] Beauty of Two Stage Stars."[106] In late May 1936, when Wong traveled from Shanghai to Beijing to study Peking Opera, calligraphy,

and Mandarin Chinese, Quong traced Wong's footsteps, arriving in Shanghai and taking Mandarin Chinese lessons before heading for Beijing. In January 1939, half a year before Wong's Australian tour, Quong settled in New York permanently.

With the exception of two intersections in London and New York, Wong's and Quong's pathways largely paralleled one another without interactions, cautioning us against presuming a de facto collective diasporic Chinese female sensibility. However, as diasporic Chinese-heritage performers, they both braved colonialist race-gender discrimination to venture into acting, pursued a peripatetic life to acquire new acting skills, searched for different and better work opportunities, and built international audiences by responding to shifting geopolitics (from interwar cosmopolitanism and Orientalism to China's Anti-Fascist War). They also both strategically played the advocate for Chinese femininity, culture, and philosophy. But Wong also differed from Quong by actively interacting with Chinese artists, writers, and diplomats as well as the moviegoing publics; and her career weathered further tumults to persist into the Cold War era. During her Australian tour, she specifically engaged with the Chinese Australian communities as well as China's consul-general, Dr. Chun-Jien Pao, not only to promote China War Relief fund-raising, but also possibly out of the shared experience of marginalization, whether by America's Chinese Exclusion Act or by the "white Australia" policy.

The shared experience of marginalization also connected Wong and Nina Mae McKinney, who undertook a vaudeville tour in Australia in 1937.[107] Both their visits defied Australia's 1928 policy that stipulated "total prohibition of colored performers from entering the Commonwealth," even though this policy eased in the 1930s.[108] Further indicative of their subjection to gender-race discrimination was that they were both slighted by ABC (the Australian Broadcasting Commission) as subpar stage performers. Correspondence between the Tivoli Theatre and ABC indicated that, in anticipation of Wong's visit, Frank Neil offered Wong's service (based on her "international reputation and the expected drawing power") to ABC at seventy-five pounds per broadcast, once a week. E. Chapple, acting federal controller of music at ABC, responded that he knew Wong only through *Shanghai Express* and that "it is quite possible she may not be a success on the stage, as was the case with Nina May [*sic*] McKinney."[109] Referencing McKinney's perceived failure as a precedent, Chapple suggested that Wong's act be viewed before any arrangements were made with Neil.[110] No follow-up communication was documented, which suggests that no contract materialized.

Yet ABC's disinterest in Wong and McKinney did not translate into their failure. Nicole Anae shows that McKinney effectively mobilized the Australian press to self-author a Black aesthetic and Black internationalism in the face of "white Australia."[111] In other words, ABC's judgment only symptomized their discrimination against nonwhite female performers. Wong's and McKinney's shared marginalization, both in their home country and in Australia, exposed race-gender

hierarchies as being bound up with global settler colonialism and the accompanying patriarchal ethno-nationalism.

Although Wong, Lady Tsen Mei, Quong, and McKinney did not interact or collaborate in ways that would suggest a collective feminist consciousness, the constellation of their analogous transnational endeavors forged a mode of ethno-cosmopolitanism predicated upon laboriously navigating precarious working and living circumstances. Such ethno-cosmopolitanism unsettled the white male dominance of the entertainment industries, demonstrating a desire to transform the film and stage landscape with their lived experiences from the margins. Together, these nonwhite peripatetic female performers produced an assemblage of practices, laying the groundwork for later generations to advance more concerted efforts to reorient, and even dissent from, Western mainstream mass media. It is by partaking in this genealogy that Wong's Australian vaudeville tour advanced her "Oriental" (dis)play and contributed to challenging the white-male-dominant entertainment industries.

Billed as the leading lady of "Hollywood Highlights," Wong performed in Melbourne from June 12 to July 15, twice a day, six days a week, then in Sydney from July 20 to August 17. Reviews indicated that her repertoire largely resembled that of her European tour, and the reception was mixed. One Australian journalist described her as "agreeably decorative," and the song number "Half-Caste Woman" gave her an "opportunity for harsh and intense acting."[112] On the American side, a couple of months later, *Variety* called her tour "a mediocre season for Tivoli Theatres," speculating that she was "not well known Down Under" and "not a boxoffice [*sic*] draw."[113] Wong herself recalled the Australia tour as "all in all a very interesting journey" "in spite of a few things."[114] Other reviewers expressed enthusiasm for Wong's acting skills. Following her opening night in Melbourne, a journalist celebrated the "charming, talented, and entertaining" Wong as "a first-rate entertainer . . . [with] an atmosphere of brightness about her 'turn,' which is easy to look at and to hear." Her song numbers in Chinese and French and a dramatic monologue stood out for "show[ing] her versatility and [meeting] with hearty approval. Her presentation is original and 'color' is added by the many beautiful Chinese costumes she wears."[115] Praising Wong's virtuoso vocal as well as visual performance skills, this review significantly departed from the Euro-American disparagement of her multilingual performance.

Indeed, while not spectacularly successful, Wong's Australia tour as a whole received publicity and reviews that did better justice to her professional aspirations. Such publicity could be traced back to shortly after her 1936 China trip, when *The Movie World*, the film supplement to the *Australian Women's Weekly*, not only detailed her newly acquired Chinese wardrobe (replacing her "Occidental" wardrobe), but also revealed her plan of producing a Chinese film utilizing the exteriors she had shot in China and casting "some of the greatest actors in the world . . . found in the Chinese theatres."[116] Thus, Wong

was presented to an Australian female readership as an ambitious filmmaker *and* a fashion model. Notably, her exoticism ("Oriental splendor") was recognized as the effect of well-orchestrated sartorial performance, rather than her racialized essence.

Publicity of her 1939 vaudeville tour similarly recognized her *performance* of the "Oriental" effect, as she was repeatedly described as not a Chinese, but a California-born Hollywood star whose first China visit was not until 1936.[117] Shirley Jennifer Lim reads such publicity as making Wong a desirable model for Chinese Australian women struggling for their cultural citizenship in White Australia. Wong's identity, however, was more complicated, given her peripatetic travels and interstitial self-positioning. Her distanciation from any a priori identity position means that hers could not be reduced to American cultural citizenship. Rather, she maintained multiple vantage points befitting a migratory performer-worker. The interstitial positioning enabled her to diagnose Hollywood's limitations in comparison with other film industries. It also facilitated her flexible engagement with international publics to not only reinforce her transnational stardom, but also foster an open and discerning spectatorial horizon.

Wong's knowledge of film and media industries in multiple countries distinguished her as not just one of the motion picture world's "most beautiful ornaments, but one of its brainiest," wrote Australian caricaturist and journalist Kerwin Maegraith, who had a portrait sketch session with Wong.[118] Specifically addressing Australia's female readership, Maegraith underscored Wong's "force of personality," "intelligence," and "wit" to see "the funny side of life, much of which is Hollywood," which Wong compared to "a gamble," noting that its "average trooper" of the year 1939 was "a good worker and a splendid fighter." Wong herself, as seen by Maegraith, exemplified precisely such a trooper with "her everlasting striving to improve her work, and . . . never be content to rest on her successes."[119] The targeted female readers were thus invited to appreciate not only Wong's glamorous cosmopolitanism, but also her struggles as a persevering and peripatetic performer-worker profoundly distanced from the "gamble" of Hollywood even as she also participated in it.

While in Australia, Wong directly interacted with the gender-race-diverse audiences, which not only publicized her stage work but also helped foster a resonant audience with long-term impact. She spoke to the *Australian Women's Weekly* about the exotic forty-three-course banquet she enjoyed in Shanghai, and attended activities at Radio Women's Club of Victoria as a "guest of honor" decked out in "a mink coat with an attractive tamarisk pink turban."[120] In Melbourne, she was welcomed with a dance party organized by the local Young Chinese League on June 10, 1939.[121] A month later, she was greeted by the New South Wales Chinese Women's Relief Fund and the Young Chinese League at the Sydney train station.[122] Upon arriving in Sydney and being welcomed by Consul-General Chun-Jien Pao and his wife, Edith, Wong was filmed giving a brief speech for radio broadcasting. In

this rare surviving forty-four-second audiovisual recording of her public speech, Wong thanked her hosts in her signature King's English, and then switched to her ancestral Taishan dialect to greet the Chinese Australian community who were "listening in." Addressing the Paos (who stood next to her) and an absent audience (the Chinese Australian community), she was visibly nervous at the beginning and stuttered slightly, but soon settled into an easier interactive manner, and concluded with a smile and a hand wave to the absent audience. Subsequently, she planned, with Edith Pao and representatives of the Young Chinese Relief Movement, an "Anna May Wong Ball" to raise medical aid for the Chinese wounded and refugees. Her interaction with the Chinese Australian communities thus continued the China War Relief campaigns that she had started in the US.

These broad-spectrum interactions left a long-term impact years after her visit. At the June 1942 annual Dragon Festival Ball organized by Sydney's Young Chinese Relief Movement, a supposedly one-and-a-half-century-old Chinese coat gifted by Wong was displayed in the fashion parade to raise funds for China War Relief and for Air Force House.[123] Such reverberations indicated the sustained impact and imaginary that Wong created through her "feminine" labor of sartorial self-fashioning and public interactions.

Notably, Wong's public interactions went in tandem with her mobilization of communication technologies. While performing in Melbourne, she endorsed the Remington Portable typewriter. A medium close-up photo in the *Sun News-Pictorial* showed her looking pensively to the right, her Chinese-English signature for the Tivoli Theatre appearing at the lower right corner. Below this photo was her endorsement of "her Remington Portable": "I have always used a Remington Portable typewriter for my personal correspondence and am delighted with your new noiseless model recently delivered to me." The readership was invited to conclude: "Miss Wong prefers a portable model for it has all standard typewriter features. You [or I], too, should use the best."[124] Her signed photo for the Tivoli Theatre thus served the dual purpose of advertising her stage performance and marketing the portable typewriter. It evokes a similar photo showing her writing with a typewriter in the Park Hotel Shanghai. This image echoes with Barbara Bourchier's description of Wong as "an excellent correspondent" who wrote "lengthy letters" to her American friends during her China trip.[125] Besides the typewriter, Wong also arranged for publicity photos depicting her making phone calls during both her China and Australia trips, respectively clad in a Western-style long-sleeved dress in the Park Hotel Shanghai and in a Chinese-style embroidered jacket in Australia, the latter photo included in her interview with a fan self-identified as F. K. M.[126]

Undoubtedly, all of these were publicity photos that were not meant to reflect Wong's real-life means of communication. Yet these analogous visual setups (albeit in different locations) reinforced Wong's image as an author-on-the-go actively engaging with friends, fans, and journalists. She was shown harnessing

technologies of writing, communication, and imaging, be it a portable typewriter, a telephone, or photography, to narrate and interpret her international trips to her multi-sited friends, readers, and audiences. Furthermore, these images conjoined her "greetings" to her long-distance public with her on-site interactions with the local audience while also publicizing her performance tour and partaking in product endorsement.

Wong's Australia tour did not simply display her glamorous cosmopolitanism; rather, it turned upon her interstitial position, transnational experience, public interactions, and engagement with media and communication technologies. Her resourceful labor as a minoritized performer-worker interconnected with that of other border-crossing nonwhite females, calling our attention to their contributions to transnational and cross-media entertainment.

Wong's stage work constituted a key facet of her mosaic career. To put on a show of "Oriental" (dis)play at center stage, she painstakingly retrained for different media forms and technologies, cultivated collaborative and cumulative authorship, ethnicized cosmopolitanism and glamour photography, and engaged with international publics, while channeling her expanded signature performances toward pushing back against colonialist, Orientalist, and ethno-nationalist gender-race discriminations. In the next chapter, I rack the focus to shift our attention from Wong's leading-lady glamour at center stage to her supporting and supplementary roles in the background and the margins. If Wong could put on a satirical show of "Oriental" (dis)play as a leading lady (as I have argued so far), what could she leverage when the show was not hers? Following her work as a marginalized performer-worker, how might we decolonize film studies from the margins and the background?

3

Shifting the Show

Labor in the Margins

In those days, there was only one Asian film actress, Anna May Wong. At the movies I used to keep my eyes peeled for her fleeting appearances on the screen.

—GRACE LEE BOGGS

Out of a hundred Chinese who were going to and fro in the background of the China-Town [as extras in The Red Lantern*], I considered myself the princess. I always assured myself that the camera wasn't looking anywhere else but at me . . . ! For two days that bliss lasted—then it was over. . . .*

For eight months I was the hundredth or two-hundredth of the Chinese.

But then—oh!—it still makes my pulse pound when I think of it: then a powerful assistant said to me: "Anna May, you will play a servant!"

No longer the hundredth, the two-hundredth. . . . No, the first, the only Chinese in the scene. . . .

Oh—I was so proud. . . .

And one time—it was the day that I got a role in a film—I'll never forget the title!—a real *role, the second female role: in* Dinty.

And I returned home—like a victor.

—ANNA MAY WONG

This chapter racks the focus to scrutinize the margins and the background, where Wong played supporting, minor, bit roles or served as an extra in a majority of her films and television shows. Wong's screen debut as an extra—one of a hundred similarly dressed Chinese girls carrying lanterns—in the Alla Nazimova vehicle *Red Lantern* (dir. Albert Capellani, 1919) was an anticlimax. As she recounted on multiple occasions, she felt deeply disappointed when her high expectations were dashed, replaced by the realization that she was completely invisible on the screen—even to herself.[1] The girl who sat in the movie theater looking for herself on the screen literally lost herself in the phantasmic silver-land. One might imagine

that Wong reiterated this primal moment of loss and frustration with a degree of gleeful vindication. For by the time she could recall this moment in interviews, she had already made a name for herself and, instead of being invisible, she had become hypervisible as *the* icon of exotic Oriental femininity. In her 1930 German interview quoted in the second epigraph above, the now cosmopolitan star-celebrity had recuperated from that primal moment, literally reimagining herself as the center—the "princess" that was the focus of the camera.

As her lifelong career demonstrates, hypervisibility and invisibility were two sides of one coin, constituting her fundamental dilemma that we still have to reckon with in our reassessment of her legacy. On the one hand, the public has been treated to proliferating audiovisual, photographic, and other media representations and multilingual coverage that hype her trendsetting fashions, enigmatic allure, humble background, and unyielding singlehood. On the other hand, much of the media frenzy (especially during her lifetime) expressed a purist and heteronormative urge to figure (or straighten) her out, to fit her into an a priori fetishized category—one that functioned as what I call a "media closet."

This "media closet" magnified Wong's consumable "freak" appeal while containing her challenge to heteronormative Orientalism and patriarchal ethnonationalism. My goal in this chapter, therefore, is to break the "media closet," to shine light on her flitting yet unmissable screen appearances, so as to theorize the ways in which her physical, intellectual, and affective labor produced her paradoxical agency in the margins and the background. Wong's marginal roles ranged from furnishing the "Oriental atmosphere" to supporting the white cast in white-centered narratives. Ostensibly fillable by any "Oriental" actor, these marginal roles acquired layered significance through Wong's intriguing maneuvers. Indeed, Wong often managed to steal and shift the show by making these roles disturbingly poignant. In other words, the marginal space, underscripted and apparently inert, could offer her unexpected leeway to re-inflect her threadbare minor characters with layers of unintended interpretive possibilities. Specifically, her performances could turn the marginal characters into sites of critiquing the center-stage narrative and its underlying ideologies. Such re-inflection characterizes her show-shifting authorship that turns upon mimicry and contestation.

This chapter joins Black film studies and feminist studies in taking up the marginalized space as the fertile site for mining subversive agency. Here are a few of my interlocutors. Miriam J. Petty examines the 1930s Black American performers, arguing that their "problematic stardom" (to use Arthur Knight's term) actually "expressed agency and negotiated ideas about their lives and identities through acts of performance and discourse that incorporated and exceeded the cinematic frame."[2] Desirée Garcia studies the race and gender power inequity in the dressing rooms of backstage musicals, concluding that Black revue dancer Jeni

LeGon mobilized her singing skills to portray an insubordinate Black servant who challenges her white mistress's stardom.[3] Finally, Black feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick focuses on the margin as a material and conceptual terrain that is alterable through Black women's struggles and production of resistant spaces and geographies.[4]

Building upon this scholarship, I illuminate how the obscured margins and the background constitute *and* problematize the center all at once. I anchor my discussion in Wong's nuanced performances that not only stole the show in the sense of gaining attention (disproportionate to her minor roles), but also *shifted* the show by flipping the hierarchy of the center and the peripheries, the main narrative and the liminal energy. Her act of *shifting* the show redistributes seeing, sensing, and relating, thus reorients the screen geography, and reshuffles the visual episteme both diegetically and extradiegetically—all of which works to redress the power inequity underlying mainstream media industries and cultures.

To theorize the power of Wong's flitting and erased presence (*not* absence) in the margins and the background on the big and small screens, I mobilize the concept of the parergon as defined by Jacques Derrida. *Parergon* designates the frame of the work (*ergon*), which is the liminal zone that is not quite a part of the work, yet also not outside of the work. Supplementing the substance (within the frame) by giving it unity, the parergon serves to unfix the binary opposition between the center and the periphery, the work and the frame, threatening to reverse the order.[5] Wong's work as a supporting actress demonstrates precisely such a reversal, akin to the effect of an anamorphic perspective. Once we rack the parergon into focus, a new method of sensing the moving images at the edges of the frame emerges. This new method leads us to problematize mainstream film history, and to pay attention to the role played by performer-workers who have been systemically marginalized, tokenized, and erased.

Confronting the history of marginalization is to generatively engage with archival lacunae. That is, many films that cast Wong in supporting roles have not survived; some of her early roles were not credited and are yet to be recovered; and when she was credited, existing documentation rarely goes beyond a mere mention of her ornamental value as part of the exotic mise-en-scène. This challenge is not dissimilar to what film historian Allyson Nadia Field encounters in her reconstruction of African American uplift cinema. Thus, while I utilize close analysis whenever possible, I also follow Field's urge to view audiovisual materials as "but one component of an expansive network of cultural traces that lead to its myriad functions." I share her method of "looking and thinking adjacently"—beyond extant cinema—so as to reconstruct a lost film and media history "out of surviving archival ephemera."[6] By combining this method with attentive and caring "reparative reading" (Eve Sedgwick's term) of a wide range of print materials (including stills,

scripts, censorship records, publicity, exhibitions, and reviews), this chapter pieces together a discursive environment in which Wong carved out a critical parergon position vis-à-vis the center stage.

The chapter begins with establishing Wong's significant "fleeting appearances on the screen" (in the words of Grace Lee Boggs). I then unpack her parergon power in three interrelated dimensions. First, via her auxiliary characters, she mimicked and acted out the white female protagonist's desires, then went a step further to meta-cinematically problematize such desires. Second, Wong destabilized the white protagonist and narrative by collaborating with other decentered elements, including costuming, set design, and nonhuman characters. Third, Wong subtly channeled her real-life experience of exclusion into the diegetic realm, revealing the underbelly of white centrism. Finally, I bring the three dimensions together in Wong's "swan song" performance in the unaired pilot and a 1961 episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*, both set at the height of the Cold War in Hong Kong. Here, her parergon power undercut white centrism *and* patriarchal nationalism all at once.

THE FLITTING FIGURE ACROSS THE BACKGROUND

A 1925 article in the British fan magazine *Pictures and Picturegoer* aptly identified Wong's flitting yet captivating screen presence: "That she is an exceptionally clever actress one cannot doubt. She may merely *wander through a corner of the picture*, but she'll *register a hit every time*. Witness the delightful flashes of her *Lilies of the Field*."[7] This writer's spotting of Wong in *Lilies of the Field* (dir. John Francis Dillon, 1924) is noteworthy because Wong was uncredited in the film and was unmentioned in the review of it by Robert Sherwood, the *Life* magazine movie critic who was to become an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. Sherwood did, however, praise Wong for her "rich" and "authentic" performance as the Mongolian maid in *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), in a review placed right next to his *Lilies of the Field* review.[8] Wong remained unmentioned when *Lilies of the Field* was shown in China in 1926 and 1928.[9] That her presence in *Lilies of the Field* was otherwise largely erased makes the British writer's comment on her "delightful flashes" that "register a hit" all the more thought-provoking.

A few years later, back in her home country, Wong's flitting yet eye-catching performances led a *Los Angeles Times* reporter to criticize the industry's waste of her talent. The reporter then proceeded to elevate Wong above the leading ladies: "The reviewers deplore the scant opportunities given Anna May Wong, whose brief appearances in pretentious pictures keep interest in her at high pitch and inevitably cause comparisons with those who play leads in the same pictures. The comparison is always to the credit of the Chinese actress, whose talents are thought to be wasted in the brief roles given her."[10]

Yet not all reviewers deplored Wong's wasted talent. One commentator considered her nonwhiteness alone sufficient to keep her in the auxiliary position. While her "exotic Chinese beauty" made her the go-to actress in any 10–20–30 melodrama with an "Oriental intrigue," this commentator believed that her "dark beauty appeared sinister by contrast with the nordic fairness of Laura La Plante in *The Chinese Parrot* and Dolores Costello in *Old San Francisco*. She has been a villainess and a vampire, but *her appearance will never let her be a heroine*."[11] According to this commentator, Wong was doomed to be the dark foil to the fair heroine; and her best option was no more than playing a sympathetic maid, as in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

A third voice could be found in a 1929 article, "Why Don't They Star?" The writer, Willard Chamberlin, mused over a host of non-starring actresses of different national and racial/ethnic backgrounds (French, Spanish, and Mexican as well as American), including Myrna Loy, Lupe Vélez, and Wong.[12] Chamberlin assessed Wong's value as "never [failing] to furnish *colorful Oriental beauty* to any role she plays," as illustrated in a Jack Freulich photo portrayal of her dance pose from *The Chinese Parrot* (dir. Paul Leni, 1927).[13] Wong's role in this film required only "one day's work and featuring," since her character was killed shortly after the opening scene.[14] Yet Freulich's set of photos portraying her dance poses were widely circulated, testifying to her powerful performance despite the brief screen time.[15] Unsurprisingly, Chamberlin used the word *color* to explain the non-stars' allure. This led him to argue that these non-stars should be envied, for they had the opportunity to wear lavish costumes and play colorful supporting roles with abandon, while the stars were encased in rigid, narrative-driven costumes and acting styles. Furthermore, while stars came and went, these supporting performers could maintain a more lasting career.

Chamberlin would not have expected Wong's non-star legacy to far exceed his definition of a lasting career. Nearly half a century later, for instance, she resurfaced, flitting across a TV screen in the home of a US colonel stationed in Iran in the late 1970s. As narrated by the colonel's daughter, Mary Flanagan, her parents enjoyed the "oldies" reruns on TV. One day, in the middle of a black-and-white gangster-style film, her dad jumped to his feet, pointed to a minor character in the background of the scene, and screamed, "Jesus God, it's Anna May Wong!" The father's excited spotting of Wong—as an uncanny time capsule, over a decade after her death and several decades after she flit across the background in the film—had no meaning for the children, for they "had no idea who this was or who, in fact, he had pointed to, since it was a *background actor in a passing scene*."[16]

That Wong's spectral resurfacing could cause so much excitement for the father testifies to her lasting impact. Yet her utter invisibility and unintelligibility to the younger generation foregrounds the importance of giving Wong's "delightful flashes" a context—that is, a context for Wong's already contextual position in

the background. How might we contextualize Wong's circumferential position to bring out her parergon power? I address this question in three dimensions.

FROM THE SUBORDINATE LOOK-ALIKE TO THE PARERGON AGENT

From the early stages of her career, Wong was fully aware of the precarious work conditions that forced her into the margins and the background (if she found work at all). In a 1925 interview, she observed, "It is hard to get into the pictures, but it is harder to keep in them. Of course, it is nice enough if one gets a five-year contract as some of the actors do, but freelancing which I do is not easy. You see, there are not many Chinese parts."[17] Indeed, while Wong did have several multiyear contracts, some of them were cut short; and Wong pushed on as a freelancer for the majority of her forty-year career. Furthermore, her career was episodic, punctuated with multiple "disappearances" and "beginnings" that resulted from peripatetic travels for work opportunities and from involuntary "retirements."

Wong's departure from a conventional teleological success narrative forces us to address the question that Lauren Berlant powerfully poses: "What does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something? Would it be possible to talk about a biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)?"[18] Following Berlant, I privilege Wong's episodic career to "dedramatize . . . epic into moment, and structure into gestures."[19] With the gestural moments from the margins and the background, Wong carved out a multiperspectival, parergon position that reoriented the dominant colonialist gaze, simultaneously framing and unsettling the center stage, thereby generating what Berlant calls "incommensurable knowledges and attachments."[20] In this section, I study *Mr. Wu* and *Shanghai Express* to demonstrate how her character supported but also upstaged the white female protagonist and, ultimately, challenged the narrative premise of white heteronormativity.

In the MGM production *Mr. Wu*, Wong "achieve[d] a sympathetic role" as the maid.[21] The protagonists are the Western-educated yet despotic Chinese Mandarin Mr. Wu and his daughter Nang Ping—yellowfaced, respectively, by Lon Chaney ("the man of a thousand faces") and French émigré actress Renée Adorée. Set in a mystical Chinese mansion with a lush Chinese garden, the narrative centers on Sino-British mutual xenophobia—specifically, Mr. Wu's honor killing of Nang Ping for her interracial affair with a British man, juxtaposed with the British mother's blatant white supremacy. Predictably, the film ends with the demise of Mr. Wu's family and the triumphant survival of the British family, who get to preserve the myth of white racial purity.

Interestingly, despite its nefarious portrayal of Mr. Wu and the now much-reviled yellowface practice, this film was enthusiastically introduced to China by a

Chinese film director, Ren Keyu.[22] Ren had not seen the film (as it was still being edited, according to his article) but included four images, one of which showed Wong in a Chinese gown, posing with an American writer identified as "Bili" in Chinese and with Moon Kwan (Kwan Man Ching). Kwan was a Chinese film poet, writer, and film director who befriended Wong, honed his craft in Hollywood, and served as a consultant for D. W. Griffith's *The Broken Blossom* (1919). Ren celebrated Lon Chaney's transformative makeup as Mr. Wu, and the big production value of the manufactured Chinese setting. He also highlighted Wong along with Renée Adorée as the *two* leading actresses, despite Wong's supporting position in the film. Ren's passion reveals a fascination with Hollywood's illusion-making techniques, ranging from set construction to yellowface makeup—a misplaced fascination in view of the power inequity underlying such techniques.[23]

Still, Ren's identification of Wong as a leading actress in the film inadvertently acknowledged the key role she played in shaping the film's Orientalist fabrication, *and* in problematizing white supremacism, both on and off the screen. Kwan recalled that it was Wong who recommended him to the film's director and producer, thus getting him hired as a technical consultant.[24] In this capacity, he recommended costumes, furnishings, and props for each scene, based on the film script. Most importantly, he lent the film's set designer, Cedric Gibbons, a copy of his *Yanqin yiqing* 燕寢怡情 (Sensuous Living in the Boudoir)—an elaborately crafted book of twenty-four plates of paintings that depicted in detail the style of premodern China's aristocratic domestic spaces, including architecture, garden design, furnishings, and clothing (figure 3.1).[25] To the extent that the paintings in this book significantly inspired the film's set design, the "authentic" China constructed in the film became possible only through diasporic Chinese collaboration with Hollywood.

Aside from recommending Kwan to the film's producer, Wong's significance in this film mainly consisted in her on-screen performance as the maid Loo Song, a subtle echo of her Chinese given name Liu Tsong, which rehashed her conflation with her fictional role. This submissive maid role, however, was completely re-inflected through Wong's conspicuous overacting. The film script gave little description of the maid, except that Wong was to simply imitate each movement of Adorée's mistress character.[26] This narrative hierarchy was undermined both by the publicity (playfully) and by Wong's hyper-performativity (earnestly).

A *Photoplay* publicity image leveraged Wong's "authentic" Chineseness to show Wong teaching Adorée how to eat with chopsticks off screen.[27] In this image, Wong and Adorée sit next to each other, looking alike in embroidered jackets and hairstyles, both holding a cup-like Chinese-style bowl, Wong eating with chopsticks while leering at Adorée on the left, Adorée holding the chopsticks to her mouth with a confused look toward Wong. This image playfully reversed Wong's and Adorée's diegetic relationship, seemingly giving Wong the due authority for *being* the authentic "Chinese." Yet the behind-the-scenes revelation was yet another

FIGURE 3.1. Plate 2 from *Yanqin yiqing* 燕寢怡情 (Sensuous Living in the Boudoir), which Moon Kwan loaned to Cedric Gibbons, set designer for *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

staging of the Orientalist fantasy. It cast Wong *performing* her Chineseness, but passed it off as her natural self, thereby obscuring Wong's labor of playing Chinese and coaching Adorée—the labor that generated box office revenue for the studio.

Another publicity image in the film's pressbook took the opposite strategy by playing on Wong's modern flapper persona, contrasted with Adorée's "Oriental" mistress character (figure 3.2). Entitled "The Chinese Flapper in American Clothes and the American Maid as a Chinese Flapper," the image juxtaposed Wong wearing a "sports outfit" with Adorée in a richly embroidered Chinese costume from the film.[28] The "sports outfit" consisted of a dark-colored traditional Chinese men's jacket that Wong reputedly had tailored from her father's wedding gown, a gray

FIGURE 3.2. Publicity image from the *Mr. Wu* pressbook, juxtaposing Wong and Renée Adorée as "The Chinese Flapper in American Clothes and the American Maid as a Chinese Flapper."

circular skirt, the obligatory flapper-style bucket hat, and dark pumps. Hands in pockets, Wong displays her elegant figure, turning toward the camera with a confident, inviting smile, one of her feet tilted slightly as if captured in motion. Adorée, on the other hand, is depicted in full-figure profile, completely turned away from the camera, hands clasped in front, helpless and withdrawn. The contrast suggests that Wong the flapper needed to labor and practice her "Oriental" manners just as much as Adorée did, albeit in different ways.

Indeed, Wong's on-screen labor consisted not only in performing Chineseness (and authenticating the Orientalist film), but also, more importantly, in channeling *and* dismantling the white-centered interracial melodrama. A supporting actress playing the maid who was supposed to be the mistress's shadow, Wong/Loo Song received disproportionate close-up shots that she milked with maximal effect. In scenes where Adorée/Nang Ping's interracial affair is about to be discovered by the punishing Lon Chaney/Mr. Wu, it is Wong/Loo Song whose facial expressions cry

VIDEO 3.1. Wong, as the maid, emoting excessively in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.1

VIDEO 3.2. Wong, as the maid, channels racist hurt in an emotional scene in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.2

out urgency and agony, as if channeling what the mistress could not or does not feel (video 3.1). Wong's maid thus becomes the expressive screen that visibilizes the feelings that narratively belong to the mistress. Far from being the mistress's shadow, the maid threatens to replace the mistress with her emotional overacting.

The most poignant scene highlighting Wong/Loo Song's affective labor is set at a garden party, where Mr. Wu asks his daughter Nang Ping to host the British Gregory family, as he watches secretly to confirm her affair with the British man, Basil (video 3.2). In this scene, unaware of Basil's romance with Nang Ping, the British mother fantasizes about her future grandson with "blue eyes and white skin" and golden hair "like sunshine." As she espouses white supremacist eugenics, the camera frames Wong/Loo Song next to the mother, making her the direct recipient of unbridled racism. Then a cut to Nang Ping's face shows her reaction of despair. As the mother carries on her monologue, a three-shot shows Nang Ping sitting on the left, Loo Song in the middle, standing next to and turning toward the mother, while holding Nang Ping's arm. Finally, the mother sits down next to Nang Ping, as Loo Song retreats into the background with wistful resignation. Loo Song's central position in the visual composition makes her a linchpin who

mediates, buffers, and manifests the feeling of dejection at being excluded from the white-centered heterosexual economy.

Richard Dyer identifies similar displacement of emotions from the white female protagonist to her black maid in *Jezebel* (dir. William Wyler, 1938). In the scene where Julie (Bette Davis) waits for her beau to return, she "no longer expresses feeling—she 'lives' through Zette [the maid played by one of the most prolific Black actresses in Hollywood, Theresa Harris]. Zette has to express excited anticipation, not in speech, but in physical action, running the length of a long stair and spacious hallway . . . —*it is black people who bodily express her [Julie's] desire*."[29] Dyer argues that such displacement oversexualizes the black female body to bear the excessive emotions considered inappropriate for the white mistress.

Wong/Loo Song similarly channels emotions around the forbidden interracial affair for Adorée/Nang Ping so that the latter's whiteness can be kept intact, and her yellowface is no more than a temporary masquerade. More importantly, Wong's silent but intensely expressive performance allows her to appropriate the mistress position; and her agonized expressions register her real-life dejection caused by the Chinese Exclusion Act and the broader discriminatory society. Since it was Wong, not Adorée, who actually suffered from racism doubled with sexism, one might argue that Wong implicitly occupied the mistress's position to give expression to her own struggles. Thus, the marginal role allowed Wong to symptomatically act out the hurt of gender-race exclusionism that was the unspeakable flip side of the diegetic Orientalist fantasy. While the visual composition and camera framing were not Wong's design, it was her intense emotional performance (far beyond what was required of the maid role) that effectively enabled her to ventriloquize the mistress with her own struggles and precarity. Her excessive agony literally animated the central position, emotionally recoloring the stereotypical female protagonist, and injecting the US race-gender discrimination back into a white-centered fantasy.

Five years later, Wong portrayed a Chinese high-class courtesan, Hui Fei, supporting Marlene Dietrich in the latter's star vehicle *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932). While some American reviewers saw Wong stealing the show, Chinese critics panned Wong for portraying a demeaning character in a "China humiliating film" (*ruHua pian* 辱華片), which resulted in the film being banned in China. This ban followed a string of Chinese protests against so-called *ruHua pian* (including Douglas Faribanks's *The Thief of Bagdad* and Harold Lloyd's *Welcome Danger*) since the 1920s.[30] My analysis of this film shows that Wong's performance, this time through sardonic underacting rather than overacting, does the more important work of counterbalancing Dietrich's glamour by staking out a space of opacity, thereby resisting both the film's race-gender hierarchies and the Chinese government's patriarchal ethno-nationalism. Before diving into Wong's show-shifting performance, I will outline and refute contemporaneous discourses that either trivialized her role or stigmatized her as a performer.

A Hawaii-based Japanese American reporter, for instance, lamented that Wong "has no chance to display her ability [in *Shanghai Express*]. Her role is too small. . . . We'd like to see Anna May Wong in another effective role like that in 'Daughter of the Dragon.'"[31] For her Chinese detractors, Wong's small role in *Shanghai Express* and many other films indicated her incompetence and her complicity with Hollywood. An article dated December 1931 referenced Hollywood's China-humiliating record and preemptively lampooned *Shanghai Express* for defaming China and Chinese characters.[32] The author specifically charged Wong with playing the "filler" (*chongren peijiao* 充任配角), described as "a debauched Chinese prostitute" (*yi xiajian bukan zhi jinv* 一下賤不堪之妓女), in *Shanghai Express*.[33] Offered as further evidence of Wong's complicity with Hollywood was her portrayal of an "un-Chinese" half-nude maid in *The Thief of Bagdad* and her "senseless" antiquated costume in a film identified as "Liang qinjia you Feizhou" 兩親家遊非洲 (Two In-Laws Touring Africa), which does not match with any of Wong's films. The author concluded by urging the Chinese consul in the US to raise a protest against Paramount.

Importantly, an English translation of this article was brought to the attention of Paramount executive Jesse Lasky Jr. and alarmed him enough that he wrote to Colonel Jason S. Joy, director of the Studio Relations Committee, on January 14, 1932, asking Joy to "come over and look at the picture with us, and discuss contacting the Chinese Minister on this matter."[34] The eventual ban on the film had far-reaching effects on the long-standing contentions among the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, the US State Department, the film studios, the Chinese Film Censorship Committee, and the Chinese government. Several years later, a long-term China-sojourning American government representative reflected upon Chinese protests against *Shanghai Express* and *The General Died at Dawn* (dir. Lewis Milestone, 1936), citing China's "supersensitive nationalism" resulting from Hollywood's repeated offenses that resulted in Chinese protests.[35]

In the protests against *Shanghai Express* as well as the earlier *The Thief of Bagdad*, Wong came into the patriarchal ethno-nationalist crosshairs. One Chinese commentator, however, defended Wong, stating that "a film is fiction" and should not be taken literally, and that "the Germans do not blame Dietrich for playing a prostitute." Still, the basis of the defense was the assumption that Wong was part of the Chinese "Self," and hence for the Chinese to blame Wong would be no different from self-annihilation (*zixiang canshi* 自相蠶食).[36] When questioned about her participation in this *ruHua pian* during her China trip in 1936, Wong explained that her power was too limited to change the entire film, and that if she had rejected the role, the studio would have hired a Korean or Japanese actor to play it, which would have been even worse, as she would have lost the opportunity even to make some changes.[37]

Wong did not specify what changes, if any, she managed to insert into *Shanghai Express*. Comparing screenwriter Jules Furthman's second "white script," dated October 9, 1931, and the "censorship dialogue script" dated January 25, 1932,

I suggest that she may have been responsible for making two important changes after filming started on October 12, 1931.[38] One change had to do with removing the subplot of her character Hui Fei's coupling with a Chinese man, which appeared in the October 9 script as a minor parallel to foreground Dietrich's Shanghai Lily's more glamorous romantic reunion with Dr. Harvey (played by Clive Brook). The other change concerned the use of two southern Chinese dialects—Taishanese (spoken by her) and Cantonese (spoken by the actors playing Chinese soldiers)—a choice that, while not in keeping with the film's setting on a train from Peking (present-day Beijing) to Shanghai (where totally different dialects were used), had contemporary cultural and political significance (as discussed below). These two changes problematized the heteronormative narrative and patriarchal ethno-nationalism, suggesting that Wong accomplished much more than enacting a "filler" role.

Diegetically, Wong's parergon power could be detected in the mirroring relationship between her character Hui Fei and Dietrich's character Shanghai Lily, and in the fact that *Shanghai Express* is one of the few of her films in which her character does not end up dead. Film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu describes Hui Fei's open end as an "unfinished product" that "opens up possibilities for how she is understood," since she cannot "be understood in the existing terms" of sex and race.[39] One of Wong/Hui Fei's open possibilities was/is her queerness, intimated by her cohabitation with Dietrich/Shanghai Lily in the same train compartment. Wedged between their first meeting (along with Leni Riefenstahl) at a 1928 ball in Berlin and their being symbolically torn apart by Hitler in 1937 (see chapter 2), Wong and Dietrich's pairing in *Shanghai Express* has stimulated speculations about the two actresses' interracial queer relationship.

Drawing upon what Sara Ahmed calls the social and sexual registers of queering, I understand Wong and Dietrich's potential queer relationship as being conjoined with the social register; that is, Wong/Hui Fei's rejection of heteronormative temporality and patriarchal ethno-nationalism. This rejection is coded in her intense, self-absorbed underacting and her injection of vocal-chirographic Taishanese into the film.

Wong's Hui Fei and Dietrich's Shanghai Lily are ushered in at the outset of the film as two sides of one coin of shaded and shady femininity. Framed through the external voyeuristic gaze, Hui Fei arrives in a porter-carried curtained palanquin that makes her completely invisible; and Shanghai Lily arrives in a car, her face partially peeking through the translucent veil. Their (half-)concealed visages are soon translated into abject shadiness as sex workers. The shared stigma lands them in the same car on the train, *and* in a first-class car that flaunts their transgression of the orthodox social mores. Wong's Hui Fei performs an additional transgression, that is, transgression against racial hierarchy, by inserting herself into the all-white first-class section of the train. The two women's subtle mutual recognition was scripted in these terms: as Shanghai Lily is "led into the compartment, glancing Hui Fei comprehends her profession. Hui Fei goes on with her game

(solitaire)."[40] Their instant mutual recognition resembles the recognition between Wong's undercover dancer and Philip Ahn's undercover FBI agent in *Daughter of Shanghai* (see chapter 1). If that recognition suggests Wong's collaboration with other racialized performers to recruit a resonating nonmainstream audience, then the recognition between Wong's Hui Fei and Dietrich's Shanghai Lily implies a connection across the color line that not only makes fun of mainstream sexist codes of "respectability" (upheld by a snobbish white female passenger), but also potentially challenges their own heteronormative profession.

Having set up this transgressive interracial same-sex bond at the beginning, the film then spends its remaining time eradicating it in order to reinforce the color line and to ensure the white heterosexual reproductive future by pushing the narrative toward the coupling of Shanghai Lily and Dr. Harvey, her ex-lover. Within the diegesis, the explicit threat to white purism comes from Chang, a mixed-race rebel leader (yellowfaced by Warner Oland) who hijacks the train to force the Chinese government to release his officer. To this end, Chang holds hostage Dr. Harvey, who is tasked to operate on a VIP. By threatening to blind Harvey so as to "deprive [him] of the ability to distinguish between white and yellow," Chang coerces Shanghai Lily to offer him sexual service in exchange for Harvey's freedom.[41] In other words, to preserve Harvey's sight (or racist outlook), Shanghai Lily has to yield to the mixed-race Chang's trespassing desire for a white woman, which contaminates white purism. But Chang's collapsing of the white-yellow racial hierarchy is forestalled by none other than Hui Fei. A rape victim of Chang, Hui Fei stabs him, thereby canceling "his debt" to her; but this action's unspoken rationale, which serves the film's ideological work, is that of saving the white couple for their heterosexual reproductive future. Hui Fei's narrative function is, therefore, white-serving, as a yellow woman who saves a white couple from a mixed-race man.

This diegetic hierarchy was registered in the inequitable extradiegetic star system. Despite their comparable screen time, records of the film's estimated production costs indicated that Wong's pay was $1,800 per week for four and a half weeks, a meager total of $8,100, or just over one-tenth of Dietrich's pay, and also significantly less than that of Oland and Brook. The cost of Wong's wardrobe totaled $300, a fraction of Dietrich's $1,625 glamour.[42] Translated into their visual appearances, Hui Fei wears a long, plain gray gown with a Chinese-inspired cut and a Mandarin collar in most parts of the film, largely credited to Paramount's leading costume designer, Travis Banton; her unadorned hair is pulled back into a bun, the trademark China-doll bangs slicked into a single tuft on her forehead. Shanghai Lily, on the other hand, dazzles and tantalizes with a luxurious fur wrap, flamboyant feather accessories, and a peekaboo facial veil.

We see how this overdetermined hierarchy could be renegotiated, however, when we refocus on the ways Wong leveraged her service role and her parergon position to shift the show. In so doing, she deflected the white heteronormative temporality and rescripted the film with her own authorship. As described

previously, Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily are both introduced as stigmatized sex workers who are twinned and sequestered in the same car. They differ significantly in how they orient themselves vis-à-vis their surroundings, however. Shanghai Lily is associated with the gramophone player, its immersive music both deflecting irrelevant external scrutiny and inviting desirable attention, similar to her diaphanous facial veil and feather accessories that conceal to reveal, deflect to intrigue. In the film, Shanghai Lily readily shuttles between different spaces and temporalities. We learn about her past romance with Dr. Harvey and her transformation into a "notorious coaster"; and we are cued to desire her re-coupling with Harvey in the future—a unilinear temporal orientation that is crystallized in the wristwatch she buys for Harvey at the end of the film. Shanghai Lily's self-absorption is ultimately galvanized toward legible white-centered heterosexual economy—the modus operandi of the narrative.

