

# ANNA MAY WONG'S DESTRUCTION OF HOLLYWOOD'S RACIAL BARRIERS

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The Roaring Twenties was an era of post-war prosperity. The United States of America was a land of hope, a land of not only financial gain and prowess, but also societal victory. Women won the right to vote, and with technological advancements, the music and film industries had begun to flourish like budding flowers. With the growth of cinema came the establishment of Hollywood, then just a regular neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, as the country's cinematic headquarters. Rather than sitting at home tending to household chores and children, women were given the opportunity to make a name for themselves through film, and quite frankly, succeeded in doing so.

While Hollywood may have been the forefront of the film industry at the time, what it lacked in was diversity. Enter Anna May Wong, an ambitious Chinese-American girl with a penchant for performing arts.<sup>1</sup> From her parents' laundromat to the big screen, she fought back against Hollywood's rampant white dominance her entire career, and succeeded in breaking racial barriers that no other actress could have ever hoped to achieve at the time. Anna May Wong succeeded in breaking barriers by becoming the first Chinese-American actress to gain notoriety in a predominantly white Hollywood.

Anna May Wong, the second child out of Wong Sam Sing and Lee Gon Toy's eight children, was born on January 3, 1905 in Chinatown, Los Angeles, California. The name given to her at birth was Wong Liu Tsong - "Frosted Yellow Willows," but she was also given the English name Anna May by her family.<sup>2</sup> Her family was originally from Taishan, China, but her father, Sam Sing's family emigrated to the United States in the

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<sup>1</sup> Kerri Lee Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum , last modified 2019, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/anna-may-wong>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

1850s. Soon after Anna May's father was born, however, his own father died in an accident, leading to the family's relocation back to China. Sam Sing finally returned to the United States some years later after marrying Anna May's mother, Gon Toy, who was also born in California but relocated back to China. Together, the two opened a laundromat on North Figueroa Street in Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> The Wong family lived in a rather diverse neighborhood, and when their first two children, Anna May and her older sister were born, they attended California Street Public Elementary School. However, Anna May and her older sister were both subjected to torment for their race, leading their parents to relocate them to the Chinese Mission School in Chinatown so that they would be accepted.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up, Anna May helped work in her family's laundromat, and attended Chinese language classes after school. When the craze of film production transitioned from New York to California in the 1910s, she began visiting nearby movie sets. She took to skipping school and using her lunch money to go watch movies, and ultimately decided she wanted to become a movie star at the tender age of nine. At eleven years old, she came up with her stage name, Anna May Wong, by combining her English and Chinese names.<sup>5</sup>

During her escapades in skipping school to hang around movie sets, Wong was spotted by a casting director who was looking for extras in his upcoming film, *The Red Lantern*. Though uncredited in the film's credits, Wong was cast as a lantern carrier. Elated about the role, her first of many, Wong and her friends later personally went to

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

watch the movie, but the picture's quality was so poor that she couldn't discern which girl was her. Despite the tawdry visuals of her very first performance, however, Wong wasn't discouraged. If anything, the role helped kick start the fire that was her barrier breaking acting career, and led to small role after small role until she finally dropped out of high school to pursue acting as a full-time career.<sup>6</sup>

After *The Red Lantern*, Wong's career quickly picked up speed. Her first credited acting role, the first credited acting role for any Chinese-American actress, came with *Bits of Life* in 1921, where she starred opposite of Lon Chaney (who donned yellowface) as his wife. The following year, she was cast in a much larger role as the lead female, Lotus Flower, in *The Toll of the Sea* (fig. 1), a film derivative of one of Hollywood's most famous operas at the time, *Madame Butterfly*. The film was one of the first to be produced by the Technicolor Company, and was not only Hollywood's first colored film, but also the first colored film in the world to not require a special kind of projector to play. This was not just a technological advancement, but also an advancement for the Chinese-American population and Wong herself, as she had been among the first actresses to ever star in a colored movie.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lily Rugo, "Anna May Wong's Life and Legacy," ECAASU, last modified March 18, 2018, <https://www.ecaasu.org/editorial/2018/3/18/anna-may-wongs-life-and-legacy>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Corliss, "Anna May Wong Did It Right," TIME, last modified January 29, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1022536-1,00.html>.



Fig. 1. Anna May Wong and Baby Moran, circa 1922, *The Toll of the Sea*.

Within the blink of an eye, Wong's career skyrocketed from small productions to the big screen of her dreams. One role that helped bring her to fame was the Mongol Slave in *The Thief of Bagdad*. Though a small role, what drew people to Anna May Wong was not just her skillful acting as her scantily clad character, who was a handmaid-turned-villainous spy for the Mongol Prince, but also her own flapperish beauty. She was unlike anything the movies had ever seen before.<sup>8</sup>

Wong, who had just turned nineteen, had a feeling that her career was going to be something big, and in the same month *The Thief of Bagdad* opened, she created Anna May Wong Productions with hopes to raise money for films about Chinese legends. Unfortunately, things went awry with her business partner, Forrest B. Creighton, and after a bout of legal troubles, the company was completely dissolved. After the venture's failure, she starred in *Peter Pan* as Tiger Lily, and in a somewhat

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<sup>8</sup> Corliss, "Anna May Wong," TIME.