Hui Fei, on the other hand, safeguards her opacity and eventually recedes from the margins into oblivion at the end of the film. Her immersion in solitaire, a one-person game, indicates self-sufficiency that fends off any external attention, echoing her initial appearance as an invisible figure behind the palanquin curtain. Her simply cut costumes bespeak a taciturn demeanor. She speaks with curt intensity, and only when spoken to, when aggressed against, or when called upon to translate the Chinese orders (more on this later). At the end of the film, surrounded by Western journalists drawn to her sensational killing of the rebel leader Chang, she summarily dismisses them in her impenetrable Taishanese—"Stop bugging me"—then walks off screen all by herself.[43] Her evasion of news-mongering clinches recalcitrant self-absorption. Most importantly, her solitary exit is the polar opposite of what was scripted in Furthman's October 9 script, in which she was paired off with her "prospective husband, a young Chinese merchant who wears European clothes." In rejecting the same-race heteronormative coupling, she not only refuses to play the minor replication of Dietrich's white glamorous reunion with Harvey, but also departs from the anti-miscegenationist heteronormative reproductive order altogether.

Hui Fei's opacity was performed by Wong in ways that exceeded this supporting character's utilitarian function. The scene where Hui Fei stabs Chang, for instance, demonstrates explosive intensity that renders its narrative function of ensuring white coupling irrelevant. In this heavily shadowed revenge scene (video 3.3), we watch the stabbing taking place behind a diaphanous drape. With the facial expressions obscured, we are more tuned in to the visceral impact of Wong/Hui Fei's forceful repeated stabbing, accompanied by her grunting and the sound effect of the dagger plunging into flesh, followed by Chang's collapse with a loud thud.

Remarkably, contrary to Shanghai Lily and Harvey's kissing scenes that were either shortened (in Ontario) or eliminated (in Japan) by censors,[44] Hui Fei's excessive stabbing on camera, although unnecessary for the narrative purpose,

VIDEO 3.3. Wong, as Hui Fei, engages in a graphic act of stabbing in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.3

was kept intact. It gives a glimpse into not only Hui Fei's rage, but also Wong's physical and emotional labor in executing this act of killing, not for the perfect look (as her own "perfect" death act analyzed in chapter 1), but for the sheer, shocking pleasure of getting away with it. Indeed, Wong/Hui Fei's apparent relishing in the repeated stabbing accentuates her pleasurable ownership of the dragon lady stereotype, even just for the moment. We may go further to argue that Wong exploited, then shifted, the narrative agenda (of eradicating Chang's racial transgression) to unleash energy that was ateleological and independent of the diegetic premise. This energy bespeaks Wong's performative agency, even from the peripheries of the screen.

We may further unpack Wong's parergon power in what the censorship dialogue script describes as her "Chinese" lines, which she delivered in Taishanese. Throughout the film, Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily both occasionally speak a foreign language (Taishanese and French, respectively), especially when they serve as impromptu interpreters when the train is held up. These occasions lead Hui Fei to translate the rebel soldiers' Cantonese (close to but different from her Taishanese) to English, and Shanghai Lily to translate between French and English for the French major. The two women's bilingual ability suggestively echoes their sexual promiscuity. Their dual defiance of linguistic and sexual purity evokes *traduttore* and *traditore*, Italian words whose similar pronunciations indicate the easy sliding from the translator (*traduttore*) to the traitor (*traditore*).[45]

Despite this similarity, they deploy the foreign language with different implications. Shanghai Lily's translation straightforwardly facilitates communication between Chang the rebel leader and the French major. Hui Fei's Taishanese, however, does not just facilitate communication, but also signals the performativity of the Taishanese and Cantonese situation. A comparison of the October 9, 1931, white script with the January 25, 1932, censorship dialogue script shows the addition of Cantonese/Taishanese lines, possibly added by Wong, who joined the filming on October 12, 1931. In the October 9 script, Hui Fei is to translate Chang's supposedly Chinese orders into English, but she speaks Chinese only on one

occasion (upon receiving a telegram from her potential husband—a detail removed in the film). In the censorship dialogue script, Hui Fei translates only once, and not for Chang. And her Taishanese lines are added in two scenes: at the end of the film when she dismisses the reporters, and in the scene where Chang forces himself into her car to sexually harass her.

In the latter scene, added after the October 9 script, Chang makes advances, speaking in what is supposed to be Chinese, and Hui Fei tenses and asks in English, "What do you want?" Chang then switches to English, "It's a long journey and a lonely one," and tries to embrace her. Hui Fei fights loose, orders him in Taishanese to "get lost quickly," and pushes him out.[46] Since there is no evidence that a Chinese technical consultant was hired, and Paramount decided not to show the script to the Chinese Embassy,[47] it is reasonable to speculate that Wong, the only credited performer who knew Chinese, was responsible for creating the Chinese lines and decided to deliver them in her ancestral Taishanese, a variant of Cantonese—the dialect most commonly used among Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth to early twentieth century. These Taishanese and Cantonese lines not only reinforced Hui Fei's rejection of heterosexual harassment, but also implied Wong's twofold debunking of Hollywood's Orientalism and China's linguistic nationalism.

First, the Taishanese and Cantonese lines exposed Hollywood's yellowvoice practice "that constructed and evoked orientality in ways perceptible by the ear rather than the eye."[48] As the vocal side of the yellowface package, yellowvoice characterized Oland's impersonation of Chang. Unlike Emile Chautard, a French actor who played the French major for whom Shanghai Lily provides translation, Oland was Swedish and could only phonetically and ineffectively imitate some Chinese sounds that may have been taught by Wong herself (given the absence of a Chinese language coach). Thus, what the mainstream English-speaking audience assumed to be an exotic altercation between Hui Fei and Chang was actually more like Wong's monologue, for Oland's make-believe yellowvoice was not a language and needed no translation or response. Devoid of communicative function, Wong's Taishanese became emphatically performative. It outed Hollywood's vocal-visual racial masquerade that erased real differences by reducing them to exotic—even nonsensical—sounds, looks, and mannerisms.

Furthermore, Wong's injection of Taishanese-Cantonese into the narrative debunked the Chinese government's linguistic nationalism. In 1932, roughly coinciding with *Shanghai Express*, China's Ministry of Education designated Mandarin Chinese the nation's official language, known as *Guoyu* 國語, literally "the national language." The goal was to promote linguistic purism so as to reinforce homogenizing nationalism at the expense of regional linguistic diversity. Such linguistic nationalism coincided with the Chinese film industry's transition from the silent era to the sound era. While some of the early Cantonese talkies achieved great popularity both in China and among diasporic Chinese communities (such as *Baijin long* 白金龍 (The Platinum Dragon), dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1933), China's

Motion Picture Censorship Committee quickly prohibited Cantonese talkies, describing them as vulgar and inferior in quality. Resistance from Cantonese filmmakers and critics ensued, lasting into the 1940s.[49]

Wong herself highlighted her plan to study Mandarin Chinese during her 1936 China trip. In 1931–32, when *Shanghai Express* was made, she may not have been fully aware of China's surging linguistic nationalism, but likely was cognizant of the perceived inferior status of Cantonese and Taishanese, *and* of their incongruity with the film's setting on a train from Peking to Shanghai, where either Mandarin Chinese or Shanghainese would be used. Thus, Wong and the uncredited Cantonese-speaking cast not only mobilized their foreign-language abilities, but also underscored the sociopolitical and cultural significance of these southern dialects among Chinese diasporic communities. Such significance powerfully refuted the Chinese government's purist linguistic nationalism.

Wong's function in the film, therefore, was not auxiliary but parergon—that is, the frame that structured the center while also destabilizing the very ideological premise that made the center the center. Wong staked her parergon position literally in the framing device of the film, the opening credit sequence. Stereotypically Orientalist on the surface, the credits are nevertheless reinscribed by Wong. When the white letters appear on the screen, listing scriptwriter Jules Furthman, cinematographer Lee Garmes, and gown designer Travis Banton, we see in the background another layer of inscription—a heavily shadowed sheet of paper on which some Chinese characters are inscribed in black ink, and a woman's hand holding a brush, tracing out more Chinese characters (figure 3.3). This writing hand bears Wong's trademark long nails, confirming her absent presence in this framing sequence.

This act of Chinese inscription evokes the close-up shot of Wong's Chinese autographing in *Piccadilly* (see chapter 1). The key difference is that, in this credit sequence, Wong literally produces the shadowed *background* that sets into relief the bright white English credits in the foreground, mirroring her supporting role for Dietrich. Yet, just as her taciturn but intensely edgy performance shifts the show, her writing in the credit sequence calls attention to itself, for her ideograms do not add up, but rather look like a random assembly of signs that both invite and repel further scrutiny. A closer analysis reveals that Wong's ideograms do not simply indicate chirographic Orientalism, but rather signify her Chinese transcription of the English names based on Taishanese pronunciation. Thus, her Chinese writing is illegible to those who speak only English or Mandarin Chinese; but it addresses those who understand her Taishanese writing/speech, generating a feeling of non-nationalist recognition and connectedness.

By hybridizing the Mandarin Chinese ideogrammatic writing with Taishanese pronunciation into a third method of sign making, Wong creatively renames the scriptwriter, the cinematographer, and the gown designer, thus

FIGURE 3.3. Wong's hand inscribing with a Chinese brush the transliterated Chinese names of the screenwriter, the cinematographer, and the costume designer in the credits sequence of *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932).

symbolically re-authoring the film. Her writing hand in the background and on the left edge of the frame virtually frames the film, emblematizing her parergon position between visibility and invisibility. This amphibious site of authorship structures and queers the center-stage white drama. It also stakes a centrifugal diasporic position that evokes chirograhic-vocal Chineseness only to rupture its homogeneity. Dwelling in the margins and intersections, and refusing to align with any hardbound identity markers, Wong leveraged the parergon position to support, only then to ditch, white heteronormativity and Chinese patriarchal linguistic nationalism simultaneously.

If Wong's supporting roles before World War II often mirrored the female protagonist only then to outshine the latter, as in *Mr. Wu* and *Shanghai Express*, this would cease to be the case in her postwar films. Due to her aging and the industry's endless quest for fresh faces, Wong's postwar film roles were invariably middle-aged maids in wealthy white families. Her scenes tend to be brief and glamour-free; still, she managed to score a memorable presence, evoking the "delightful flashes" characterizing her early supporting roles. In the next section, I turn to Wong's two postwar films, *Impact* and *Portrait in Black*, in which her maid roles resemble the television servants that L. S. Kim studies, in that they all operate in the visual peripheries to maintain the white middle-class norm.[50] I push it further to theorize Wong and her telltale background in two dimensions. The first has to do with Wong's channeling of her real-life diasporic experience to historicize and re-inflect the maid role. The second hinges on her maid character collaborating with a nonhuman actor, the background décor, and the overall set design

to produce an atmosphere that displaces the white female protagonist from her own home.

THE TELLTALE BACKGROUND: THE "ORIENTAL" MAID, THE IMMIGRATION PHOTO, AND THE OBJECT-SUBJECTHOOD OF THE ATMOSPHERE

Impact (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1949), a postwar film noir, revolves around an adultery-murder intrigue engineered by a wife with her lover against her doting husband. The film eventually delivers poetic justice—the wife duly exposed and the husband who has escaped narrow death ready to marry a female garage worker who has nursed him back to health. This resolution becomes possible only after the family's maid (played by Wong) decides to help retrieve the crucial evidence against the wife.

As the maid driving the narrative, Wong (after more than four years' "retirement") received much publicity in the film's pressbook, which sought to revive and cash in on her "Oriental" appeal (again).[51] The "attractive Chinese star" was described as leading the supporting cast, playing a loyal maid, "an important featured role" "whose testimony at a murder trial adds to the film's stirring climax."[52] Wong's performance was positively reviewed in *The Hollywood Reporter*, but only to the extent that it added authenticity.[53] Interestingly, her prolonged retirement was attributed to the wicked "Oriental meanies" that she rejected, choosing instead to do lectures on Chinese customs and Oriental beauty habits for women's clubs.[54] Yet the fundamental reason for Wong's forced retirement was Hollywood's discriminatory racism and sexist agism, as Wong made clear in an interview, saying that she was happy doing a film again, "instead of being just a technical advisor as I was during the war years."[55] She specifically praised the director: "For once the director Arthur Lubin thought a Chinese could play a Chinese part," instead of casting a Caucasian actor in yellowface.[56]

If Wong found vindication in this grand comeback, her maid character does not seem to merit too much excitement as yet another service role for the white heteronormative narrative. My interest, however, lies in the pivotal scene where she suddenly leaves the white couple's house and her immigration photo turns up in the San Francisco Immigration Office and is presented in a close-up shot for the scrutiny of her diegetic searchers who stand in for the film's audience (figure 3.4). Her diegetic searchers are the female garage worker and the detective who believe that the maid can find the key evidence to clear the husband's name. Their locating of her immigration photo takes the drama from white San Francisco to labyrinthine Chinatown, where the searchers track her down after a suspenseful chase sequence.[57]

Considering that the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 when the US and China became allies during World War II, allowing a quota of 105 Chinese to

FIGURE 3.4. The maid's (played by Wong) immigration photo, discovered in the San Francisco Immigration Office in *Impact* (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1949).

immigrate to the US each year, *Impact*, released in 1949, was one of the earliest films to dramatize the historical shift of Chinese legal immigration regardless of class background. Diegetically, the maid's gratitude for the husband's good deed for her and her Chinese family seems to hint at his sponsorship for her escape from China, which was embroiled in civil war as the filming was underway. When the film was released in April 1949, the Communist Party was rapidly overpowering the ruling Nationalist Party, and China was to become a socialist country six months later, in October, catalyzing the Cold War era and America's McCarthyism. The maid's immigration to the US with the white man's help at this historical juncture thus signals the upcoming Cold War tension. Unsurprisingly, the film portrays the maid as thankful, hardworking, cooperative, and compliant with the recently implemented immigration laws. Prefiguring the post-1960s East Asian "model minority" stereotype, the maid repays the white man by eventually deciding to work with the court to clear his name, thereby upholding the white family's heterosexual mores and eventually dispelling the noir atmosphere of the film.

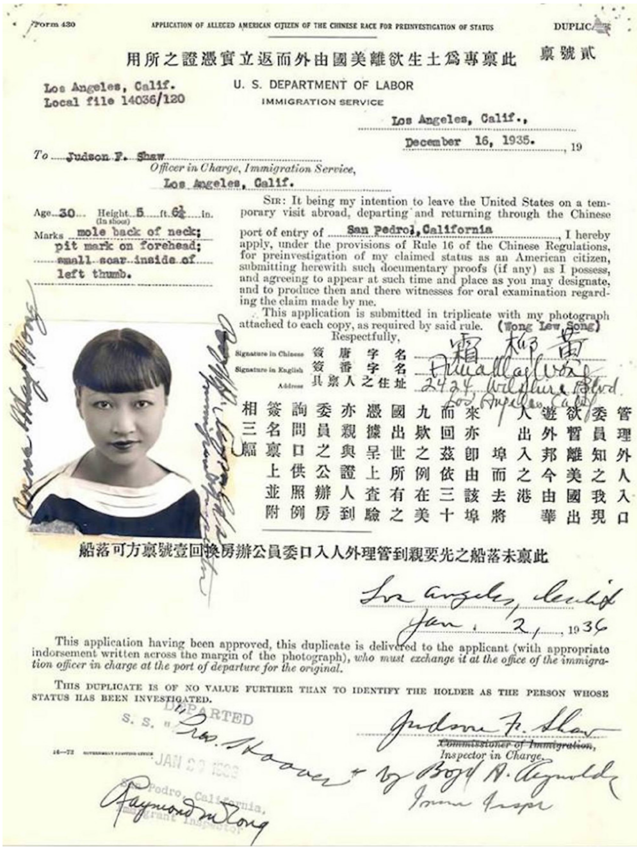
All these elements portend a happy picture of new Chinese immigrants being successfully integrated, at the cusp of the Cold War era, to serve and uphold the US white bourgeois and patriarchal system. Yet this future of assimilation through hierarchization is unsettled by Wong the performer-worker, who stamped the domestic worker character with her own photo and signature. The diegetic immigration photo, excavated in the San Francisco Immigration Office, is emphasized visually through a close-up shot *and* sonically with a sudden burst of "Oriental" music that insinuates the alien atmosphere into the alien-controlling bureaucratic office. In the photo, Wong as the maid is framed in a frontal medium close-up, her hair worn in two low side buns, her neck encased by a dark-colored, austere mandarin collar, suggesting the character's working-class background. In addition to the photo and signature, the immigration card carries data—visa issue date, place of issue, and visa number—that serve to surveil Chinese immigrants as data-fied individuals.

The glamour-free photo forms a stark contrast with Wong's interwar glamour shots; more importantly, it ineluctably (even if inadvertently) resurfaces the history of Chinese women's immigration to the US and subsequent struggles in the adopted country. As an American-born Chinese, Wong was technically not an immigrant herself. Still, her life and career were significantly impacted by the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was particularly strict on the immigration of laborers and women. In 1924 the US Border Patrol was created, as an agency within the Department of Labor, to specifically regulate Chinese immigration to the United States across the US-Mexico border. Under these draconian strictures, ethnic Chinese born in the US had to file and obtain approval for Form 430—Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status—prior to their foreign travels, so that they would be allowed to return to the US (figure 3.5). Wong's paperwork for over two decades, starting from 1924, testifies to the long-term repeated labor imposed on all ethnic Chinese to prove their legitimacy to an exclusionary racist system.[58] In chapter 1, I discuss Wong's Chinese autographs—a form of chirograhic Orientalism she reiterated on many occasions, from 430 forms to gifted photos and signatures in films. Similarly, her photos in these legal forms constitute the historical backstory of the domestic worker character's immigration photo in the film, amplifying this ostensibly trivial detail with a haunting past. These documents bear witness to Wong's precarious situation as a racialized freelancer compelled to constantly travel for work opportunities.[59]

To have an immigration-style photo taken for the film, even just for the fictional scenario, could be yet another reminder of her struggles. In other words, Wong's own experience with the exclusionary American society, which long preceded the fictional maid's ability to benefit from the new, post-1943 immigration law, adds a historical backstory to her character, revealing the latter not as a model minority facilitator of the white patriarchal order, but rather as a working-class Chinese woman whose arrival in the postwar US resurfaces the specter of racism and sexism in the long history of US immigration.

Not only did Wong the performer-worker inject the Chinese immigration travails into her newly immigrated domestic-worker character, but her insistent singlehood also calls out her character's queering misfit with the heteronormative narrative. In each Form 430 file, Wong answered "No" to the formulaic question "Have you ever been married?" As I argue in chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter with regard to *Shanghai Express*, Wong's solitary status signals a position that challenges, queers, and exits from white-male-centered heteronormative temporality. In *Impact*, Wong's solitary position similarly adds an ironic spin to her character's service to white patriarchal heteronormativity. Despite her scripted function, the domestic worker's singlehood, redoubled by Wong's lifelong single position, introduces a departure from the norm.

Wong further shapes her character with her own fashion sensibility. She wears floor-length, form-fitting dresses cut in a hybrid style of Chinese qipao and



Form 430 APPLICATION OF ALLEGED AMERICAN CITIZEN OF THE CHINESE RACE FOR PREINVESTIGATION OF STATUS DUPLIC

此稟專爲土生欲離美國由外而返立實憑證之所用 貳號稟

Los Angeles, Calif.
Local file 14036/120

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
IMMIGRATION SERVICE

Los Angeles, Calif.,
December 16, 1935., 19

To Judson F. Shaw
Officer in Charge, Immigration Service,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Age 30 Height 5 ft. 6½ in. (In shoes)
Marks mole back of neck; pit mark on forehead; small scar inside of left thumb.

SIR: It being my intention to leave the United States on a temporary visit abroad, departing and returning through the Chinese port of entry of San Pedro, California, I hereby apply, under the provisions of Rule 16 of the Chinese Regulations, for preinvestigation of my claimed status as an American citizen, submitting herewith such documentary proofs (if any) as I possess, and agreeing to appear at such time and place as you may designate, and to produce then and there witnesses for oral examination regarding the claim made by me.

This application is submitted in triplicate with my photograph attached to each copy, as required by said rule. (Wong Lew Song)

Respectfully,

Signature in Chinese 簽唐字名 黃柳霜
Signature in English 簽番字名
Address 具稟人之住址 2424 Wilshire Blvd Los Angeles Calif

管理外人入口委員知之我現欲暫離美國出遊外邦今由華人出入之港埠而去將來亦卽由該埠而回玆依三十九款之例在美國出世所有之憑據呈上查驗亦親與證人到委員之公辦房詢問口供照例簽名稟上並附相三幅

此稟未落船之先要親到管理外人入口委員公辦房換回壹號稟方可落船

Los Angeles, Calif
Jan. 2, 1936

This application having been approved, this duplicate is delivered to the applicant (with appropriate indorsement written across the margin of the photograph), *who must exchange it at the office of the immigration officer in charge at the port of departure for the original.*

THIS DUPLICATE IS OF NO VALUE FURTHER THAN TO IDENTIFY THE HOLDER AS THE PERSON WHOSE STATUS HAS BEEN INVESTIGATED.

DEPARTED S. S. "Pres. Hoover"

JAN 29 1936

San Pedro, California, Immigrant Inspector

Judson F. Shaw
~~Commissioner of Immigration,~~
Inspector in Charge.

FIGURE 3.5. Wong's photo and signature on Form 430, dated January 2, 1936, for her trip to China (the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files Folder 17-10457, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Riverside, CA).

Western gown, which underscores her slinky elegance, evoking her costuming in *Daughter of Shanghai* and *Dangerous to Know*, and departing from the conventional simple outfit befitting a domestic worker (as suggested in the immigration photo). After leaving the white family, she wears an elaborate Chinese-style jacket in her uncle's house, and later, in the courtroom, a form-fitting Western suit dress matched with a broad-brimmed hat, high-heel pumps, and trendy cat-eye shades. Interestingly, she wore the same type of cat-eye shades when arriving at New York's LaGuardia Airport in 1951, presumably to star in her own TV series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*.[60] By overlaying her own fashion sensibility on her character, Wong distances her portrayal from that of a real-life domestic worker.

From her parergon position, Wong stamps her character with her signature imprint, including her immigration travails, deviance from heteronormativity, and sartorial performance. As a result, the diegetically restored white bourgeois

domestic order, buttressed by the postwar assimilation of new immigrant laborers, stands exposed as no more than a fantasy predicated upon continuous race-gender hierarchization.

Now I turn to Wong's housekeeper role in yet another comeback film, *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960), to rack the focus further into the background and the margins. Here Wong enacts a housekeeper who occasionally flits across the background as part of the ornamental and mysterious atmosphere of the film. Just as the atmosphere is invisible yet permeating and indispensable, so are the "atmospheric" extras and supporting actors. If the setting of *Impact* was changed from New York and Los Angeles to San Francisco to avoid bad weather and heavy smog, Wong's background housekeeper in *Portrait in Black* shows that the diegetic "atmosphere" she conjures is as important as the literal environmental conditions.

A Lana Turner vehicle shot in Eastmancolor on location (again) in San Francisco, *Portrait in Black* resembles *Impact* in reiterating the adultery-murder intrigue, but without the happy ending of heteronormative recoupling. In *Portrait*, the San Francisco shipping mogul's wife (Turner) schemes with her lover, her family doctor (Anthony Quinn), to kill her invalid wealthy husband at the beginning of the film. Instead of consummating their affair, however, the adulterous couple are haunted by a string of blackmail letters—each congratulating her on the success of the first "murder" (of her husband), then of the "second venture" (killing her husband's assistant)—until things spiral out of control, ending in the frenzied doctor plummeting from her upstairs window to his death.

Portrait in Black turned out to be Wong's big-screen swan song; she died prematurely the following year. Publicity and reviews rehearsed Wong's perennial dilemma of being simultaneously hyped and dismissed for her "Oriental" mystique. To exploit Wong's comeback after another prolonged absence from the big screen, publicity erased her previous comeback in *Impact*, touting *Portrait* as her return for "one of the top roles" after seventeen years' "vacation" following *Lady from Chungking* (1942).[61] The caption for a December 15, 1959, publicity photo swooned over Wong's unchanged beauty, describing her role in *Portrait* as the "woman of mystery" "as usual."[62] Wong's niche appeal led to her two-week, seven-city film tour, along with Lana Turner and producer Ross Hunter, starting in New York and culminating in the film's Chicago world premiere.

Paradoxically, Wong's much-publicized "mystery" easily flipped into tongue-in-cheek reception. One reviewer dismissed her performance as "merely inscrutable as the suspicious housekeeper," and her "mysterious" demeanor suggested that she could "keep her own counsel as easily as a Buddha figurine."[63] Indeed, her character was compared to the "inscrutable East" by another minor character in the film, and her words to mere "fortune cookie" messages. Not only clichéd, Wong's role as the aged housekeeper was also very limited and easily missed. Like the maid in *Impact* who is a postwar immigrant laborer, the housekeeper in *Portrait* is also brought to the US from Hong Kong as a servant by the

shipping mogul. But she no longer serves a narrative function; and her presence is relegated to flitting across the background executing mundane duties, with only occasional expressive scenes.

Such flitting appearances evoke exactly what Mary Flanagan recalled in her family anecdote cited in the first section of this chapter, regarding her father's excited spotting of Wong scurrying across the background in an "oldie" aired on television in late-1970s Iran. The father's excitement of being surprised by his memory of another time (the past), another place (the US), and another medium (film), all channeled by the spectral Wong, starkly contrasts with Mary's utter befuddlement. As if anticipating the intergenerational gap, the film's publicity sought to win the young postwar filmgoers by evoking the nostalgia of their "mothers and fathers" for Wong, the "first and best of the Oriental beauties."[64]

Yet Wong's significance far exceeded the white audience's phantasmic attachment to a largely forgotten "Oriental" icon that was re-commercialized for the Cold War–era entertainment industry. At the production level, Wong's housekeeper in *Portrait* is especially meaningful in comparison with another Universal-International production, the much better-known *Imitation of Life* (dir. Douglas Sirk, 1959). Both films were produced by Hunter and starred Turner, supported by Sandra Dee as her daughter. They also shared the costume designer Jean Louis, borrowed from Columbia, the director of photography Russell Metty, and the composer Frank Skinner. Most important for my analysis is that both films feature a housekeeper/maid of color, but of different "colors"—the African American Juanita Moore in *Imitation* and Wong in *Portrait*. The mirroring of Moore and Wong is especially poignant, considering that Wong's role was a new addition in the film adaptation of the original stage play. Producer Hunter decided to change the character of a butler to an "Oriental housekeeper" because "I hate mysteries in which somebody has a chance to say 'The Butler did it!'"[65] Wong's "Oriental housekeeper," therefore, carries the dual valence of gender and racial makeover from the male butler in the mystery-suspense genre and from the Black housekeeper in *Imitation of Life*. Additionally, Wong's housekeeper in *Portrait* grows from her own character repertoire of maids and hostess-mistresses throughout her career.

In view of this layered backstory and the noir narrative, Wong's housekeeper sets out to problematize the white drama from the parergon position; and she does so precisely by working *with* the background and contributing to the atmosphere. The term *atmosphere* designates the mood conjured by the set design; but it was also used by Hollywood studios in the first half of the twentieth century to refer to extras (oftentimes nonwhite) who were recruited to enhance the "authentic" exotic setting for a white-centered film. This Hollywood usage suggests that the extras and minor performers were treated as inert quasi-objects or props who simply existed, without much activity or agency.

Countering the studio practice of thing-ifying the Other, the minimally paid and non-individuated "atmospheric" extras and typecast supporting actors

VIDEO 3.4. Wong, as the housekeeper, silently flits across the middle ground in *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.4

revalorize their thingness by collectively conjuring the environment that enables, enlivens, and sometimes destabilizes the central drama. In *Portrait*, Wong's housekeeper shuttles between the drama and the atmosphere, dwelling in intermediary zones such as the mansion's grandiose doorway, a staircase, and a wall-phone area. From this mediatory zone, the housekeeper connects the interior and the exterior, the upstairs and the downstairs, the background and the foreground, confounding the naturalized hierarchy between the object and the subject. Animated by her shuttling movements, the objecthood of the doorway, the staircase, the wall phone, and the rest of the set design all intervene in the white human drama, recasting it as being constituted *and* de-constituted by its environs.

Wong's very first appearance in the film encapsulates her pivotal mediatory role even as an apparent walking prop. As Lana Turner's wife converses with her husband's assistant in the foreground, we see Wong's housekeeper silently floating across the screen from left to right in the middle ground to answer the door off screen (video 3.4). Two things stand out in this short scene. First, Wong's housekeeper is the only moving character in this static scene; her spectral flitting across the screen momentarily redirects audience attention from the conversation in the foreground to her character's intermediary middle ground. This effect is impactful due to the shallow focus that compresses the spatial layers, rendering them almost interpenetrable. Second, the figure of the housekeeper, clad in a simple loose-fitting black jacket matched with her black hair, starkly contrasts with the bright color schemes of the background and the foreground, the former consisting of yellow carpeted stairs and the elaborate white metalwork of the staircase rail, and the latter featuring Turner's character encased in a light green brocade gown with a tight bodice mimicking the qipao style. Sandwiched between the Eastmancolor-enhanced foreground and background, Wong's housekeeper evokes the black-and-white era anachronistically inserted into the 1960 film technology. Thus, Wong's onscreen

FIGURE 3.6. Asian décor (the porcelain figurine, the painting on the back wall) "misplaced" in the Western-style bedroom. Frame enlargement from *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

appearance is both silently passé and obtrusively present. Such out-of-time-and-placeness, or what I have theorized as "anachronotope," reshuffles the temporal and the spatial ordering, disorienting the diegetic central drama.

As the film unfolds, we see how the anachronotopic Wong/housekeeper installed in an opulent white family actively collaborates with the set design and a nonhuman actor to create an "atmosphere" that slowly destabilizes the guilt-ridden widow (Turner) in her own home environment. The film's much-publicized, luxurious set design includes the mansion, its furnishings, and Turner's and Dee's gowns and multimillion-dollar jewelry on loan from David Webb. Art dealer Martin Lowitz's gallery was credited for providing oil paintings, especially those covering the walls of the doctor's apartment. What was not mentioned in the publicity or the film credits, and yet became conspicuous in the film's mise-en-scène, was the omnipresent Asian décor in the mansion, including paintings of different styles, figurines, and Buddha sculptures.

(Faux) Asian décors have commonly been featured in Hollywood productions set in an Asian location or enclave. In analyzing *The Cheat* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1915), starring Sessue Hayakawa as an art collector,[66] Daisuke Miyao argues that "Japanese taste" in combination with European Japonisme reshaped white American middle-class consumption, such that "the collection of Asian art was an integral part of these [white] women's assertions of their social positions both as cultural leaders and as New Women."[67] Unsurprisingly, *The Cheat* exploits Japonisme while presenting a cautionary tale against American New Women's overconsumption of "Oriental" decadence. *Portrait in Black*, however, offers no justification for such a heavily "Orientalized" set design, except for a tangential mention of the shipping-tycoon husband's business with Hong Kong. We may easily dismiss the heavy use of Asian décor as Orientalism that backfired, since it clashed with the Western architectural style and furnishings (figure 3.6). Yet Wong's forceful mediatory performance suggests that she, as the housekeeper, synergizes with

VIDEO 3.5. Wong, as the housekeeper, performs with the Siamese cat to undermine the authority of Lana Turner as the wealthy widow in *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.5

the Asian décor to reinforce the misplaced "Oriental atmosphere," which dissolves the intended dramatic illusion and eventually unravels the white drama. Culminating her collaboration with the Asian décor is her pivotal scene with a Siamese cat, which literally dethrones Turner's wealthy widow from her own home space.

In this scene (video 3.5), Turner's widow hears a noise in her recently murdered husband's bedroom, then finds his hospital bed being raised inexplicably. Shrouded in heavy shadows, she is circling up to the bed when the husband's cat, Rajah, suddenly jumps onto the pillow on the left; a cut to the cat's front shows him growling at the wincing widow, who picks him up in fear and hurries to put him out of the bedroom door, her image now literally ensnared in the giant shadows of the elaborate metalwork of the stair rail. Footsteps off screen follow, triggering her high-angle perspectival shot of Wong the housekeeper appearing like an apparition far down at the foot of the stairs, her face and body cast in heavy shadows by the back lighting. A medium close-up framing then shows her wearing a heavily embroidered gown with a large jade decoration at the neck, drastically different from the simple black outfit she wears in the rest of the film and reminiscent of the imperial gown she wore in her Broadway play *On the Spot* (see chapter 2). Wong's half shadowed face and sudden appearance suggest kinship with the Siamese cat. The white embroidery on the dark ground of her gown also matches the cat's coat. Furthermore, Wong as the housekeeper affectionately cuddles Rajah, who runs downstairs to her, in contrast to the Turner character's paranoia.

Interestingly, when Rajah runs downstairs, an over-shoulder shot from the housekeeper's perspective shows a large white relief sculpture on the background wall upstairs right in the center, literally pushing Turner's character to frame left, where her white-gowned body is absorbed into the white background. The relief

FIGURE 3.7. Wong in costume, holding the Siamese cat, in the *Portrait in Black* pressbook.

FIGURE 3.8. Wong in costume, holding the Siamese cat from *Portrait in Black*, in *Time* magazine (June 20, 1960).

sculpture depicts a horse with a raised hoof facing a giant Asian-style vase containing a large bouquet of plum flowers that fill the top part of the sculpture. The composition of this shot highlights the affinity between Wong the regally costumed housekeeper, the white Asian décor, and the exotic Siamese cat actor, who together construe an alien and alienating "atmosphere" that sends Turner's character fleeing into her bedroom. Unsurprisingly, this sequence that reorients (and re-Orients) the environment signals the very first implicit indictment of the widow's guilt for her husband's death.

It is noteworthy that the Siamese cat was treated as a veritable actor, whose casting was publicized on December 7, 1959. Producer Hunter described the ideal cat candidate as "a dramatic actor, sort of a four-footed Marlon Brando," not "a comic" like Rhubarb;[68] and the cat's first qualification was to "know how to manipulate the controls of an electrically operated hospital bed."[69] Two weeks later, another piece of publicity (dated December 21, 1959) broadcasted Turner's cat phobia—her "toughest scene in the film: merely had to enter a room, pick up a Siamese cat from a bed, carry it to the hall and drop it. She not only has a phobia about cats, she is also allergic to them." Contrary to Turner's feline phobia, Wong's natural ease with the Siamese cat was widely publicized. Two photos, in the film's pressbook and in *Time* magazine, depicted her in character cuddling the cat; she was dressed in the imperial gown and the housekeeper outfit, respectively, posing in front of two Asian paintings used in the film (figures 3.7 and 3.8). In the pressbook, the

Wong-and-cat photo (with Wong in the gown) was used to suggest a pet supplies tie-in. Such publicity undoubtedly exploited the film's "Oriental" mystery, enacted by Wong *and* by the Siamese cat.

Publicity stunts aside, Wong's collaboration with the fictional Rajah most certainly benefited from her real-life companionship with a Siamese cat named Bu-Bu, whom she inherited in 1952; and she jocularly talked about making him live the "Wong way."[70] Two years later, she described Bu-Bu as a "character cat full of surprises" who was "almost human and scares me sometimes."[71] Wong's playful coinage "character cat" prefigured Hunter's search for a cat who was a "dramatic actor" *and* anticipated her own postwar self-refashioning as a "character actress" for television (more on this in the next section). While there is no evidence that Bu-Bu played Rajah in this film, Wong did write about the bliss of getting to collapse in her own garden accompanied by "the birds, bees and the cat" after returning from her publicity tour for *Portrait in Black*.[72] And her companionship with Bu-Bu (and another cat, Smokey) undoubtedly facilitated her easy collaboration with Rajah in constructing the "Oriental" mystique and claiming authority in the white domestic space, with the effect of displacing the white-centered narrative of guilt and paranoia.[73]

Wong's collaborative performance with other-than-human elements in the margins and the background of *Portrait* enabled her to carve out a parergon-based yet pervasive atmosphere that worked to upend the central drama. In the next section, I explore how Wong rebegan (again) via the new medium of television, giving yet another iteration of the "Oriental" maid, this time supporting Barbara Stanwyck's American expatriate character in the NBC series *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (September 1960–September 1961). Wong's maid in the episode "Dragon by the Tail," aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961, turned out to be her last performance; she passed away on February 3. As if following Bu-Bu the "character cat full of surprises," Wong refashioned herself as a character actress for the new medium of television. It is as a parergon character actress that she mounted a counter-discourse to the Cold War US patriotism advocated in her *Barbara Stanwyck Show* episode.

THE CHARACTER ACTRESS REBEGAN ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Wong refashioned herself as a character actress for television while rehearsing for her amah/maid role in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. At the same time, she was also doing two TV stints in 1959, making guest appearances in "The Lady from South Chicago" (dir. Paul Stanley; aired November 2) and "Mission to Manila" (dir. Bernard Girard; aired November 23), two episodes of the TV series *Adventures in Paradise*, produced by 20th Century Fox Television and broadcast on ABC.[74] Wong was pleased when the series' producer praised her for adding "a needed exotic and

colorful touch" and invited her to do more. Aside from improved job prospects suggesting her successful transition to TV, one wonders what Wong might find satisfactory in doing these add-on Orientalist touches. The answer could be her conscious transformation into a character actress around this time. In an October 1959 letter, she described the character part as "most interesting as it calls on one's imagination and *does need much work by oneself to orient oneself* in that character to feel at home."[75] Just over a month later, she formally announced her "transition" from "leading roles to character parts," including roles in television shows, "even Westerns like 'Wyatt Earp'—and I find character roles are more fun."[76]

Film historian David Lazar identifies two types of Hollywood character actors—those who "brought an indelible character with them from film to film, so [they] could make an impression quickly, . . . simply . . . by appearing" and those whose "essential personality was effaced as they disappeared into each new role."[77] Wong's performance as a character actress went beyond these two poles. Evoking her comment on Bu-Bu the "character cat" being "almost human"—that is, out of the feline character[78]—I understand her performance as going out of character by applying "imagination" and "much work." In other words, she solidified her signature performances by rerouting the minor stock roles with layered race-gender negotiations. By disidentifying from and resignifying the phantasmic Oriental roles, she could, paradoxically, "feel at home" with them. Wong's excitement as a character actress stemmed precisely from the ability to imaginatively recreate the ornamental add-on roles, and furthermore to shift the central narrative by leveraging her parergon position.

Notably, Wong's transformation into a character actress came after a series of efforts to transition to the bustling television industry. She was the first Asian American to have her own series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (dir. William Marceau, 1951), produced by DuMont Television Network, which also made her the first female lead on television.[79] A *New York Herald Tribune* reporter stated that "the exotic actress" hoped to use "her own television program" "to blaze a trail in this medium for members of her race as she did in motion pictures."[80] Named after her Chinese name, the show featured Wong as an Oriental antique dealer doubling as a detective, whom she described as "a good girl against bad men," "a combination of 'The Daughter of Fu Manchu,' 'The Daughter of Shanghai' and 'The Daughter of Dragon.'"[81] Considered unsuccessful and severely panned for poor production, the show folded after just one season, which comprised ten episodes aired between August 27 and November 21, 1951. One reviewer rehashed the British criticism of Wong's vocal acting in *The Circle of Chalk* from more than two decades earlier, disparaging her "Americanese" as unbecoming to her Oriental role.[82] Such entrenched Orientalism indicated precisely how Wong continually defied pigeonholing across time and media forms.

Despite the truncated TV show, Wong took advantage of this opportunity to "learn TV the hard way."[83] Adjusting to the less glamorous TV production set, she preferred that television shows be filmed (instead of transmitted live), for "it gives an artist an opportunity to correct any fluffs and the lighting will be more effective than the crude lighting that live shows permit."[84] She also realized that "whether we like it or not, television is here to stay," as she witnessed many film studios in Los Angeles switching to making films exclusively for television broadcasting.[85] Two months after telling Fania Marinoff about Los Angeles studios' switchover, she had successful meetings with television agencies in Los Angeles, and hoped to do a mystery TV series on film, with a preliminary plan of doing three half-hour shows in one week, which, she wrote, would not leave much time for retakes, but at least would offer more effective lighting, especially for a mystery series.[86] This plan did not materialize; nor did the two offers she received in late 1952—to be mistress of ceremonies for a TV series showing old-time Chinese mystery films, and to play the "maid companion" to Ginger Rogers in a Paramount film.[87]

In 1953, Wong continued to search for work in television. She admitted to catching "televisionitis"—that is, becoming glued to the set and getting lazy, after finally acquiring a TV set.[88] She also drew inspiration from Tallulah Bankhead, who experienced "television christening" after claiming that "television has no father" in *The Big Show* on radio. Bankhead sensationalized her resolve as "hav[ing] the tiger by the tail," so she "must carry on or perish."[89] Similarly, Wong decided to "take the bull by the horns"—that is, to continue reaching out to those who were "contemplating Oriental production or productions with Oriental characters."[90] That Wong's job prospects were limited to "Orient"-related projects indicated the structural uneven ground for her in comparison to Bankhead. While they both enjoyed cross-Atlantic celebrity at their prime, Bankhead was wooed by radio, theater, and television, enabling her to accomplish a notable post-film performance career. Wong, on the other hand, had to proactively seek out radio and television opportunities, which, when materialized, were sporadic and marginal, replaying her film career of disappearances and multiple rebeginnings.

Unlike Bankhead, who could choose to accept television as "another taunt, another challenge" and to ride on "the wheels of progress," Wong—a racialized, aging, and now asexualized freelance performer-worker—could not jump on the bandwagon of media technological progress or readily benefit from it. Her criticism of live television shows' technical inferiority and witty coinage of "televisionitis" indicated her reservations about the new medium. Thus, her venture into television is best understood as the necessity to survive in white- and male-centric showbiz and to remain financially solvent by rising to the occasion, just as she had managed to transition to the talkie era and variegated stage performance genres earlier in her career.[91] Her effort to "carry on," therefore, was not the diametrical opposite of "perishing," as it was for Bankhead, but rather a sliding of the scale.

Wong's efforts yielded some TV appearances in the mid- to late 1950s, including in *The Letter* (dir. William Wyler, 1956), adapted from a short story by Somerset Maugham; "The Chinese Game" (dir. Buzz Kulik, 1956), an episode of the CBS series *Climax*; and "The Deadly Tattoo" (dir. Paul Nickell, 1958), again for *Climax*. In January 1959, she was offered a "recurring part through a 26 week series," but was disappointed that "they want my name more than what dramatics I can offer."[92] It was in late 1959, after doing the two aforementioned episodes of *Adventures in Paradise*, that she expressed excitement and explicitly repositioned herself as a character actress.

Commenting on Wong's "Asian/American femme beauty" on television, Danielle Seid points out its intimate intertwinement with "legacies of racial-sexual stereotype," and its effect of "smooth[ing] over the contradictions of an increasingly multicultural U.S. empire."[93] More specifically, Seid argues that Wong's self-making entrepreneurial resourcefulness, reflected in her authoritative matriarchal characters in *Adventures in Paradise* and *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, could be coopted to construct the Cold War–era Asian American model minority image, thus playing into America's neoliberal multiculturalism, even as it enabled "Asian/American women's gendered and sexual citizenship."[94]

This argument accurately captures Wong's TV characters' *function* in the scripted narratives, which catered to conservative, white American middle-class family values. Yet if we refocus on what Wong brought to the table (rather than what she was scripted to do), and how her television performance added to her long career of strategic race-gender performances, we can gain a better understanding of Wong's reworking of her televisual "character parts" through imagination and labor. Wong's self-repositioning as a character actress at the end of 1959 came at the very end of her life-career and right on the brink of the codification of the hybridized Asian American identity. It powerfully encapsulated her lifelong de-essentializing critique of national borderlines and patriarchal ethno-nationalism, both of which underwent further entrenchment on both sides of the bamboo curtain during the Cold War era.

Wong's end-of-life performance as a character actress was also particularly poignant as her youthful visage transformed into a weathered flesh-and-bone landscape, one that was sculpted by labor, stress, disappointment, and resilience across time and space—all congealed in superimposition. This aging and weathered body had become an archive that telescoped her character types, acting skills, reiterative signature performances, and episodic disappearances and rebeginnings. Her end-of-life performances show how corporeal enunciations, historical and geopolitical forces, and performative agency and practices exert pressure upon each other. Her last performance, in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*—a reenactment of the "Oriental" maid in Hong Kong, the interstice between the Cold War rivals—throws into relief precisely how she bodily occupied and animated the parergon position on the small screen to counter Cold War ideology.[95]

Wong played the Hong Kong maid, or "amah," in footage used in both the unaired pilot of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*, titled "Hong Kong and Little Joe" (dir. Richard Whorf, 1960), and the episode "Dragon by the Tail" (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired Jan. 30, 1961). Production records indicate that she worked at two different times: rehearsing on November 10 and shooting from November 11 to 13 in 1959, and rehearsing and shooting again on September 23 and 26, 1960. The 1959 footage shot for "Hong Kong and Little Joe" was later transformed into "Dragon by the Tail," adding footage shot in September 1960.[96] The morphing of "Hong Kong and Little Joe" into "Dragon by the Tail" incorporated feature-film elements in response to the emerging TV economies of scale (such as the larger and better-quality TV screens opening up the medium to a richer, wider-shot feel).[97] In the context of my analysis, the transformation foregrounded Cold War propaganda in "Dragon by the Tail," which led to significant changes in Wong's performance.

Both the unaired pilot and the episode are set in Hong Kong, a British colony, and Macau, a Portuguese colony—the East Asian playgrounds of Little Joe (Barbara Stanwyck), a Chinese-born American woman known for her scandalous career as a gambler and trader in "everything except her American passport."[98] They both contain the narrative of Little Joe cheating in a Macau casino for quick funds to rescue an American ship captain captured by Red China. The framings of the narrative, however, are completely different. In the unaired pilot, Little Joe's rescue act is purely an "affair of the heart," which only leads her to realize that the captain is stringing her along for her money, with no intention to marry her. It ends on an ambivalent semi-romantic note, with Wong's amah introducing Mr. Takamoto, who presents Little Joe with the gift of a pearl necklace. In "Dragon by the Tail," however, Josephine Little (previously known as Little Joe) begins her rescue act as a half-minded effort to help the American government, since the captain was captured while trying to deliver a Chinese American scientist out of Red China. But she ends up a fully converted patriot, giving an impassioned lecture on American loyalty in the face of Red China's threat. Stanwyck reportedly extemporized the patriotic speech, which left her in tears, leading House Un-American Activities Committee chairman Francis E. Walter to endorse "Dragon by the Tail" as an "encouraging, heart-warming and inspiring" entertainment. Stanwyck was praised for being "an American patriot speaking from her heart" and fighting back against the "red move" in the entertainment industry.[99]

My focus, however, is on the flip side of Cold War indoctrination, as embodied by Wong's parergon killjoy amah, who queers and questions the delusions ranging from Little Joe's heterosexual fantasy to Josephine Little's loyalty declaration. Her killjoy affect stemmed from the specific sociohistorical status of the "amah" character, unlike the fantastical Orientalist "maid" types Wong enacted in her early career, and more grounded than her postwar new-immigrant maid characters in *Impact* and *Portrait in Black*. The word *amah* refers to a specific social sector of female domestic workers who were part of the expanding population of Chinese working-class women in postwar Hong Kong. Many of the amahs fled from

VIDEO 3.6. Wong, as an amah working for Barbara Stanwyck/Little Joe, intervenes in the latter's decision-making in "Dragon by the Tail," an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.6

politically turbulent and famine-stricken mainland China in the late 1950s to early 1960s to find work in Hong Kong, which was experiencing its first postwar economic takeoff, thanks to its opportune position as the most important trading port in the Far East (since mainland China had closed itself off to the capitalist world). Amahs were live-in maids who typically remained single and provided for their families in mainland China. The single migrant amahs residing in their employers' homes raised a host of issues, including class disparity intertwined with intimacy, the domestic workers' wages and degree of independence, their precarious (il)legal status, their gendered labor, their aging and care, and the ways they reshaped the family and kin structure of China.[100] The *Barbara Stanwyck Show* episodes only tangentially incorporated this postwar phenomenon of live-in female domestics, offering barebone scripting of the amah as "of an indeterminate age and wear[ing] the single braid down her back signifying her unmarried state."[101] Wong's authoritative enactment, however, delivered an aging yet outspoken amah with gusto, mocking the script's description of her as Little Joe's "faithful Chinese amah."[102]

In the pilot and the episode, Wong's amah ostensibly follows Stanwyck's character closely, promptly offering a cigarette or carrying her stuff. Yet, similar to the mimicking maid in *Mr. Wu*—who actively mediates, even ventriloquizes, her mistress's feelings—the amah turns out to be an uninhibited killjoy. Her interceptive authority is conveyed in the ways she delivers the lines and also visually anchors some key scenes, from the margins and the background. This is illustrated in two scenes that are largely identical in the pilot and the episode. In the first scene (video 3.6), Little Joe visits an effeminate Chinese quasi-spy (played by Philip Ahn) to seek help in rescuing the American captain captured by Red China. Wong's amah follows Little Joe into the room and is quickly framed out. As Little Joe expresses her desire to rescue the captain, a cutaway shot brings the amah into the center foreground, her eyes dramatically rolling, displaying sarcastic disapproval of her mistress's foolish sense of duty prompted by her American identity. A few moments later, she jumps into the frame, speaking loudly and trying physically to stop Little Joe from risking her life to raise the money needed for the rescue.

VIDEO 3.7. Wong as the amah anchors the gambling scene in "Dragon by the Tail," an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.7

In the second scene (video 3.7), Little Joe cheats at a card game in Macau to obtain the rescue funds. With Little Joe seated at the table in the foreground, the camera frames Wong's amah squarely in the center, albeit in the background, so that we see her anxious facial expressions in reaction to her mistress's every move. This is accentuated by a cutaway shot to a medium close-up framing of her reacting with increasing anxiety following the previous close-up shot of Little Joe's hand surreptitiously swapping out a card. Thus, the impact of Little Joe's action is mediated to the audience through her knowing amah's facial expressions, as the other card players are kept in the dark. In both scenes, Wong's amah begins as an unobtrusive marginal or erased presence; but she either anchors the frame from the background or abruptly jumps into the foreground, augmenting or interrupting the central drama through vivacious vocal-visual acting.

Ultimately, in both "Hong Kong and Little Joe" and "Dragon by the Tail," Wong's amah exceeds her servant status to forcefully deconstruct the central narrative. In "Hong Kong and Little Joe," she deflates Little Joe's hetero-romantic fantasy by mocking the latter's self-delusional trust in the swindling American captain. Considering Wong's signature subversion of self-sacrificial "Oriental" femininity, her amah's chastisement of Little Joe's passivity in the heterosexual relationship registers her unreserved outcry against the sexist construct of the pining, vulnerable female type. In "Dragon by the Tail," as the central narrative switches from patriarchal hetero-romance to American patriotism, Wong's amah turns to protest against Cold War indoctrination by repeatedly trying to stop Josephine Little from taking risks for "a country you don't even live in." While she has fewer lines and scenes in "Dragon by the Tail" than in "Hong Kong and Little Joe," Wong's amah seizes every opportunity to assert her presence and dissent from her mistress's views. In a scene added to "Dragon by the Tail," Wong's amah and Stanwyck's Josephine Little are positioned at a window against a panoramic backdrop representing a bay view in Hong Kong. They each occupy half a screen, Josephine Little seated on the left, the amah standing on the right, pacing with agitation, loudly urging her mistress to flee with the money instead of further "risking your life for

FIGURE 3.9. Wong as the amah, taking up an authoritarian position vis-à-vis Stanwyck's Josephine Little in "Dragon by the Tail" (dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1961), an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (frame enlargement).

your country" (figure 3.9). Here Wong/amah takes up space as her mistress's equal, even an authoritative counselor, although she is excluded at the end for Stanwyck/Little's loyalty speech to be valid.

Wong/amah's dissent from patriarchal nationalism, Cold War politics, and the heteronormative fantasy makes her a quasi-anarchist killjoy. Enacting the Hong Kong amah dwelling in the margins of the screen and the interstice of the Cold War empires, Wong propels intense enunciation, a piercing gaze, sarcastic facial expressions, and a critical stance. Four decades after her screen debut as an extra lost in one hundred fungible Chinese girls in the Alla Nazimova vehicle *The Red Lantern*, Wong seems to have circled back to her first "breakthrough"—that is, to "play a servant"—"No longer the hundredth, the two-hundredth. . . . No, the first, the only Chinese in the scene."[103] From this early-career excitement at playing the No. 1 servant to her end-of-career self-positioning as a character actress who exercised "imagination" and hard work to "feel at home" with "character parts,"[104] Wong crafted a method of dis-identificatory and critical enactment of the maid roles. This method turns upon *corporeal* positioning—that is, orienting her body toward these roles, putting them on but not merging with them, reshaping them with her own sociopolitical experiences. In so doing, her body became a palimpsest screen and an archive that rehearsed, explored, and (re)assembled strategies of leveraging the parergon position to both construct and challenge the presumptive seat of authority at center stage. This is also how, as a supporting performer-worker, she shifted the show, redistributed agency, and reshuffled the sociopolitical hierarchy.

In the next chapter, I further rack the focus to study how Wong navigated exclusion when she lost "Chinese" roles to white actresses, turning these forced disappearances into new possibilities of visibility, and visibility *on different terms*. These instances exceed the victim discourse to demonstrate Wong's labor and strategies of living with and weathering through precarity while retraining to carry on a life-career that was significantly episodic.

4

The Show Must Go On—in Episodes

(Now You See Her, Now You Don't)

*I have been very busy getting settled and running back and forth to the M.G.M. studio. Have made two tests for the "Lotus" part. From all appearances Miss Rainer is definitely set for the part of Olan. No use bucking up against a stone wall. Practically, every one [*sic*], including my friends, seems to feel that I should take the Lotus part "if there is lots of money in it."*

—ANNA MAY WONG

In the letter to Fania Marinoff quoted above, Wong narrated her latest efforts and frustrations. These included the busy-ness of lobbying for the role of the female protagonist, O-lan, in MGM's mega-production *The Good Earth* (adapted from Pearl S. Buck's best-selling and Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, published in 1931); her frustration at being relegated to testing for the concubine role, Lotus; and her bitter resignation with the "stone wall" of white Hollywood that barred her way, instead casting the German-born Luise Rainer as the female lead. Rainer would go on to earn an Academy Award for her yellowface performance of O-lan, her second Best Actress Oscar in a row.

Although the casting of *The Good Earth* was not Wong's first or last experience of being passed over in favor of a white actress, it has come down in history as one of the most scandalous illustrations of Hollywood's exclusionism. It was also undoubtedly a watershed event in Wong's life-career that directly triggered her 1936 China trip and significantly transformed her screen personae. This chapter argues that Wong's exclusion did not make her a mere helpless victim of the system; rather, her agency found expression despite invisibilization. She actively negotiated with MGM, a major Hollywood studio, and then strove to regroup after being rejected. Through her China trip and her subsequent *claim* on her modern Chinese identity, she made a bid for spokesperson status for contemporary China,

especially Chinese femininity, in competition with MGM's *The Good Earth*. Not only defying Hollywood's racism, she also questioned the Chinese government's dismissive rejection of the working-class Chinese diasporic communities from which she came. Her assertive claim as a spokesperson for modern, nationalist China went in tandem with her ironic subversion of China's patriarchal ethnonationalism, reinforcing her interstitial position that was critically distanced from any essentialist identity coercion.

By tracking how Wong navigated her forced disappearance from the casting of *The Good Earth*, this chapter also advances a broader understanding of Wong's entire career, characterized by multiple disappearances and rebeginnings. This episodic pattern underscores her grappling with the precarious conditions through waiting, stalling, exiting, repositioning, retraining, rerouting, and rebeginning. This episodic career, made up of brief and all-too-often truncated episodes, resembles staccato music that is composed of short, spiky, and noncontinuous notes. Just as the staccato music elicits intensified emotions, Wong's episodic career was saturated with intense feelings of anticipation, disappointment, frustration, fatigue, anger, resignation, joy, and angst. Taking seriously the episodic pattern, I work against unidirectional teleology and instead work toward a method of understanding "failures" and thwarted trajectories as the precondition for rupturing and reshaping the status quo. It is these "failures" and truncations that made possible Wong's off-center authorship, enabling her to rewrite the terms of visibility and invisibility, and to challenge mainstream representational regimes.

This emotionally charged, episodic, staccato pattern similarly characterizes the careers of all minoritized performer-workers who interact with mainstream entertainment systems. My tracing of Wong's persistent yet nonteleological disappearances and reappearances, therefore, offers an analytical framework to better understand an unconsummated career as a testimony of resilience, resourcefulness, and resistance of the white and male erasure of the racialized and gendered labor and aspirations of minoritized performer-workers. In chapter 2, I delineate an obscured genealogy of early-twentieth-century border-crossing ethnic female performers based on their largely parallel career paths. Here, I highlight instances of convergences and interconnections between marginalized ethnic performers and media workers. Wong's off-center authorship rested precisely upon collaborating with other ethnic performers and media workers to coproduce her relational agency.

This chapter unfolds in four parts. First, I outline the circumstances of Wong's episodic, staccato career pattern, setting the stage for her China turn, which did not indicate an easy realignment with her "Chineseness," but rather deepened her misfit neither-nor (neither Chinese nor American) position that resisted normative identity politics. I then delve into Wong's three post-China-trip media works to analyze how she narrativized her trip and addressed

her Sino-American publics through her opaque position and correlated multifocal perspective.

THE EPISODIC, STACCATO CAREER: DISAPPEARANCES AND REBEGINNINGS

Wong's first departure from exclusionary Hollywood in 1928 led her to interwar Europe, where she quickly became an international star/celebrity. With her newly minted cosmopolitanism, she was welcomed back to the US in 1930, soon starring in the Broadway show *On the Spot* and making her first Hollywood talkie, *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), in which she starred as Fu Manchu's daughter, catering to "shiver-lovers" with a full supply of "thrill and chills."[1] Next up was the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *Shanghai Express*, in which she gave a show-shifting performance that decenters Dietrich and her character's hetero-romance. By 1933, she was playing a minor role in a B movie, *A Study in Scarlet* (dir. Edwin L. Marin). The burst of opportunities to cash in on her European-made fame had already waned.

Before doing *A Study in Scarlet*, she was already meeting rejections: "My Honolulu offer to do 'On the Spot' fell through, but I might do it later."[2] She lost the bid for the Chinese female protagonist in *The Son-Daughter* (dir. Clarence Brown and Robert Z. Leonard, 1932) to a white actress, Helen Hays: "I guess I look too Chinese to play a Chinese."[3] Meanwhile, she kept busy that year, performing on the variety stage in Chicago in May 1932; in Albany, New York, and the Bronx in June; and in New York City in July, with Jack Benny as the MC, along with comedienne Una Merkel. In August 1932, *Modern Screen* announced that Wong, a freelance actress, was slated to play in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (dir. Frank Capra, 1933), a film set in warlord-torn China, starring Barbara Stanwyck as a missionary's fiancée captured by General Yen, yellowfaced by Swedish-born Nils Asther.[4] This, again, did not materialize. The Chinese female role of General Yen's maid-mistress went to Toshia Mori—a Japanese-born Columbia contract player and a 1932 WAMPAS Baby Star (along with Ginger Rogers and thirteen other awardees).

By June 1933, Wong had arrived in London, embarking on a busy schedule of vaudeville shows across the UK (see chapter 2), while starring in three films: *Tiger Bay, Chu Chin Chow*, and *Java Head*.[5] Her successful second trans-Atlantic trip shows that her cosmopolitanism was inextricably linked to the marginalization and exclusion she encountered in the US. The confusing journalistic coverage of her plans and whereabouts, as outlined below, indicate her struggles with precarity and uncertainty between finishing *A Study in Scarlet* in early 1933 and arriving in London in June 1933.

At the end of March 1933, she was reportedly planning a European visit that was to be followed by a brief return to Hollywood in summer, and then a personal-appearance tour of South America. On April 11, director Harry Lachman threw a farewell party for her in anticipation of her trip to London on the coming Friday.

Yet it was not until over a week later that her American passport was finally issued; and by May 1, she was said to have reached Southampton via the ocean liner *Europa*. A May 8 update, however, stated that Wong, supposedly in Europe, actually had gone to Shanghai to make a film with Moon Kwan, whom she had recommended to MGM as a technical consultant for her film *Mr. Wu* six years ago.[6] In early June, she was spotted in Chicago, "paus[ing] on her way from Hollywood to Berlin at the Golden Temple of Jehol at a Century of Progress Exposition," as evidenced by a photo.[7] A few days later, she was reportedly seen in London, "welcomed by the mob" as Bebe Daniels was.[8] While in London, before deciding to accept an "English offer," Wong was still hoping Lawrence Langner would produce *The Circle of Chalk* and cast her in New York.[9] Taken together, these varied reports suggest that Wong's work in Britain was both a turn toward other possibilities and a detour from her original plan, resulting from lack of work in the US. But this "disappearance" from the US ended up becoming a pivotal episode in her career, enabling her to build a multilingual vaudeville repertoire and collaborate with British musicians, vocalists, and dance coaches to improve her skills (see chapter 2).

A few months after returning to America in June 1935, Wong started negotiating with theatrical producer Morris Gest to perform in the Broadway staging of *Lady Precious Dream*.[10] This was first adapted from a classic Chinese play by Chinese playwright Hsiung Shi-i 熊式一 for the London stage in 1935. Wong saw Hsiung's version in January 1935 at Langner's recommendation. She declined Hsiung's offer of the lead role, due to a commitment to vaudeville performances in Italy, but asked Langner to consider staging it in New York.[11] Wong's negotiation with Gest regarding this play ended unsuccessfully, however; and Gest's Broadway version ended up with an almost all-white cast. It ran from January to April 1936, with Helen Chandler as the female lead and, significantly, with costumes designed by Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, the renowned Peking Opera actor who specialized in playing female roles.[12]

Wong's biggest setback, however, was her exclusion from *The Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1937). Buck's novel chronicles a Chinese farming family's saga from the north to the south and back, persisting through poverty, drought, wealth, warfare, and death; and this film adaptation promised to jettison clichéd Orientalism by turning attention to "real" Chinese people. The female protagonist, O-lan, anchors the drama by keeping the family together even after her estranged husband, Wang Lung, uses the hard-earned family wealth to take a concubine named Lotus. MGM's production of the film version, starting in 1933, was a tortuous process that spanned four years and cost two and a half million dollars, going through the hands of four directors and two producers (Albert Lewin succeeding Irving Thalberg upon the latter's death in 1936). The production also involved at least five stakeholders whose interests did not fully align, but who all understood the high stakes of this film. Their interactions made the film a veritable Sino-American intergovernmental, intercommunal, and interracial media event. This complicated

dynamic also led Wong to undertake the China trip in 1936. Those five stakeholders were American mainstream press, MGM, the Chinese Nationalist government, the Asian American communities and their print media, and Wong herself.

At the film's gestation stage, Wong was considered the most likely candidate for the female lead. Grace Kinsley, a *Los Angeles Times* film columnist, cited an "authoritative source" stating that Wong was "likely to play the lead," and "in fact she is quite sure to if W. S. Van Dyke directs it."[13] Referencing Kinsley, a San Francisco–based Japanese American newspaper further confirmed Wong being the "logical one" due to her "fitness for the role," "undoubted acting ability," purported ancestral connection with the region of the fictional characters, and ability to speak the local Chinese dialect.[14] One of the earliest reports on Wong's exclusion from *The Good Earth* also came from this Japanese American newspaper, in September 1934, as a one-liner: "Anna May Wong not considered for a role in Good Earth."[15] This most likely referred specifically to the role of O-lan, given that Wong was screen tested for the supporting role of Lotus the concubine in late 1935. The MGM record on December 10 of that year described Wong's screen test as Lotus "a little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make [male protagonist Wang Lung's] infatuation convincing; however, deserves consideration." On December 14, the screen test note read: Wong "deserves serious consideration as possibility for Lotus—not as beautiful as she might be."[16] Another Chinese American tested for Lotus was Mary Wong, who was found to be "impossible for Lotus, not sufficiently attractive."[17]

While under "serious consideration" for Lotus, Wong was losing both hope and interest in the film. Writing to Fania Marinoff on December 16, 1935, she expressed bitter resignation at losing the bid for the female lead ("No use bucking up a stone wall"). She mentioned doing two tests for the Lotus part, but felt strongly inclined to carry out the original plans of going to China instead of playing Lotus.[18] Indeed, she was already preparing for her China trip in September 1935 by reading diasporic Chinese writer and humorist Lin Yutang 林語堂's newly published bestseller *My Country and My People* (1935), so that she would not "feel too much a stranger when going to Vaterland."[19] Shortly after her Form 430 application was approved, she sailed for China in January 1936.

Wong's disqualification for the female lead has been attributed, correctly, to the anti-miscegenation law, which meant that Paul Muni's casting as the male lead prohibited the casting of a nonwhite actress to play his wife, O-lan—or, for that matter, his concubine Lotus. Another important factor was the intervention of China's First Lady, the Wesleyan College–educated Madame Chiang (Soong May-ling 宋美齡), wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石. As has been noted by multiple historians, *The Good Earth* held an important position both in the Sino-American relationship and in Hollywood's diplomatic history. The Chinese Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek strictly monitored the film's location shooting in China (led by George Hill) at the end of 1933; the

footage was examined by China's Central Film Censorship Committee before it was permitted to be shipped to the US.[20] The Chinese government also stipulated six requirements and sent representatives (General Tu Ting-Hsiu 杜庭修, later replaced by Mr. Huang Chao-Chin 黃朝琴) to MGM to oversee and ensure a positive depiction of China.[21] The sixth stipulation, expressing hope that "the cast in the picture will be all Chinese," was relinquished by the Chinese government for being "impracticable." The implication was that the Chinese government was more concerned with a positive narrative and characterization than with ethnic Chinese performers' right to play Chinese characters. Thus, Hollywood's entrenched yellowface practice went unchallenged.

Given the Chinese Nationalist government's investment in the film, it is unsurprising that Madame Chiang specifically advised against casting Wong as the female lead.[22] If MGM excluded Wong on account of the anti-miscegenation law, the Chinese government ostracized her on the grounds of her questionable reputation and diasporic working-class background, which were deemed at odds with the government's escalating promotion of a modern image of China.

Wong's exclusion from *The Good Earth* has been cited by post–civil rights Asian American historians and critics as a scandalous illustration of Hollywood's racism, sexism, and overall exclusionary ideology. Yet we must be careful not to anachronistically attribute this critical sensibility to Wong's contemporary Chinese American communities. The San Francisco–based Chinese American magazine *Chinese Digest*, which was the first English-language magazine by and for American-born Chinese, dedicated a special issue in March 1937 to *The Good Earth*, celebrating the "faithful" and "minute" screen adaptation of "one of the greatest novels of our time."[23] The editorial, penned by male editors who were elite business and community leaders committed to promoting traditional Chinese culture, enthusiastically "ventured the hope" that with *The Good Earth* representing the motion picture industry's "most supreme achievement thus far," the cinema had reached "fulfillment."[24] The authors were not concerned with Wong's exclusion from the film; rather, they expressed excitement about unprecedented Chinese American participation in the production, and the opportunity to gain a glimpse into the workings of a major Hollywood studio. In "An Inside View of the Motion Picture Studio" and "Who's Who among the Chinese in 'Good Earth,'" each recruited Chinese American was introduced, including art technician Frank Tang and technical adviser James Zee-Min Lee.[25]

Ching Wah Lee, cofounder of *Chinese Digest*, who was cast as Ching, the best friend of Wang Lung (Paul Muni), penned a series of articles describing the "Chinese aspect" of the filming process.[26] He detailed MGM makeup artist Jack Dawn's yellowface techniques with much interest.[27] When asked about the cast of the film, Lee concurred with the Hollywood logic that Muni and Luise Rainer were "stars" with "a huge following which goes to all their shows and are never disappointed." Regarding the "Chinese players," Lee matter-of-factly remarked

that "except for Anna May Wong, Willie Fung, Jimmy Howe, Bruce Wong, and half a dozen others, the Chinese cast [in the film] looks like a Hollywood Directory of Chinese players."[28]

Chinese Digest did cover Wong in a number of news snippets in the mid- to late 1930s, reporting on her multilingual performances in Europe,[29] her new interest in Chinese theater and cinema during her China trip,[30] a three-year contract with Paramount upon returning from China,[31] her starring role in *Daughter of Shanghai* (supported by Ching Wah Lee as her character's father),[32] her election to the executive board of the Motion Picture Artists' Committee and her plan to mount a benefit affair for refugees in war-torn China,[33] her moving out of an apartment that overlooked a Japanese garden (due to the Sino-Japanese conflict),[34] her attendance at the dedication ceremony for New Chinatown in Los Angeles,[35] and her participation in a Motion Picture Artists' Committee rally (along with none other than Luise Rainer) calling for a boycott of Japanese goods.[36] Yet, overall, Wong was not seen as more deserving of a Chinese role than either a Caucasian or another Chinese American actress (such as the Hawaiian-born Columbia graduate Soo Yong). Like the Chinese government, the Chinese American community leaders' unproblematic acceptance of yellowface casting (on account of the white actors' popularity and acting skills) contrasted with their criticism of negative portrayals of Chinese customs or characters. This discursive climate contributed to the apparent lack of community support for Wong's candidacy for a role in *The Good Earth*.

More importantly, Wong's nonpreferential treatment by her contemporary Chinese Americans may have had to do with her *interstitial* position of neither-Chinese-nor-American. This neither-nor *experience* was shared by all Chinese Americans, caught between the US Chinese Exclusion Act and the surging Chinese nationalism that demanded the diasporic Chinese's allegiance to the "motherland." Different from Wong's neither-nor position, however, the community leaders sought to alleviate the misfit status by converting it into a both-Chinese-and-American vantage point to promote the community's bridging function. Ching Wah Lee, celebrated as "Mr. Chinatown" in San Francisco, described the second-generation Chinese Americans as a "mighty conflict of cultures"—that is, as American as they were Chinese—and "a decided asset" to American society.[37] He worked as a cultural mediator, helping define the Chinese American identity by studying and introducing Chinese culture and art to white Americans, and leading Chinatown tours to introduce a real-life Chinese American community.[38] Still, hampered by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the desired hybrid Chinese American identity failed to save the Chinese American community from being treated as separate from the mainstream. At the same time, the strong language-culture-kinship linkages with ancestral hometowns in China (and with Chinese culture in general) lent this community to being harnessed by China's rising nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Following the 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1960s civil rights movement, the hybrid Chinese American (and Asian American) identity became institutionalized and recognized as a triumph of the struggles for diversity.[39] Yet the task of replacing the pathologized neither-nor misfit with the uplifting both-and, two-way fit remained incomplete to the present day, as evident in the resurgence of anti-Asian racism triggered by COVID-19. One reason for such entrenched anti-Asian racism-sexism, paradoxically, has to do with the overvaluation of assimilation or becoming "American," which requires that minoritized subjects fit into the American mainstream only to naturalize and reinforce the mainstream as the norm, thus leaving the white premise of the mainstream unchallenged. Furthermore, the desire for assimilation counterproductively legitimizes the scrutiny that targets the minoritized subjects. Thus, assimilation is an impossible project. By pathologizing the neither-nor experience as a failure, the assimilation drive disavows this experience, failing to recognize or mobilize the critical potential of the interstitial position where difference is generative and game-changing, and must not be rendered palatable.

This critical potential was precisely what Wong achieved by turning her experiential neither-nor dilemma into a position of critical disidentification. The neither-nor position enabled her to question homogenizing identity categories, be they Chinese or American. In so doing, she performed and anticipated what Kandice Chuh calls a postcolonial and transnational "subjectless" critique that leverages "categorical flux" to challenge "naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities."[40] Wong's critical neither-nor disidentification also evokes the concept of opacity as theorized by Édouard Glissant. Writing from a postcolonial Caribbean perspective, Glissant describes opacity as unknowability and untranslatability to the dominant colonialist epistemology. He argues for the "right to opacity," that is, the right to be fundamentally nontransparent, different, unreducible, and unintelligible to the dominant mode of knowledge extraction.[41] This "right to opacity" upends the colonialist terms of visibility and the system of hierarchy.

Understanding Wong's neither-nor position as opacity and as a position of de-essentializing critique enables us to better understand how she regrouped following her exclusion from *The Good Earth*, and in what ways she further developed her nuanced, multi-registered audience address. I explore these questions by turning to three media works that arose from her 1936 China trip. They are (1) Wong's photo shoots and travelogue footage documented with her own equipment and in collaboration with Newsreel Wong (aka H. S. Wong or Wang Xiaoting), a Shanghai-based newsreel photojournalist; (2) the 1957 ABC TV episode titled "Native Land," featuring her 1936 China travel footage overlaid with her narration, two decades later, addressing the postwar American audience; and (3) the MGM short revue film *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937), in which she paraded Chinese fashions with an ironic twist. Ostensibly facilitating intercultural translation, these media works quickly flip into a charade that reasserts the

poetics of opacity, upends Orientalist epistemology, and recruits synchronic and diachronic resonating collaborators and audiences, with the effect of rewriting the terms of visibility and relationality.

ANNA MAY WONG VISITS SHANGHAI: NEWSPAPERWOMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHER

In May 1930, at the height of the international fame Wong achieved in interwar Europe, journalist Marjory Collier lamented the "grim joke that brought a creature of two such different worlds under the Kliegs" only to dispose of her in the "inevitable screen end . . . death." She then pointed out that Wong had other options. "She could take herself and a cameraman to China and show us delights undreamed of by Hollywood. . . . She could take us to their gardens, show us some of the world's finest mountain scenery, give us a glimpse of the descendants of the geniuses who created the Sung vases and the K'ang Hsi plum-blossom jars."[42] Collier's whim turned out to be prescient. Six years later, excluded from *The Good Earth*, Wong traveled to China with a cameraman, Newsreel Wong, *and* with her own Leica camera and lighting equipment. The resulting media works were uniquely significant in revitalizing her career, demonstrating her agency in shaping the Sino-American relationship at key historical junctures, and traversing media technologies from amateur filming to postwar television, as well as engaging with journalism and photography.

As if echoing Collier's suggestions, Wong spent her China trip "gathering material for the production of a Chinese play in the United States or Europe," and considered the "possibilities of a film dealing with modern China," one "that would bring out the striking contrast between the old and the new."[43] She envisioned herself as "a Chinese travel guide" who would "show tourists about large Chinese cities with their irreconcilable Eastern and Western elements. In this way . . . the incredible contrasts could be portrayed without asking her audience to stretch their imagination to the breaking point."[44] The mediator role she envisioned, however, turned out to be nothing close to a transparent bridging between China and America. Rather, her media works demonstrated the difficulty of negotiating from an interstitial position that insisted on disidentifying from both China and America, and yet claiming knowledge about both. Thus, what Wong brought back to her American public was not cinema verité–style scenery "undreamed of by Hollywood," but rather her version of China produced from her position as a traveler, a "newspaperwoman," an estranged "daughter of China," a learner, a photographer, and an (auto)ethnographer.

From the outset, Wong's China trip was far more complicated than a conventional, nostalgic root-searching and root-identifying narrative. It was a strategic move that led to her *shuttling* between frustrations in the US and alienation in

China, as encapsulated in a 1937 article, "Third Beginning," published nearly one year after her return from China.[45] In this article, Wong explained her rejection of the concubine role in *The Good Earth*: "I'll be glad to take the test, but I won't play the part. If you let me play O-lan, I'll be very glad. But you're asking me—with Chinese blood—to do the only unsympathetic role in the picture, featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters."[46] Frustrated, she traveled to China because "I had to be sure whether I was really playing a Chinese or merely giving an American interpretation of one. So—I saw China. Much to my surprise, I needed a dialect interpreter, for I spoke Cantonese and so in Shanghai was at a total loss, with Shanghai-ese [*sic*] being spoken on all sides."[47]

This feeling of alienation, coupled with her decision to "see China," her ancestral country, meant that her China trip could not be a simple matter of becoming Chinese, culturally or emotionally. Rather, it bespoke her entangled struggles as she learned to optimize her interstitial position and to differentially address her American and her Chinese publics (including her Chinese detractors). With this trip, Wong pivoted her exclusion from Hollywood to refashion herself as an authoritative China spokesperson (without becoming Chinese)—in competition with MGM's *The Good Earth*. Although outshone by *The Good Earth*, which was released to rave reviews, the impact of Wong's trip and travelogue footage proved long-living, morphing through media forms across two decades, enabling her to transform the "cultural diplomat" role into that of a producer of interstitial knowledge *and* affect.

Wong carefully planned to document her China trip. At a stopover in Honolulu, she excitedly announced to a Japanese American journalist: "So now, I'm a newspaperwoman too."[48] She had been invited to contribute articles about her China impressions to the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.[49] Aside from authoring newspaper articles; doing interviews; meeting with Chinese cultural workers, politicians, and Euro-American expatriates; and orchestrating photo shoots, Wong used her Leica camera and an arc lamp to cocreate her travelogue footage with Newsreel Wong and others.[50] Her itinerary and activities in various Chinese cities, largely mirroring (albeit at a much smaller scale) the MGM crew's extensive location shooting and prop acquisition for *The Good Earth* two years before, constituted an alternative presentation of modern China, and especially of Chinese femininity. Thus, Wong's China trip enabled her to compete with MGM for the "China spokesperson" status.

Like the MGM crew, Wong toured Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, and Suzhou; but Wong also went to southern China and Hong Kong. On drastically different scales and budgets, both Wong and the MGM crew worked with Newsreel Wong to conduct their respective on-location, quasi-ethnographic filming. During the MGM crew's location shooting, Newsreel Wong provided consultation and helped film the sound effects with his Movietone equipment.[51] That Anna May Wong worked with Newsreel Wong during her China trip suggests not only the latter's linchpin

position in (co-)filming American film and newsreel footage in China, but also Wong's flexible mobilization of available resources for her own purposes.

Wong and the MGM crew also similarly focused on acquiring objects or "props" that they saw as representative of the "real" China. While the twenty tons of properties procured by the studio crew—ranging from "a complete farm, with house and all equipment (even three water-buffalo!) to costumes, children's toys, and the minutest details of everyday life"—facilitated MGM's construction of a verisimilar setting in *The Good Earth*,[52] Wong's "props," mainly qipao dresses and Peking Opera costumes,[53] enabled her performance of modern urban Chinese femininity spiced with operatic exotica in her post-1936 films and stage plays. Off the screen and stage, Wong's Chinese wardrobe also played an important role when she wore or auctioned off parts of it in support of China's Anti-Fascist War with Japan.

To strengthen her bid for the China spokesperson position, Wong the estranged "daughter of China" consistently presented herself as an eager learner of traditional and modern Chinese customs and culture with the goal of updating her portrayal of Chinese characters for the US audience. She hired a female teacher to coach her in Mandarin Chinese, just as she practiced King's English, German, French, and other European languages during her previous travels. She also demonstrated agency in controlling what was presented to the Chinese and American publics, and how to address them. A salient occasion illustrating her self-positioning both as a learner and as being in control of image making was her visit to the Peking Dramatic School (Beiping Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao 北平中華戲曲專科學校) in present-day Beijing, where she engaged in photography and filming.

During a visit, she used her arc lamp to enhance the photographing of a young actor, Song Dezhu 宋德珠, playing the White Snake spirit in the act of "Jinshan si" 金山寺 (The Golden Mountain Temple) from *The Legend of the White Snake*.[54] She also sat for a group photo taken at the Dramatic School (figure 4.1), which shows Wong, the visitor, taking up the prominent position in the middle of the front row, wearing a qipao and holding an open paper fan, beaming a smile at the camera.[55] Her central position and confident demeanor, reinforced by the stately authority conveyed by the large fan, renders her the symbolic master. Meanwhile, Li Boyan 李伯言, the actual master and the vice principal of the school, is demurely perched to the left in the front row, with a closed fan. All the students in the front and back rows surround Wong. Wong's occupation of the master's position as the only woman in an otherwise all-male photo signaled an anomaly. The fact that the photo did not include the school's female students, who appeared in the film footage later used in the 1957 ABC TV episode "Native Land," suggests the photo's adherence to the Peking Opera's all-male tradition, which renders Wong's presence doubly transgressive.

The public persona Wong produced in these photo shoots was simultaneously studious and assertive. The studious aspect fit with her declared goal of re-recognizing her ancestral land so as to create positive Chinese characters on the

FIGURE 4.1. (Bottom right) Wong posing in a group photo at the Peking Dramatic School (Beiping Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao 北平中華戲曲專科學校) during her 1936 China trip. Published in *Shiri xiju* 十日戲劇 (Peking Opera Decadaily) 22 (Mar. 31, 1938): n.p.

screen. The assertive aspect imparted her confidence as a wannabe spokesperson for China. This dual register characterized her interstitial position, which she constantly recalibrated between earnest engagement and careful distanciation, so as to best interface with a spectrum of public expectations. We see this more amply illustrated in her Shanghai travel footage, especially at the moment when she autographed her Chinese name for her Chinese host.

Assembled under the title "Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China," the eight-minute silent travelogue was largely filmed by Newsreel Wong for Hearst Metrotone News.[56] Although it was unaired, according to a Hearst newsreel index card, the Hearst sponsorship indicates that the footage was filmed with an American audience in mind. In 1938, Wong planned to show the five reels of film made in China (which likely included the footage for Hearst Metrotone), combined with her fund-raising wardrobe auction for China War Relief.[57] With the American public as the target audience, the footage was filmed with a quasi-ethnographic approach, featuring Wong the celebrity arriving on location, so to speak, then interacting with the local people and environment. "Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China" opens in February 1936 with Wong arriving at the dock in a fur coat matched with a "cat-head" hat, speaking while being photographed and filmed by international journalists on the deck. A cut shows her entering the Park Hotel Shanghai, wearing the same hat, but a lighter jacket dress, indicating a different season. The rest of the footage was filmed during her April–May stay in Shanghai, following a trip to Hong Kong, Manila, and Changon (Wong's ancestral hometown in Guangdong province, where she visited her father, who had returned to his hometown in 1934). Wong was shown in different summer qipao dresses that she had tailored in Shanghai. In all locations she stood out, due to her height, big strides, swinging arms, and ease with the camera—looking toward it just enough to acknowledge and engage with the audience. Her difference was noted by local pedestrians, who were shown stopping to gaze at her or looking directly into the camera.

Wong's dual address in the footage, to her Chinese public and to her anticipated American audience, became most conspicuous in the scene of autographing. Evoking the scenes in *Piccadilly* where she smuggled in her Chinese signature and *Tiger Bay* where she traced out her Chinese name with chalk (see chapter 1), the autographing scene in the travelogue footage also acquired new meanings as it was reenacted in the Chinese context for both Chinese and American audiences. Here she was visiting Shanghai's Star Film Studio, accompanied by the studio's managers, producers, directors, and main actors, including Hu Die (Butterfly Wu), the 1933 China Movie Queen. Wong, slender and tall next to Hu, proudly sported her newly acquired light-blue silk qipao,[58] followed and surrounded by the studio's personnel—all gathering in front of a studio building in a medium-long shot. A cut to close-up shots shows Hu and Wong conversing with smiles and gestures. This is followed by a medium shot of Wong writing in a Chinese book with a brush (figure 1.3). While we are not privy to what she actually wrote in the footage, a journalist's

report titled "Jottings on Anna May Wong's Visit" made it clear that Wong was requested to write her Chinese name with a brush (see chapter 1).[59] As she traced out the strokes in a medium close-up framing, studio boss Chang Shih-chuan (S. C. Chang) 張石川 and publicity manager Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲, along with Hu Die, watched with great interest. Upon finishing her writing, she looked to Chang, who nodded with approval, then looked to the camera with a big, triumphant smile.

Wong's smiling look toward Chang, then toward the camera, encapsulated her address to two audiences—the Chinese audience represented by her on-camera studio hosts, and the American audience anticipated through the release of the footage. Collaborating with Newsreel Wong, Wong offered her Chinese persona for the Sino-American double gaze. Her greeting to the anticipated American audience specifically invited the latter to see her Chinese knowledge endorsed by her Chinese hosts. The fact that her travel footage was not formally released in America until being reedited for the television episode "Native Land" in 1957 meant that her audience address was not only transnational and transcultural, but also poignantly diachronic (more on this in the next section, on "Native Land").

Equally important were Wong's efforts to establish a rapport with her Chinese public. By proudly displaying her Chinese calligraphy with a brush—a symbol of classic literati refinement—Wong gratified her curious Chinese hosts, journalists, and the broader public. She also accepted the challenge to speak Mandarin Chinese by playfully reeling off the numbers one, two, three (etc.). She literally donned modern urban Chinese femininity by modeling a qipao dress tailored in a famous fashion shop in Shanghai. While visiting the Star Film Studio, she had an extensive conversation with Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962), a preeminent dramatist and film director from whom she learned about Chinese theater. All of this indicated her adoption of modern Chinese femininity and earnest engagement with Chinese culture and entertainment.

She further drew upon her broad knowledge of Euro-American film techniques to advise on lighting and makeup while visiting the Star Studio's filming set where a detective movie, *Jingang zuan* 金剛鑽 (The Diamond Drill, dir. Xu Xinfu 徐欣夫, 1936), was being made.[60] When asked to comment on Chinese cinema, Wong suggested making more cost-efficient "landscape films," since the Chinese dramatic films she had seen tended to be under-edited, possibly due to the low budget that made too many outtakes unaffordable.[61] By building conversation and collegiality with Shanghai filmmakers and dramatists, Wong explored work opportunities in China, which she had been planning while preparing for the trip to China. Coinciding with her travel, the Chinese American magazine *Chinese Digest* reported that the scarcity of Chinese roles in American films led Wong to study Chinese opera under the tutelage of Mei Lanfang and also to study Mandarin Chinese with the hope of gaining success on the Chinese stage in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other cities.[62]

During and shortly after her China trip, Chinese-language news intermittently anticipated her involvement in Chinese filmmaking. She reportedly had appeared

in *Jingang zuan*[63] and planned to open a film school in China. Upon her arrival in Hong Kong, Moon Kwan and Joseph Sunn Jue, who had cofounded the Grandview Film Company in San Francisco in 1933 and moved it to Hong Kong in 1935, stated they would invite Wong to play in two talkies during her Hong Kong visit.[64] Wong also mentioned receiving "offers to do pictures" in Shanghai and Hong Kong, but planned to stick to her original purpose for the trip—namely, to study Mandarin Chinese and Chinese customs and traditions, as well as writing articles about the trip (presumably for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle*).[65]

Ultimately, however, Wong did not succeed in expanding her career to China. In an interview after returning to Los Angeles, she attributed this to her foreignness in China: "I am convinced that I could never play in the Chinese theater. I have no feeling for it. It's a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I'm too American."[66] Shirley Jennifer Lim attributed Wong's misfit in China to her fundamental self-identification as an American "modern girl."[67] Yet Wong's feeling of being disadvantaged was only one side of the story. The other side was that she leveraged her "stranger" perspective to maintain opacity so as to refuse any essentialist identity alignment, be it Chinese or American. This enabled her to enact and juxtapose multiple identity types, engaging with identity-specific expectations while also commanding a critical gaze that mocked these expectations. In so doing, Wong fashioned a multi-perspective authorial position as a performer-worker.

Twenty years later, in her ABC television episode "Native Land," Wong's interstitial multi-perspective position became the key for remediating the 1936 travelogue footage for her Cold War–era American audience. Not only did her authority as a China spokesperson outlive that of *The Good Earth*, but also her mediator role had morphed into self-reflexive multifocal shuttling across space, history, geopolitics, media forms, and her own episodic life-career. This self-reflexive multifocal authorship debunked the presumed transparency in intercultural mediation, replacing it with opacity—that is, the refusal to align with digestible and essentialist identity positions.

"THE CHINESE-LOOKING LADY IN A FOREIGN DRESS": FROM 1936 CHINA TO THE POSTWAR AMERICAN TV SCREEN

"Native Land" (1957), an episode of the ABC TV travelogue series *Bold Journey*, roughly coincided with the lawsuit filed by John Henry Faulk against Aware Inc.—a right-wing organization that specialized in blacklisting suspected pro-communist entertainment personalities. Faulk was a CBS Radio comedy show host who was fired for alleged "un-American activities." Although he eventually won his case against Aware Inc., the case encapsulated the paranoid McCarthyism against

communist countries, including the People's Republic of China, founded in 1949. In chapter 3, I argue for Wong's disidentification from Cold War America's patriotic indoctrination through her outspoken amah character in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. In "Native Land," Wong directly addressed the Cold War–era American television audience by remediating her pre-communist Chinese travelogue footage. Straddling seismic shifts in geopolitics, history, media technologies, and her life-career, Wong in "Native Land" refashioned her authorship and audience address not only in the aftermath of her exclusion from *The Good Earth*, but also in the wake of red-baiting McCarthyism.

"Native Land" came during a prolonged hiatus in Wong's big-screen acting, which led her to actively search for television opportunities (see chapter 3). Four days after "Native Land" was released on February 14, 1957, Wong gave an interview, reiterating criticism of the negative stereotype of Oriental femininity that Hollywood had imposed on her. She also described her retirement (prior to the comeback in "Native Land") as the necessary "soul-searching" time for her to meditate, study, learn, and ultimately to "be revitalized, refreshed, reborn."[68] With this new self-understanding, she announced, "I am going to act in parts that suit my age. They will be roles into which I can inject some understanding, some sensitive feeling, for I want acting to be pleasure for me again."[69] Her hope for new, suitable roles in television embodied her persistent endeavor to sustain an episodic acting career across different media platforms. And her reclaiming of pleasurable acting (as opposed to merely reiterating stereotypes) anticipated her self-refashioning as a "character actress" (see chapter 3). Arguably, the pleasure of becoming a character actress began in "Native Land," in which she channels her younger self touring China while addressing the Cold War–era American television audience.

On January 23, 1957, Wong wrote to Fania Marinoff, excitedly anticipating her upcoming trip to New York for a TV deal that was to feature her personal appearance "in connection with my first visit to China film."[70] This TV deal became "Native Land," an ABC television episode that aired at 9:30 p.m., prime time, on February 14, 1957, and was rerun on March 9. In the same letter to Marinoff, Wong proudly described this TV episode as "the springboard for the beginning of their [ABC's] new season's series," *Bold Journey*. "Native Land" would "repeat the setup" of a successful local showing of her "first visit to China film" that was accompanied by her personal appearance and narration. Seeing herself as "the only well known name and my film on China having been so enthusiastically received," Wong expected a big publicity campaign for this episode.[71] The ABC press department described "Native Land" as Wong "present[ing] her films of life in China before it was hidden behind the Bamboo Curtain."[72] In this setup, the older Wong (the featured guest) played the native informant explicating and mediating the 1936 footage (featuring her younger self as a traveler); and John Stephenson, the show's host, anchored and stood in for the general American television audience. Their conversational style promoted a casual, living-room feel for the television audience.

On the surface, "Native Land," as an episode of *Bold Journey*, followed the show's self-branding as "your television passport to the exciting colorful world of adventures as seen through the eyes of the real people." Stressing authentic experiences of exotic foreign lands, each episode was narrated by a guest who was also the traveler who had "photographed [the footage] with their own 16mm cameras."[73] Designed to be family friendly, the show hoped to serve a pedagogical purpose: "Through such viewing, parents can share with their children a common interest and experience, and gain some understanding of what is discussed in school."[74] Consistent with the family-friendly ethos, the show was sponsored by Ralston Purina, whose commercials for its Chex breakfast cereals, featuring Lee Goodman from the company, punctuated each episode, advertising the "crunchy" product catering to "grown-up" taste.

Packaged as family-friendly education (about pre–World War II China), Wong's "Native Land" nonetheless differed from most of the adventure episodes in this show. Rather than reveling in remote places mystified as eternal and primitive, "Native Land" turned upon the urgency to grapple with change, precisely as the disappeared old China was nostalgically presented (and present-ed) on screen while the actual, present People's Republic of China was off-limits to American explorers. Host Stephenson reassured the audience that Wong's film was "not new" and was therefore untouched by China's recent political turmoil, and thus possessed the "beauty" of "rekindling the memory of China that was, and probably will never be again."[75] Yet just as the past was not lost, the present could not be disavowed. As Wong migrated from her 1936 travelogue footage into the 1957 "Native Land," she conjured an accordion of enfolded layers of temporality and spatiality, addressing Cold War American families from a multifocal perspective.

Wong's authoritative mediator status is established at the outset of "Native Land." Stephenson introduces her as the world's most well-known "Chinese woman," the "international motion picture favorite" who visited "the native land of her parents" after establishing herself as "a Hollywood leading actress." Wong is to serve "as our guide on tonight's journey" to a "slumbering giant in peaceful tranquility" in a "heartwarming episode." A close-up shot of a large book shows Wong's English name printed on the left page, and the title "NATIVE LAND" printed on the right page. Thus, Wong is positioned as not only the tour guide, but also the author of the "book" (or the show). This authorship comes at a price, though, as the title "Native Land" induces the audience to associate Wong's nativity (or root) with China, thus reinforcing the white American stereotyping of East Asian–heritage persons as perpetual foreigners.

This stereotype is upended by Wong's multifocal perspective and interstitial positioning throughout the entire show. Upon entering from screen right, she greets Stephenson in Taishanese: "*Gung hei*," she says, which means "congratulations" (often used as a New Year's greeting). Yet she she mistranslates it for her American audience as "greetings" (used for any occasion). This subtle "error"

FIGURE 4.2. Wong in the *Bold Journey* episode "Native Land" (ABC TV, 1957), wearing a head scarf embroidered with her Chinese name, sitting in front of a rope structure (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

instantly debunks her transparency as a mediator, and instead foregrounds her freewheeling translation and playful audience address. Analogously, her outfit displays an idiosyncratic assemblage of quasi-Chinese elements, including a light-colored brocade jacket and square black headwear that drapes backward to her shoulders, its top front decorated with her Chinese name in white embroidery. During the show, she is seated in front of a rope structure partially covered with netting, suggesting a half-folded sail (figure 4.2). All of these elements contribute to her performative Chineseness for the American audience.

Having visually displayed her quaint "Chinese" appearance, Wong then turns around to displace this image by recounting two anecdotes that highlight her misalignment with the Chineseness she encountered in 1936. In the first anecdote, she is perceived in rural China as not a real person, but a "robot," a "flicker" in the picture, and a "white devil." In the second anecdote, she orders tea in the Park Hotel Shanghai, expecting something authentic, only to be given an American-style tea bag. If the first anecdote stresses her strangeness or ahead-of-time-ness to the rural Chinese who are unfamiliar with modern film technology, the second anecdote mocks her own American stereotype of the "authentic" China, which is rebutted by the latter's Westernization and coevality. From the outset, Wong underscores the misrecognition between the Chinese and herself, embodied in their mutually alienating and alienated gaze. Thus, she makes clear that she performs the role of a

tour "guide" in "Native Land" with an ironic twist. Even as she introduces the travelogue footage in a quietly authoritative voiceover, she simultaneously foreignizes herself as a tourist and quasi-ethnographer strategically performing Chineseness. Thus, she addresses the postwar American audience by presenting herself as a fellow American *and more*—that is, as a seasoned migratory performer-worker constantly shuttling within the interstitial space.

Two interconnected themes run through Wong's remediation of her 1936 footage: image making and the composite nature of the images. A curious Chinese practice of posthumous portrait painting that Wong highlights in the show emblematizes Wong's composite approach to "Native Land" and to her self-imaging. As Wong describes to Stephenson and the audience, the Chinese get portrayed only after death, when a painter brings a book of a hundred facial features, each appearing in different shapes and indicating different ages, from which the descendants select the version of each feature closest to that of the deceased; the painter then paints a "composite" portrait based on the selections. Wong's description of this "composite" portraiture prefigures present-day computational recombinant creation from a data bank. Yet it also undergirds Wong's self-imaging and her method of assembling "Native Land" by gleaning and recombining her 1936 travelogue footage. By assembling the footage into a trajectory of traveling from Shanghai through Suzhou to Beijing and concluding with her visit with her father in their ancestral village of Changon (which actually took place before her Beijing trip), "Native Land" constructs Wong's homecoming and "native" turn while also allegorically serving as a portrait of the deceased China, as seen and composited by Wong.

Within this composite portrayal of China, Wong highlights her composite image making in China in collaboration with Newsreel Wong and some locals, by calling attention to her location filming sessions (so to speak). These sessions also double as her ethnographic capturing of seemingly spontaneous happenings. In this process, the distinction between the exotic local Other (Chinese people and customs) and the scopophiliac foreign Self (Wong) is evoked only to be recomposited when both parties are involved in the filmic mutual gaze. This is illustrated in Wong's dry-humor revelation to the American audience that the local Chinese were puzzled by her looks and wondered "who is that foreign-looking or the Chinese-looking lady . . . in foreign dress"—a composite misfit indeed! By turning the joke on herself (being subjected to the Chinese gaze and disqualified as a "native informant"), the older Wong calls out her younger self's strangeness, which led her to "go native."

The footage then shows her younger self visiting Shanghai's famous silk and tailor stores to have qipao dresses custom made. A star/celebrity who is also a learner, a tourist, and a quasi-ethnographic filmmaker, Wong displays her process of transforming into a "native" *on camera* and *on location*. As her voiceover emphasizes, her younger self eagerly planned to "get the pictures" of the authentic tailoring

VIDEO 4.1. Wong visiting a tailor shop in Shanghai in 1936, in footage shown in the "Native Land" episode (1957) of *Bold Journey* (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.1

process. She insisted on having measurements taken in the store—that is, *on the authentic location*—instead of having the tailor do it in her hotel (which would be like a movie set). Commenting on the tailor's bewildering skill of marking the measurements by tying knots on a string, shown in the footage, the older Wong quips, "How he can tell which knot is what knot I know not," thus playfully underscoring her foreignness *and* her performative native turn *for* the film (video 4.1).

Continuing the theme of self-imaging in the double sense of self-refashioning and filmmaking, we see the younger Wong staging another scene in her Beijing "bungalow" (her domesticating translation of *siheyuan* 四合院, Beijing's traditional residential compound with houses built around a rectangular courtyard) situated in an "alley" (her translation of *hutong* 胡同). In this scene, the local merchants brought a variety of goods (fabric, fans, paintings, etc.) to her courtyard for her selection. Yet the older Wong reveals that the real purpose was filming: showing her going through the beautiful Chinese objects as Newsreel Wong filmed her comically draped with a large pile of fabric, evoking the scene where she is decked out in the elaborate multiple pieces of the Chinese wedding gown in *The Toll of the Sea* (see chapter 1).

The process of staging and filming depended on collaboration not only with Newsreel Wong, but also with the locals who agreed to be filmed. During the footage of her tour of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the older Wong's voiceover praises her guide, a local male teacher garbed in a traditional gown, for being

FIGURE 4.3. Wong filming a funeral procession in China in 1936 with her Kodak 16mm camera, in footage shown in "Native Land" (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

"most cooperative" in being filmed. The Chinese, Wong tells us (reiteratively throughout her career), disliked being filmed, for fear of losing their souls to the camera. Perhaps Wong regularly revived the myth of the soul-snatching camera to emphasize the incommensurability between her career choice and the "Chinese" tradition. But her comment on the teacher's cooperation in this instance also underscored her collaborative authorship in obtaining the footage.

Her distanced yet collaborative image making also characterized some of the more ethnographic scenes, such as a funeral procession and a wedding ritual. One brief shot by Newsreel Wong showed the younger Wong turning her Kodak 16mm camera toward a wealthy family's funeral procession (figure 4.3). This mise-en-abyme setup indicates that Wong likely filmed some of the footage used in "Native Land" when she was not in front of the camera. If the funeral scene is more typically ethnographic, the scene of a wedding ritual illustrates Wong's interest in not so much capturing the exotic spectacle as underscoring that the ostensible exoticism was actually a composite of variant elements, analogous to the composite ancestor portraiture and her own image making. In the wedding sequence, the older Wong narrates that an American-educated Chinese bride she knew is marrying a man from a traditional family, leading to a "composite" ceremony in which she is dressed in pink (merging the Chinese red and the Western white), riding in a car from her home, then changing midway to a traditional sedan.

The bride's emergence from the sedan was clearly staged. As the sedan parked facing the camera, the curtain was lifted by the amah who helped the bride out; the latter then stood, letting the camera scan up her body. A close-up, toe-to-top tilt shot highlights her ornate wedding gown, almost in an Orientalist fashion, which, however, is derailed as Wong's amused voiceover points out the irony that the American-educated bride is not weeping to show her sorrow over leaving her parents (per the ritual). Another irony is the fact that the bride was filmed full frontal and presented to the American audience, even as Wong's voiceover explains the tradition that the bride must be completely covered and not seen by anybody (including her husband) until the wedding night.

The discrepancy Wong highlights in her narrative not only illustrates the bride's departure from the traditional wedding ritual, but also suggests her willing collaboration with Wong and Newsreel Wong in the filming. Arguably, Wong, who had spent her career developing her signature "Oriental" (dis)play for the Western gaze, would have found a mirror image in the Western-educated bride. Sharing the bride's ironic dis(play) and recomposition of the ritual through her own convivial filming, Wong transformed the seeming ethnographic footage to mock a casual tourist glance *and* confront the Orientalist gaze with her and her subject's shared female practice of deviation.

The central quasi-ethnographic section in "Native Land" shows Wong's visit to the Peking Dramatic School just a few days after arriving in Beijing. This visit was to significantly shape her performance career; and Wong's narrative of this footage illustrates her gender-oriented collaborative authorship. Writing to her American friend Bernardine Szold-Fritz on May 19, 1936, she talked about visiting the Dramatic School (which she also called Children's Theater, because all the students were children) that morning for the third time; and she planned to pay a daily visit as part of her education.[76] Wong not only photographed the actor Song Dezhu's performance and sat for a group photo (figure 4.1), but also witnessed Peking Opera training at close range. The older Wong comments on a training session where a male teacher taught a female student "how to be [or play] a girl," for Peking Opera traditionally was performed by an all-male cast, and male actors specializing in female roles (such as Mei Lanfang) had established an elaborate system of body language to convey various female types and emotions (video 4.2). The footage also shows the younger Wong visiting the backstage where Song Dezhu put on the "lotus feet" (shoes) to imitate women's bound feet, then dressed his head in five steps for his female character—all captured in close-up shots.

While the older Wong plays the native informant by offering many details to the American audience, she also reinserts her outsider position into the narrative by recalling her inadvertent violation of the actors' "superstition" about their untouchable prop beards. It was as an inquisitive outsider that she interacted with the teachers and students at the Dramatic School to coproduce the sneak-view footage of the backstage. Indeed, working with foreigners on their filmmaking

VIDEO 4.2. Wong visiting the Peking Dramatic School in Beijing in 1936, in footage shown in the "Native Land" episode (1957) of *Bold Journey* (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.2

ethnographic tours was by no means a novel experience for the teachers and students at this school. The school was founded in 1930 by preeminent Peking Opera performance artist Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–58), who appointed the school principal Jiao Juying 焦菊隱 (1905–75), a dramatist well versed in both traditional Chinese opera and modern spoken drama who later obtained a doctoral degree in drama in Paris. Under Jiao's leadership, the Dramatic School spearheaded a new pedagogy. It reformed traditional operatic education by terminating apprenticeship (and corporal punishment), adopting a curriculum of diverse subjects, including foreign languages, and, most importantly, pioneering coeducation (contrary to the traditional male-only practice). Due to its modern operatic education, the school attracted foreign visitors such as Wong herself. The training scenes showcased in her footage were, therefore, no esoteric secret; on the contrary, such scenes were put on display for foreign tourists and their ethnographic gaze. For instance, Kodachrome footage identified as being filmed in 1938, possibly by another foreign visitor/tourist, similarly shows this school's students training in the courtyard where Wong did her filming.[77]

The difference was that Wong's footage demonstrated more sustained involvement, as indicated by the heavy use of close-up framing as well as her presence in front of the camera (filmed by Newsreel Wong) *and* possibly behind the camera. Her close-range observation indicated a special interest in male students impersonating female roles (following the Peking Opera tradition), and in

female students learning from a male teacher to act like a woman (reflecting the newly instituted coed system). This interest in gender performance and performativity, combined with her procurement of operatic costumes and headgear, inspired her post-China-trip performances on screen and stage (see chapters 1 and 2).[78] The ostensibly quasi-ethnographic footage, therefore, went beyond cursory Otherizing scopophilia to embody Wong's engagement with the Chinese locals to build collaboration from her position as a sojourning outsider and observer-participant.

Wong's travelogue footage ended with her visit with her father (who had returned from the US in August 1934) in their ancestral village, Changon, accompanied by her sister Ying and youngest brother, Richard. The closing long wide shot shows Wong, dressed in an elegant long qipao, back to the camera, supporting her aging father as they stroll into the setting sun filtered through trees. Accompanying this atmospheric shot, the older Wong, her father now dead, tells Stephenson that her one and only trip to China was the "most meaningful" among her many cosmopolitan travels. Her tone of nostalgia seems to deliver the show's promise of having an ex–film star of "Chinese extraction" (Wong's jocular self-identification) guide Cold War–era American families on a heartwarming tour to her father's "native land," which is now tucked away in another time as well as another space.

And yet, since the travelogue footage was silent and was not publicly shown in the late 1930s, its surfacing in 1957 on the television screen, enlivened by the older Wong's voiceover, means that the past became visible and legible only through the present recomposition and remediation. The entanglement of absence and presence, and of different spatiotemporalities, both highlights the historical shifts and resists unilinear temporality. Thus, "Native Land" does not simply transform Wong's travelogue footage into a vehicle for teaching ordinary Americans about a friendly "old China" that was irreversibly replaced by America's Red enemy. Moreover, Wong seizes this opportunity to interrupt a linear progression and insist on the continuous relevance of an episode of her career. This past-present composite is encapsulated in the juxtaposition of the two Wongs from different historical eras, with her double gaze first inscribed in the 1936 16mm film, then in the 1957 television show. In these inter-temporal and cross-media processes, Wong occupies multiple positions as a star, a quasi-ethnographic filmmaker, a cosmopolitan traveler, a controversial Chinese "daughter," an American exotic icon, and, ultimately, a peripatetic performer-worker and a tongue-in-cheek mediator who performs the "native informant," addressing and greeting the public from an interstitial position unaligned with any essentialist identity.

From the 1936 travelogue footage that resulted from her exclusion from *The Good Earth* to "Native Land," which signaled her relaunching of television acting following the 1951 foray into *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, Wong weathered episodes of disappearances to chart out labor-intensive rebeginnings while

maintaining active interactions with different publics. In the next section, I continue to explore Wong's multi-registered audience address in another media work derived from her China trip.

"I THOUGHT I COULD BRUSH UP ON MY MANDARIN": INSIDE JOKES AND INTERACTIVE AGENCY IN THE MARGINS

Produced by Louis Lewyn Productions, distributed by MGM, and released on April 3, 1937, just over two months after *The Good Earth*'s premiere on January 29 in Los Angeles, *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* is a short musical revue set in a garden tea party cohosted by the actress Elissa Landi and the comedian Charley Chase. Its Orientalist extravaganza decked out in a loud color scheme makes it the polar opposite of *The Good Earth*'s mud-caked realism. Yet they share the full-blown yellowface costuming, the makeup, and the fixation on Oriental exotica (albeit in different forms). Indeed, *Hollywood Party* could be understood to cash in on American audiences' surging interest in China as a result of *The Good Earth*'s spectacular success and, ironically, Japan's escalating war on China.

In *Hollywood Party*, the hosts and a large number of ensemble actors stage yellowface pyrotechnics marked by quaint costumes, coolie hats, folding fans, taped "Oriental" "slit eyes," and contrived yellowvoice and body mannerisms, in a mish-mash "Oriental" setting crowded with a faux-Shinto shrine, man-carried sedans, bamboo blinds, miniature pagodas, and other "Oriental" bricolage. Cohost Chase, yellowfacing the fictional "Charley Chan Chase the magician" in a faux-Manchu robe, manneristically twitches his Fu Manchu–esque mustache, speaks with the Hollywood-concocted yellowvoice, and announces the song-and-dance numbers with bogus "Oriental" magic tricks. The revue numbers put on display for the diegetic tea-party guests and the film audience are clownish verging on campy, as illustrated in the yellow-clad Ahern Sisters' dance caricaturing "Chinese" bowing and kowtowing against the background of a miniature pagoda, the Al Lyons Band dressed in faux-Manchu gowns and hats, and the Marcus Show Girls posing as dancing-and-singing hula girls.

Wedged right in the middle of this cringe-worthy Orientalist frenzy is Wong's first screen appearance following her China trip. In this under two-minute snippet (in the twenty-minute film), Wong gives a quiet and witty fashion show of the exoticized, yet modern, feminine chic dresses that she has recently acquired from China. Cued by Elissa Landi striking a mini gong, Charley (Chan) Chase introduces Wong as a "China lady of fashion." A cut directs the audience's attention to closed yellow bamboo blinds, flanked by two Chinese women dressed, respectively, in purple and green silk jacket suits. As one woman strikes a standing gong accompanied by nondiegetic, stereotypically chirpy pentatonic music, the other woman pulls open the blinds, revealing Wong, seen through the slats, dressed in a long blue qipao,

VIDEO 4.3. Wong modeling dresses she had procured in China, in *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.3

standing with her back to the camera, left arm akimbo, in front of a Chinese-themed background drape, as if she were part of the Orientalist setting (video 4.3).

This brief tableau full shot prefigures Wong posing as a mannequin modeling the Peking Opera woman warrior costume at the beginning of *Daughter of Shanghai* (released eight months later, in December 1937). Anticipating the fully developed strategy of mobilizing a fashion parade as subversive "Oriental" (dis)play in *Daughter of Shanghai* (chapter 1), Wong in *Hollywood Party* uses the brief snippet to explore the agency of self-objectivization. Opening the fashion parade in a tableau pose, she objectivizes herself as a prop modeling other props—the exotic costumes—only then to break out of the objecthood to directly address the mainstream white American audience (both diegetic and extradiegetic). At the same time, she interacts with the two Chinese-heritage women in the stage margins to coproduce a beguiling show of Chinese femininity.

Stirring out of the tableau pose, the blue-clad Wong detaches from the background behind the blinds, turns around, and walks to the foreground toward the camera, as the chirpy pentatonic music continues. Then a cut takes us to behind the blinds, offering a medium framing of her wielding an obligatory Chinese folding fan of matching blue color as she addresses the camera/audience, stating that she was so impressed by the "smart and vivid" Chinese ladies in their "beautiful modern dresses" that she decided to "go completely Chinese in my wardrobe." She goes on to teach the American audience about the blue qipao she is modeling, describing it as an "afternoon dress in the famous Peking blue from the former capital now called Peiping." Here Wong avoids using the foreign-sounding Chinese term *qipao* (or the Cantonese equivalent *cheongsam*), and instead domesticates it into an American-friendly "afternoon dress," which is not a Chinese concept. Yet she also strategically retains the exotic visual appeal of the dress by branding it as "Peking blue." Additionally, she shows off her up-to-date knowledge of China, telling the audience about the imperial capital city's name change from Peking to Peiping.

The next costume Wong displays, after the purple-clad Chinese woman briefly shuts the blinds, is a silver cape, "a blending of the very old and the very new; the material is tribute brocade from the imperial palace made along the latest western lines." Taking off the cape, revealing a bright yellow qipao, Wong momentarily turns to the green-clad Chinese woman on the right, speaking in Chinese. The latter responds in English, "I'm sorry but I only understand Cantonese," whereupon they share a hearty laugh. After the brief Chinese interlude (more on this later), Wong turns to the camera to face the mainstream white American audience, her big smile slowly replaced by a straight, authoritative face as she smoothly segues to introduce her yellow qipao as a "dress from Peiping," made of "the famous imperial yellow with a dragon, the symbol of the old China." As Wong smilingly closes this information capsule while elegantly opening the folding fan, a cut takes us back to a full shot of her—seen through the blinds with open slats. Wong's quietly witty fashion show is followed by a performance by the Al Lyons Band, with all the musicians yellowfacing in gaudily colored, make-believe Manchu robes and hats.

Short as it is, Wong's fashion parade sabotages the yellowface extravaganza in the rest of the revue film, but not because one is authentic while the other is fake. Rather, the critical difference is one between satirical identity performance and racist caricature. By self-reflexively and sartorially performing Chineseness, Wong satirizes not only American Orientalism but also Chinese linguistic nationalism. She seizes the stage offered by *Hollywood Party* to display her new knowledge about Chinese fashion and culture so as to play the China spokesperson. Meanwhile, she also leverages her Chinese knowledge to playfully challenge the very notion of authenticity, debunking the Western-centric epistephilia about China on the one hand and the Chinese Nationalist government's homogenizing construction of Chineseness on the other. In introducing the fashions, she underscores the hybridization of the old and the new, the imperial Chinese brocade and the Western cut (for the cape). Thus, she does not so much reinscribe the ancient China mystique as render it a playable and mutable icon that could be grafted onto the Western fashion idiom to produce composite Chineseness. Such composite objects constructed by Wong's embodied and discursive mediation demonstrate how the ostensibly binary notions of the East and the West, the object and the subject, the old and the new, necessarily reshape each other, instead of simply blending or clashing with each other.

It is hard to empirically track down how Wong's contemporary, predominantly white audience received her subtle sabotage of race-gender stereotyping that was, after all, the main attraction of *Hollywood Party*. Publicity showed that American theater exhibitors recommended this film for "good comedy" and "outstanding" colors, suitable for "general patronage."[79] Although Wong was listed as one of the personalities paraded in the film, it was the "comedy" or the blatant yellowface caricatures that were highlighted. Interestingly, Wong had collaborated with Charley Chase in comedy shorts earlier in her

career, possibly when she was a Hal Roach contract player (more on this in the Refrain).[80] Yet, in contrast to Chase, whose long-term contract with Roach as a comedian led the audience to see his yellowface performance as entertaining, Wong was recognized largely for her straight-faced "Oriental" authenticity. It is therefore all the more important to look to the margins and the background to appreciate Wong's double entendre through interacting with other racialized co-players on the screen, and how such interactions might help recruit a resonating alternative audience.

This collaborative authorship is crystallized in the Chinese interlude described above. In this interlude, inserted into her fashion parade, Wong abruptly interrupts her English introduction of a silver cape and turns sideways to speak Chinese to the green-clad Chinese co-player in the margin. The latter responds in idiomatic American English with a smile, "I'm sorry but I only understand Cantonese." Wong smiles back and remarks with mock disappointment, "Oh, I thought I could brush up on my Mandarin." They both laugh heartily as Wong turns to face the camera and the mainstream white audience, and then, without missing a beat, straightens her face and segues to introduce the yellow qipao she reveals under the cape. During this flitting and opaque Chinese interlude, Wong deftly collapses the center stage and the edge of the screen/stage space (or the parergon), working with the supporting Chinese female co-player to simultaneously claim *and* debunk the homogeneous authentic Chinese identity.

I have argued elsewhere that this Chinese interlude constitutes "a make-believe performance amenable to multiple, potentially contradictory, interpretations."[81] For the mainstream white audience, Wong's untranslated Chinese side talk reinforces her opacity as the "inscrutable Oriental." Her subsequent comment—"Oh, I thought I could brush up on my Mandarin"—then leads the white audience to believe that she has just spoken a Mandarin line to her Chinese co-player. This belief clinches Wong's updated and upgraded modern Chinese identity, following her much-publicized Mandarin lessons in China. With this linguistic upgrading (given the Chinese government's promotion of Mandarin as the national language), she presents herself as a spokesperson for modern China (especially modern Chinese urban femininity), contesting *The Good Earth*, which excluded her but was endorsed by the Chinese government.

In the meantime, Wong's Chinese interlude mocks the Chinese government's homogenizing linguistic nationalism. For she and her Cantonese-literate co-player share the tacit understanding that her Chinese line is not Mandarin (as they make it out to be, for the white audience), but something close to her ancestral Taishan dialect. In other words, when the female actress in the margin feigns inability to understand Wong's "Mandarin," they coproduce a side show to convince the white audience of Wong's Mandarin capability and, by extension, her new alignment with the Chinese government, in order to align with Hollywood's newfound support for that government. Thus, their shared laughter implies an inside joke, legible only to

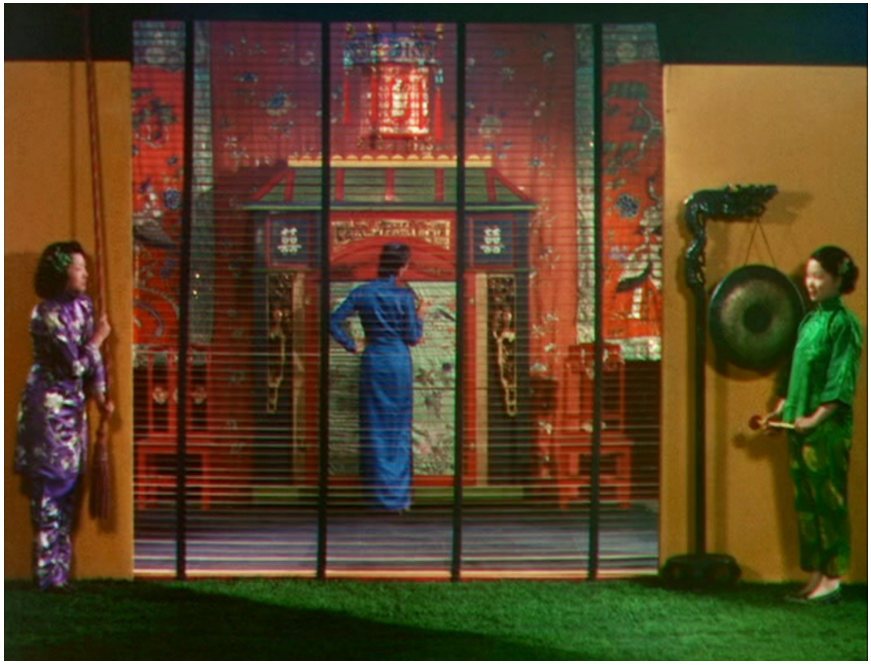


FIGURE 4.4. Mise-en-abyme spatial demarcation in *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937) (frame enlargement).

a similarly marginalized ethnic audience who could see that Wong's make-believe "Mandarin" Chinese is for the gullible. By smuggling Taishanese into the show and passing it off as Mandarin, Wong, in collaboration with another ethnic performer and resonating audience, exploits the burgeoning Sino-American rapprochement, only then to surreptitiously displace China's homogenizing nationalism with a supranational and diasporic lingua-culture rooted in southern Chinese dialects.[82]

Wong and her co-player's collaboration links the center stage (occupied by Wong in her fashion parade) and the margins (occupied by her co-player), collapsing the spatial demarcation within the mise-en-abyme screen frame. In Wong's fashion show, we see layers of frames—the screen frame, the frame of the bamboo blinds flanked by the purple and green-clad ethnic Chinese female performers, the square Chinese-style drape, and the make-believe ornate doorway in the *background* behind the blinds (figure 4.4). Yet when Wong and her co-player interact across the edges, they collapse and de-binarize the center and the margins, much as Wong did when she shifted the show from the parergon position (see chapter 3).

This center-margin traversing extended beyond the diegesis. Since *Hollywood Party* existed in the shadow of the mega-production *The Good Earth*, which had premiered two months earlier, Wong's collaboration with the ethnic Chinese

co-player took place in the margin of the margin, bespeaking the complex entanglement between the center and the parergon, between visibility and invisibility, between the star/celebrity and the performer-worker. It is in the interstice between exclusion and inclusion that Wong and her Chinese co-player develop their speech "in a forked tongue"—that is, speaking as authentic spokeswomen for modern Chinese femininity on the one hand *and*, on the other, as tricksters juggling multiple identity positions, sharing inside jokes and laughter. When their collaborative side show elicits and fosters a more discerning viewership, such tacit mutual recognition spreads further through the circulation of glance, wink, laughter, and verbal asides. We see this circulation further fleshed out in *Daughter of Shanghai*, in the dance sequence where Wong's character's sideways glance meets with that of Philip Ahn's character (see chapter 1). These sideways interactions echo what Glissant theorizes as the "right to opacity,"[83] resisting mainstream scrutiny (whether it aims at interpellation or Otherization), thereby demanding altogether different terms of visibility with matching strategies of discernment and attunement.

Wong's reshaping of the terms of visibility and spectatorial sensibility arose from her episodic career. Contrary to the British journalist John Newnham's description of Wong's willful disappearances and reappearances,[84] Wong's disappearances were imposed by Hollywood's marginalization and exclusion (as amply illustrated by the casting of *The Good Earth*), which also forced her to regroup and retrain herself while seeking opportunities elsewhere, as demonstrated by her China trip, which in turn led her back to the big and small screens in the US. Her episodic disappearances and reappearances enacted what Lauren Berlant calls the "dissociative poetics" that taught her to navigate systemic negativities, and to use the disappearances as "a potential hub" of "lines of flight" so as to "better show up even for these relations that one also finds unbearable because one must bear them."[85]

Wong's episodic career was persistent, resilient, and anachronotopic. Rather than pursuing a telos-driven forward and upward trajectory, it scrambled chronology and teleology through reiterations (with differences) and multiple rebeginnings and reorientations. It also foregrounded the physical, intellectual, and affective labor of waiting, frustration, retraining, and regrouping. Thus, even as she was striving for center-stage roles, she inevitably straddled the center, the periphery, and the off-screen/stage spaces, shattering the naturalized hierarchizing optic. Wong's diegetic and extradiegetic shuttling between these differentially weighted sites resembles what Ashon Crawley calls "centrifugitivity" in relation to Black Pentecostalism. Centrifugitivity conjoins centripetal and centrifugal movements, asserting dissent and descent simultaneously as the grounds of social gathering.[86] Similar to Wong's episodic, anachronotopic, oftentimes off-center, and even invisibilized career, centrifugitivity privileges "indeterminacy of meaning" by moving "not simply in a linear, forward progression but also vertically, down and up, askance and askew." Such a nonteleological dynamic gravitates toward "otherwise

worlds of possibility," necessitating an "ongoing anticipatory posture, an affective mode of celebratory waiting."[87]

This "ongoing anticipatory posture" accurately captures Wong's investment in her actual and potential audiences, with expectations of making contact beyond the entrenched system of Otherization and interpellation. Understood in the *longue durée* during and since her lifetime, Wong's Chinese interlude from *Hollywood Party* shows that her episodic yet persistent life-career is one of constantly reaching out and building toward multi-sited publics with whom to foster synergistic transformative politics from the centrifugitive margins. The surging interest in Wong over the past two decades is clear evidence of her success in speculating and recruiting expanding audiences who are learning to critically engage with her complex legacy.

By recruiting an expanding public through the sideways audience address, Wong redefines authorship in two critical aspects. First, she debunks the individualist and autonomous notion of authorship, and instead highlights the call-and-response with similarly marginalized co-performers and resonating viewers. Second, her centrifugitive performances dwell on the tension between the center and the margins, hypervisibility and invisibility, compliance and defiance—thereby underscoring the paradox of agency. That is, her situated agency is inevitably entangled with constraints and negotiations. Her paradoxical authorship is quintessentially intersubjective and relational, stemming from her multifocal and anticipatory interactions with her co-players and resonating audience. Her peekaboo intervention and multiple rebeginnings retrain the viewers' eyes to look differently, teaching them to coproduce a centrifugitive sensory field and interactive minoritarian agency.

Wong's centrifugitive neither-nor position, combined with eclectic leverage of resources, dovetails with a postcolonial and poststructuralist sensibility. In the next chapter, I probe the ways in which present-day critical viewers (including film critics and media practitioners) respond to Wong's time-capsule "greetings." At the heart of my discussion is how such diachronic call-and-response reanimates and re-composites Wong's legacy to address issues surrounding social equity and justice in our own time.

5

Encore the Performer-Worker

Meeting Anna May Wong's "Greetings"

. . . tout texte est d'une certaine manière une lettre d'amour [any text is in a certain way a love letter].

—JACQUES DERRIDA

In the previous chapters, I have analyzed Wong's signature performances, characterized by what I call the "Oriental" (dis)play—a double-entendre strategy of displaying "Oriental" femininity to mainstream viewers while simultaneously (dis)playing and rupturing the same stereotypes for critical viewers who share(d) her interstitial position. By tracing Wong's longitudinal parodic signature performances that permeated even her minor roles and off-screen activities, I refocus on invisibilized labor to formulate performer-worker studies with the ultimate goal of reorienting Euro-American film and media cultures. A critical link in my labor-centered and de-individualistic performer-worker studies is Wong's synchronic *and* diachronic "greetings" that invite and foster a shared critical interstitial sensibility.

This chapter, therefore, fleshes out Wong's "greetings" to the world, and the world's responses to her. I understand the call-and-response as not causal or lineal, but rather rife with surprise encounters, tension-ridden engagements, and circuitous resonances, resulting in complex cross-spatial and cross-time interlocution. Taking a cue from Derrida's observation, quoted above, that any text is in a certain way a love letter with an anticipated recipient (the beloved), I use the concept of "greetings" to encapsulate Wong's proactive and nuanced recruitment of supportive publics through various modes of performances and audience address. The publics she addresses include international colleagues, friends, audiences, reviewers, critics, and fans

Simultaneously, I take seriously Derrida's questioning of a text's or a love letter's sure arrival at a destination—an assumption predicated on the singularity of the sender, the receiver, and the message. To the contrary, Derrida derails destination into "destinerrance"—"a fatal possibility of erring by not reaching a predefined

temporal goal in terms of wandering away from a predefined spatial goal."[1] Destinerrance is inevitable, as it "arises from the feature of iterability that Derrida associates with any sign, trace, or mark, even prelinguistic marks."[2] Iterability means that the sender, the message, and the receiver are all infinitely divisible, thus deviating from a singular identity or entity, with unexpected results. The postcard bearing the love message intended for the loved one is available to anyone who has access to the postcard: "The recipient, however fortuitously he or she may come upon that postcard, is transformed into someone else, put beside himself or herself, dislocated, by reading it. I become the person to whom those words seem to be addressed, their fitting recipient."[3] The fortuitous destinerrance of the message, therefore, produces surprise relationships while losing some intended relationships, leading to in-flux positions.

Wong's greetings to her public are no love messages on open postcards. On the contrary, as I have argued throughout the book, they are carefully encrypted, opaque, flexibly addressing differently located audiences with variant sensibilities. Still, in extending greetings to the public elsewhere and in other times, she inevitably acknowledged *and* speculated in the contingent destinerrance of her greetings. In this context, destinerrance means that there is no guarantee in how her greetings will be met, by whom, and in what ways, especially posthumously. Wong's greetings to the public, therefore, entail throwing her performances into multiple time-spaces, encountering her contemporary audiences, *and* projecting a speculative relation with audiences elsewhere and yet to come. Such speculative relation building makes her a historical "companion" whose "potential history" beckons our response and engagement—and through responding, we transform ourselves.[4]

In her study of early twentieth-century female film workers who suffered erasure, Jane Gaines states that "what might have been" might become "what could be again."[5] "What could be again" is never a mere present-day realization of "what might have been," but rather the potential history's reanimation and transformation through the present spectatorial interventions. In other words, it is through the encounter between Wong's speculative greetings and the public's speculative responses to her as a historical companion that a relationship becomes possible, which in turn reconstitutes both Wong's legacy and the responding public's self-positioning. The speculative and contingent nature of the encounters effectively pushes beyond empirical reception studies, the limitations of which are laid out in this book's Prelude. Specifically relevant to this chapter is that empirical reception research tends to focus exclusively on a discrete historical period, that of Wong's lifetime, which risks disregarding her posthumous legacy as a historical companion.

Two critical insights become possible through the speculative approach. First, Wong's greetings to the world invest in a resonating public that is yet to come, but also acknowledge that the meetings with her greetings are contingent, rather

than planned. Second, contemporary historians, critics, and motivated viewers speculatively construe and build out Wong's legacy by creatively reworking her elliptical and widely disseminated traces. They further ferment such encounters into media-oriented and sociopolitical interventions. Centering the contingent yet ineluctable encounters between greetings and responses, this chapter reinforces Wong's anti-teleological, anachronotopic salience that is both out-of-time-place *and* across diverse time-places.

This chapter first revisits two instances illustrating Wong's poignant greetings to her American and international publics, then analyzes how her greetings are met by three Asian American media practitioners who mobilize diverse media technologies to re-mediate and reanimate Wong's legacy. Imbricating the past and the present, these media works embody the present-day media practitioners' interlocution with Wong's greetings.

WONG'S GREETINGS TO THE WORLD

Wong's four-decade-long performance career traversed disparate Euro-American-Australian film, theater, television, and radio industries. Her reiterative authorial position gives rise to "greetings" that have shaped and shifted the variegated reception horizons. As laid out in the previous chapters, her greetings take a range of forms, including her signature performances; correspondence with film and theater practitioners, musicians, writers, photographers, art critics, and friends; travelogue writings and filming; multilingual interviews; gifted photos with Chinese and English autographs; and off-screen and off-stage work, such as educating and entertaining Hollywood's white crews and casts with her performative Chinese expertise and fund-raising for China War Relief. In view of Wong's wide-ranging greetings during and after her lifetime, her international professional network and audience circles could be understood as emerging from her hailing.

As Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues, film is "a relational medium" through which "authors, spectators, critics all anticipate each other in their relationships as historically situated subjects."[6] Wong's address to audiences, both actual and anticipated, catalyzes precisely such relationality with responsive spectatorial sensibilities. In this process, film and other media apparati morph into potentially empowering relation-building vehicles. Two instances I have referenced at different places in the book serve to remind us of Wong's solicitation of relationality based on critical sensibility.

The first instance is her self-announced arrival on the scene as a "considerable spot of yellow that's come to stay on the silver of the screen" at the beginning of her career.[7] This prideful challenge to film's literal and symbolic white-centric aesthetics, however, was defused by the journalist who cannibalized Wong's "spot of yellow" into "a much-needed freshness to the screen, a breath of lotus flowers," which would add to the "screenland color symphony."[8] To wrestle Wong's challenge from

the dispossessing and expropriative "color harmony" means that we must reanimate her voice, first and foremost by recognizing her address to a resonating audience that she speculatively anticipated.

The second instance illustrating Wong's direct relation-building with her audience came two decades later, in 1939, when her career staccatoed yet persisted across space and media platforms. As her burgeoning power of provocation in 1921 became seasoned with witty sarcasm in 1939, she criticized her Euro-American audience for seeing her as "a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf," urging the Australian audience to see her as "an actress, not a freak."[9] Resisting the Euro-American pathologizing fetishism of her "Oriental" femininity, Wong directly "greeted" her Australian public, challenging them to be more discerning and intelligent in appreciating her performance skills *as* performance skills.

Respectively marking the "first beginning" of her career and the lull that followed the "third beginning," these two instances encapsulate Wong's provocative reaching out to her anticipated audiences. This interlocutory stance has fermented a politically conscious spectatorial sensibility among marginalized media critics and practitioners. In this process, "what might have been" and "what could be again" (to borrow from Jane Gaines) become mutually constitutive through an anticipated yet difficult call-and-response. The three media works I study here all demonstrate painstaking reckoning with and re-mediation of Wong's legacy. They are Yunah Hong's *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (2010), an hour-long documentary featuring an actress, Doan Ly, vocally reenacting passages gleaned from Wong's correspondence and interviews; Celine Parreñas Shimizu's short documentary *The Fact of Asian Women* (2002), which similarly deploys reenactment to probe the possibility of performative agency through relational filmmaking; and Patty Chang's *The Product Love* (2009), which comprises a two-channel video installation and one video loop. This work grapples with Wong's ambivalent legacy by staging failed translation and stunted affect, and by doctoring Wong's film section to resignify her overdetermined iconic fetish value. My analysis devotes more space to Chang's *The Product Love* due to its textual complexity, radical recontextualization, and multilayered engagement with the fantasy surrounding Wong.

All three works explore the position of ethnic Asian female media workers within and outside mainstream film and media industries across history. Here, media practice, criticism, history, and spectatorship converge to address three questions: (1) What can an early twentieth-century Chinese American female performer-worker like Wong teach us today? (2) What kinds of mutual interactions could become possible between a historical companion and contemporary social agents? And (3) how does our interlocution with Wong as our historical companion help us write feminist and decolonial film and media histories?

Pondering similar questions, Jane Gaines speculates "historical coincidental relations across times and cultures." She celebrates "a symmetrical 'eloquence of the same,'" "the power of matched things, of finding resemblance between ourselves

and earlier others," and "a politics of 'she too': 'She too' was burdened with family responsibilities, 'she too' was unacknowledged in her time, and 'she too' could not get the job for which she was qualified."[10] For Gaines, the reiteration of "she too" in "historical coincidental relations" suggests that the past and the present are both historicized and reconstituted in their mutual recognition. The erased historical figures "need us in order to exist historically, . . . not just as lost figures of the past, but as *provocative images in and for the present*."[11] Thus, echoing Shimizu's theorization of film being relational and anticipatory, Gaines posits a gesture of being "*in anticipation*" that is shared by feminist scholars, the moving-image evidence, and the pioneering filmmakers, when they meet "halfway," supplementing each other's aspirations.[12]

Gaines's co-constitutive and halfway-meeting approach guides my analysis of the three contemporary Asian American re-mediations of Wong. Two important differences distinguish my study from Gaines's, however. First, I emphasize that the meeting of the historical companion with the present, though anticipated, is a difficult one that requires labor-intensive self-reflection; and the results cannot be guaranteed (per Derrida's notion of destinerrance). In other words, the call-and-response may not always be a straightforward recognition of "she too," but could also stem from the painstaking process of learning to tune into an uncanny wavelength, as in "She speaks to me; but I am not sure about what and how, and I struggle to find a way to respond." In different ways, the three media works inscribe this difficult contact that is at once intimate and friction-laden, anticipated and struggled with. It is through this contact that Wong's salience comes across time and space as palpable, affective, and momentous.

My second difference from Gaines is that Wong's contemporary interlocutors I study in this chapter are not just feminist film historians; they are two media practitioners (Hong and Chang) and one critic-practitioner (Shimizu). Since media making is the chosen mode of engaging with Wong, I pay special attention to the operations of the (multi)media form and technology. Specifically, I explore how the digital turn, which has democratized media authorship and transformed our media ecosystem, might enable today's feminist and decolonialist practitioners to construct their audiovisual responses to Wong's greetings.

IN HER OWN WORDS: FROM VENTRILOQUIZED HISTORICAL ALIGNMENT TO THE ARCHIVE EFFECT

Korean American documentary maker Yunah Hong's *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* was made a few years after the first feature-length documentary about Wong, *Anna May Wong, Frosted Yellow Willows: Her Life, Times, and Legend* (dir. Elaine Mae Woo, 2007). They differ significantly in the position of enunciation. Woo's documentary chronicles Wong's life-career from a third-person perspective that assembles talking-head interviews, audiovisual illustration, and a voiceover

narrative (by none other than Wong's veritable Chinese/Hong Kong American successor in Hollywood, Nancy Kwan). Hong's documentary utilizes some talking-head interviews, but mainly channels Wong through contemporary Vietnamese American actress Doan Ly's reenactment of Wong's own words gleaned from her correspondence, interviews, and screen-stage performances. Ly, reenacting Wong, frequently addresses the camera and the present-day audience in an attempt to simulate Wong's greetings to her public. The reenactment, laced with talking-head interviews, is interspersed with black-and-white archival photos and film footage. The documentary ends abruptly with a freeze-frame showing Wong herself walking toward the camera—a moment lifted from her 1936 China travelogue footage in Shanghai (see chapter 4).

Recognizing her own struggles as a first-generation Korean American immigrant filmmaker mirrored in Wong's life-career, Hong recuperates Wong as a fellow woman warrior to offer a personal yet also politically motivated response to Wong's greetings. She gestures toward a genealogy of Asian American female media workers that renarrativizes American film history. Hong's film takes advantage of relatively affordable digital technology to felicitously splice together the past and the present, presenting them as a uniform audiovisual discourse. Hong explains that Ly reenacts Wong's words and songs to promote the audience's "sense of Anna May Wong."[13] That is, Ly, as Wong's proxy, reanimates the long-deceased Wong and her long-silenced voice, thus heuristically bringing the latter up close to the contemporary audience. This strategy of reenactment, according to Hong, facilitates the audience's identification with the absent Wong.

But does this seamless time travel, via Ly's vocal-visual reenactment, really enable what Gaines calls a "halfway" anticipatory meeting between the past and the present? The answer is both yes and no. The documentary flattens the complexity of the past, short-shrifting Wong's nuanced experiences that largely predated the civil rights movement so as to fit them into today's identity politics. The move to de-historicize the past and graft it onto the present is manifested in a formal feature of the documentary. Not only are Ly's vocal-visual enactment and the talking-head interviews shot with a digital video camera, but Wong's archival photos and film footage are also re-mediated digitally. Thus, the digital technology levels the past and the present, erasing their differences and enabling their alignment. Indeed, the reenacted past is audiovisually indistinguishable from the present, as the reenactment sequences and the present interviews are shot in the same style—crisp sound and full color with high-definition resolution.

Furthermore, Wong's words drawn from her letters and printed interviews were originally unvoiced, and her vocal performances on the stage were unrecorded. Ly's vocal reenactment of Wong is, therefore, a form of ventriloquism, which does not *refer to* Wong's voice or stage performance, but rather serves as a proxy—possible and desirable only because of the absence of Wong's voice. Thus, Hong's reenactment forfeits "its indexical bond to the original event," and instead produces

a "fantasmatic" "mise-en-scène of desire" to animate the past, as Bill Nichols would argue.[14] Such ostensibly effortless re-presentation of the past produces an illusion that the past is completely knowable and readily available. And the contemporary Ly becomes a transparent conduit for the past Wong, paradoxically by replacing Wong and erasing their differences. As a result, the documentary makes it impossible to historicize either the past or the present. On the one hand, the nuances of Wong's experience prior to the 1960s are subsumed by post–civil rights Asian American identity politics. On the other hand, present-day digital media technology becomes naturalized. De-historicization of both the past and the present defuses Wong's power of engaging with and challenging contemporary audiences at a deeper level.

Yet the documentary also inadvertently accomplishes something different. Despite the seemingly seamless stitching of the past and present, the shifting media ecosystem inevitably tears apart the uniform digital surface to reveal the divergence between the "inconceivable" past (à la Gaines) and the present, and thereby foregrounds the question of what Wong can teach us beyond symptomizing entrenched systemic inequity. Commenting on the power and limits of digital technology, Anna Everett advances the notion of "digitextuality," arguing that the digital framework "has introduced new visual and aural media codes that draw extensively from the medium specificities of film, video, and radio while introducing new characteristics and imperatives that are properties of digital technologies alone."[15] However, digitextuality by no means guarantees the merging of different media technologies and formats. Instead, digitextuality must accommodate, and sometimes even foreground, the divergences between media technologies, particularly when they are compressed into a single space.

Such media divergences within the digital framework come to the fore in Hong's documentary when Wong's black-and-white film footage is replayed silently or with a few spoken lines, only to be overlaid with contemporary commentators' voiceover sound bites. The jarring juxtaposition of the archival footage with the sound imported from the present time calls attention to digitextuality that accentuates the gap between different media technologies and different times. The resulting effect counters Hong's goal of bringing Wong up close to the contemporary audience via reenactment. Rather, it leads to what Jaimie Baron describes as "temporal disparity," associated with the "archive effect."[16] Visualizing Wong's life-career elliptically, the grainy black-and-white imagery reveals inevitable temporal distance and lacunae, cuing the feeling of absence and irretrievability that undermines the apparent ease of re-presenting the past through full-color reenactment. In other words, the film cannot re-present the past without reinforcing the archive effect of loss. The complicated past thus remains shrouded in "temporal disparity," diverging from the reenacted past and the full-color present; it looms as a ghostly receding horizon that insists on our attention yet also resists easy assimilation, be it through reenactment or digital re-mediation.

Contrary to the plenitude and easy accessibility promised by the digital episteme that enables Hong's documentary, the archive effect, combined with digitextuality that heightens divergent media technologies, adheres to the engrossing reticence of another temporality. The documentary's concluding shot freeze-frames on Wong walking up to the camera, smiling broadly but silently in close-up. This silent freeze-frame stands in stark contrast with the film's eloquent opening that showcases historians and critics readily commenting on Wong, followed by Ly's effortless vocal reenactment of Wong's Chinese song "Moli hua" 茉莉花 (A Jasmine Flower). Yet the silence does not mean that the past seals itself off from the present. In the context of Wong's 1936 silent travelogue footage, "Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China," from which the freeze-frame shot is lifted, Wong was speaking before turning to directly face the camera while carrying on talking, presumably addressing Newsreel Wong, who filmed her. As Hong's documentary ends abruptly with a freeze-frame of Wong smiling at the camera, the arrested energy enhances her vivid facial expressions, as if she is addressing us across time, even if inaudibly. This suspense compels us to tune in and ponder what Wong would have said to us today, and how her anticipatory greetings are simultaneously channeled and obfuscated by the digitally rendered full-color reenactment and eloquent talking heads.

Thus, despite the de-historicizing reenactment that levels the past and the present, Hong's documentary paradoxically evokes "temporal disparity" that denaturalizes the plenitude of reenactment and the digital episteme. As we recognize the illusion of re-presentation, and turn our attention to the underlying mechanics of mediation, we become more conscious of Wong's inaudible greetings from a different time, *and* of the documentary's own technological and sociopolitical conditions. How does the irreducible past greet, challenge, and reshape the present? And what strategies might today's media critics and practitioners develop to meet the past "halfway" in a self-reflexive and mutually constitutive manner? Hong's documentary raises these questions without addressing them. To pursue these questions, I turn to Celine Parreñas Shimizu's short documentary *The Fact of Asian Women*.

THE FACT UNDER (DE)/(RE)CONSTRUCTION: THE METAPROCESS OF REENACTMENT

Inspired by Frantz Fanon's *The Fact of Blackness*, Shimizu's *The Fact of Asian Women* critically reexamines Hollywood's stereotyping of Asian American femininity across the long twentieth century. A feminist media critic and practitioner with a Filipino American background, Shimizu shot the film in 2001 in San Francisco with a small budget and a crew of women of color. Her short documentary mobilizes self-reflexive camerawork and lighting to problematize conventional Hollywood techniques that contribute to creating a hypersexualized Asian female mystique.[17]

VIDEO 5.1. Lena Zee impersonates Wong in *The Fact of Asian Women* (dir. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 2002) (credit: Celine Parreñas Shimizu).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.5.1

Working *through* (rather than simply against) Orientalist stereotypes, Shimizu casts three contemporary Chinese American actresses to reenact emblematic scenes, respectively featuring Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu in three corresponding films: *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932), *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine, 1960), and *Charlie's Angels* (dir. McG, 2000). The contemporary actresses also vocally reenact Wong's, Kwan's, and Liu's interview excerpts. Following these reenactments, *The Fact of Asian Women* stages the three contemporary actresses in full costume on San Francisco streets, walking and displaying themselves the way they think Wong, Kwan, and Liu would do. Such imaginary, anachronistic, and hyperbolic reenactment creates a disjuncture with the present-day San Francisco, provoking pedestrians' befuddled gazes. Finally, Shimizu invites the actresses to reflect on their filming experience and, more specifically, on their approaches to reenactment. These interview sessions, edited into the documentary, take place in retail stores of the actresses' own choice.

Actress Lena Zee impersonates Wong, first reenacting a scene from *Shanghai Express* and then acting out how she imagines Wong would walk in downtown San Francisco. Zee's retro Oriental costuming and hairstyle, heavy makeup, stiff and mechanical slow gait, stony stare, and utterly expressionless face make her a zombie-like walking curiosity that both attracts the pedestrians' attention and puzzles (even repels) them (video 5.1). In her interview, Zee explains that she imagines and enacts Wong's stiffness, rigid asexuality, and constrained body language due

to the latter's self-defensive gestures in response to a hostile environment. Zee's interpretation of Wong's asexuality contradicts the common fetishization of Wong as an icon of Oriental feminine hypersexuality.

However, the point of this documentary is not which interpretation is historically accurate, but rather how Zee (along with the other two contemporary actresses, Angelina Cheng and Kim Jiang) utilizes the platform to meet and reckon with the legacy of Wong (as well as those of Kwan and Liu), while reflecting upon their own positioning in contemporary American popular media culture. Such negotiation and self-reflection unfold through performative re-presentation that brings out layered visual, vocal, and intergenerational affective engagement filtered through the present-day actresses' circumstances, experiences, and embodied understandings of gender and racial politics in popular media. It centers the present-day actresses subjecting their own physical bodies to contact and contestation with the Orientalist feminine stereotypes enacted by previous generations of ethnic Chinese performers. Thus, the corporeal body—along with costuming, hairstyling, and body language—becomes the very site of past-present meeting, greeting, friction, and mutual reconstitution.

Not only do the contemporary actresses drastically reshape their physical appearances and mannerisms to project their understanding of the earlier performers, but their (re)enactment also leads to their own bodies being perceived as puzzling spectacles that provoke contemporary pedestrians' gazes and bewilderment in downtown San Francisco. In other words, such performance/reenactment subjects the material medium—the contemporary performers' corporeality—to real-life vulnerability. As Shimizu puts it, "moving like Anna May Wong constitutes a kind of pathological asexuality for Lena Zee; strutting like Nancy Kwan results in a particular kind of sexual availability for Angelina Cheng that leaves her shaken on the streets; and Kim Jiang's donning dominatrix gear to evoke Lucy Liu reveals the caricature quality of contemporary Asian female roles."[18] In staging the dramatic misfit of asexualized or hypersexualized Asian females in the real-life environment, the documentary reminds us of the compromises Wong, Kwan, and Liu must have suffered in playing stereotypical Oriental femininity.

Importantly, such suffering is not submissive or joyless. I have argued throughout the book that Wong's own reenactment of gender-race stereotypes constituted strategic "Oriental" (dis)play that produced subversive pleasure. Tuning into such subversive pleasure, we may recast the present-day actresses' reenactment of the earlier ethnic Chinese actresses as, potentially, similarly pleasurable and ironic, even though (or precisely because) it is experienced as awkward, disjointed from reality, and campy. This pain-to-pleasure flip demonstrates how working *through* (not simply against) stereotypes and engaging with the complicated historical legacy might generate marginalized yet situated agency.

As Shimizu argues, Asian American film spectators (including Wong, Kwan, Liu, and the contemporary actresses, who all start as film viewers) who encounter the often hypersexualized "Oriental" femininity in mainstream cinema do not "simply learn and accept these images," but rather "converse with and challenge them in a dialectical process."[19] Mainstream media's power of exploiting hypersexual Oriental femininity, therefore, not only "repress[es] our experience but also compel[s] our film practice and our speech" as rejoinders.[20] *The Fact of Asian Women*, as a rejoinder, aims to "recognize not only the pain but also the pleasure provoked by these images," and such pleasure "may be available for viewers even in the most unexpected representations."[21] Shimizu argues that Asian female performers may find pleasure in *authoring* themselves as sexual beings.[22] Through the younger generation's embodied (re)enactment of the previous generations' (perceived) performance styles, *The Fact of Asian Women* foregrounds precisely the encounter between different generations of Asian American women, and their shared subversive pleasure across time.

One method that facilitates this intergenerational affective meeting and reckoning is what Shimizu calls the "metaprocess of relational filmmaking."[23] By inviting the contemporary actresses to engage bodily and analytically with earlier Chinese-heritage female performers, the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectators anticipate and constitute each other across history, acquiring agency through interactive coauthorship that connects filmmaking, performance, and spectatorship. Through anticipation, negotiation, and contestation, the "metaprocess of relational filmmaking" distinguishes Shimizu's strategy of reenactment from the reenactment in Yunah Hong's documentary.

Hong strives for seamless alignment between the present and past by encouraging spectatorial conflation of Wong and Doan Ly. Her goal is to make Wong accessible and relatable for the contemporary audience. Shimizu, on the other hand, uses reenactment to inscribe encounter, discrepancy, even disidentification between the past and the present, while insisting on their relational engagement. Notably, it is the similar disidentification with her roles that enabled Wong's own ironic enactment of gender-race stereotypes. Ultimately, *The Fact of Asian Women* is not concerned with making the past legible to the present-day audience. Rather, Shimizu deploys the "metaprocess of relational filmmaking" to bring the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectators into a vigorous and difficult interplay. In this process, the past and the present meet, challenge, and constitute each other, as the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectator-critics find their voices through a diachronic conversation. This, then, cracks open the overcharged, stereotypical "Oriental" femininity for new pleasurable and subversive reworking. Key to Shimizu's metaprocess is not only the contemporary actresses' reenactment of preexisting film scenes, but also their speculative reinterpretations of their predecessors' psychosomatic states. Such

speculative reinterpretation and enactment undergird Patty Chang's 2009 installation work *The Product Love*.

FAILED TRANSLATION, STUNTED AFFECT, SPECULATIVE ENACTMENT: TRANSMEDIATING WONG'S OUTLINE

Chang's *The Product Love* registers multilayered efforts to reckon with Wong's problematic representations, forged by German director Richard Eichberg and critic Walter Benjamin. In this installation work, Chang works to empty out Wong's Orientalist iconography, distill it into an outline, and refill it with new meanings and possibilities. Different from Shimizu's endeavor to foster marginalized voices and instill agency into generations of Asian (American) performers' self-authored "sex act," *The Product Love* underscores aphasia, stuttering, arrested temporality, and stunted affect. It exposes the intractable difficulty *and* urgency of sense making through speculative reinterpretation from Wong's time to the present day.

The Product Love is composed of two video installation channels (forty-two minutes) and one short film loop, forged out of layered intertextuality, speculative enactment, reinvented film footage, and juxtaposition of apparently unrelated imagistic and linguistic references. The title "The Product Love" evokes Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, originally titled "Die Ware Liebe" (The Product Love, or Love as Commodity), which puns on "die wahre Liebe" (the true love).[24] This is also the play Wong expressed interest in when meeting with Brecht in June 1942 during the latter's sojourn in Santa Monica.[25] The wordplay and intertextual reference highlight the treacherous ambivalence besieging interracial and cross-cultural intimacy. Infatuation, enchantment, and desire for communication are revealed as being simultaneously "true" (*wahre*) and subjected to commodification (*Ware*) under the Western male gaze. In other words, *The Product Love* evokes what Saidiya Hartman calls the "scenes of subjection" where terror and surreptitious pleasure coexist, even when they occupy drastically disbalanced positions in the system of exclusion and dispossession.[26] More specifically, Chang's critique also resonates with what Asian America critic Leslie Bow calls American "racist love" directed toward Asianized proxies—"love" predicated upon anxiety and desire.[27]

Channel One, "Translators," reworks Walter Benjamin's German essay "Gespräch mit Anne [*sic*] May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," based on his 1928 meeting with Wong in Berlin.[28] It stages three native English speakers—one Asian female, one white female, and one white male—struggling to translate the essay into English. Shot in Los Angeles, Wong's birth city, this video compels the viewer to toil along with the three translators who painstakingly pore over Benjamin's German text, and to share their frustration as they

all fail to render into legible English Benjamin's tortuous syntax and impenetrably florid verbiage, which are symptomatic of his attempt to grasp the enigmatic Wong, whom he dubbed "Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," or the "Chinoiserie [Chinese-style European décor] from the Old West." While recognizing Wong as a modern "walking contradiction to existing stereotypes about Chinese women," Benjamin, echoing contemporary German media coverage, contributed to "reinforc[ing] those very stereotypes [about Chinese femininity]."[29]

The failed translation of Benjamin's essay in Chang's Channel One is particularly ironic in view of Benjamin's famous essay "The Task of the Translator," originally written in 1921 as the introduction to his translation of Baudelaire. In this essay, Benjamin foregrounds the difficulty of translation, for translation is an art that must not simply convey the original meaning, but also, more importantly, creatively fulfill the kinship between languages and facilitate the rebirth of the "pure language." By staging the ultimate failure of translating his writing on Wong, Chang's "Translators" video channel exposes Benjamin's Orientalist male gaze and (failed) attempt to make sense of Wong. Contrary to Benjamin's messianic vision of a "pure language," Chang's video forces translation into stutter and aphasia, which may then, paradoxically, give way to alternative sense making in resistance of the fixating white male gaze.

If the "Translators" video channel grinds the translation of Benjamin's essay to an aphasic halt, Channel Two, "Actors," dooms interracial intimacy by speculatively enacting how Wong and Benjamin's 1928 meeting could have devolved into an unfeeling carnal encounter. Shot in Hangzhou, a southeastern Chinese city that Wong visited during her 1936 China trip, the "Actors" channel shows two Chinese actors, made up as Wong and Benjamin, woodenly going through motions suggestive of a soft-core pornographic encounter under the direction of a diegetic Chinese crew. This whole process was staged for Chang's meta-mediatic camera. The double mediatic gaze pushes Wong's objectification (enacted by the Chinese actress) to the extreme, so as to body forth and confront the entrenched gender-race discrimination in Benjamin's 1928 meeting with Wong and, more generally, in Wong's precarious relation to the white male-dominant society.

Taking place on a bed surrounded with retro "Oriental" décor, the sex scene features Wong's Chinese impersonator dressed in a cheesy bright-yellow qipao, contradicting Benjamin's description of Wong's modern Western attire composed of a blue coat, a skirt, a light-blue blouse, and a yellow tie. The Chinese actress is subsequently stripped down to naked fleshly existence. Passive, tepid, voiceless, and unresponsive to the touch of the actor impersonating Benjamin, she resembles an inanimate prop in the entire mock sex scene, contrary to Wong's witty eloquence that both teased and upended Western Orientalist assumptions, as suggested by Benjamin's description. The relationship between the two Chinese actors, and between them and their characters, becomes perverted as the impossibility of a relationship due to mechanical motions.

Furthermore, the Chinese actors are also alienated from the diegetic male Chinese crew who directed and filmed the mock sex scene, and whose filming was in turn filmed by Chang for her installation project. Facing Chang's camera, one Chinese male crew member disregards the two actors' utter apathy and opines, in Mandarin Chinese, that the Oriental woman maternally encouraged Benjamin's desire due to the latter's lack of self-confidence, and that Benjamin's desire for Wong symbolized his flirting with the Eastern culture by touching its sensitive spot. The other man in the crew tries to translate the East-West heteroerotic economy into English for Chang, with awkwardness that echoes the failed translation in the "Translators" channel, and makes the description of the sexual encounter comically blunt. Mediated and amplified through Chang's own camera, the sex scene embodies stunted affect that not only satirizes the Orientalist fantasy, but also flips spectatorial voyeurism into embarrassing discomfort. Such discomfort further instigates radical disidentification from the representation.

During an intermission in the impassive sex scene in the "Actors" channel, the actor who impersonates Benjamin, complete with the Benjaminian mustache and hair, decides to vigorously fan himself and the actress's half-covered, motionless body laid out on the bed. This detail, out of place and farcical given the Benjamin connection, nevertheless visualizes the humid, hot summer typical in Hangzhou City in southeast China where the video was made. The location and the culturally specific practice of hand-fanning, combined with the actor's sweaty half-naked body and Chinese looks (despite the attempted Benjaminian makeover), force the viewer to inhabit the cognitive dissonance between the Chinese actor and Benjamin, between the impassive sex scene and Benjamin's essay. On the other hand, however, the viewer is also invited to recognize their uncanny underlying similarity—namely, their shared East-West binary that results in caricaturist Otherization. Thus, Benjamin's 1928 essay based on his meeting with Wong is turned inside-out as its underlying race-gender power inequity is literally stripped naked through speculative enactment in the "Actors" channel.

Chang lunges another heavy-handed stab at Western "racist love" (a la Leslie Bow) in the third component of *The Product Love*, a three-minute film loop and a photographic installation housed in a gallery room adjacent to the two-channel video installation. Cryptically titled "Laotze Missing," the film loop is a transfer from video documentation that references and reconfigures a key scene from Wong's first German film, *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928). It was toward the end of filming *Show Life* that Wong met with Benjamin, who then penned the enigmatic essay dismantled in Chang's two video channels. Unlike the video channels that are projected onto an entire wall in high-definition saturated colors, the black-and-white low-resolution film loop is projected in thumbnail size on a large blank wall from a reel-to-reel Eiki projector in the middle of a dimly lit, empty room (figure 5.1). Additionally, unlike the two channels that translate and enact the 1928 Wong-Benjamin meeting in present-day Los Angeles and

FIGURE 5.1. The projection setup of "Laotze Missing," a three-minute film loop in *The Product Love* (created by Patty Chang, 2009).

Hangzhou, the film loop "Laotze Missing" remains anchored in the 1928 film *Show Life*. The film loop's aesthetic, temporal, and spatial disconnect from the two video channels evokes what Jaimie Baron describes as "temporal disparity" and the "archive effect."

By revisiting and literally *un*-tracing a scene from *Show Life*, "Laotze Missing"does not just return to the past "scene of subjection," (a la Saidiya Harman), but also shows how the past could be transformed into an outline that can in turn be re-signified. Echoing what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the "residue of the fetish" that exceeds immediate ideological labeling, Wong's outline, as a residue of her stereotypical figuration, is an opaque form that is conspicuously empty (or emptied out), passive on the one hand, and stubbornly present and beckoning on the other. This outline inspires an imaginary that could reparatively meet and resonate with Wong's greetings.

The scene from *Show Life* that Chang un-traces and re-signifies in "Laotze Missing" is borderline sadistic. It shows Wong's character Song, the nonwhite lovelorn and self-sacrificial woman, being literally cornered and circumscribed, subjected to knives thrown and landing around her body, delineating her outline (video 5.2). The white male knife thrower, John, first sadistically motions to target her, making her cower in terror. He then violently drags her up and forces her to stand straight against the door, and proceeds to limn the outline of her figure on the door with white chalk. He subsequently pushes her to screen right, and proceeds to throw knives at the chalk outline. As she watches the knives accurately land right on the edge of her outline on the door, literally cutting out her figure while casting long, dark shadows that slash across her outline, threatening to (symbolically) impale her body, the initially terrified Song now turns to the man with an admiring,

VIDEO 5.2. Wong as Song in a sadomasochistic scene in *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928, black and white, 9.5mm Pathé Baby transfer).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.5.2

rapturous gaze in a luminously lit close-up shot, her chest heaving with fear-turned-excitement. Within the same close-up shot, her rapture morphs back into terror; a cut to a medium shot shows the man grabbing her, violently thrusting her against the wall into the chalk outline, now encased with knives. The next medium close-up shot frames her face restrictively flanked by two knives just above her shoulders, her face twitching with the fear of capture tinged with hope for mercy in response to the man's taunting question "Are you afraid?" When the man proposes a "double turn" of knife throwing as an entertainment stunt, however, a close-up shot—angled from the man's perspective, markedly disconnected from the previous sequence of shots—shows her responding with a (misplaced and mis-genred) radiant happy smile, her head still encased within the chalk outline, the flanking knives no longer visible.

In this "scene of subjection," Wong's face and body turn into the site of contending emotions, vividly diagrammed through the quasi-magnifying lens of the camera and the luminous, amber-tinted lighting.[30] Wong's tour-de-force performance of terrified vulnerability mixed with masochistic submission is reminiscent of her tear-drenched performance in *The Toll of the Sea* captured in extreme close-up framing, which I liken to a quasi-camera study of an "Oriental" performer's emotive abilities (see chapter 1). Struggling with the white Orientalist "racist love," Chang's film loop rewrites the "scene of subjection." She literally *un*-traces the straitjacketing dagger-edged outline so as to visualize speculative emancipation.

FIGURE 5.2. The projection stutters just before the knife-throwing man pushes away Wong's character, Song, in a scene from *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928), reworked by Patty Chang in "Laotze Missing."

Her film loop begins with the original film moment where the white man forcefully outlines Wong/Song's figure on the door. The loud Eiki projector noise sets into relief the eerie silence of the original footage. Then, instead of having him push her away, the projector pauses, making clicking noises for a few seconds, then plays the film backwards at a reduced speed. As the frames flicker through in the reverse order, we see the man slowly, almost lovingly, erase the chalk outline around Wong/Song, as if releasing her from bondage.

Once the chalk marking is completely erased, the projector pauses for a split second, then replays the original film footage so that Wong/Song is once again forcefully encased in the chalk outline. Just as the man lays his hand on her shoulder to push her away, the projector pauses, making harsh clicking noises for a prolonged twenty-four-second duration as if struggling through a jam (figure 5.2). This cacophonic suspense forces the viewer to reread the "scene of subjection" as potentially embryonic of a showdown between the two characters despite their drastic inequity. Alternatively, it also makes one ponder the possible intimacy in that touch before motion resumes and turns the touch into a brutal shove. The suspenseful stillness thus transforms Wong/Song from a panicking victim into a defiant rival or a semi-anticipating playmate. When the film finally resumes, showing Wong/Song pushed to screen right, gazing back at her outline on the door, the projector loudly "jams" again for another twenty seconds, accentuating the uncertainty and ambivalence assumed by the emptied-out chalk outline under her gaze (figure 5.3).

FIGURE 5.3. Wong's prolonged gaze at her outline as the projection pauses again in "Laotze Missing."

After prolonged dwelling on the suspenseful moment, the film resumes at slightly accelerated speed, then pauses abruptly at a close-up framing showing Wong/Song's rapturous admiration morphing into terror in reaction to the man off screen, leaving the audience speculating the next crisis moment. This scene in *Show Life* ends with her agreeing to participate in the man's "double turn"—that is, to become the human target for his knife-throwing stunt in the variety show. Serving as the human target around whom the white man is to trace an outline with his projectile knives at his stunt show, Wong's body is literally reduced to the white male's violent projection.[31] Indeed, just as the stunt show intrigues the diegetic audience with razor-edge suspense, the film itself teases its predominantly white audience with a sadomasochistic drama that teeters between two sets of possibilities—the white man either really impaling her *or* successfully outlining her body with the knives; Wong/Song being either terrified at being harmed *or* desiring to just narrowly survive thanks to the white man's precise marksmanship. Her passivity as a human target seems to deplete her ability to address the audience or exercise any form of agency.

However, as I argue in chapter 1, by accomplishing "puro arte" and putting on a perfect show of vulnerable and self-effacing "Oriental" femininity, Wong's pleasure in hyper-performance gains the potential of reverse-contaminating the white male's sadistic desire and "reorienting" (à la Sara Ahmed) the colonialist and heteropatriarchal pleasure economy. If this potential is Wong's greetings to her audience, then Chang's film loop effectively meets and reactivates her greetings by un-tracing and reinventing the 1928 film scene.

Countering the original film sequence that exploits and naturalizes white sadism, Chang's film loop jams its mechanism. It not only reverses, pauses, and stutters, but also denaturalizes the image flow with the loud projector noise, the clicking jamming sounds, the flickering low-resolution quality, and the crude framing of a small square projected on the dim, empty wall. The surfacing of the crude mechanism of the apparatus forces us to contemplate the significance of the Wong-shaped chalk outline (performatively and mechanically traced, un-traced, and retraced), and to recombine all the audiovisual details of pausing, stuttering, and reiteration. All of this works to collapse the unilinear temporality, to produce what I call anachronotope. Dwelling on the anachronotopic reshuffling of naturalized processes, viewers can learn to reanimate their multiple meanings and potentials that exceed the overarching white-male-colonialist sadistic narrative.

Watching the film sequence being played in reverse, the un-tracing of the chalk outline, a viewer of Chang's anachronotopic film loop experiences a surprising feeling of liberation that is impossible in the original film narrative. Yet this feeling was already potentiated in Wong's strategic "Oriental" (dis)play of stereotypes, which pushed back against race-gender constraints. Furthermore, the film loop continues to grapple with the chalk outline in the second long pause, arresting Wong/Song and the white man in the prolonged act of staring at the chalk outline (figure 5.3). Singled out from the original film, flanked by Wong/Song and the white man, the chalk outline becomes the central object of contemplation for Wong, and for us, the extradiegetic audience. An index of Wong's body, the emptied chalk outline registers her physical trace, suggesting disembodied presence, apparition, and imprint on public memories. Its uncanny emptiness is pregnant with meanings and affect—as an enigma, or the "residue of the fetish" (à la Anne Anlin Cheng).

This frozen frame visually evokes the quasi-tableau moment in *The Pavement Butterfly* (discussed in chapter 1) that features Wong's character (center) gazing at her life-size portrait (frame left) created by the Parisian painter, while being gazed at by the painter (frame right) unawares. This quasi-tableau calls attention to the interchangeability between Wong, her character, and the portrait, all of whom are displayed for the white painter's gaze. Still, Wong and her character's intense gaze at the portrait of herself as the Other prefigures Chang's freeze-frame in which Wong/Song gazes at the chalk outline, channeling the audience's attention. In both cases, the portrait and the outline seem to become animated and gaze back at Wong and her character *and* at us, the audience.

The emphasis on Wong's gaze at her own figuration (whether a portrait or a chalk outline) as the uncanny self-Other complicates the axes of desire projection. We are prompted to go beyond the white-male-dominant heterosexual scopophilia to discern Wong's desire for and/or bewilderment with her doppelgänger, or the "residue of the fetish." Such intense relating with the self-Other

makes possible her self-authorship, even if diegetically the white man owns the authorship. Furthermore, the outline or the portrait gazes back, not only at Wong and her character but also at us, suggesting a charged spectral presence, a history that beckons to be met, reckoned with, and rewritten. By liberating a detail such as this from a colonialist film, and speculatively reworking it, we can hope to activate Wong's signature performances and meet her nuanced audience address "halfway" across history.

In summary, Chang's *The Product Love* guides us to grapple with Wong's problematic representation through failed translation in the "Translators" channel and stunted affect in the "Actors" channel, both exposing the precarious nature of interracial intimacy and intercultural communication as determined by the Orientalist gender-race inequity. More importantly, *The Product Love* mobilizes the figure of the outline in the film loop "Laotze Missing" to explore ways of unleashing a past moment, re-signifying it, and meeting its greetings so as to facilitate alternative meaning making and relation making. This is also how critical spectatorship comes into being. While not guaranteeing fundamental power reconfiguration, the critical spectatorial consciousness keeps searching for decolonizing and generative connections across time and space.

MEETING ANNA MAY WONG'S GREETINGS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The three Asian American media works I have studied here illustrate difficult and different engagements with Wong's greetings in the age of independent media making, partially facilitated by digital technology, and explicitly inspired by postcolonial and intergenerational feminism. In each instance of speculative (re)enactment, certain details of Wong's signature performances are released from the original contexts, gaining anachronotopic salience, thus resurfacing in double exposure—through the lenses of the past and of the present where her calls meet responses. This double exposure construes a stereoscopic composite image of Wong, which befits her mosaic transnational and cross-media performances that I have unpacked throughout the book. This stereoscopic composite image scrambles and superimposes different temporalities and spaces, prompting us to examine border-crossing, diachronic, and cross-media shifts on the one hand and, on the other, to scrutinize gender-race politics and geopolitics specific to different times and locations.

Through the gyrating lens that refracts and re-composites Wong and her works in the age of digital technology and independent feminist Asian American (multi)media practices, we—the contemporary critics, historians, makers, spectators, and fans—explore methods of meeting and responding to the greetings of Wong, our insistent even if opaque historical companion. In the process of reanimating Wong's spectral presence with afterlives, we also learn to historicize our own position and better understand the potentials and perils of our own

media ecosystem—in connection with and contradistinction to that of Wong's time. Through examining Wong's strategic "Oriental" (dis)play and her multi-registered audience address, and through speculating "what might have been" and how it "could be again," I pivot back to our own relation to and accountability for our historical companions.

By tuning in to the greetings Wong sent to her publics then and now, we foster critical discernment that is reparative, speculative, and affective all at once. In practicing what Eve Sedgwick calls the "reparative reading," we may, finally, hope to get in touch with the necessarily opaque "minoritarian affect," to "*feel each other*," and to experience the "recognition [that] flickers between minoritarian subjects," as José Esteban Muñoz speculatively anticipates.[32] That is, echoing Muñoz's "feeling brown, feeling down" and following Wong's scathing witticism, may we dare to imagine how we might "feel yellow, feel W(r)ong?"

Refrain

The Second Beginning in the Wong Time (Intersti-racial Comic Melancholia)

Life is too serious to be taken seriously. This game of pictures [Hollywood] will not whip me. I shall change with my rhythm.

My doctor insisted I come here [Sierra Madre Lodge, Pasadena] to rest and continue treatments until a complete recovery is effected. . . . Having done a great deal of thinking while laid up and am going to overcome the habit of worrying all the time about things that are not worth the bother.

*Being up in mid-air and detached from the earth if only temporary [*sic*], gives one a chance to sort out one's thoughts and keep the lovely ones, and tossing out the worthless ones.*

—ANNA MAY WONG

I finish writing this book at a moment when the always-on-the-go-until-breakdown Anna May Wong is making yet another comeback and another rebeginning—this time posthumously, invoked by her twenty-first-century legacy bearers. Besides nationwide US recognition in the form of a 2022 quarter coin bearing her image (as part of the US Mint's American Women Quarters Program), a biopic is in the works, starring and executive produced by the British Chinese actress Gemma Chan, with a script written by the Tony Award–winning Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang, based on Graham Russell Gao Hodges's 2004 biography, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend*.

This historical moment of anticipation is fueled by the campaign for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI. After centuries of exclusion, marginalization, and scapegoating as "perpetual foreigners," a history that once again raised its ugly

head with the soaring anti-Asian hate crimes unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unsurprising that diasporic Chinese and Asian American communities turn to Wong as a trailblazer and a role model to combat racism and sexism, promote self-empowerment, and restate the obvious—namely, that Asian Americans have been essential contributors to every aspect of the American lifeworld.

This pressing agenda must confront two sticky issues, however. First, campaigns for antiracism and social justice do not follow a unilineal progressive trajectory, but rather go through serial setbacks and resurgences. Second, Wong's own career was characterized by constant frustrations braided with rebeginnings. Both her individual career and the collective social justice campaigns throw into disarray the linear teleology (from victimhood to vindication, or from failure to success). Indeed, failures and rebeginnings are at the heart of the struggles against race-gender hierarchies and broader exclusionary systems.

In this Refrain, I am inspired by Wong's career episodes (including stallings, detours, cul-de-sacs, ebbs and flows, retrainings and reiterations) to speculate about another rebeginning, as Wong herself has envisioned—as a serial rebeginner.[1] Emulating her multiple rebeginnings, I set forth a "second beginning" of this book to underscore the multi-perspective research we urgently need, not only to fully account for Wong's legacy but, more importantly, to understand her as a linchpin in the broader landscape of performer-worker studies that I advance in this book.

I use this "second beginning" to speculate what-might-have-been and what-could-be-again. That is, while acknowledging sociohistorical and political constraints that produce setbacks, I deploy rebeginnings to resist determinism, reimagine potentials, reshuffle linear temporality, and fracture single-perspective time-space into mosaic anachronotope. It is through serial rebeginnings that the past, the present, and the future overlay and intertwine, that "here" and "elsewhere" interconnect and shape each other, and that the what-if possibilities become palpable and salient, for Wong as much as for her present-day interlocutors. In this sense, Wong's legacy ultimately consists in recruiting us to co-labor with her across space and history, to meet her greetings "halfway" (as Jane Gaines suggests), and to imagine possible rebeginnings.

This book has moved from Wong "putting on a show" at the center of screen and stage to her "shifting the show" from the margins and background to her carrying on the show (for "the show must go on") elsewhere and in different forms of media, despite being excluded from high-profile Hollywood productions. The book has also examined three contemporary Asian American media works to track their speculative meeting with Wong's greetings, bearing out intergenerational feminist mutual anticipation *and* engendering a critical spectatorial sensibility. In this Refrain—the book's own second beginning—I speculate about Wong's comeback as a comedienne. Wong's comedic performances sporadically surfaced in her oeuvre, signaling the diametrical opposite to her one-thousand-death fame. In the second beginning that follows, I revive Wong's truncated career as a comedienne, imagining what might have been, what could be again, and why it matters.

This second beginning builds upon the main body of the book by further flipping the script of pathologized "Oriental" femininity so as to recast racial melancholia through a comic lens, thereby envisioning a joyful agential authorship even as it is also marginalized, detoured, thwarted, and constantly recalibrated.

This second beginning opens with Wong's double replacement *and* spectral presence in *Flower Drum Song* (dir. Henry Koster, 1961)—a landmark musical comedy about Chinese American assimilation. I then flash back to two instances of her vivacious slapstick performances to theorize what I call intersti-racial comic melancholia in the Wong time. Despite her abject "thousand-death" reputation, Wong's versatility for diverse genres was noted by British writer Evelyn Waugh, who, in May 1930, wrote, "I should like to see Miss Wong playing Shakespeare. Why not a Chinese Ophelia? It seems to me that Miss Wong has exactly those attributes which one most requires of Shakespearean heroines." He further commented, "I cannot see her as Lady Macbeth, but she seems to me perfectly suited for the role of Juliet or to any of the heroines of the comedies."[2] While Shakespeare's comedies are not identical with film comedies, and his comedy heroines are not necessarily comic themselves—and, of course, Juliet and Ophelia are profoundly tragic characters—Waugh's comment does point up Wong's wide spectrum of performance skills. And Wong did perform Shakespeare's comic "shrew" in 1930, in a Mary Pickford sendup that could have catalyzed a whole separate career of burlesquing white femininity and debunking white male authorship.

By speculating about Wong's alternative career as a comedienne, I not only question the narrative that keeps pathologizing her as a victim of her times, but also propose two ways of reenergizing racialized stardom and its role in performer-worker studies. First, I bring comedy studies and critical race and ethnic studies into cross pollination, foregrounding the ludic and carnivalesque insurgence from racialized and gendered burlesques. Second, I posit the concept of intersti-racial comic melancholia to capture the paradox of comic melancholia that is interracial and interstitial, that is, residing in the co-laboring and potential synergy between differentially marginalized performer-workers. This refrain concludes by calling for lateral branching-off that refuses to flow with linear temporality. Ultimately, this second beginning reenvisions the wrong time as the Wong time, as Wong's anachronotopic life-career has modeled for us.

AUNTY LIANG'S "CHOP SUEY" SONG: IMAGINING WONG'S DUET WITH JUANITA HALL IN A MELTING-POT MUSICAL COMEDY

On July 17, 1960, Wong wrote to Fania Marinoff and Carl Van Vechten with great excitement, for she had been offered "one of the leads" by Ross Hunter in the film adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*. Hunter had recently produced *Portrait in Black*, which featured Wong as a housekeeper (see chapter 3). *Flower Drum Song*, a novel by Chinese American author C. Y. Lee set in San Francisco's Chinatown

after World War II, had already been adapted into a Broadway musical by Gene Kelly in 1958. The Hunter-produced film was slated to begin shooting in February 1961, according to Wong's letter. This "lead" would have been Wong's biggest role since the 1940s, *and* a comic role in an all-Asian-cast musical celebrating the newly minted hybrid Asian American identity in postwar America.

Sadly, Wong's high expectation was not to be realized. Her long suffering of frustrations and precarity resulted in failing health that had already landed her in the hospital for an emergency blood transfusion in 1953.[3] On February 3, 1961, she was found dead at home, right before the filming of *Flower Drum Song* started. She was replaced by the Juilliard-trained, light-skinned African Irish American actress Juanita Hall in the comic role of Aunty Liang, making the film's main cast all-Asian but one. Before playing in *Flower Drum Song*, Hall had won a Tony award for portraying Bloody Mary (a Tonkinese/Vietnamese woman) in the 1949 Broadway show *South Pacific*, a role she reprised in the 1958 film version. In the same year, she also played Aunty Liang in a mixed-race cast in the Broadway version of *Flower Drum Song*. She made Liang a comic, bubbly optimist actively seeking assimilation into America, and eventually awarded US citizenship. In the Broadway show, upon graduating from citizenship school, Hall's Aunty Liang proudly performs the song "Chop Suey," leading the mixed-race cast, celebrating the Chinese American community as a lively ingredient newly accepted into the American "melting pot"—chop suey style.

On the surface, Hall's casting as Aunty Liang seems to be an anomaly in a narrative that centers San Francisco's Chinatown residents and new Chinese immigrants. This is doubly curious since the Broadway show's director, Gene Kelly, reportedly intended to "keep an all-Oriental [sic] cast as much as possible instead of using makeup on a Caucasian man to look Chinese."[4] Kelly's desire for an "all-Oriental cast" did not materialize. His Broadway show featured a predominantly Asian but mixed-race cast. Playing down Hall's African Irish American heritage, the music composer of *Flower Drum Song*, Richard Rodgers, stressed the theatrical illusion of Chineseness cocreated by the performers and the audience: "The ethnically mixed cast certainly didn't lessen the total effect; what was important was that *the actors gave the illusion of being Chinese*. This demonstrates one of the most wonderful things about theatre audiences. People want to believe what they see on a stage, and they will gladly go along with whatever is done to achieve the desired effect."[5] To put it simply, the enveloping musical vibe emulsifies differences between races, between ethnicities, and between performers and the audience.

In a different take from Rodgers's "melting pot" rhapsody, musical theater scholar Kathryn Edney argues that Hall's insertion in the Chinatown narrative subtly transformed the drama into one about African American desegregation. Coming on the heels of the 1954 landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that abolished public school segregation, Hall's performance of "Chop Suey" in the Broadway show reframed the song "in terms of how African

Americans fit within the larger white society," even though the song within the narrative concerns Chinese assimilation into American society.[6] Debunking the illusion of postwar assimilation, Anne Anlin Cheng argues that Hall/Aunty Liang's exuberant vocal performance of "Chop Suey" in the film version indicates the "very *mode* of national exclusion" through "pathological euphoria," that is, "the solicitation of euphoria (and here the euphoria of being a hyphenated subject, the 'Asian-American') as a means of alleviating the pains of exclusion" from the nominal American diversity.[7]

How would Wong have approached Aunty Liang if she had lived to play this role? Would she be as comical and embracing of the postwar ideology of the "melting pot"? Or would her already pathologized status reinforce Cheng's argument of assimilation as "pathological euphoria"? *Or* would she insist on her neither-nor interstitial position and defy easy categorization, even if such categorization is updated to include a hyphenated both-and identity? We will never know the answers to these questions. However, as a landmark almost-all-Asian musical film that sharply contrasts with Wong's oeuvre, which only tokenized her (sometimes along with a few other Asian-heritage performers),[8] *Flower Drum Song* invites a discussion around how Wong's spectral presence entails significant vertical *and* lateral connections. To put it differently, what if Wong had met her vertical successor Nancy Kwan, the female lead in this film; and what if she and Juanita Hall had duetted on the "Chop Suey" song?

Nancy Kwan, a Hong Kong–born Eurasian dancer-actress, can be seen as Wong's successor, given that her fame rose in the US exactly when Wong's life was waning. Kwan shot into stardom with her wildly successful Paramount debut film *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine, 1960), which led to her starring role in *Flower Drum Song* the following year. As Wong's successor, she also became famous for portraying exoticized "Oriental" or Americanized femininity (with the aid of sartorial makeover). The vertical lineage between Wong and Kwan underlies Celine Parreñas Shimizu's short film *The Fact of Asian Women* (see chapter 5).[9] These two iconic yet racialized female performers have received similar criticism for their "contaminated desires" (Anne Anlin Cheng's term) in portraying stereotypical "Oriental" femininity. Commenting on Kwan's typecasting, Cheng argues that Kwan in *Flower Drum Song* possessed no agency as "an actor under contractual injunction to performance," and under the gaze of the film producer and director. By contrast, her character, the vivacious Chinatown nightclub singer-dancer Linda Low, exudes whiteness and hyperfemininity in her "I Enjoy Being a Girl" number, demonstrating subversive power through "improper and inappropriable joy." Such subversive power, Cheng argues, is strictly "confined within the frames of this performance" and does *not* extend to Kwan the performer.[10]

Whether a gender-race-disadvantaged performer-worker is capable of agency despite systemic marginalization is a question that fundamentally connects Wong

and Kwan across history. Unlike Cheng, who posits a clear-cut distinction between extradiegetic overdetermination (for Kwan) and the diegetic space of subversive performance (for Linda Low), my book has located Wong's paradoxical agency in her strategic navigation of the different spaces on screen and stage, and her interweaving of on- and off-stage/screen spaces. Furthermore, Wong's reiterative and interlocutory greetings set in motion a vertical genealogy constellating herself, Kwan, and many other marginalized women performer-workers past, present, and to come.

Equally important are Wong's lateral connections and impact. Her narrow miss of the comedic Aunty Liang in *Flower Drum Song* compels us to wonder what she could have done in an all-Asian musical comedy, at the cusp of a new era that saw the rallying for a diasporic Asian American communal identity and the new US legislation regarding Asian immigration and naturalization. On the flip side, her replacement by Hall also calls on us to ponder a potential interracial relation between marginalized (albeit differently racialized) performer-workers. While Hall's casting in the film enabled her to reprise the role of Aunty Liang that she had created in the Broadway version, this seemingly straightforward self-adaptation should be rerouted to take into account Wong's spectral presence. Such rerouting inspires the possibility of interracial re-mediation and co-mediation of this comedic role. That is, we can reconsider Hall's filmic portrayal of Aunty Liang through the lens of Wong's signature performance styles and, conversely, speculate how Wong might have interpreted this role through the lens of Hall's comedic performance.

This interracial reframing of Aunty Liang allows us to speculatively fructify Wong's rebeginning as a satirical comedienne whose comedic acting was already demonstrated in her early-career intermittent slapsticks. Two instances I study below show how Wong's comedic performances burlesque white femininity and upend white male authority, and thereby challenge the American racial imaginary. Bringing together comedy studies and critical race and ethnic studies, I theorize her comedic power in terms of interstiracial comic melancholia.

BUSTING THE BUG AND SLAPPING THE PIE: ANNA MAY WONG'S INTERSTI-RACIAL COMIC MELANCHOLIA

Race and comedy are intricately linked in America, according to critical race studies scholar Albert Laguna. "Race is a kind of 'American style' of comedy at its core," and "[c]omedy [of race] stages the mechanics of racialization."[11] Yet comedy studies has been considered incompatible with critical race and ethnic studies, because comedy's reliance on caricaturization flies in the face of "activists . . . fighting for recognition of personhood, to be taken seriously, not as jokes or as

one-dimensional comic figures."[12] Laguna's braiding of comedy studies with critical race and ethnic studies offers a theoretical framework for reanimating Wong as a subversive comedienne.

Sidelined and truncated as they were, Wong's slapstick performances are ripe for anachronotopic reappearance. She began acting as a comedienne when recruited in 1926 by Hal E. Roach Studios for two-reel "star comedies" that were "smartly dressed, produced on the scale of the best in dramatic features," and featured "a real star cast."[13] The recruitment of Wong, Lionel Barrymore, Theda Bara, and "other headliners" was described as "the talk of the industry and this coup firmly established Roach as one of the most prominent figures in the short products."[14] A *Variety* report announced: Wong, "Chinese actress, under contract to Hal Roach for Oriental comedy."[15] Exactly *which* "Oriental comedy" was left unidentified. An August 1926 contract with Roach Studios shows that Wong was to play the "Heroine" in an "untitled" film (production no. S-15) at the pay rate of $250 per week.[16] Comedy short S-15 was released on November 28, 1926, under the title *On the Front Page*, featuring—not Wong, but Lillian Rich as the Countess.[17]

Wong did appear in another Roach two-reeler comedy as a "Baroness," in production no. S-17, at the same pay rate. This film was released on April 24, 1927, as *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Wood Jackman).[18] Her character, a "serio-comic adventuress," seems to have an ambiguous racial identity.[19] Named Baroness Stoloff in some publicity, she was nonetheless described as a "Chinese siren, who gives herself a good time separating folks from their cherished valuables."[20] In the film, Wong's jewelry thief, now named Wanda (still a racially unspecific name), "a high flying jailbird wanted by the police," is costumed in a low-cut, light-colored metallic sheath dress with a voluminous, dark-colored, sequined cape extravagantly fringed with white feathers. Her headdress is a bandana-shaped hat with a mass of irregular spikes, decorated with two large shining ornaments in the front. Slinking under the cloak of darkness after a heist in this extravagant non-"Oriental" "costumed costume" (Jane Gaines's term), she flees into hiding in the house of Mr. Buggs, a rare-insect collector.

Slapstick ensues as Mr. Buggs's plainly dressed girlfriend (Priscilla Dean) and her aunt show up. After some visual gags, with Wong/Wanda single-handedly flinging Mr. Buggs down a flight of stairs, she is eventually dragged upstairs by the latter to be hidden away in a room so as to avoid misleading his girlfriend. This leads to Wong/Wanda's most comedic performance: her solo fight against a bug that has escaped from Mr. Buggs's box and crawled up her leg into her dress. This bodily humor is first witnessed by Black butler Dusty (played by Oliver Hardy in blackface) through a keyhole—a view shared with the film audience. The audience thus adopts Dusty's "Peeping Tom" perspective, watching Wong/Wanda trying in vain to swat the bug under her sheath dress by patting up her own body and then slapping herself on the nape (video 6.1). A cut then takes the audience inside the room to watch her circling around, kicking her legs frantically, her arms on her

VIDEO 6.1. Wong as a comedienne in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Wood Jackman, 1927) (credit: Aurore Spiers).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.6.1

waist as if trying to lift the dress or to shake out the bug. Finally, Mr. Buggs comes upstairs and tries to scare the bug out of her dress by banging on a gong—only to be pushed out the door by Wanda/Wong.

When the bug finally drops out after much commotion and toppling of objects, Wong/Wanda is instantly hurled into another fight—this time with her immaculately tailcoated "rival pickpocket" (played by the Japanese actor Sojin)—over a brooch she has stolen. After confusion escalates, with all the characters chasing and bumping into each other through multiple doors that open frantically left and right, the cops arrive, arresting the two thieves played by Wong and Sojin, leaving the white characters in restored peace, with the home space resecured by the "Black" butler.

Independent of the obligatory, law-and-order ending deployed to eliminate the racialized, criminalized, and invasive elements, Wong's comedic acting is noteworthy for playing up a flurry of bodily humor arising from increasingly frantic corporeal contortions. Diametrically opposite to her trademark somberly paced, melancholic death acts (see chapter 1), Wong's comedic performance offers a rare glimpse into her skill of playing for laughs—in this case, partially in collaboration with Sojin. Their duet comic effect is enhanced by the fact that these two Asian-heritage performers both donned hyperbolic Western costumes—a drastic departure from their exotic "Oriental" images in the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), which was a big hit within and outside the US just three years earlier.

On top of the intra-Asian visual gags, the film also stages an illusory interracial comic connection between Wong's racially ambiguous jewelry thief and the butler played by Hardy in blackface. Dusty is not only the first to encounter Wong/Wanda when she barges into Mr. Buggs's house, but also the first to see her exaggerated bodily reaction to a crawling bug. His perspective shot framed by the keyhole (vicariously shared by the audience) evokes the Peeping Tom trope, now racially as well as sexually charged, with a comic twist. Upon witnessing Wong/Wanda's animated physical contortion accentuated by her constraining sheath

dress, Hardy/Dusty's body also becomes instantly hyperactive in sync. He pounds the floor with excitement while looking up at the camera, then suddenly dashes downstairs with an exaggerated gait.

Such hyperbolic performance undoubtedly behooves the genre of slapstick comedy. However, the fact that such bodily humor is first performed by and transmitted between a racialized performer (Wong) and a racialized character (Dusty) suggests that a minoritized performer/character is perceived as more prone to letting their bodily integrity be disrupted by external stimuli. Hardy's broad caricaturization certainly reinforced the stereotyping of African American characters as primitive and childish. Commenting on the animated body of racialized subjects, Sianne Ngai writes that African Americans are subjected to "the disturbingly enduring representation . . . as at once an excessively 'lively' subject and a pliant body unusually susceptible to external control."[21] She further argues that "animation turns the exaggeratedly expressive body into a spectacle for an ethnographic gaze—a spectacle featuring an African-American subject made to move physically in response to lyrical, poetic, or imagistic language."[22] Interestingly, Ngai points out that "animation's affective connotations of vivacity or zealousness do not cover every racial or ethnic stereotype." While African American bodies tend to be portrayed as excessively animated, Orientalized bodies are more likely to be marked by "pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess." Yet such differential racialization only goes to show "the extent to which animation remains central to the production of the racially marked subject."[23]

Taking a different perspective than Ngai's diagnosis of affective racialization through corporeal animatedness, Anne Anlin Cheng describes the effect of racialization and the formation of a racial identity in terms of melancholia. She states that "there has always been an interaction between melancholy in the vernacular sense of affect, as 'sadness' or the 'blues,' and melancholia in the sense of a structural, identificatory formation predicated on—while being an active negotiation of—the loss of self as legitimacy."[24] She further suggests that "racial melancholia . . . has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection."[25] For Cheng, the concept of racial melancholia conjoins the African American "ambulatory despair" (expressed in the "sorrow songs" of the slaves) and the Asian American "manic euphoria" (as expressed in the pro-assimilation "model minority" desire in *Flower Drum Song*). Both despair and euphoria stem from the experience of loss and sadness that "conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity."[26]

If Ngai's "animatedness" captures how affective racialization is visualized, Cheng's "racial melancholia" describes the psychic process of racial subject formation. Notably, both concepts stem from comparing and twinning African American and Asian American experiences of racialization, which lead to divergent performance styles—hyperactivity and impassivity, sorrow and euphoria. Ngai's

and Cheng's comparative interracial approach is thought-provoking for my consideration of Wong's comedic act in conjunction with that of Sojin and of Hardy in blackface in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*. Yet merely pairing Asian American and African American experiences of racialization could not adequately describe what happens in this comedy, for two reasons.

First, Wong's comedic act in the 1920s predated the establishment of Asian Americans' "model minority" status by at least four decades. Given the Chinese Exclusion Act, the "yellow peril" discourse, and Wong's famous pathos-laden, tragic persona, her animated bodily humor was an anomaly, contradicting both the impassive "Oriental inscrutability" and the "manic euphoria" (*Flower Drum Song* style). The question, then, is what we might make of Wong's seeming anomalous animatedness, which anchored the racialized bodily humor in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*. This brings me to the second difficulty with simply applying Ngai's and Cheng's interracial approach to this short comedy: there is no actual African American performance in this film—an exclusion covered up, yet also rendered conspicuous, by Hardy's blackface caricature. In other words, there is *no* shared interracial animatedness or melancholia on the screen.

The film, nevertheless, does offer an *illusion* of interracial proximity between Wong/Wanda and Hardy/Dusty, suggesting that Wong, the racialized performer, could be performing the bodily humor as both Asian *and* Black, generating an in-between racial feeling that I call intersti-racial comic melancholia. The seeming oxymoron—comic melancholia—conjoins comedy/euphoria and tragedy/melancholia as two sides of the same coin of affective racialization and what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the "psychic strategy in response to" racialization. Wong's interstiracial comic melancholia that straddles Asian and Black is indicated in her spirited whole-body movement in attempting to shake out the bug. The way she twists and kicks her legs evokes the Charleston she performed just a year earlier, in 1926, in the "East Is West" segment of Columbia's *Screen Snapshots* series.[27] Promising to "offer a glimpse into the Heart of the Movie World revealing intimate and Unusual Views of Your favorite Stars 'On Location' and in the Privacy of their Homes,"[28] the "East Is West" segment casts Wong, "our only Chinese movie star," as "a real Chinese bloom" nestled in a sunny garden, who bursts into "a peppy Chinese dance" that turns out to be the Charleston.

At the same time, Josephine Baker was making a splash in France, first with the Charleston in 1926 at the Folies Bergère in Paris, then with her famous 1927 "Danse Sauvage" in a banana skirt. In August 1928, while visiting the Netherlands, she was filmed by Fox Movietone News going native in a full Dutch outfit, including wooden clogs, *and* performing the Charleston for a large crowd, comically kicking off or dropping her clogs while being egged on by a Dutch woman to continue the dance.[29]

These performances were not causally connected. Yet their convergence reflected the exotic dance craze in interwar Euro-America. The Charleston craze linked Wong and Baker through their comically animated bodily movement.

Wong's appropriation of the Charleston, which originated in African American dance movements, not only enabled her self-fashioning as a flapper in the *Screen Snapshots* segment, *and* inflected her comedic act in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*, but also rendered her comedienne persona intersti-racial: in between Asian and Black, and in between racialized somatic choreographies. Such intersti-racial comic performance undoubtedly draws upon practices of racialization. Yet it also suggests that differential racialization aiming to segregate different ethnic groups can be problematized when the codes of racialization are mixed and interspliced. Wong's intersti-racial comic performance enacted precisely the intersection between feeling yellow and feeling Black (appropriating Muñoz's concept of "feeling brown, feeling down"). In so doing, her intersti-racial comic melancholia suggests a tentative answer to Muñoz's question: "How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?"[30]

Wong's intersti-racial comic act took on strengthened carnivalesque power in her short burlesque of Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Sam Taylor, 1929). Included in the British revue film *Elstree Calling* (dir. Paul Murray, Adrian Brunel, André Charlot, and Alfred Hitchcock, 1930), Wong's skit both evokes the antebellum minstrelsy of burlesquing Shakespeare *and* works to delimit, transgress, and parody Pickford's idealized white femininity. Produced by British International Pictures as a star-studded "big talking singing & dancing cine-radio revue" intended to compete with Hollywood's revue films, *Elstree Calling* features an extra layer of mise-en-abyme, being a film framed as a variety show for television broadcast. The opening plays out the comic mishaps that ensue when the unreliable televisual signal fails to reach the diegetic audience. The film, therefore, melds together vaudeville, film, and the burgeoning television industry, six years before BBC began regular television transmissions. This hybrid setup renders Wong's short burlesque part film, part stage performance, and part television show, tinged with unique liveliness.

Wong's three-and-a-half-minute skit was directed by Alfred Hitchcock.[31] A review following the film's preview at the Alhambra Theatre in London on February 6, 1930, dismissed Wong's skit: "All you see of Anna May Wong is in trunks throwing custard pies in a burlesque on 'Taming of the Shrew' which starts well with Donald Calthrop as Fairbanks and then falls to bits." Half a century later, an April 1986 UCLA film program stated that Hitchcock "should be thoroughly ashamed of himself." Yet what if we switch away from Hitchcock's auteurship and refocus on Wong "in trunks throwing custard pies"—with carnivalesque gusto?

Wong recreated a key scene from Pickford's film, *The Taming of the Shrew*, played on a similar set, with stairs in the center background leading up to an arched doorway at the top, where the shrew's room is located, just off screen. Also as in Pickford's scene, the shrew (now played by Wong) is introduced through her stupendous destructive power. The skit opens with the British actor Donald Calthrop as the pompous Petruchio entering the stage on a motorcycle, proceeding to show off

VIDEO 6.2. Wong spoofs Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Elstree Calling* (dir. Paul Murray, Adrian Brunel, André Charlot, and Alfred Hitchcock, 1930).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.6.2

his taming skills by whipping the motorcycle into an autopiloting circling motion. He then tells Baptista that he—Doug (referencing Douglas Fairbanks, who plays Petruchio in Pickford's film)—has come to "woo" "Mary" (referencing Pickford), which he then corrects to "Katherine" (the original shrew in Shakespeare's comedy). Baptista responds by calling him "Mr. Woo" (possibly referencing Wong's 1927 film *Mr. Wu*, discussed in chapter 3), and offers a tongue-in-cheek "happy be thy speed" in wooing his daughter.

As Calthrop/Doug/Woo/Petruchio strides up the stairs with a pompous holler, he is instantly showered with an avalanche of tumbling wheels, furniture, and baskets (video 6.2). Wong's shrew then storms to the archway, pie in hand, clad in the skimpy, metallic exotic dance costume that she had displayed in *Piccadilly* and that has practically become shining armor in this skit. Fuming and gasping, she kicks away a chicken (a motion that underscores her bare legs "in trunks") and scolds ferociously, not in Elizabethan English but in her ancestral Taishan dialect. As Baptista laughs hysterically at his daughter's tantrum, an extreme close-up shows Wong's shrew widening her eyes, hurling a pie with full force. Petruchio ducks and the pie lands squarely on Baptista's face, causing him to fall back onto the still autopiloting motorcycle and being summarily carried away. A cut back to Wong shows her shrew carrying on fuming, kicking away another chicken and launching another pie, this time successfully hitting the suitor, who spends the rest of the skit being repeatedly targeted to the extent that his facial features become completely white-plastered and disfigured—a whiteface caricature that spoofs white actors' racial masquerade through yellowface, blackface, brownface, and so on. Finally, "Shakespeare" himself appears on the scene, amused with his characters warring and wallowing in chaos. Iconoclastically, the moment he announces his identity he receives a resounding pie-slap that throws off his trademark hair—which turns out to be a toupee, leaving him bald and powerless. This Taishanese-spouting, part-bikini-clad part-armored shrew is not to be tamed—even by the author who has created her. Or, rather, this pie-hurling "shrew" is not Shakespeare's creation after all; she has created herself, utilizing the visual gags afforded by the modern

slapstick comedy and vaudeville to poke fun at white male authorities. Thus, Wong enacted what was likely the very first "Oriental" parody of a Shakespearean play that literally threw the white order into pie-plastered disarray.

Wong's spoof built upon intersti-racial performance of "Oriental" (dis)play *and* blackface minstrelsy all at once. Studies of the linkage between Shakespearean burlesque and minstrelsy have shown paradoxical connections between racial caricaturization and parody, or between white supremacy and subversion.[32] In a similar vein, Terri Simone Francis anchors Josephine Baker's "fractured" authorship in her oppositional burlesque "signification."[33] Drawing upon the theatrical tradition of Shakespearean burlesque, Wong's comic act ineluctably, even if unintentionally, traded in the racializing minstrelsy practice. Yet if Josephine Baker turned minstrelsy on its head, Wong rerouted minstrelsy through her "Oriental" (dis)play and what I have elsewhere theorized as "yellow yellowface,"[34] forging an intersti-racial comic performance, applying pressure to blackface and yellowface all at once, thereby destabilizing racialization that segregated different racial and ethnic groups.

Not only did Wong's burlesque dethrone the white theatrical canon, but it also sent up Pickford's "American sweetheart" image, which Pickford herself was seeking to transform into one of more sophisticated femininity.[35] With a boyish, lithe figure accentuated by her skimpy metallic costume, Wong both modeled the 1920s flapper girl and evinced the 1930s androgynous glamour ideal, countering Pickford's frilly white femininity. Here Wong's intersti-racial comic act dwelled between "yellow yellowface" and whiteface, partially mimicking Pickford only to upend white femininity. In a publicity stunt for *Elstree Calling*, two compare-and-contrast photos by the Lumière North American Company (based in London) show Wong in a full shot, clad in the skimpy costume (figure 6.1).[36] The left picture frames her in the center, facing the camera, eyes narrowed and looking daggers from under her trademark bangs, arms defensively crossed in front of her chest, body straight and taut with tension. The right picture introduces a few differences that dramatically transform her entire body language. Dressed in the same costume, she is framed slightly to frame right, turning gently toward the left, gazing into a mirror held up in her right hand, while her left hand gently combs her hair—or, rather, a bobbed, wavy blond wig! She primps with an amused look, as if pleased with her own playful white masquerade. The blond wig, mimicking Pickford's trademark blond hair (sans the long curls), visualizes Wong's expropriation of the role of the white shrew.[37] This Asian-to-white intersti-racial performance raises a key question: Did Wong become nominally white merely by adopting a blond wig and coquettish body language, or did Pickford and the ideal white American femininity become de-essentialized as a gender-race construct that relied upon exclusion of the nonwhite for its own demarcation?

The caption of the publicity photo exploited precisely this ambiguity by stating, "Anna May Be Mary! The Wong Version of Pickford!" Punning on Wong's

FIGURE 6.1. "Anna May Be Mary! The Wong Version of Pickford"—publicity for Wong's burlesque of Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Elstree Calling* (1930) (credit: Crawford Theater Collection (MS 1387). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library).

middle name "M/may" to pique the audience's curiosity about Wong's potential transgression of the domain of white femininity, this caption also ultimately denied Wong the white privilege. For the "Wong version of Pickford" was the "wrong version," which decisively (albeit playfully) rendered Wong an inferior copy of the original Pickford. As the publicity text reassured the white readers, Wong, despite being touted as the "'Celestial' imitation of the 'World's Sweetheart,'" was no Pickford; and her costume, "the Oriental dancing 'armour,'" bore no resemblance to Pickford's costumes in the *Shrew* film or any other films. In other words, the publicity stunt put on display the "Orientally" armored Wong crowned with a blond wig only to stress the bizarre incongruity, thus rendering her burlesque intriguing and potentially transgressive, yet ultimately disposable as a comic gag that could not really touch the "original" white femininity reserved for Pickford. Such reinforced exclusion of the racialized Other illustrates the colonial discourse that Homi Bhabha pithily summarizes as the "ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white.'"[38]

And yet it is precisely by leveraging this composite image and its amalgamation of ostensibly incommensurable elements (such as the visual clash and the surprise outburst of Taishanese) that Wong succeeded in contaminating and upending purist identity ideology, and thus challenged the hierarchization and exclusion such purism aimed to justify. Burlesquing Pickford's white shrew penned by Shakespeare, Wong's performance evoked the minstrel tradition and its injurious racialization of African Americans. But she also dismantled white racial masquerade, replacing it with her intersti-racial comic performance that dethroned white male authorship, spoofed the white feminine ideal, and desegregated the compartmentalizing racialization of nonwhite racial/ethnic groups. Wong's intersti-racial performance can thus be understood as "feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong"—a racial affect that responds to Muñoz's call for the subalterns to engage in "feeling each other."[39]

"STEAL AS MANY LAUGHS AS POSSIBLE" AND WAIT TO REBEGIN

In a 1930 article, Wong wrote that the Chinese managed to "steal as many laughs as possible," believing "that some day [*sic*] in some eon fate will turn the page, and that they will 'come into their own.'"[40] She also observed, tongue-in-cheek, that Chinese women retained their youthful look because they remained "unruffled through life," for "worry is a non-productive institution," and they were "inclined not only to put it off continuously, but eventually to relegate it to someone else."[41] Here Wong not only countered the Western stereotype of the scheming and "inscrutable Oriental" by underscoring the significance of good humor (that her own comments also illustrated); more importantly, she reimagined temporality, especially the seemingly empty and passive time of waiting.

Waiting to "come into their own" is not some essentialist "Chinese" fatalism; nor is the act of "steal[ing] as many laughs as possible" a mere survival coping mechanism. Rather, laughing while waiting signals a method of deviating from and dwelling outside linear teleological temporality, echoing what Berlant calls a "dissociative poetics" and "a potential hub" that allows "damaged" people of color to navigate systemic negativities, and to bear unbearable relations.[42] It further resonates with Muñoz's understanding of waiting as "being out of time, or at least out of a linear mapping that is straight time" and "straight time's choke hold." He considers waiting as integral to the experiences of people of color, queer and trans people, and people with disabilities: "There is something black about waiting. And there is something queer, Latino, and transgender about waiting. Furthermore, there is something disabled, Indigenous, Asian, poor, and so forth about waiting. Those who wait are those of us who are out of time in at least two ways. We have been cast out of straight time's rhythm, and we have made worlds in our temporal and spatial configurations."[43] Muñoz jokingly calls this "CPT (colored people time)" that is "desiring, and anticipatory in the queerest utopian of ways."[44]

Juxtaposing Wong's with Berlant's and Muñoz's ruminations on subaltern people's anticipatory waiting, I suggest that subversive jokes, laughter, and what I call the intersti-racial comic melancholia work hand-in-hand with "colored people time" not only to queer and warp temporality but, more specifically, to curve temporality, to be anachronotopic, or to create what I call the "Wong time." Appropriating the long-running pun of *Wong* and *wrong*, the Wong/wrong time queers *and* curves the straight time so that her truncated comedic act could return as a rebeginning—one that is not in the straight future. Rather, the future, freighted and pulled by the potent past, fractures from the straight time and curves around to meet and fructify the past. Wong's intersti-racial comedic act, which occurred only intermittently and barely went beyond the "first beginning" of her decades-long performance career, is but one example of all that could have been. It catalyzes our speculative reimagination of what might be again in the curve of Wong time.

Anna May Wong's life-career constellates recursive episodes. They make up a multifaceted mosaic, a shapeshifting kaleidoscope, a meandering, endless labyrinth with multiple entries, throughways, cul-de-sacs, departures, returns, and nooks for agonizing, waiting, resting, laughing, and rebeginning.

At the end—is another beginning, for us and for our historical companion.

NOTES

MAJOR ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES CONSULTED

La Biblioteca Luigi Chiarini, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome
La Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de l'Audiovisuel
British Film Institute, Reuben Library
Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949)/民国时期期刊全文数据库
Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California
Nasjonalbiblioteket (National Library of Norway), Periodicals Collection
National Archives and Records Administration, Riverside, California
New York State Archives
UCLA Film & Television Archive
University of Glasgow Library—Special Collections
University of Southern California, Cinematic Arts Library
Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

PRELUDE

1. The other four distinguished women featured in the 2022 quarter coins issued by the US Mint as part of the American Women Quarters Program are Maya Angelou, Dr. Sally Ride, Wilma Mankiller, and Nina Otero-Warren. See American Women Quarters Program, https://www.usmint.gov/learn/coin-and-medal-programs/american-women-quarters.

2. See https://shop.mattel.com/products/anna-may-wong-barbie-inspiring-women-doll-hmt98.

3. I use the term *Euro-America* to designate the geopolitical span Anna May Wong navigated during the two World Wars, and also to indicate the continuous (albeit somewhat different) Orientalist imaginaries she negotiated.

4. I use the term *life-career* instead of *life and career* to posit an entangled complex where Wong's life and career do not simply parallel, but rather entail and constitute each other. The two nodes dynamically interweave to form a field of tension and entangled complexity.

5. Lon Jones, "Anna May Wong to Visit Australia—Chinese Star Will Arrive in Few Weeks," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1, 1939, 8S.

6. *The Sydney Morning Herald* quoted in Derham Groves, *Anna May Wong's Lucky Shoes: 1939 Australia through the Eyes of an Art Deco Diva* (Ames, IA: Culicidae Press, 2011), 19.

7. *Variety*, Sept. 20, 1939, 6.

8. "Yellow on Silver," *Pantomime*, Dec. 10, 1921, 26. Wong was identified as Bessie May Wong in this article, with a photo depicting Anna May Wong, and the films attributed to "Bessie May Wong" included Anna May Wong in the cast, even though she was not credited. The misnaming could be indicative of the white media's tendency to conflate ethnic Chinese actresses, here confusing Anna May Wong with her contemporary Bessie Wong, who made occasional appearances in a few movies around this time.

9. "Yellow on Silver."

10. Documentaries featuring Wong include *The Fact of Asian Women* (dir. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 2002); *Anna May Wong, Frosted Yellow Willows: Her Life, Times, and Legend* (dir. Elaine Mae Woo, 2007); and *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (dir. Yunah Hong, 2013). Interestingly, two media works prominently featuring Wong were released in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. One is the Peabody-winning five-hour PBS series *Asian Americans* (2020), produced by Renee Tajima-Peña, which dedicates a portion of the first episode, "Breaking Ground," to Wong. The second is the Netflix drama miniseries *Hollywood* (2020), programmed by Ryan Murphy, which takes a revisionist approach by injecting the present-day diversity/inclusion campaign into mid-century Hollywood so as to reimagine Wong as a Best Supporting Actress Oscar awardee—a recognition that eluded her in real life. Additionally, the film *Babylon* (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2022) includes a character named Lady Fay Zhu, inspired by Wong but reinventing her as a ghost screenwriter and secret lesbian companion for the white female protagonist.

11. The three biographies are Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave, 2004); Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905–1961)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003); and Yunte Huang, *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* (New York: Liveright, 2023). Compendium of Wong's work: Philip Leibfried and Chei Mi Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide to Her Film, Stage, Radio, and Television Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004). For some major critical scholarship on Wong, see Patrice Petro, "Cosmopolitan Women: Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong, and Leni Riefenstahl," in Jennifer Bean, Anupama P. Kapse, and Laura Evelyn Horak, eds., *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014), 295–312; Sean Metzger, "Anna May Wong and the Qipao's American Debut," in *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014), 109–24; Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "Racial Threat or Racial Treat? Performing Yellowface Sex Acts in Stag Films, 1920–1934," in *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 102–39; Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019); and Tim Bergfelder, "Negotiating Exoticism: Hollywood, Film Europe and Cultural Reception

of Anna May Wong," in Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby, eds., *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920–1939* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 302–24.

12. I hyphenate *gender* and *race* to indicate their intertwinement and intersectionality (rather than simple combination) both in Orientalist stereotyping and in Wong's subversive enactment of such stereotypes.

13. Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 14.

14. Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 16.

15. Clark, 12.

16. Kate Fortmueller, *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), 18.

17. Emily Carman, *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

18. The most famous example illustrating the anamorphic lens is the heavily studied Renaissance painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein. Viewed from an oblique angle, the distorted gray shape in the foreground becomes legible as a skull, commonly interpreted as a memento mori of the transience of life.

19. For a preliminary study of Wong's gesture of "greeting," see Yiman Wang, "Anna May Wong's Greetings to the World," in Josephine Lee and Julia H. Lee, eds., *Asian American Literature in Transition, vol. 1: 1850–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 281–300.

20. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 205.

21. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

22. Film historian Kim K. Fahlstedt unearths a rich history of San Francisco Chinatown movie theaters' exhibition activities. But his study ends in 1916–17, a few years before Wong launched her acting career in 1919. See Kim K. Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco's Chinese Neighborhood* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

23. Rich describes such "re-vision" as "seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 35.

24. Daphne Marlatt, "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis," *Tessera* 8 (Spring 1990), 15.

25. Hartman describes "critical fabulation" in these terms: "by playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done." Such "critical fabulation" generates what Canadian conceptual artist Stan Douglas calls a "recombinant narrative," which, according to Hartman, "'loops the strands' of incommensurate accounts and . . . weaves present, past, and future in retelling the [Black] girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present." Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (June 2008): 1–14, see 11–12.

26. Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2, 26, 28.

27. Allyson Nadia Field, ed., "Speculative Approaches to Media Histories" I, II, in *Feminist Media Histories* 8.2 (Spring 2022), 8.3 (Summer 2022).

28. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51, see 149.

29. J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds,'" *Progress in Human Geography* 32.5 (2008): 613–32, see 618.

30. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading," 149, 137.

31. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies," 618.

32. Gibson-Graham, 620.

33. Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 6–7.

34. Terri Simone Francis, *The Audacious Josephine Baker: Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

35. Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 167–68 (emphases mine).

36. See Jane Gaines, "Dorothy Arzner's Pants," *Jump Cut* 37 (July 1992): 88–98, https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC37folder/ArznersTrousers.html.

37. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian American: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 100.

38. Lee, *Performing Asian American*, 101 (emphasis mine).

39. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and other STDs)*," *Theatre Journal* 52:1 (2000): 67–79, see 70.

40. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31.3 (Spring 2006): 675–88, see 679.

41. Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," 677 (emphases mine).

42. Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," 680.

43. José Esteban Muñoz, "Vitalism's After-Burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta," *Women and Performance* 21.2 (2011): 191–98.

44. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 59.

45. Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, part 2, 1931–1934*, translated by Rodney Livingston et al., edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 507–30, see 510. Three years before publishing this essay, Benjamin met with Wong in 1928 and published his impression, "Gespräch mit Anne [*sic*] May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," in *Die Literarische Welt*, July 6, 1928, 213. Whether Benjamin thought of Wong's widely disseminated photos while writing "A Little History" is unknown. What matters is that "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong" speaks volumes about his befuddlement in regard to "eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen." I discuss this article and Patty Chang's creative reinterpretation of it in chapter 5.

46. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 336–75, see 341.

47. I have not seen the French script. The complete story (published in *Le Film Complet*, June 11, 1931) indicates a key difference: Wong's character is described as well traveled, speaking a mixture of French and English, possibly to accommodate her insufficient

French. I thank Dr. Christina Corfield for translating the French documents into English. All references to French archival sources in this book are based on her translation. *Le Film Complet* (June 11, 1931) is held in La Bibliothèque nationale de France.

48. Kwan Man Ching 關文清 (Moon Kwan), *Zhongguo yintan waishi* 中國銀壇外史 (An Anecdotal History of Chinese Cinema) (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1976), 61–62.

49. Gaines, "Dorothy Arzner's Pants."

50. See Melanie Bell, *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

51. John K. Newnham, "Chinese Puzzle," *Film Weekly* (UK), June 17, 1939.

52. Newnham, "Chinese Puzzle."

53. Robert McIlwaine, "Third Beginning," *Modern Screen*, Nov. 3, 1937, 41, 80.

54. Gladys Baker, "Having Lunch with Anna May Wong: Chinese Actress Will Return to Cinema This Fall," *The Birmingham News,* Aug. 22, 1937, 70.

55. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, "Forgetting Anna May Wong," *Wasafiri* 19.43 (2004): 14–18, see 16.

56. Patricia J. Williams, "On Being the Object of Property," *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 5–24.

57. Lauren Berlant, "She's Having an Episode: Patricia Williams and the Writing of Damaged Life," *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 27.1 (2013): 19–35, see 23 (emphasis mine).

58. Berlant, "She's Having an Episode," 24 (emphasis mine).

59. Berlant, 25.

60. Berlant, 26.

61. Berlant, 26 (emphasis mine).

62. Lauren Berlant, with Jay Prosser, "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *Biography* 34.1 (Winter 2011): 180–87, see 181 (emphasis mine).

1. PUTTING ON A SHOW: ANNA MAY WONG'S "ORIENTAL" (DIS)PLAY ON THE SCREEN

1. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 196, n.16.

2. Cheng, *Second Skin*, 42.

3. Cheng, 192, n.5.

4. Cheng, 166, 167.

5. Cheng, 48.

6. Cheng, 48.

7. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 188.

8. Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 3 (emphasis mine).

9. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc*., translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 20.

10. In a trifold publicity brochure for the Capitol Theatre in London (published by Renown Stationery Stores, Fort, Bombay, and held by Special Collections, Reuben Library, British Film Institute), Wong was billed after Gray and the British actor Jameson Thomas

(who played Victor). Gray and Thomas were listed as the female and male leads. Wong was described as "the famous Chinese actress . . . who has made her name in American films, has a most difficult role in this production and rises to really great heights." On Wong upstaging Gray, see an advertisement describing Wong "[running] away with the picture despite it being a Gilda vehicle." *The Billboard*, Apr. 6, 1929, 21.

11. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 67.

12. Yiman Wang, "The Art of 'Screen Passing'—Anna May Wong's 'Yellow Yellowface' Performance in the Art Deco Era," *Camera Obscura* 20.3 (2005): 159–91, see 175.

13. Wang, "The Art of 'Screen Passing,'" 177.

14. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23/3–4 (Sept. 1982): 74–88, see 75.

15. Béla Balázs, *Schriften zum Film, band 2: "Der Geist des Films," Artikel und Aufsätze 1926–1931* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1984), 165; quoted in Anna Sofia Rossholm, *Reproducing Languages, Translating Bodies: Approaches to Speech, Translation and Cultural Identity in Early European Sound Film* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2006), 65.

16. Her Chinese name appears as either "Huang Liushaung nushi" 黃柳霜女士 (Lady Anna May Wong) in the calligraphy style known as *kaishu* (the regular script), 楷書 or as "Huang Liushuang" (Anna May Wong) in the style of *zhuanshu* 篆書 (the seal script), both printed vertically as in a classic Chinese text.

17. Wong was periodically criticized for enacting negative Chinese female stereotypes from the perspective of Chinese patriarchal nationalists. A July 1, 1931, censorship record shows that *Piccadilly*, distributed by Columbia, was censored in China on November 24, 1930, for "depict[ing] the murder of a Chinese dancing girl, who was shot by her Chinese lover, and other sordid scenes, in a low class quarter of a city purported to be London." This record is held in the Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Chapter 4 delves into Wong's negotiation with her Chinese public. For a detailed study of Wong's controversial reception in China in the first half of the twentieth century, see Yiman Wang, "Watching Anna May Wong in Republican China," in Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip, eds., *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 169–85.

18. "Huang Liushuang canguan Mingxing linzhua" 黃柳霜參觀明星鱗爪 (Jottings on Anna May Wong's Visit to the Star Motion Picture Co. Ltd.), in *Yingwu xinwen* 影舞新聞 (News on Movies and Dance) 2.17 (1936): 6. The image showing Wong autographing with a brush was shot by Newsreel Wong (aka H. S. Wong) and is included in an illustrated news report, "Huang Liushuang canguan Mingxing gongsi" 黃柳霜參觀明星公司 (Anna May Wong Visits the Star Film Studio), in *Dianying huabao* 電影畫報 (Screen Pictorial) 30 (1936): 24. Newsreel Wong (aka Wang Xiaoting 王小亭 or H. S. Wong) also filmed the Hearst newsreel footage including her visit to the Star Film Studio (more on this in chapter 4).

19. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 161.

20. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219.

21. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

22. Nizan Shaked, "Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement," *American Quarterly* 60.4 (2008): 1057–72.

23. The *Piccadilly* script is held by Special Collections, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

24. See this book's prelude, where I outline Wong's labor and precarious work conditions in the light of studies of Hollywood's freelance and short-term actors undertaken by Danae Clark, Emily Carman, and Kate Fortmueller, among others.

25. See the script held by Special Collections, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

26. Wong signed an eighteen-month contract with British International Pictures on October 30, 1928, for four films to be directed by Richard Eichberg. See *Variety*, Oct. 31, 1928. *Piccadilly* premiered in London on January 31, 1929, and started touring Germany in February, while exterior shooting for *The Pavement Butterfly* began in February in Monaco in southern France.

27. Jane Gaines, "Dorothy Arzner's Pants," *Jump Cut* 37 (July 1992): 88–98, https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC37folder/ArznersTrousers.html.

28. Gaines, "Dorothy Arzner's Pants."

29. In their "discovery" accounts, reporters relished in dramatizing Wong's allegiance to her father's laundry despite her newly gained glamour in the Hollywood dream factory. She was "the celestial 'Cinderella'" who took off "the gilded slipper of the moviedom" to "preside at the iron-board at night," or the "modern Cinderella" "from the Orient" who returned the jewelry and beautiful clothes to the studio safe and property room at 5:30 p.m. and took a five-cent trolly-car back home to resume working in the laundry. See Linton Wells, "Chinese Beauty Snubs Films; She Won't Forsake Laundry," *Seattle Star*, Aug. 31, 1921, 5; "A Modern Cinderella Here from the Orient," *New York Tribune*, Sept. 18, 1921, B3.

30. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 78, 87.

31. Wong's obituary in the *New York Times* opened with this incident, describing the photo spread as an advertisement showing her in a magnificent mink coat, with her legs encased in ankle-length brocaded silk pantaloons, in the rotogravure section of a Sunday newspaper. See "Anna May Wong Is Dead at 54; Actress Won Movie Fame in '24," *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1961.

32. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 81–82.

33. The name implicitly references the last character of Wong's Chinese name romanized as Wong Liu Tsong.

34. The opening bird's-eye-view panning shot begins with the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, revealing the location as Istanbul, even though it is only known as the "Eastern Harbour" in the film, apropos the ahistorical Orientalist mystique.

35. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 81–82.

36. For technical details of Technicolor subtractive process 2 (including the camera construction), see David Pierce and James Layton, *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915–1935* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 2015); and Xin Peng, "Colour-as-Hue and Colour-as-Race: Early Technicolor, Ornamentalism and *The Toll of the Sea* (1922)," *Screen* 62:3 (2021): 287–308.

37. While Marion did not write the script for Mary Pickford's version of *Madame Butterfly* (dir. Sidney Olcott, 1915), she was likely familiar with that rendition, given her close working relationship with Pickford shortly after 1915.

38. See Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 143.

39. "Specials that ARE Specials," *Variety*, Dec. 29, 1922, 99. Contrary to the absence of Wong (and the cast as a whole) in the publicity was the ubiquitous listing of the director, Chester Franklin; the writer, Frances Marion; and the photography director, J. A. Ball, who was responsible for developing the green-red Technicolor.

40. A Clemmer Theater advertisement claims that "the Drama is as True to Life as the Colors!"

41. See my paper, "The Physiognomy of the Location," presented at the On Location conference at UC Berkeley in 2013. Xin Peng makes a similar argument about the figure-ground merging; see "Colour-as-Hue and Colour-as-Race," 299.

42. See *The Toll of the Sea* Scrapbook, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Since the film was shot entirely exterior with sunlight or sunlight arcs, the actors wore no makeup to avoid appearing "glaringly." See "No Makeup for Screen Players," *The Chronicle* (Centralia, WA), Apr. 7, 1923.

43. Sime Silverman, "*The Toll of the Sea*," *Variety*, Dec. 1, 1922, 35.

44. "Yellow on Silver," *Pantomime*, Dec. 10, 1921, 26.

45. In interviews and her two-part autobiography, Wong underscores her iconoclastic violation of her family's and old China's traditional teachings of female submissiveness. See Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl" parts 1 and 2, in *Pictures*, Aug. and Sept. 1926. Also noteworthy is a 1926 article, "She Won a Triple Fight," in the Anna May Wong Clippings in New York University Special Collections. The "triple fight" refers to Wong's successful foray into filmdom in spite of "parental objection," "competition of thousands of girls," and "the racial difference which will always hold her . . . apart from the new world that she has tried to make her own." In the same breath, this article makes Wong the very product of the new medium of film. Wong is described as "motion-picture's own gift. No other business could have produced her, developed her, mingling the seductive traits of her heritage with the free expression of modern America so exquisitely." Taken literally, words such as *producing* and *developing* render Wong herself the photochemical film inscribed by light and chemically transformed into an image that hybridizes the Orient and the Occident. This article also stresses Wong's agential race-gender performances as "almost a typical American flapper," noting that her performances are so compelling that men seek her out for "dancing favors" at parties, "while many a placid, white beauty seethes inwardly with the ignominy of wall flowering." Five years after Wong's self-announced arrival as a "spot of yellow on the silver of the screen," this article enthuses over Wong's successful enchantment of the white society by subjecting herself to Hollywood's cinematic rendering *and* performing femininity, exotic *and* American.

46. Chung-Shu Kwei, a Chinese journalist and editor of several US-based Chinese American publications in the 1920s, pointed out that the costumes in *The Toll of the Sea* were too old-fashioned for a modern girl like Wong, and that Wong's modern-girl image was not representative of Chinese women. See Chung-Shu Kwei, "Photo-play Review," *The Chinese Students Monthly* 18.2 (Dec. 1922): 74–76, see 75. This journal was published in New York by the Chinese Students' Alliance in the United States of America. Chung-Shu Kwei served as the journal's editor-in-chief from 1922 to 1925.

47. Wong returned to San Francisco from China on November 28, 1936, via Honolulu, where she was stranded due to a shipping strike. While in Honolulu, she reportedly had not decided "whether to go back to Hollywood or play on the stage in New York or go on

over to Europe." See "Anna May Wong Stranded by Pierce Strike but She Doesn't Mind; Will Enjoy Stay Here," *Nippu Jiji* (Daily News), Nov. 5, 1936, 1. The stranding cost her a contract in London. See "Shanghai Man Breaks Hawaii Tie-up," *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, Dec. 23, 1936, 512. This precarious situation was followed by her unstable Paramount contract in April 1937. Her film title(s) kept changing; so did the contract terms. All of these suggested her volatile pathway. When the Paramount pressbook describes *Daughter of Shanghai* as Wong's first picture in three years, attributing her screen absence to her stage performances in Europe and America, the precarious and unpredictable course of her career is glossed over. See *Daughter of Shanghai* pressbook, 15, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

48. See Robert McIlwaine, "Third Beginning," *Modern Screen*, Nov. 3, 1937. Wong mentioned her initiation of this plot concept eight months earlier in a March 4, 1937, letter to Fania Marinoff. In the same letter, she also talked about a Paris offer for which she had not yet received the script, which suggested that Wong's Paramount film contract was in flux and she was considering traveling to Europe for work, which she did in June and July. Letters to Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff are held in the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

49. In Series IV, Subseries A, Box 13, Folder 7, Yoshio Kishi and Irene Yah Ling Sun Collection, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

50. Louise Leung, "East Meets West: Anna May Wong Back on Screen after an Absence of Several Years, Discusses Her Native Land," *Hollywood Magazine*, Jan. 1939, 40, 55. Leung was the first Chinese American woman reporter working for a mainstream US newspaper.

51. "Slaughter of Aliens Told," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1934. For the multiple versions of the script, see File D-159 to File D-164, Paramount Pictures Scripts, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. The film's pressbook describes the film as a "story ripped directly from the headlines," suitably directed by Robert Florey, a French émigré director in Hollywood who had made his name as "Hollywood's ace exposer" with an "outstanding nose for news." See "Robert Florey Becomes Hollywood's Ace Exposer," *Daughter of Shanghai* pressbook, 14, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

52. This scene was shot in a San Francisco curio shop, and Wong wore a "striking Chinese gown of imperial yellow." Barbara Miller, "Oriental Film Actors In Demand: Shanghai War Spawns Epidemic of Chinese Pictures," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 1937, D1.

53. Although described as a "princess" dress in the narrative, this costume matches a warrior gown that Wong procured in Beijing. According to Molly Castle, Wong's British friend who visited her in Beijing, Wong decided to play a warrior role in Peking Opera, and had a warrior gown tailored to fit her figure. See Molly Castle, "Caviar and Cabbages," *The Sketch* (Feb. 3, 1937), 230. Wong had used this gown in the summer stock show of *Princess Turandot* shortly before filming *Daughter of Shanghai* (see chapter 2).

54. The film makes a uniquely progressive move in portraying a quasi-alliance of the racialized characters against the white human traffickers, yet also establishes another hierarchy with the ethnic Chinese in the authoritative position. The Black "razor man" (portrayed by Ernest Whitman) playfully departs from the derogatory stereotype of the "hatchet man" popularized by Hollywood's usual exploitation of Chinatown's Tong wars.

55. That Wong played the decisive role in shaping her sartorial performances in multiple films after her China trip was confirmed by none other than Paramount's leading costume

designer, Edith Head, who designed her costumes in *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939). According to Head, Wong "held daily fashion conferences at Paramount on outfits for her personal wardrobe" while starring in *The Island of Lost Men* (dir. Kurt Neumann, 1939). See Edith Head, "Fashion Thoughts," *North West Champion* (Moree, NSW, Australia), July 27, 1939, 7. For an example of her off-screen costume show, see a fashion article in *Screenland* (Mar. 1938) in which Wong modeled two of her qipao dresses, one made of white satin matched with pants, the other of black satin matched with a gauze cape striped with blue, red, and green silk threads.

56. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31.3 (Spring 2006): 675–88, see 679, 677.

57. A third Alexander-Stern film, *Adventure in China*, was announced in November, and filming was slated to begin in December 1942. See *Variety*, Nov. 4, 1942, 7. This film did not materialize. Despite Hollywood's increased investment in war films set in China, Wong's film opportunities dried up, and she did not return to the big screen until 1949, playing a newly immigrated maid in a noir film, *Impact* (dir. Arthur Lubin).

58. Such war spectacles include Paramount's *Disputed Passage* (dir. Frank Borzage, 1939) and *China* (dir. John Farrow, 1943). Wong was hired to coach Dorothy Lamour (playing a China-raised Eurasian) in *Disputed Passage* while she was working on Paramount's *Island of Lost Men*. See James Parish and William Leonard, "Anna May Wong," in *Hollywood Players: The Thirties* (New York: Arlington House, 1976), 532–38, see 536. There is no mention of Wong, however, in the budget records of *Disputed Passage*, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Instead, a Miss Aida Sue was employed on April 11, 1939, as a dialogue coach for Lamour at $100 per week for eight weeks. Sue was described as a non-US citizen, but a California resident.

59. Brian Taves, "Joseph H. Lewis, Anna May Wong and Bombs over Burma," in Gary D. Rhodes, ed., *The Films of Joseph H. Lewis* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), see 130. William Nigh, director of *Lady from Chungking*, was also a prolific B movie director who made the *Detective Mr. Wong* series in the mid- to late 1930s, starring Boris Karloff in yellowface. He had previously worked with Wong on two silent films, *Mr. Wu* (1927) and *Across to Singapore* (1928), both Orientalist fantasies with Wong playing supporting roles.

60. See Anna May Wong, "Manchuria," *Rob Wagner's Script*, Jan. 16, 1932, 7.

61. Fred Wing, *New Chinese Recipes* (New York: Edelmuth, 1941). This book was reprinted in 1942, published by United China Relief in New York.

62. *The Billboard*, Jan. 3, 1942, 10.

63. For Wong's other wartime activities, see Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 200–05.

64. I thank the UCLA Film & Television Archive Research and Study Center ex-manager Mark Quigley for having the Paramount 35mm print transferred to a video for my study, and the Research and Study Center officer, Maya Montañez Smukler, for coordinating and making this film available for streaming during the pandemic.

65. See documents of United China Relief Fund in Motion Picture Association of America World War II Records, Folder 340, dated July 28, 1941, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library; and "Stars for China," *Time*, Aug. 25, 1941, 56.

66. Harry Carr, "The Lancer," in *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 21, 1932, A1.

67. Sen, "Huang Liushuang zuo zhujiao" 黃柳霜做主角 (Anna May Wong Plays the Leading Role), *Haitao magazine* 海濤雜誌, June 1946, 4. The author referenced Wong's degrading interwar portrayals of Chinese femininity, then shifted to praise her redeeming performance in *Lady from Chungking*.

68. See Breen's letters to Alexander-Stern, Sept. 19 and Sept. 22, 1942, *Lady from Chungking* Production Code Administration records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

69. Herb Kugel, "Hollywood's Dream Factory during World War II," *WWII History*, July 2009, https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/hollywoods-dream-factory-during-world-war-ii/.

70. Harold Huber, playing the Japanese general, was of Swiss ancestry but was said to bear "a striking Oriental appearance" and needed very little makeup to become a "typical Jap"—a publicity gimmick akin to that of Warner Oland, the Swedish actor most famous for playing Charlie Chan. See *Lady from Chungking* pressbook, production files, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

71. "Uses Authentic Chinese Makeup," *Lady from Chungking* pressbook.

72. "Beautiful Chinese Costumes Worn by Anna May Wong," *Lady from Chungking* pressbook.

73. For high-resolution scans of these photos, see https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10189924. These photos are in Box 383, Folder 5723, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

74. Karen J. Leong points out that Madame Chiang specifically blacklisted Wong as unsuitable for Hollywood's pro-China films. See Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

75. This dark-humor epitaph has become a poignant, pithy reference to the injustice Wong suffered through her life-career. See, for instance, "Anna May Wong Dies at 56," *New York Herald Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1961; and Neil Okrent, "Right Place, Wong Time: Why Hollywood's First Asian Star, Anna May Wong, Died a Thousand Movie Deaths," *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1990, 84–96.

76. E. Le Berthon, "Anna May Wong Was a Laundryman's Daughter," *The Picturegoer Weekly* (previously *The Picturegoer*), Oct. 17, 1931, 17.

77. Marjory Collier, "That Chinese Girl: East Meets West in Anna May Wong," in the column "Screen Types—as a Woman Sees Them," *The Picturegoer*, May 1930, 26–27.

78. See undated typescript, "An Appointment with Sessue and Anna May," 19, Yoshio Kishi and Irene Yah Ling Sun Collection, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

79. Elizabeth Wong, *China Doll: The Imagined Life of an American Actress*, a play presented by Jason Fogelson of William Morris Agency, New York, 1996, 86.

80. One exception is the tear-less death scene in *Lady from Chungking*, where Wong's character Kwai Mei's execution is narratively sublimated for the patriotic cause.

81. See Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* 27.6 (1986): 6–23; Pansy Duncan, "Tears, Melodrama and 'Heterosensibility' in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*," *Screen* 52.2 (Summer 2011): 173–92; Jane M. Gaines, "Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama," in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 325–39.

82. Silverman, "*The Toll of the Sea*."

83. Anna May Wong, "My Film Thrills," *Film Pictorial* (London), Nov. 1933, 6.

84. Walter Benjamin, "Gespräch mit Anne [*sic*] May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen" (Speaking with Anna May Wong: A Chinoiserie from the Old West), *Die Literarische Welt* (The Literary World), July 6, 1928, 1.

85. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

86. Broderick D. V. Chow, "Here Is a Story for Me: Representation and Visibility in *Miss Saigon* and *The Orphan of Zhao*," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24.4 (2014): 507–16, see 512.

87. Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 1.

88. Chow, "Here Is a Story for Me," 512 (emphasis mine).

89. Chow, 507.

90. Chow, 512 (emphasis in original).

91. Chow, 508.

92. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

93. Silverman, "*The Toll of the Sea*."

94. Janet Staiger, "The Eyes Are Really the Focus: Photoplay Acting and Film Form and Style," *Wide Angle* 6.4 (1985): 14–23, see 20. A salient example of how the shifting film techniques impacted the acting style was Asta Nielsen's protest against Ernst Lubitsch's close-up cropping and editing that cut short her emotional scenes in the 1919 film *Intoxication*. See Michael Wedel, "Ernst Lubitsch Fuels Debate over Tears in the Cinema" (Oct. 15, 1920), in Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael David Richardson, eds., *A New History of German Cinema* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014): 86–92.

95. Jean Epstein, "Magnification and Other Writings" (1921), translated by Stuart Liebman, *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 9–25; Daisuke Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 200.

96. Pansy Duncan, "Tears, Melodrama and 'Heterosensibility,'" *Screen* 52.2 (Summer 2011): 173–92, see 186.

97. Duncan, "Tears, Melodrama and 'Heterosensibility,'" 192.

98. Duncan, 186.

99. The film was drastically recut for the Australian release, which ends with the over-the-shoulder shot of John bending over Song's body. The two-person shot reinscribes heteronormativity by recentering the white man's perspective.

100. Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 23, 182.

101. Cheng, *Second Skin*, 196, n.16.

102. Stirling Bowen, "The Theatre: Edgar Wallace," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 31, 1930, 4.

103. Wong, "My Film Thrills." In this book's refrain, I argue that Wong's truncated career as a comedienne navigated precisely in between the differentially racialized performances, contributing to an "intersti-racial" formation.

104. Some reviews faulted the film for overusing close-ups, which also distinguished the film from the Broadway version.

105. Jeffrey J. Richards, "The British Board of Film Censors and Content Control in the 1930s: Images of Britain," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 1.2 (1981): 95–116, see 105. The very first filming request from Warner Bros. in January 1931 was rejected by

the British film censors on the grounds of coarse language and the characters' depravity in "a sordid tale of crime and lust."

106. Review in *Kinematograph Weekly*, Mar. 17, 1938, 25.

107. Paramount press release, *Dangerous to Know*, Jan. 11, 1938, quoted in Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930–1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 82.

108. "Miss Wong Sports First 'All Whale' Film Gown," *Dangerous to Know* pressbook, 13, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

109. Wong to Van Vechten, Jan. 3, 1938; and review in *Variety*, Nov. 3, 1937, 5.

110. "Top-Notch Cast Adds Power to New Film," in *Dangerous to Know* pressbook, 13 (emphasis mine), microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

111. *Look* magazine, a popular large-size "feature picture" magazine published in Iowa, was launched in February 1937 and, within a few weeks, reached over a million copies sold for each issue. By March 1, 1938, it was claimed two million copies were sold of each issue.

112. This title was begrudgingly granted, however. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Alma Whitaker called it Wong's "near-won sartorial supremacy." Travis Banton, who nominated Carole Lombard, offered Wong a backhanded compliment: "She dresses interestingly. She can carry off a touch of eccentricity. But she does not typify the well-dressed woman." Alma Whitaker, "Which Star Really Deserves Best-Dressed Woman Title?," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 28, 1934.

113. "Chinese Actress Claims Honor of 'Most Murdered,'" *Dangerous to Know* pressbook, 13.

114. "Practice Makes Wong's Suicide Almost Perfect," *Dangerous to Know* pressbook, 14. The music referenced may be Edvard Grieg's incidental music "The Death of Åse" in his *Peer Gynt* suite.

115. Chow, "Here Is a Story for Me," 512.

116. Chow, 512.

117. Burns, *Puro Arte*, 1.

118. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

119. Shane Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona," *Camera Obscura* 23.1 (2008): 10–45, see 28.

120. Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona," 29, 32.

121. Duncan, "'Tears, Melodrama and 'Heterosensibility,'" 192.

122. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian American: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 100, 101.

2. PUTTING ON ANOTHER SHOW: SPOTLIGHTING ANNA MAY WONG IN THEATER

1. The role went to theater actress Helen Hayes.

2. See *Variety*, Jan. 28, 1925, 5, 45; "Repeating Chinese Girl," *Variety*, Feb. 4, 1925, 5; *Variety*, Mar. 11, 1925, 31; *The Billboard*, Apr. 25, 1925, 15; *Variety*, Feb. 9, 1927, 21.

3. "Chinese Girl to Do Playlet," *The Billboard*, Dec. 4, 1926, 17.

4. *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, Dec. 7, 1927.

5. The UK-based Whitehall Films Company planned to film it in China with Wong playing a role. That plan was aborted. See Frank Tilley, "British Film Field," *Variety*, May 16, 1928, 4.

6. *Variety*, Oct. 31, 1928, 6.

7. See David P. Sentner's report in the *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express*, Apr. 11, 1931. Sentner further quoted Jesse L. Lasky as saying Wong possessed "mature acting powers" and "a mellow voice."

8. For a historical study of the translation and international circulation of the Chinese play *Huilan Ji* 灰闌記, see Wenwei Du, "The Chalk Circle Comes Full Circle: From Yuan Drama Through the Western Stage to Peking Opera," *Asian Theatre Journal* 12.2 (Autumn 1995): 307–25.

9. Hi-Tang was originally a courtesan, causing Lord Cromer to decry the illicit sexuality as "distinctly from that neighborhood [of Shanghai, or Chinese debauchery]." Basil Dean responded by changing the brothel to a teahouse and Hi-Tang from a courtesan to a teahouse dancer. See Basil Dean, *Mind's Eye: An Autobiography 1927–1972* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 64.

10. Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage: Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759–2008* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 87, 101.

11. This interview originally appeared in *The Observer* (London) and was reprinted in a China-based English-language newspaper, *The North-China Daily News*. My reference is to the reprint. "Miss Anna May Wong a Chinese Actress in Film and Play: Never Been to China: An Interview," *The North-China Daily News*, Apr. 11, 1929, 8.

12. Hubert Griffith, "Anna May Wong on the Stage," *The Evening Standard*, Mar. 18, 1929, 18 (emphasis mine). Contrary to Griffith's criticism of Wong's vocal ability, a Chinese journalist in London praised her transition from the silent film to the song-and-dance stage to take advantage of Westerners' chinoiserie. The journalist also enthused over the spectacle of the play, which they believed was an adaptation of *Yutang chun* (rather than *Huilan ji*)—a well-known opera about a courtesan's fall and rise that ends in her happy wedding with the judge who clears her name and saves her from a death sentence. See "Huang Amei zai Yinglun dayan *Yutang chun*" 黃阿媚在英倫大演《玉堂春》(Anna May Wong Makes a Splash Playing *Yutang chun* in England), in *Beiyang huabao* 北洋畫報 (The Pei-Yang Pictorial News) 7.318 (1929): n.p.

13. Dean, *Mind's Eye*, 67, 68.

14. Ivor Brown, "The Circle of Chalk" review in "This Week's Theatres," *The Observer*, Mar. 17, 1929, 15.

15. Charles Morgan, "Anna May Wong in a London Play," *The New York Times*, Mar. 31, 1929, 102.

16. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space" (1980), reprinted in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 335–48, see 339.

17. Three years later, Wong did take dramatic acting lessons from renowned British theater actresses Kate Rorke and Mabel Terry-Lewis, niece of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century leading actress Ellen Terry. Wong's goal was to "fit myself for dramatic acting." But this was not until 1932, when she was reported to be "leaving" Hollywood again. See "Anna May Wong Leaving," Oct. 26, 1932, in the Anna May Wong Biography Files held by the Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

18. Dean, *Mind's Eye*, 65.

19. Brown, "The Circle of Chalk" review. Quong's performance was also embraced by critics in Australia—her homeland. The Sydney-based magazine *The Home* asserted that her "striking success" outshone Wong. Quoted in Angela Woollacott, "Rose Quong

Becomes Chinese: An Australian in London and New York," *Australian Historical Studies* 38.129 (2007): 16–31, see 27.

20. Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage*, 101.

21. Wong was quoted in John Scott, "European Bouquets Get Notice: Chinese Flapper Crashes Continent before Finding Recognition Here," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1931, 11; and in George C. Warren, "Anna May Wong Returns a Poised Cosmopolite," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 4, 1931, D1.

22. See, for instance, H. J., "Anna May Wong learnt Französisch Und wird im Herbst in Wien zum am Theater spielen" (Anna May Wong Learns French and Will Act in the Theater in Vienna This Fall), *Mein Film* 236 (1930): 7; and Anna May Wong, "Mein erstes Wort im Sprechfilm" (My First Word in the Talking Pictures), *Mein Film* 239 (1930): 4.

23. The editor of a German interview with Wong prefaced it by describing her German as "delightfully chatty . . . with an English accent," and assured the readership and audience that her German in *Hai-Tang* (the German title of *Flame of Love*) was "graceful, understandable and good." Anna May Wong, "Bambus oder: Chinas Bekehrung zum Film" (Bamboo or: China's Conversion to Film), *Mein Film* 222 (1930): 3–4. A year later, Wong told John Scott of the *Los Angeles Times* that her German in *Hai-Tang* was deemed "too perfect" by the critics, such that they believed she must have used a double. See Scott, "European Bouquets Get Notice." I thank Dr. Michael Holohan for translating German materials into English.

24. *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), Sept. 28, 1930, 1.

25. *Tänzerinnen der Gegenwart. 65 Bilder erläutert von Fred Hildenbrandt* (Zürich: Orell Füssli, 1931), 13, and photo no. 47.

26. Quoted in Scott, "European Bouquets Get Notice," 13.

27. Scott, 11.

28. Carroll Harrison, "Oriental Girl Crashes Gates via Footlights," *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express*, June 6, 1931, reprinted in G. D. Hamann, ed., *Anna May Wong in the 1930s* (Hollywood, CA: Film Today Press, 2002), 9.

29. Harrison, "Oriental Girl Crashes Gates."

30. Florence Roberts, "Fashions from Stage and Stalls," *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, Mar. 30, 1929, 786.

31. Roberts, "Fashions from Stage and Stalls."

32. *Picture Play*, Nov. 1929, 31, 94.

33. Betty Willis, "Famous Oriental Stars Return to the Screen," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Oct. 1931, 44–45, 90, see 90.

34. Willis, "Famous Oriental Stars."

35. Willis, 90.

36. Willis, 45.

37. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 112.

38. See Philip Leibfried and Chei Mi Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide to Her Film, Stage, Radio, and Television Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 150.

39. "All for Mr. Wallace: A Chinese Actress Reaches Broadway, and If She Is Not Wong, Sue Her," *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1930, X3.

40. "Roll of Anna May Wong," *The New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1930, 40.

41. "Anna May Wong in Old Play," *Billboard*, Dec. 13, 1930, 14.

42. Among this article's wide syndication in the US and Canada, see, for instance, "Chinese Girl Fine Linguist," *The Victoria Daily Times* (BC, Canada), Dec. 23, 1930, 6.

43. *Daily News* (New York), Mar. 30, 1931, 379.

44. "Chinese Girl West," *Variety*, May 6, 1931, 62.

45. Grace Kingsley, "Oriental Film Plays Planned," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1931, 21.

46. Wong to Van Vechten, Sept. 21, 1932. Letters to Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff quoted in this and other chapters are held in the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, unless otherwise noted.

47. The *New York Times* publicized an image of Wong in this costume on Nov. 9, 1930, p. RP27.

48. I have elsewhere used *Hollywood on Parade* to discuss Wong's "vocal-visual camouflage that enabled slippery points of identification and disidentification." Yiman Wang, "'Speaking in a Forked Tongue': Anna May Wong's Linguistic Cosmopolitanism," in Sabrina Qiong Yu and Guy Austin, eds., *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 65–83, see 78.

49. Also importantly, *On the Spot*, a gangster melodrama set in Chicago, coincided with the New York Theater Guild's production of *Roar China!*, based on Russian playwright Sergei Tretyakov's 1926 anti-imperialist play drawn from his 1924 visit to China.

50. Clare Boothe Brokaw, "Mary Pickford: The End of an Era," *Vanity Fair*, Aug. 1932, 19.

51. Patrick Keating, "Artifice and Atmosphere: The Visual Culture of Hollywood Glamour Photography, 1930–1935," *Film History* 29.3 (2017): 105–35, see 108. Relatedly, Liz Willis-Tropea identifies the drastic uptake of the word *glamour* between 1930 and 1932. See Liz Willis-Tropea, "Glamour Photography and the Institutionalization of Celebrity," *Photography & Culture* 4.3 (Nov. 2011): 261–76, n.3.

52. Jerold L. Simmons and Leonard J. Leff, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 22. See also Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

53. Hilary Lynn, "What Is This Thing Called 'X'?," *Photoplay*, Apr. 1933, 27–28, 89.

54. Willis-Tropea, "Glamour Photography," 262.

55. Keating, "Artifice and Atmosphere."

56. In two years, her husband would launch Condé Nast, the global mass media company that published magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, to which Steichen contributed modernist and commercial photographs.

57. This detail of Garbo's accentuated eyelashes recurred in a shot in her 1932 film *The Grand Hotel*. Patrick Keating discusses this stylistic reiteration in his article on glamour photography, "Artifice and Atmosphere" (2017).

58. Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), ch. 4. Wong commented on Van Vechten's photos in letters to him dated May 5, 1932, July 31, 1932, and Mar. 14, 1936.

59. Man Ray's photo was originally titled "Visage de nacre et masque d'ébène" (Mother-of-pearl face and ebony mask) when first published in the French high-fashion magazine *Vogue* (May 1926), the French edition of the American *Vanity Fair*. Both *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, which published Steichen's photos of Wong, were owned by the Condé Nast family; *Vanity Fair* was folded into *Vogue* in 1936.

60. Man Ray's photo was published next to a set of vérité photos of Chinese gladiators performing at the Grand Music Hall on the Champs-Élysées—all included in the "At the Theater" section of *Vogue*. This placement further suggests the photo's connection to racialized exotic performance.

61. J. Brooks Atkinson's review of *On the Spot*, "The Play," *The New York Times*, Oct. 30, 1930, 36.

62. *Variety*, Jan. 13, 1937, 2.

63. *Variety*, Apr. 14, 1937, 61.

64. "Parted by a Nation's Hatred . . . and Hitler," *Look, The Monthly Picture Magazine*, Feb. 1937, 3. This was advertised as "Why Did Hitler Tear These Women Apart?," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), Jan. 6, 1937, A-6. In the advertisement, the photo was visually torn apart three ways.

65. The photographer was the Jewish Alfred Eisenstaedt, who also famously shot Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini's first meeting in Italy in 1934 before immigrating to the US, joining *Life* magazine as a founding staff photographer.

66. Patrice Petro, "Cosmopolitan Women: Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong, and Leni Riefenstahl," in Jennifer Bean, Anupama Kapse, and Laura Horak, eds., *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 295–311, see 308.

67. "Parted by a Nation's Hatred . . . and Hitler."

68. Xiao Fen, "Huang Liushaung ji bian waiguo Zhong" 黃柳霜幾變外國種 (Anna May Wong Almost Turned into a Foreign Race), *Kangle shijie* 康樂世界 (The Healthy & Happy World) 1.4 (1939): 1.

69. *Variety*, Aug. 18, 1937, 76.

70. *White Plains Reporter*, Aug. 3, 1937, quoted in Leibfried and Lane, *Anna May Wong*, 156.

71. Gladys Baker, "Having Lunch with Anna May Wong: Chinese Actress Will Return to Cinema This Fall," *The Birmingham News*, Aug. 22, 1937, 70.

72. The first mention of Wong's (unmaterialized) plan to play in *Turandot* was a German stage version in 1930. See "Chinese Girl Fine Linguist," *The Victoria Daily Times* (BC, Canada), Dec. 23, 1930, 6. A German film version of *Turandot* was made in 1934, featuring a white actress, Käthe von Nagy. A Norwegian reviewer compared the German *Turandot* with Wong's British musical film *Chu Chin Chow* (both being screened in Norway over Christmas in 1934) and concluded that *Turandot*'s limited use of Chinese elements yielded a superior effect (contrary to *Chu Chin Chow*'s tiringly elaborate sets and costumes). The reviewer specifically praised von Nagy's understated yellowface makeup so that "for the most part she appears as we are used to seeing her." See "New Movie Premieres This Christmas," *Aftenposten*, Dec. 27, 1934, 4. All the Norwegian materials studied in this chapter are held in the periodicals collection of Nasjonalbiblioteket (National Library of Norway). I thank Dr. Francis Steen and Jon Rasmus Nyquist for translating them into English.

73. See John Gerard and Lawrence Langner's typescript, "Turandot, Princess of China," Act 1, Scene 1, p. 20. This script, created in 1946 as property of Theatre Guild Inc. in New York, is now held in the Lawrence Langner Papers, YCAL MSS 688, I. 1964 Acquisition, Box 74, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Although this script was not the one they wrote for Wong in 1937, it was likely a close adaptation. An indication is that the answer to Turandot's first riddle is "willow"—the middle character in Wong's Chinese name commonly translated as "frosted yellow willow." Wong's correspondence with Langner between November 15 and December 3, 1946, shows that a copy of the script was sent to

Wong, and Wong proposed to do this play on the radio for Langner's Theatre Guild Airways, while Langner suggested that Wong ask her agent to make her available for the play's summer stock show the next season. See their correspondence in YCAL MSS 436, Box 245, Folder 6203, Theatre Guild Archive, Series I, Subject and Correspondence Files, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

74. Gerard and Langner, "Turandot, Princess of China," 60, 61 (Act 1, Scene 3).

75. Gerard and Langner, 51, 52 (Act 2, Scene 3).

76. Baker, "Having Lunch with Anna May Wong," 70.

77. The "water sleeves" worked as a prop *and* as quasi-prosthetic arms allowing the performer to express emotions and show off acting skills that are visible to audience seated at the far side of the theater.

78. Mark A. Vieira, *Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits: The Chapman Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 114, plate 154.

79. *The Home*, Aug. 1, 1939, 50, 51, the "Special Plates" section.

80. Lon Jones, "Anna May Wong to Visit Australia—Chinese Star Will Arrive in Few Weeks," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1, 1939, 8S (emphasis mine).

81. See Yiman Wang, "Anna May Wong's Greetings to the World," in Julia Lee and Josephine Lee, eds., *Asian American Literature in Transition, vol. 1: 1850–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 281–301. A copy of this map is deposited at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

82. See Luo Shusen 羅樹森, trans., "Wo de yinmu kongbu tan" 我的銀幕恐怖談, *Xiandai dianying* 現代電影 (Modern Screen) 1.7 (1934): 28–29.

83. "Glasgow Empire Program week commencing Aug. 27, 1933," Henry Farmer Papers, Archives & Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library. All of Wong's letters to Farmer are also contained in the Farmer Papers.

84. Henry Farmer Papers.

85. Anton Dolin, "Teaching Ballet to the Stars," *Film Pictorial* (London), June 8, 1935. Wong commissioned the dance act from Katherine DeMille for fifty pounds. See Anne Edwards, *The DeMilles: The American Family* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 131.

86. Edwards, *The DeMilles*, 131.

87. Dolin, "Teaching Ballet to the Stars."

88. Marguerite Tazelaar, "A Report on London's Filmland Submitted by Anna May Wong," in Anna May Wong Clippings held by New York Public Library. *Variety*, Dec. 4, 1934, 11.

89. The courtesan's monologue was quoted in its entirety in Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 122–23.

90. This letter was sent during her stay at Claridge's Hotel in London. Following the successful Italian tour, she received a surprise invitation to play in Madrid.

91. I thank Dr. Francesca Romeo and her mother for translating the Italian news coverage of Wong into English. The Italian materials are held by La Biblioteca Luigi Chiarini, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome.

92. See the front cover of *Excelsior: Weekly Illustrated Magazine*, Oct. 24, 1934.

93. Luciano Ramo, "È arrivata May Wong" (May Wong Is Here), *Cinema Illustrazioni*, Dec. 12, 1934, 12–13. Another Italian report two years ago had turned the fetishistic gaze to her "tiny feet," purportedly maintained by ten pedicurists she had imported from China.

See "Per i piedini di May Wong" (For the Tiny Feet of May Wong), *Cinema Illustrazione*, Feb. 3, 1932, 10.

94. Ramo, "È arrivata May Wong."

95. I thank Dr. Francis Steen and Dr. Jon Rasmus Nyquist for translating the Norwegian materials into English, also helping me understand the subtle connotations of Norwegian words that could not be fully captured in the English translation.

96. "Anna May Wong Is Coming on Sat.," *Aftenposten*, Feb. 13, 1935, 4.

97. "Great Evening at The Mill, or China in Oslo," *Aftenposten*, Feb. 18, 1935, 4.

98. The original word for "lovely" is *delig*, which was repeatedly used in this report to describe Wong. *Delig* suggests a heavenly bliss that commands high appreciation, but not a possessive desire. I thank Dr. Francis Steen for underscoring the subtlety.

99. "Great Evening at The Mill."

100. "Great Evening at The Mill."

101. "The People of Gothenburg Didn't Want to See Anna May Wong," *Aftenposten*, Mar. 11, 1935, 4.

102. H. and S.T. (from Gothenburg), "A Mean Salvo against Anna May Wong," *Stavanger Aftenblad*, Mar. 16, 1935, 7.

103. Frank Neil had been trying to book Wong since 1934. See F. K. M., "Going Back-Stage to Meet the Star! The *Table Talk* Interviewer Sees Talkie—and Then Meets the Leading Actress! An Interview with Attractive Anna May Wong, the Famous Film Star Now at the Tivoli," *Table Talk* (Melbourne), June 15, 1939, 5, 30, see 30.

104. Lim, *Anna May Wong*, 198–99.

105. One of the most prominent border-crossing nonwhite female performers was Josephine Baker, who has received extensive scholarly attention. See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Terri Simone Francis, *Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

106. Quong's diary entry on July 19, 1934, Diary 1934–38, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 10, Rose Quong Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

107. McKinney was the first Black American actress to star in a studio film, *Hallelujah* (dir. King Vidor, 1929) and to tour Australia as the leading lady of a vaudeville program. Like Wong, she also enjoyed a transnational stage-and-screen performance career, becoming particularly popular in interwar Europe. When Wong was doing films and stage acts in the UK in 1934, McKinney was costarring with Paul Robeson in *Sanders of the River* (dir. Zoltán Korda, 1935).

108. "Colored Performers. Federal Ban Likely," *Adelaide News*, Mar. 28, 1928, 1. Also see Nicole Anae, "'They Will All Be My Color': Nina Mae McKinney and Black Internationalism in 1930s Australia," in Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 123–48, 128.

109. E. Chapple's memorandum to ABC's general manager dated May 18, 1939.

110. Chapple's opinion was conveyed to the Tivoli Theatre in Melbourne on May 20, 1939.

111. Anae, "'They Will All Be My Color.'"

112. *The Sydney Morning Herald* quoted in Derham Groves, *Anna May Wong's Lucky Shoes: 1939 Australia through the Eyes of an Art Deco Diva* (Ames, IA: Culicidae Press, 2011), 19.

113. *Variety*, Sept. 20, 1939, 6.

114. See her letter to Marinoff and Van Vechten dated September 11, 1939, after returning to her Santa Monica home. In the same letter, Wong expressed happiness about being back home, after being cut off from friends while in Australia, which was "so far away."

115. "Bright Show at Tivoli Anna May Wong," *The Argus*, June 13, 1939, 12. I thank Ms. Jasmine Lee Ehrhardt, who worked as my undergrad research assistant and helped me compile the Australian news coverage of Wong gleaned from Trove, the Australian digital collections from Australian libraries, universities, museums, galleries, and archives.

116. "Calling Australia," *The Movie World* (*The Australian Women's Weekly* special film supplement), Jan. 30, 1937, front cover. The section on Wong, "Oriental Splendor," was written by the magazine's Hollywood representative, Barbara Bourchier.

117. The first report emphasizing her Americanness was "Anna May Wong: Arrival in Sydney, Not Born in China," *National Advocate* (Bathurst, NSW), June 5, 1939, 1.

118. Kerwin Maegraith, "Hollywood Is a Gamble—Says Anna May Wong," *The Sydney Morning Herald Women's Supplement*, July 24, 1939, 4. This article included his sketches of Wong and her autograph, which undoubtedly enhanced its appeal to the female readership. Maegraith stated that Wong played a critical role in shaping her sketches.

119. Maegraith, "Hollywood Is a Gamble."

120. "The Best Meal I Ever Had . . . Some Famous People Tell Us Where They Found It," *The Australian Women's Weekly*, Aug. 5, 1939, 20; "Radio Women's Club," *The Age*, July 1, 1939, 22.

121. See Groves, *Anna May Wong's Lucky Shoes*, 21.

122. "Philosophy Is a Heritage: The Importance of Relaxing," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 18, 1939, 4 ("For Women" section).

123. "Women's Letters," *The Bulletin*, June 24, 1942, 23.

124. "Miss Anna May Wong Writes about Her Remington Portable," *The Sun News-Pictorial*, June 15, 1939, 10. An identical advertisement also appeared in *The Sun News-Pictorial*, June 30, 1939, 16.

125. Barbara Bourchier, "Here's Hot News from All the Studios!," *The Australian Women's Weekly*, Sept. 12, 1936.

126. See "Anna May Wong Making a Phone Call in Park Hotel, Looking Like a Scene from a Movie," *Shidai tuhua banyuekan* 時代圖畫半月刊 (Modern Miscellany: A Fortnightly Pictorial Review) 9.6 (1936): n.p.; and F. K. M. "Going Back-Stage to Meet the Star!"

3. SHIFTING THE SHOW: LABOR IN THE MARGINS

Epigraphs: "In those days": Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 25. Boggs, ten years Wong's junior, was a Chinese American philosopher, social activist, and civil rights advocate (along with her husband, James Boggs, an African American political activist). She is the subject of the documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* (dir. Grace Lee, 2013).

"Out of a hundred Chinese": Anna May Wong, "Bambus oder: Chinas Bekehrung zum film," (Bamboo or: China's Conversion to Film), *Mein Film* 222 (1930): 3–4. This article, authored by Wong, was likely based on an interview she gave in German after her

personal appearance at the premiere of her first talkie, *Hai-Tang* (or *The Flame of Love*) at the Schweden-Kino.

1. Wong recounted this experience in articles such as "My Film Thrills," *Film Pictorial* (London), Nov. 1933, and "Had Childhood Start in Land of Makebelieve: Star of 'Chu Chin Chow' Began Her Film Career at Age of Twelve," *Chu Chin Chow* pressbook (1934), microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

2. Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

3. Desirée J. Garcia, "Dressing the Part: Black Maids, White Stars in the Dressing Room," in Paula J. Massood, Angel Daniel Matos, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, eds., *Media Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 183–94.

4. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

5. Jacques Derrida and Craig Owens, "The Parergon," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 3–41.

6. Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2, 26, 28.

7. H. C., "A Chinese Puzzle," *Pictures and Picturegoer*, Feb. 1925, 12–13 (emphases mine).

8. Robert E. Sherwood, "The Silent Drama," *Life*, Apr. 10, 1924, 24.

9. See advertisements in the Shanghai-based English newspaper, *The North-China Daily News* (*Zilin xibao*), June 14, 1926, and June 14, 1928. Both advertisements only highlighted the white leading actors to ensure the audience of the picture's quality.

10. Robert Lusk, "Defects in Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 8, 1928, C19, C24.

11. "The Melodramatic Anna May Wong: The Chinese Film Star Appears in the Latest of Cinema Thrillers 'Across to Singapore'" (emphasis mine), Anna May Wong Clippings, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library. *The Chinese Parrot* (dir. Paul Leni, 1927) actually stars Marian Nixon, not Laura La Plante, who starred in another of Paul Leni's films, *The Cat and the Canary* (1927).

12. Willard Chamberlin, "Why Don't They Star?," *Picture-Play Magazine*, July 1929, 70–72, 107.

13. Chamberlin, "Why Don't They Star?," 71 (emphasis mine).

14. *Variety*, Jan. 11, 1928.

15. One photo collage in the Anna May Wong scrapbook in the special collections of University of Chicago Library shows Wong in three dancing poses photographed by Jack Freulich. The title, "Anna May Wong May Wing," puns on "May" as both her middle name and an auxiliary verb, and on "wing" as referring to her winged dance costume and as sounding similar to "win." Contrary to the American rhetoric of playful fetishism, a Chinese review of *The Chinese Parrot* referred to Wong's dance number, chastising her "butt-swishing" imitation of "turen wu" 土人舞 (primitive native dancing) in a skimpy costume. Ban Ma 斑馬, "Huang A'mei daniu pigu" 黃阿媚大扭屁股 (Anna May Wong Swishes Her Butt with Abandon), in *Pei yang hua pao* 北洋畫報 (The Peiyang Pictorial News), 5.216 1928, 3.

16. Account by Mary Flanagan, who was living with her family stationed in Iran ca. 1977–79 (emphasis mine). The "oldies" were aired by American Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS). This story was relayed to me in an email dated April 25, 2015, by Dr. Anita J. Alkhas, whom I met while giving a paper at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Mary Flanagan was her childhood friend. I thank Ms. Fanagan for giving me permission to use her story, and I thank Dr. Alkhas for connecting us.

17. Wong's 1925 interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, quoted in Scarlet Cheng, "An Uneasy Success," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 4, 2004.

18. Lauren Berlant, with Jay Prosser, "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Laurent Berlant," *Biography* 34.1 (Winter 2011): 180–87, see 181.

19. Lauren Berlant, "She's Having an Episode: Patricia Williams and the Writing of Damaged Life," *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 27.1 (2013): 19–35, see 23, 24.

20. Berlant, "She's Having an Episode," 26.

21. "The Melodramatic Anna May Wong," Anna May Wong Clippings, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

22. Ren Keyu 任克予, "Wu Xiansheng" 吳先生 (Mr. Wu), in *Yinxing* 銀星 (The Movie Guide) 12 (1927): 42–43.

23. Ren was not alone in being fascinated with Hollywood's supposedly superb make-believe techniques. This sentiment regularly surfaced in China throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite the simultaneous decrying of Hollywood's derogatory representation of Chinese characters and customs. For a study of the historical discourses concerning racial masquerade in China versus in the US, see Yiman Wang, "Anna May Wong: Toward Janus-Faced, Border-Crossing, 'Minor' Stardom," in Patrice Petro, ed., *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 159–81.

24. Moon Kwan, *Zhongguo yintan waishi* 中國銀壇外史 (An Anecdotal History of Chinese Cinema) (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing Press, 1976), 265.

25. Kwan, *Zhongguo yintan waishi*, 266. The print of *Yanqin yiqing* 燕寢怡情 (Sensuous Living in the Boudoir) was originally held in the Qing Dynasty Library; and the second half (containing twelve plates) was later reprinted by Yiyuan zhensang publishing house in Shanghai, ca. 1910–20s. This was possibly the copy owned and lent by Kwan to Gibbons.

26. Wong/Loo Song's aping of Adorée/Nang Ping's gestures was prescribed in the film's continuity script dated April 4, 1927, MGM Collection, Cinematic Arts Library's Archives of Performing Arts, University of Southern California.

27. *Photoplay*, Jan. 1927, 48.

28. See *Mr. Wu* pressbook, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

29. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29 (Autumn 1988): 58 (emphasis mine).

30. I have written on China's protests against *Welcome Danger* and other *ruHua pian* 辱華片, unpacking the complicated political and affective negotiations between multiple stakeholders in and outside China in two articles. See Yiman Wang, "The Criss-crossed Stare: Protest and Propaganda in China's Not-So-Silent Era," in Jennifer Bean et al., eds., *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 186–209, and "Chinese Cinema's Other: Wrangling over 'China-Humiliating' Films (*ruHua pian*)," in Aimee Nayoung Kwon, Takushi Odagiri, Moonim Baek, eds., *Theorizing Colonial Cinema: Reframing Production, Circulation, and Consumption of Film in Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 92–110.

31. James T. Hahada, "Anna May Wong as a Film Artist," *Nippu Jiji*, June 3, 1932, 9. *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) was Wong's first talkie after returning to Hollywood in 1931. Despite her star billing and extensive screen time in this Fu Manchu film, Wong's pay was

just over half of Sessue Hayakawa's and less than half of that of Warner Oland (who played Fu Manchu in yellowface).

32. Lian Hua 蓮花, "Pailameng liyong Huang Liushuang she ruguo yingpian" 派拉蒙利用黃柳霜攝辱國影片 (Paramount Utilizes Anna May Wong to Produce Picture to Disgrace China), *Zhongguo sheying xuehui huabao* 中國攝影學會畫報 (Pictorial Weekly), Dec. 1931, 5.

33. Ironically, Warner Oland's yellowfacing of the Euro-Chinese rebel leader in *Shanghai Express* went uncriticized and his visit to Shanghai in 1936 was welcomed by local media, in contrast to the contentious reception of Wong's "home-returning" in the same year (see chapter 4).

34. Paramount communication with Hays Office, *Shanghai Express* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

35. See Frederick "Ted" Herron's exchange with this unidentified American government representative, referenced in Herron's letter to Joseph Breen, Apr. 16, 1937, *Shanghai Express* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Ted Herron was appointed to lead the Foreign Department within the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, representing Hollywood abroad.

36. Xiao Ke 小可, "Cong Shanghai kuaiche shuodao: Zhongguo qingnian ying suxun xinlu gongxian shijie bi riren zhi xuanchuan wushi qiji" 從《上海快車》說到：中國青年應速尋新路貢獻世界俾日人宣傳無試其伎 (Thoughts on *Shanghai Express*: Chinese Youth Should Seek New Ways to Contribute to the World in Order to Debunk Japanese Propaganda), *Dianying shibao* 電影時報 (*Film Times*) 35 (June 26, 1932). *Shanghai Express* was made several months after Japan invaded northeast China on September 18, 1931, and bombed Shanghai on January 28, 1932, which fueled Chinese patriotism. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this author chose to target the Japanese diplomacy of presenting a royal kimono to Dietrich (possibly inspired by a kimono-like costume she wore in the film).

37. "Yingxin Huang Liushuang zuo di Gang yipie tanqi wuru zuguo yingpian ta yao ku qilai zizhuan duanwen shu ta ru dianyingjie zhi jinguo" 影星黃柳霜昨抵港一瞥 談起侮辱祖國影片她要哭起來 自撰短文述她入電影界的經過 (A Glimpse of Film Star Anna May Wong Arriving in Hong Kong on the Brink of Tears When Talking about China-Humiliating Films: Her Self-Account of Venturing into the Film Industry), in *Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail), Feb. 22, 1936, Section 2, p. 4.

38. The original starting date was October 1. It was postponed to accommodate Wong's tour with *On the Spot* in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Grace Kingsley, "Oriental Film Plays Planned," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1931, 21. Jules Furthman's script is in Jules Furthman Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library; the censorship dialogue script is in Motion Picture Division licensing files, 1921–1965, New York State Archives.

39. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 58–101, see 75–76.

40. See Sequence A in Jules Furthman's white script dated October 9, 1931.

41. See Sequence E in Jules Furthman's white script dated October 9, 1931. Chang's heavy-handed "color" line did not make into the film.

42. *Shanghai Express* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

43. The censorship dialogue script dated January 25, 1932, translated her Taishanese line as "Don't talk. I don't want to talk." This ending significantly differs from that in

Furthman's script dated October 9, 1931. In both scripts, the journalists unleash rapid-fire questions prying into Hui Fei's private life, mirroring Wong's real-life experience of having her romantic life scrutinized by the media. Hui Fei's verbal response was not specified in Furthman's script, so Wong's Taishanese line could be her own design.

44. *Shanghai Express* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

45. I have elsewhere written on Wong's and Dietrich's roles as translators in relation to their performative border-crossing stardom as the site of contesting the essentialist national identity and national cinema. See Yiman Wang, "Screening Asia—Passing, Performative Translation, and Reconfiguration," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15.2 (Fall 2007) (special issue on "What's Left of Asia"): 319–43.

46. The censorship dialogue script recorded this line as "Get out of here, quick," which did not capture the correct tone of Wong's Taishanese.

47. See Jason Joy's résumé, Sept. 30, 1931, included in the film's censorship files, *Shanghai Express* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

48. Robert Charles Lancefield, *Hearing Orientality in (White) America, 1900–1930* (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 2004), 54.

49. For related discussions, see Yiman Wang, *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 32–33; and Kenny K. K. Ng, "The Way of *The Platinum Dragon*: Xue Juexian and the Sound of Politics in 1930s Cantonese Cinema," in Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, ed., *Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic Histories* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 156–78, see 166–68.

50. L. S. Kim, *Maid for Television: Race, Class, Gender, and a Representational Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

51. The film's pressbook readily dished up Wong's beauty tips for the audience. See "Anna May Wong Offers Chinese Beauty Hints," *Impact* pressbook, 14. I thank Shelley Stamp for generously sharing the pressbook with me.

52. *Impact* pressbook, 11–12. Wong's maid was described in the leading Hong Kong newspaper as a "sympathetic" role—"the agreeable kind she would like to keep doing in movies." "Anna May Wong Film," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 9, 1949, 5.

53. "It is good to see Wong back on the screen playing the role of an Oriental maid with conviction and authority. She has several good scenes and makes the most of them." *Hollywood Reporter*, Mar. 15, 1949, *Impact* reviews, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

54. *Impact* pressbook.

55. "Anna May Wong Returns to Screen in 'Impact,'" *Impact* pressbook, 12.

56. Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Sept. 1948 (while she was shooting on location in San Francisco). Letters quoted in this chapter are held in the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, unless otherwise noted.

57. The film was originally set in New York but was relocated to San Francisco due to unpredictable weather conditions in New York. Los Angeles was also avoided except for a few brief scenes, due to its severe smog. See *Impact* pressbook, 12, 13. To capitalize upon San Francisco's landmarks, including Chinatown, new background scenes were written. In one such scene, the maid is chased through Chinatown and finally hides away in a back room, letting her uncle (played by Philip Ahn) ward off her searchers. This sequence spotlights

the colorful four-storey building—the real-life Woo Family Association built in 1920, now located at 840 Washington Street, San Francisco.

58. These documents are now held in the Chinese Exclusion Act case files Folder 17-10457 at the National Archives and Records Administration, Riverside, California.

59. As she wrote to Marinoff in a letter dated June 16, 1952, when she entertained hopes of doing a film in the UK: "Unfortunately, I don't like sailing except to get to a destination where I have to be for business reasons. I suppose that comes from my past traveling experiences as I have seldom taken a trip just for pleasure's sake as I felt I couldn't afford it."

60. "An Arrival from Hollywood," *New York Herald Tribune*, Aug. 27, 1951, 7. Originally known as Harlequin glasses, the cat-eye shades were designed by Altina Schinasi to challenge the presumption that bespectacled women lacked attraction. Wong's adoption of these shades was at the very cusp of the new eyewear trend, suggesting her eagerness to return to the public purview with an updated image. This eyewear soon became a standard fashion accessory for many film and television stars, including Lucille Ball as Lucy in the long-running TV classic *I Love Lucy*, launched in October 1951.

61. See "Famed Chinese Star Back for Screen Role," in *Showman's Manual*, 6, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute. On an eerily momentous note, *Time* magazine juxtaposed Wong's and Riefenstahl's coinciding comebacks, describing them as "two fiftyish former cinema stalwarts—Wong, 53, who quit the screen 17 yrs ago after countless mystery women roles in Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan easterns; and Leni Riefenstahl, 53, German film star of the 1930s, called by Hitler 'the perfect example of German womanhood,' who will redirect a remake of a movie in which she once starred, *The Blue Light*." *Time*, June 20, 1960.

62. This was a photo advanced for use by Hollywood columnist Bob Thomas.

63. A. H. Weiler, "Lana Turner Stars in Film at 2 Theatres," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1960, 19.

64. "Of Mansions and Murder . . . ," *Portrait in Black* pressbook (London), cover, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

65. "Maybe the Killer Was the Housekeeper," *Showman's Manual*, 4, microfilm collection, Reuben Library, British Film Institute.

66. Hayakawa's character was originally Japanese but was changed to Burmese in the 1918 re-release, due to Japanese Americans' protest against what they perceived as demeaning depictions of Japanese.

67. Daisuke Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 36.

68. Rhubarb starred in the eponymous film *Rhubarb* (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1951), playing the ginger who inherits and successfully runs a baseball team.

69. This and the next publicity regarding Lana Turner's cat phobia are from *Portrait in Black* files, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library. According to this casting call, the film went into production in the same week when the cat's casting was ongoing.

70. Wong to Marinoff, June 16, 1952.

71. Wong to Marinoff, Mar. 6, 1954.

72. Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, July 17, 1960.

73. Mexican-born actor Anthony Quinn, as the doctor/lover, David Rivera, carried his Hispanic heritage over to the character, who, according to the shipping tycoon, is "quite

a feather for a Napa Valley fruit-picker." Rivera's upward class mobility enables symbolic whitening, making him an eligible love interest for Turner's character the wealthy widow. The film publicity celebrated Quinn's final victory of getting to kiss the girl, after spending his long career cheering for the leading white actor who gets the girl. Thus, *Portrait* presents a white-dominant narrative predicated upon differential racialization, including Quinn as what Diane Negra would call "off-white," while excluding Wong as decidedly "Oriental" and nonwhite. Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

74. Wong to Marinoff, Oct. 26, 1959. In this letter, Wong mentioned being interviewed by Barbara Stanwyck—"a very decent regular sort of person"—and she was planning to rehearse for the role of Stanwyck's Hong Kong amah (maid).

75. Wong to Marinoff, Oct. 26, 1959 (emphasis mine).

76. Bob Thomas, "Killed Off: Actress 'Died a Thousand Deaths' in Pictures," *New York Evening News*, Dec. 15, 1959.

77. David Lazar, *Celeste Holm Syndrome: On Character Actors from Hollywood's Golden Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), xii.

78. Wong to Marinoff, Mar. 6, 1954.

79. Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Women after the Network Age* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 3.

80. Harold Brown, "Television Topics: Anna May Wong Hopes to Blaze Trail on TV as She Did in Movies," *New York Herald Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1951, D7. This article included a photo portrait of Wong in a Chinese gown with patterned embroidery in the lapel area. Since the recordings of the entire show were destroyed, and barely any visual trace survived, we can only guess that this picture, which was not seen in any other context, might represent Wong's eponymous persona in the show.

81. Brown, "Television Topics."

82. Joe Csida, "The Gallery of Mme. Liu Tsong," *The Billboard*, Sept. 8, 1951. Csida caustically wrote, "It is suspected that even if Miss Wong were given a sound script she would still sound like an attractive Oriental girl who has been thoroly [*sic*] Americanized. Her voice and accent, which of necessity must be somewhat exotic-sounding and Chinese-flavored to give any meaning at all to the title role, comes across as pure Americanese, which good lines or bad, would louse up the lead character. It is highly unlikely, too, that Miss Wong, in any role, will ever win any acting awards." Quoted in Danielle Seid, *Beautiful Empire: Race, Gender, and the Asian/American Femme on U.S. Television Network* (University of Oregon, PhD diss., 2017), 102, n.9.

83. Wong to Marinoff, Dec. 31, 1951.

84. Wong to Marinoff, Dec. 31, 1951.

85. Wong to Marinoff, Dec. 31, 1951.

86. Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Feb. 17, 1952.

87. Wong to Marinoff, Oct. 3, 1952.

88. Wong to Marinoff, July 28, 1953.

89. Tallulah Bankhead, *My Autobiography* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1952), quoted in Wong's letter to Marinoff, July 28, 1953.

90. Wong to Marinoff, Mar. 6, 1954.

91. In the March 6, 1954, letter to Marinoff, she mentioned the financial stress of upkeeping her house at 326 San Vicente Boulevard, known as the "Moongate" comprising four apartments, two of which were rented out.

92. Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Jan. 2, 1959. This offer did not seem to be realized, judging from the list of Wong's television works.

93. Seid, *Beautiful Empire*, 23, 49.

94. Seid, 23, 99.

95. Here my argument departs from Danielle Seid's description of Wong's performance in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* episode as "obedient, almost completely silent, and arguably easily forgettable." Seid, *Beautiful Empire*, 59.

96. Wong, represented by agent Armstrong/Deuser, was contracted in 1959 at $1,000 for four days. Her salary for the September 1960 shooting was prorated per the original contract. Interestingly, Philip Ahn, represented by agent Herdan/Sherrell, was hired at $275 for one day to play an effeminate Chinese quasi-spy. See *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

97. See Karen L. Herman's introduction in the booklet included in the three-disc DVD set *The Barbara Stanwyck Show, vol. 1* (E1 Entertainment, 2009).

98. Hong Kong, a British Crown colony with a majority Chinese population, occupied a unique position as the last capitalist front, right on the edge of the Red China. Its liminal geopolitical position endowed it with special import in the Cold War–era American Orientalist imaginary. In *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* episodes, the Hong Kong location shooting was done in collaboration with the Marvin Farkas Film Company (Fa Jia Shi yingpian gongsi), located at 421 Li Po Chun Building in Hong Kong. See *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* manuscript files, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

99. "'Red Move' on Movies & TV," *Weekly Television Digest*, Jan. 23, 1961, 8. Also see "Inspired Extemporaneous Remarks by Barbara Stanwyck (Included in her Jan. 30 TV Drama) are praised and Included into Congressional Record by Rep. Walter," *NBC Trade Releases*, Jan. 19, 1961. This performance also won Stanwyck one of the two inaugural Justicia Awards presented by the National Association of Women Lawyers for "meritorious performance of roles upholding law and justice." See "Women Lawyers Honor Loretta Young and Barbara Stanwyck for Performance of Roles Upholding Law and Order," *NBC Trade Releases*, May 1, 1961.

100. For a nuanced history of the many different kinds of female domestics in Hong Kong, including amahs, see Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), ch. 3.

101. See the script of "Little Joe" written by Albert Beich, dated October 26, 1959, in William H. Wright papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

102. See Beich, script of "Little Joe." Wong's amah was a stark contrast to Little Joe's other amah played by Beulah Quo in the episode "The Miraculous Journey of Tadpole Chan" (aired on November 14, 1960; dir. Jacques Tourneur). Quo received no close-up shots and only delivered a few lines in a purely functional manner.

103. Anna May Wong, "Bamboo or: China's Conversion to film," *Mein Film* 222 (1930): 3–4.

104. Wong to Marinoff, Oct. 26, 1959.

4. THE SHOW MUST GO ON—IN EPISODES (NOW YOU SEE HER, NOW YOU DON'T)

Epigraph: Wong to Marinoff, Dec. 16, 1935.

1. See a review of the film, "Palace Fans Shiver at 'Daughter of Dragon,'" in *Evening Star*, Oct. 3, 1931, A-4.

2. Wong to Van Vechten, dated Sept. 21, 1932. Letters to Van Vecthen and Fania Marinoff quoted in this chapter are held in the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, unless otherwise noted.

3. Wong to Van Vechten, Sept. 21, 1932.

4. See *Modern Screen*, Aug. 1932, 92.

5. Wong's letter to Fania Marinoff dated July 5, 1933, indicated that she was doing *Tiger Bay* for the Wyndham Film Company (shooting at Basil Dean's Studios) while doing cabaret shows in London. By August 4, she had her vaudeville tour set for England and had obtained a two-picture contract. See *Variety*, Aug. 15, 1933, 17.

6. *Variety*, May 9, 1933, 2.

7. "Chinese Actress at World's Fair," *Roanoke Rapids Herald* (Roanoke Rapids, NC), June 1, 1933, 12.

8. *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 5, 1933, 8.

9. See a brief report in the *New York Times* (July 23, 1933). Wong to Marinoff, July 5, 1933.

10. *Variety*, Oct. 2, 1935, 53.

11. Wong to Langner, Jan. 26, 1935, YCAL MSS 436, Box 245, Folder 6203, Theatre Guild Archive, Series I, Subject and Manuscript Files, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

12. Mei toured Europe in 1935 and met Wong at a reception in London. Wong planned to study Peking Opera with him during her 1936 China trip.

13. Grace Kinsley, "Hobnobbing in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 30, 1933, 7. Kinsley's "daily guide" was considered straight information particularly valuable to freelance actors, cameramen, and technicians seeking work. See Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 176–77. Van Dyke was considered as a replacement for George Hill—the original director, who also led the location shooting and reviewed screen tests in China from 1933 to 1934, but who died by suicide in August 1934.

14. "Anna May Wong to Play Native Role in 'Good Earth,'" *Shin Sekai Nichinichi Shinbun* (The New World Daily News), Apr. 7, 1933, 8.

15. *Shin Sekai Nichinichi Shinbun*, Sept. 26, 1934, 8.

16. MGM Collection, Box 176, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

17. MGM Collection, Box 176. The record was dated December 7, 1935. Mary Wong did eventually obtain the role of the "little bride" for one of the sons. Despite common belief, this was not Anna May Wong's sister, also named Mary Wong, but rather an expert sales manager at the China Emporium in San Francisco. See "Who Is Who among the Chinese in *Good Earth*," *Chinese Digest*, Mar. 1937, 9.

18. Wong to Marinoff, Dec. 16, 1935.

19. Wong to Van Vechten, Sept. 24, 1935. A Vancouver-based Chinese-language newspaper also reported Wong's plan to go to China, celebrated her genuine performance, and affirmed her positive view on China. Yun Shan 雲山, "Huang Liushuang zhi guiguo xun" 黃柳霜之歸國訊 (News on Anna May Wong Returning to China), in *Tai Hon Kong Bo* 大漢公報 (Chinese Times), Sept. 16, 1935, 7.

20. See censorship reports dated December 13, 1933, and May 21, 1934, in *Zhongyang dianying jiancha weiyuanhui gongbao* 中央電影檢查委員會公報 (The Central Film Censorship Committee Newsletter).

21. The stipulations in the agreement with MGM were set forth in 1933:

    a. The film should present a truthful and pleasant picture of China and her people

b. The Chinese government can appoint its representatives to supervise the filming
c. MGM should accept as much as possible of the Chinese supervisor's suggestions
d. If the Chinese government decides to add a preface to the picture, MGM undertakes to do it accordingly
e. All shots taken in China must be passed by the Chinese censors for their export
f. The Chinese government hopes that the cast in the picture will be all Chinese

See *The Good Earth* censorship records in Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Records indicate that extensive screen tests were done with Chinese actors in China and with Chinese American actors in Culver City. However, the November 30, 1935, issue of *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that Irving Thalberg had decided to give up the plan of all-Chinese casting because there were "not enough suitable Chinese actors."

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

23. *Chinese Digest* was cofounded by Ching Wah Lee (1901–80) and Thomas Chinn (1909–97) in 1935 and ran until 1940. Ching Wah Lee was to play Wong's father in *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937).

24. Editorial, "In Praise of The 'Good Earth,'" *Chinese Digest*, Mar. 1937. I thank an anonymous reviewer for their insight that Chinese American press at the time was dominated by elitist business, religious, and community leaders who were cultural brokers and were less likely to be sympathetic to Wong, who did not receive higher education and would not be perceived as representing Chinese culture.

25. *Chinese Digest*, Mar. 1937, 9, 12.

26. Ching Wah Lee, "Hollywood," a series of reports from Hollywood on *The Good Earth*, featured in *Chinese Digest*, Aug. 7, 1936, 9, 14; Aug. 14, 1936, 9, 14; Aug. 21, 1936, 7, 9.

27. The magazine's associate editor, William Hoy, similarly complimented Akim Tamiroff's yellowface and thick-accented acting as the despotic Chinese general in Paramount's *The General Died at Dawn*. See William Hoy, "Reviews and Comments," *Chinese Digest*, Sept. 11, 1936, 10.

28. Lee in *Chinese Digest*, Aug. 1, 1936, 7.

29. "Harvard Claims Chinese High I.Q.," *Chinese Digest*, Nov. 1935, 2.

30. "Chinese Theater Thrills Anna May Wong," *Chinese Digest*, Sept. 25, 1936, 7.

31. *Chinese Digest*, May 1937, 12.

32. Frank Tang, "News from Electric Shadow Land," *Chinese Digest*, Dec. 1937, 18.

33. *Chinese Digest*, Mar. 1938, 12.

34. *Chinese Digest*, Apr. 1938, 15.

35. *Chinese Digest*, Aug. 1938, 13.

36. "Hollywood Holds Chinese Rally," *Chinese Digest*, Jan. 1939.

37. Ching Wah Lee, "The Second Generation of the Chinese," presented at the fifty-sixth annual National Conference of Social Work in 1929, quoted in Atha Fong, "Chingwah Lee: San Francisco Chinatown's Renaissance Man," *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* (2011): 37–48, see 41.

38. See Fong, "Chingwah Lee." Also see K. Scott Wong, "Between the 'Mountain of Tang' and the 'Adopted Land': The Chinese American Periodical Press and the Emergence of Chinese American Identities in the Face of Exclusion," in Ruth Mayer and Vanessa Künnemann, eds., *Trans-Pacific Interactions: The United States and China, 1880–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 123–40.

39. One of the earliest Asian American publications, *Gidra: The Monthly of the Asian American Experience*, was launched in 1969 by a group of Asian American students at the University of California, Los Angeles, and lasted until 1974. Promoted as the "voice of the Asian American movement," this journal mobilized the term *Asian American* for global decolonization and Third Worldism.

40. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 57, x. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the resonance between my argument of Wong's neither-nor position and Chuh's "subjectless" critique.

41. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

42. Marjory Collier, "That Chinese Girl: East Meets West in Anna May Wong," in the column "Screen Types—as a Woman Sees Them," *The Picturegoer*, May 1930, 26–27.

43. Elizabeth Keen, "Chaplin Writes 8,000 Words toward Oriental Film on Trip," Anna May Wong Clippings at New York Public Library. Despite the title's exclusive focus on Chaplin, who traveled through Shanghai on his pan-Asia tour and claimed that he had written a film scenario with a Far Eastern background, the article actually described Wong's activities in China in more detail.

44. Keen, "Chaplin Writes 8,000 Words."

45. Robert McIlwaine, "Third Beginning," *Modern Screen*, Nov. 3, 1937, 41, 80.

46. McIlwaine, "Third Beginning," 80.

47. McIlwaine, 80. Wong's ancestral dialect was Taishanese, which is similar to Cantonese but not identical. The difference between these two dialects led Hu Die 胡蝶 (Butterfly Wu)—the Shanghai-based, Cantonese-speaking actress—to remark on the difficulty of interpreting for Wong during the latter's visit to the Star Film Studio, where Wu was a star player.

48. Max Morinaga, "Anna May Wong One-Day Visitor en route to China," *Nippu Jiji* (Timely News), Jan. 29, 1936, 1, 3, see 3. *Nippu Jiji* was a Honolulu-based Japanese American newspaper.

49. She wrote six articles for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Her articles for the *San Francisco Chronicle* were featured on Sundays, starting in May 1936. See "Anna May Wong Writes for Chronicle," *Chinese Digest*, May 22, 1936, 15.

50. Most famous for his photo "Bloody Saturday" (or "Shanghai Baby"), capturing an orphan crying in rubbles after Shanghai's bombing by Japan on August 28, 1937, Newsreel Wong was the first prominent Chinese news photographer who contributed to Hearst News Agency, and also served as a staff representative in Shanghai for Fox Movietone News. He filmed Douglas Fairbanks's and Mary Pickford's China visit in December 1929, which he sent to the US as a newsreel.

51. See Charles G. Clarke (A.S.C.), "China Photographically Ideal," *American Cinematographer*, Sept. 1934, 202, 211–12.

52. See Clarke, "China Photographically Ideal," 211.

53. She had a large quantity of Peking Opera costumes and female headgear custom made in Beijing. See *Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail, Hong Kong), Aug. 22, 1936, 4; and *Guangzhou minguo ribao* 廣州民國日報 (The Canton Republican Daily News), Sept. 27, 1936, 3.

54. Song Dezhu 宋德珠, the female-impersonating actor who quickly made his name and had a long career that lasted into socialist China, learned to speak English and French in school.

55. Liu Yusheng 柳雨生 (aka Tongzhai yuyi 彤齋予亦) documented the photo-shoot activities at the Peking Dramatic School in "Tongzhai juhua (Wu)" 彤齋劇話（五） (Tongzhai on Peking Opera No. 5), *Shiri xiju* 十日戲劇 (Peking Opera Decadaily) 22 (Mar. 31, 1938): n.p. The page shown in figure 4.1 includes multiple images of the students practicing their craft. The middle right image was captured with the aid of Wong's arc light. The bottom left image shows Song Dezhu trained by his teacher Zhu Ruxiang 諸如香 to walk on "lotus" shoes, mimicking women tiptoeing with bound feet.

56. A copy of this short travelogue film is preserved and held at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, and is made available on the Archive's YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/9mDJDt2vD7w?si=LlHzZFqikBifjCqF.

57. See the Paramount press release dated January 13, 1938, during the filming of *Dangerous to Know*, in the Anna May Wong clippings at the Margaret Herrick Library. Wong's showing of the travelogue footage for China War Relief was also mentioned in Dick Kleiner, "Anna May Wong Offers Own 'Bold Journey' to Video Fans," in *Marshfield News-Herald* (Marshfield, Wisconsin), Feb. 16, 1957, 9. This article also emphasized that Wong spent most of her money on filming while in China.

58. The color description is from "Huang Liushuang canguan Mingxing linzhua" 黃柳霜參觀明星麟爪 (Jottings on Anna May Wong's Visit to the Star Motion Picture Co. Ltd.), in *Yingwu xinwen* 影舞新聞 (News on Movies and Dance) 2.17 (1936): 6.

59. "Huang Liushuang canguan Mingxing linzhua" 黃柳霜參觀明星麟爪 (Jottings on Anna May Wong's Visit to the Star Motion Picture Co. Ltd.), in *Yingwu xinwen* 影舞新聞 (News on Movies and Dance) 2.17 (1936): 6.

60. "Huang Hu chuhui ji" 黃胡初會記 (The First Meeting of Anna May Wong with Butterfly Wu), *Yule zhoubao* 娛樂週報 (Variety Weekly), May 9, 1936, 357.

61. "Huang Liushuang zaidao Shanghai zhuyan dumu duanju" 黃柳霜再到上海主演獨幕短劇 (Anna May Wong Returned to Shanghai, Played in a One-Act Play), *Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail), Apr. 9, 1936, section 4, p. 4. Interestingly, Wong's interview was narrated as a one-act play staged in Room 405 at Park Hotel Shanghai, starring Wong interacting with reporters A and B.

62. "Anna May Wong to Study for Stage," *Chinese Digest*, Jan. 17, 1936, 4. A few days after Wong's departure, *Chinese Digest* reported on Wong's plan to do a performance tour in China with a cast of her choice after studying Chinese theater under Mei Lanfang. "Anna May Wong Sails," *Chinese Digest*, Jan. 31, 1936, 6.

63. "Huang Hu chuhui ji" 黃胡初會記 (The First Meeting of Anna May Wong with Butterfly Wu).

64. "Daguan yingpian gongsi choubei huanying Huang Liushuang" 大觀影片公司籌備歡迎黃柳霜 (The Grandview Film Co. Ltd. Getting Ready to Welcome Anna May Wong), *Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail), Feb. 21, 1936, section 2, p. 4.

65. Wong to Van Vechten and Marinoff, Feb. 22, 1936 (from Hong Kong).

66. Quoted in Edward Sakamoto, "Anna May Wong and the Dragon-Lady Syndrome," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1987, 40.

67. Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 156.

68. Mac Davis, "Fled from Fame for Five Years Because She Was Branded an 'Evil Woman'! But Anna May Wong Has 'Reformed,' and Is Wooing a New Kind of Success," *New York Enquirer*, Feb. 18, 1957, Anna May Wong Clippings at New York Public Library.

69. Davis, "Fled from Fame."

70. Wong to Marinoff, Jan. 23, 1957.

71. Wong to Marinoff, Jan. 23, 1957.

72. See the writing on the reverse of a publicity photo showing Wong sitting on a mat, fully dressed in a Chinese-style robe, looking pensively up into the camera, her meticulously manicured hands holding a small, bell-like artifact. See ABC Photo Division Press Information, https://historicimages.com. This photo was also published alongside Kleiner, "Anna May Wong Offers Own 'Bold Journey' to Video Fans." Like the publicity text, this image suggests a time capsule that sought to erase Communist China by transporting the American audience to a milieu that was, by 1957, cleanly eradicated by the Communist government in mainland China.

73. See the end credits of each episode. ABC publicity credited John Stephenson, the host of the *Bold Journey* series, for presiding over an "innovation among TV formats," which would present "the product of non-professional motion picture cameraman [*sic*] who are first and foremost adventurers." See ABC Photo Division Press Information, https://historicimages.com.

74. Irene F. Cypher, "Teacher's Guide" (Apr. 1958). Cypher was on faculty in the Department of Communications in Education at New York University, specializing in audiovisual education.

75. I thank UCLA Film & Television Archive Research and Study Center officer Maya Montañez Smukler for coordinating and making this film available for my research during the pandemic.

76. Wong's letters to Szold-Fritz are held in the Bernardine Szold-Fritz Correspondence, YVAL MSS 544, Box 5, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Szold-Fritz was residing in Shanghai, running the International Art Theatre in Shanghai that she established.

77. See https://www.sohu.com/a/202609029_687846 (accessed Feb. 15, 2022).

78. Wong wrote to Szold-Fritz on August 8, 1936, about purchasing three Chinese stage costumes. Her purchase was also covered in Chinese press. Also see Feng Yi 鳳儀, "Huang Liushuang zai Ping jiangban xizhuang" 黃柳霜在平辦戲裝 (Anna May Wong Procuring Peking Opera Costumes in Beijing), *Tanxing guniang* 彈性姑娘 (Dancing Girls) 1.6 (1936): 15–16; Liao Liao 了了, "Huang Liushuang shisanri wan xie dapi jiuju hangtou you Ping zhi Hu le" 黃柳霜十三日晚攜大批舊劇行頭由平至滬了 (Anna May Wong Arrived in Shanghai on September 13 with a Large Quantity of Peking Opera Costumes and Headgear), *Guangzhou minguo ribao* 廣州民國日報 (The Canton Republican Daily News), Sept. 27, 1936, 3.

79. See an Iowa exhibitor's and a New Hampshire exhibitor's recommendations in "What the Picture Did for Me," *Motion Picture Herald*, July 17, 1937, 84; and "What the Picture Did for Me," *Motion Picture Herald*, Feb. 12, 1938, 64. The New Hampshire exhibitor observed that the film's outstanding coloring made it one of the best "musical comedies."

80. A 1938 photo story illustrated Wong's training for her patriotic surgeon role in *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939). See "Why Anna May Wong Had to Watch an Operation: The Famous Oriental Actress Trains for a Great Role," *Click: The National Picture Monthly Magazine*, Dec. 1938, 8–9. Juxtaposed with her "no glamour" image in surgeon's scrubs is an undated photo, showing the younger Wong playing opposite Charley Chase, captioned "Starting her career, she played comedies with Chas. Chase." In this photo, Wong wears a black, tight, cropped top matched with a sheer skirt that is identical to her costume in *Across to Singapore* (dir. William Nigh, 1928). Since Wong left for Europe in 1928, Wong's comedies with Charley Chase were likely produced by Hal Roach in or before 1928.

81. Yiman Wang, "'Speaking in a Forked Tongue': Anna May Wong's Linguistic Cosmopolitanism," in Sabrina Qiong Yu and Guy Austin, eds., *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 65–83, see 80.

82. Taishan dialect, like Cantonese and other southern Chinese dialects, was and is commonly used among Chinese diasporic communities in the US, Southeast Asia, and Australia, which were the popular destinations for Chinese labor export during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These dialects have spread far and wide beyond the national boundaries with the population migration. They are, therefore, simultaneously subnational and supranational.

83. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

84. John K. Newnham, "Chinese Puzzle," *Film Weekly* (UK), June 17, 1939.

85. Lauren Berlant, "She's Having an Episode: Patricia Williams and the Writing of Damaged Life," *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 27.1 (2013): 19–35, see 24, 26.

86. Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

87. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 256.

5. ENCORE THE PERFORMER-WORKER: MEETING ANNA MAY WONG'S "GREETINGS"

Epigraph: Jacques Derrida, *Trace et archive, image et art* (Bry-sur-Marne, France: INA Éditions, 2014), 73.

1. J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida's *Destinerrance*," *MLN* 121 (2006): 893–910, see 893.

2. Miller, "Derrida's *Destinerrance*," 896.

3. Miller, 900.

4. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

5. Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 202.

6. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "Theory in/of Practice: Filipina American Feminist Filmmaking," in Melinda De Jesus, ed., *Pinay Power: Filipina American Feminist Theory Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 309.

7. "Yellow on Silver," *Pantomime*, Dec. 10, 1921, 26.

8. "Yellow on Silver."

9. Lon Jones, "Anna May Wong to Visit Australia—Chinese Star Will Arrive in Few Weeks," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1, 1939, 8S.

10. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 131.

11. Monica Dall'Asta and Jane M. Gaines, "Constellations: When Past and Present Collide in Feminist Film History," in Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, eds., *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinema's Past and Future* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 13–25, see 21 (emphasis mine).

12. Shimizu, "Theory in/of Practice," 309; Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 202 (emphasis mine).

13. Steve Su, "Interview with Filmmaker Yunah Hong," *Alt Magazine*, http://www.asianloop.com/article/100/Interview_with_Filmmaker_Yunah_Hong.

14. Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 35.1 (Autumn 2008): 72–89, see 74, 76.

15. Anna Everett, "Digitextuality and Click Theory: Theses on Convergence Media in the Digital Age," in Anna Everett and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

16. Jaimie Baron, "The Archive Effect: Archival Footage as an Experience of Reception," *Projections* 6.2 (Winter 2012): 102–20, see 105, 109.

17. Shimizu, "Theory in/of Practice," 319–20.

18. Shimizu, 322.

19. Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Helen Lee, "Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality," *Signs* 30.1 (Autumn 2004): 1385–1402, see 1386.

20. Shimizu and Lee, "Sex Acts," 1388.

21. Shimizu and Lee, 1386.

22. Shimizu and Lee, 1387.

23. Shimizu and Lee, 1388.

24. See Barbara Pollack on *The Product Love* in *Art in America Newsletter*, Sept. 18, 2009, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/patty-chang-60316/.

25. See Klaus Völker, *Brecht Chronicle* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 114.

26. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century American* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

27. Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

28. Walter Benjamin, "Gespräch mit Anne [*sic*] May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," *Die Literarische Welt*, July 6, 1928, 213. Shirley J. Lim uses this essay to argue for Wong's ethnic cosmopolitanism. See Lim, "'Speaking German Like Nobody's Business': Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4.1 (2012): 1–17.

29. Pablo Dominguez Anderson, "'So Tired of the Parts I Had to Play': Anna May Wong and German Orientalism in the Weimar Republic," in Brian D. Behnken and Simon Wendt, eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Ethnicity, Race, and National Belonging in a Transnational World* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013), 261–83, see 265.

30. The 35mm print held by the British Film Institute is amber tinted. The Pathé Baby version, from which I selected the clip included in this book, is black and white.

31. This "double turn" scene in the British-German co-production is included in the 9.5mm Pathé Baby transfer that drastically cuts the film down from eight reels to four reels. However, the 1929 Australian censorship deleted this scene, although it kept the scene Chang reworks in the film loop, where the white man rehearses his knife-throwing targeting at Wong's outline (rather her body).

32. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31.3 (Spring 2006): 675–88, see 679–80 (emphasis mine).

REFRAIN: THE SECOND BEGINNING IN THE WONG TIME (INTERSTI-RACIAL COMIC MELANCHOLIA)

Epigraphs: "Life is too serious": Herb Howe, "Herb Howe Tells the Strange Career of Anna May Wong between Two Worlds: Oriental by Birth and Western by Training, Anna May Wong Walks Broodingly along the Imaginary Line That Divides the Races," *The New Movie Magazine* (July 1932): 25–27, 74, see 74. Here Wong queerly quotes Oscar Wilde's quip that "life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" from *Lady Windermere's Fan*, staged in 1892, published in 1893. This originally appeared as "life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" in Wilde's play *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, staged in New York in 1883 and printed in a private limited edition in 1902. This line went viral in the first half of the twentieth century and was quoted frequently in different forms, one of which was "life is much too important to be taken seriously." For an account of Wilde's line and its viral history, see https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/07/26/serious/. I thank Dr. Kiki Loveday for pushing me to think deeper about Wong's resonance with this ostensible throwaway reference.

"My doctor insisted": Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Dec. 28, 1953 (written while convalescing after emergency treatment of internal hemorrhage). Wong's youngest brother, Richard Wong, attributed her physical breakdown to "improper eating and self-isolation, emotional worries from the menopause and financial worries from no work and all this leads to a disregard of life and friends." Richard Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Dec. 15, 1953.

"Being up in mid-air": Wong to Marinoff, Nov. 5, 1956 (upon her return to Santa Monica from New York); in this letter, Wong informed Marinoff that her episode "The Chinese Game" in the CBS TV show *Climax!* was to be aired on November 22, 1956. Several months later, in February 1957, she returned to New York to record the narration for her China travelogue footage that became the "Native Land" episode of ABC's *Bold Journey* television show.

1. Robert McIlwaine, "Third Beginning," *Modern Screen*, Nov. 3, 1937, 41, 80; Gladys Baker, "Having Lunch with Anna May Wong: Chinese Actress Will Return to Cinema This Fall," (1937), *The Birmingham News*, Aug. 22, 1937, 70.

2. Evelyn Waugh, "My Favorite Film Star," *The Daily Mail*, May 24, 1930, quoted in Alexa Alice Joubin, "The Paradox of Female Agency: Ophelia and East Asian Sensibilities," in Karra L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, eds., *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 79–99. I thank Dr. Joubin for bringing Waugh's essay to my attention.

3. Wong to Marinoff and Van Vechten, Dec. 28, 1953. Letters to Marinoff and Van Vechten quoted in this chapter are held in the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

4. This is quoted in Chinese American artist-turned-actor Keye Luke's memoir, "'Cantonese Ham': Keye Luke," transcribed by Susie Ling, *Gum Sam Journal* 27.1 (2004): 44–53, see 51.

5. Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 295 (emphasis mine).

6. Kathryn Edney, "'Integration through the Wide Open Back Door': African Americans Respond to *Flower Drum Song* (1958)," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 4.3 (2010): 261–72, see 269.

7. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 42 (emphasis in original).

8. Wong did star (opposite James B. Leung) in one early Chinese American film, *The Silk Bouquet* (aka *Dragon Horse*, dir. Harry Revier, 1926), which was based on a Chinese play, featured a predominantly Chinese American cast, and was produced by the San Francisco–based Zhonghua yizhi yinghua gongsi 中華益智影畫公司 (China Educational Film Company). This exception, however, proved the rule that the rest of her oeuvre mostly exploited her solitary "Orientalness." For an in-depth discussion of *The Silk Bouquet* in relation to Wong's "trans" method, see Yiman Wang, "Sticking with *Trans*: Reconsidering Chinese American Cinema through Anna May Wong," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (Feb. 2024): 1-18.

9. Also see Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

10. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 58.

11. Albert Laguna, "On the Comedy of Race," *Cultural Critique* 111 (2021): 104–32, see 104, 105.

12. Laguna, "On the Comedy of Race," 104.

13. Kenneth Reed, "Hal Roach Believes in Feature Comedies," *Pathe Club Yearbook 1927* no. 74: 48–49, see 49. "Hal Roach Adds to His List of Stars," *Motion Picture World*, Nov. 6, 1926, 32.

14. Reed, "Hal Roach Believes in Feature Comedies."

15. *Variety*, Sept. 8, 1926, 21. Between 1926 and 1928, she played opposite Roach's other comedian Charley Chase. See an undated photo captioned "Starting her career, she played comedies with Chas. Chase," cited in chapter 4, note 80.

16. Wong's Hal Roach contracts, Box 35, University of Southern California, Cinematic Arts Library.

17. See https://www.lordheath.com/Roach_filmography.html.

18. A Pathé Baby print of the film exists, in the possession of Dr. Aurore Spiers. I thank her for giving me access to a digital transfer of this copy, created by Chicago Film Archives.

19. *Motion Picture News*, Apr. 22, 1927.

20. *Film Daily*, Apr. 17, 1927, 14.

21. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12.

22. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 97.

23. Ngai, 95.

24. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 20.

25. Cheng, 2 (emphases in original).

26. Cheng, 23–24.

27. A forty-two-second film segment is available at https://www.efootage.com/videos/83474/anna-mae-wong-dances-charleston?fromSearch=1.

28. Quoted in Philip Leibfried and Chei Mi Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide to Her Film, Stage, Radio, and Television Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 39.

29. For a thirty-eight-second film of Baker's performance, see Fox Movietone News Collection, Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina, https://youtu.be/W-htW75ATJg.

30. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31.3 (Spring 2006): 675–88, see 677.

31. See the Pacific Film Archive record dated June 6, 1993.

32. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 76; Charles Haywood, "Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque," in *Folklore & Society: Essays in Honor of B.A. Botkin* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1966), 77–92.

33. Terri Simone Francis, *The Audacious Josephine Baker: Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

34. Yiman Wang, "The Art of 'Screen Passing'—Anna May Wong's 'Yellow Yellowface' Performance in the Art Deco Era," *Camera Obscura* 20.3 (2005): 159–91.

35. See Sonya Freeman Loftis, "Mary Pickford as Shakespearean Shrew: Redefining the Image of America's Sweetheart," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 28.3 (Fall 2010): 331–45.

36. Crawford Theater Collection (MS 1387). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

37. Pickford cut her long curls in order to project more sophisticated femininity in her version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. See Freeman Loftis, "Mary Pickford as Shakespearean Shrew."

38. Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125–33, see 132.

39. Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down."

40. "The Chinese Are Misunderstood, Says Anna May Wong," *The Rexall Magazine*, May 1930, 1, 4. This magazine was published by Rexall Drug Stores.

41. "The Chinese Are Misunderstood, Says Anna May Wong."

42. Lauren Berlant, "She's Having an Episode: Patricia Williams and the Writing of Damaged Life," *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 27.1 (2013): 19–35, see 23.

43. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 182.

44. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 182–83.

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Note: Anna May Wong is sometimes referred to as "AMW" in this index.

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Yiman Wang is Professor of Film & Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood*.

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Cover design: Michelle Black.
Cover illustration: Anna May Wong writing her Chinese name in *Tiger Bay* (1934), dir. J. Elder Wills. Courtesy of STUDIOCANAL.

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