larger role, the companion to Renée Adorée's character (in yellowface) in *Mr. Wu*.<sup>9</sup> After a while, however, Wong had grown frustrated by the recurring small or demeaning roles she was given, and decided to sail for Europe. This action would become a sort of trend for an assortment of actors and actresses frustrated with Hollywood during the era of the Hays Production Code, a set of strict anti-miscegenation, misogynistic, and nationalistic rules adopted in the 1930s to clean up the United States' sleazy film industry, and most would end up finding the roles and success they craved overseas.<sup>10</sup>

Between her first talking film, *The Flame of Love*, in 1930, and an operetta, *Tschun Tschu*, spoken and sung entirely in fluent German, Wong found success and easier access to leading roles in Europe, starring in plays, films, and musicals alike. Her success in Europe cemented her place in history as the first sought-after Chinese-American actress, regardless of the country. Taking note of her big screen dominance in Europe, within the same decade, Paramount Studios in the United States came into contact with Wong and promised that, upon her return, she would be given leading roles like those she'd been handed overseas. Clinging to that promise with high hopes, she soon made her return, and starred in the Broadway production of *On The Spot*.<sup>11</sup>

Even after her return to the United States, however, she was still asked to play stereotypical Asian roles. She refused to use Japanese mannerisms when playing a Chinese character on the set of *Dangerous to Know*, and only accepted the role as Dr. Fu Manchu's daughter in *Daughter of the Dragon* after being promised a role in a Josef von Sternberg movie. After filming von Sternberg's 1932 movie *Shanghai Express*,

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<sup>9</sup> Corliss, "Anna May Wong," TIME.

<sup>10</sup> Corliss, "Anna May Wong," TIME.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

which would soon become one of her most critically acclaimed roles upon release, she spent the next year touring around China, not to return until the 1950s. Upon her return, she became the first Asian American to host a television show with *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*. She had plans to return to filming in the United States, as well, but unfortunately died on February 3, 1961 of a heart attack before she could return. She was 56 years old at the time of her death.<sup>12</sup>

Anna May Wong was rejected by China for being "too American" and America for being "too Chinese," but through her skillful acting and strong will prevalent through a period of harsh anti-Asian sentiment spread across the United States, she succeeded in introducing the beauty of China to the country, thereby helping break the sturdy racial barriers of the Roaring Twenties onward until her death.<sup>13</sup> In addition, to this day, Wong is considered to be among the most beautiful actresses to have ever lived. She was named the "world's best dressed woman" by the Mayfair Mannequin Society of New York in 1934, as well as the "world's most beautiful Chinese girl" by *Look* magazine in 1938.<sup>14</sup> After Wong's death, both the Asian-American Arts Awards and the Asian Fashion Designers groups named annual awards after her.<sup>15</sup>

Did Anna May Wong abolish racism? No. Even now, discrimination against Chinese people and the practice of yellow-facing are both still prevalent in both Hollywood and the United States as a whole. But, for a Chinese woman to be on the big screen during the 1920s was a massive step forward for not just Chinese-Americans,

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

<sup>13</sup> S.E. Smith, "Remembering Anna May Wong," *this ain't livin'* (blog), entry posted September 6, 2014, [http://meloukhia.net/2014/09/remembering\\_anna\\_may\\_wong/](http://meloukhia.net/2014/09/remembering_anna_may_wong/).

<sup>14</sup> Corliss, "Anna May Wong," TIME.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, "Anna May Wong," National Women's History Museum.

but also Chinese people around the world. She provided a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark and dreary world, and to this day, her name is still held among the best actresses of all time. The world will not only remember Anna May Wong for her contributions to cinematic history, but also society as a whole.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Anna May Wong and Baby Moran. November 26, 1922. Photograph.  
[https://m.media-amazon.com/images/M/MV5BODY1YjljOTQtZDg3Zi00OWJkLWJINDAtNTk2OWI2N2RjNjI4XkEyXkFqcGdeQXVyMDUyOTUyNQ@@.\\_V1\\_SY1000\\_CR0,0,1357,1000\\_AL\\_.jpg](https://m.media-amazon.com/images/M/MV5BODY1YjljOTQtZDg3Zi00OWJkLWJINDAtNTk2OWI2N2RjNjI4XkEyXkFqcGdeQXVyMDUyOTUyNQ@@._V1_SY1000_CR0,0,1357,1000_AL_.jpg).

This photograph portrays Anna May Wong as Lotus Flower in *The Toll of the Sea*, a young Chinese woman waiting for her white husband to return from the United States after he leaves just after their wedding. In her arms is child actress Priscilla Moran (nicknamed Baby Moran) playing Lotus Flower's son Little Allen (named after his father, Allen Carver, played by Kenneth Harlan). I've included this photograph because not only was *The Toll of the Sea* Wong's first major acting role, but also the first fully colored feature film created in Hollywood.

### Secondary Sources

Alexander, Kerri Lee. "Anna May Wong." National Women's History Museum. Last modified 2019. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/anna-may-wong>

This entry into the National Women's History Museum's website about actress Anna May Wong provides a detailed description of her life from start to finish. The entry talks about her achievements as an actress, as well as her struggles in a predominantly white Hollywood.

Corliss, Richard. "Anna May Wong Did It Right." TIME. Last modified January 29, 2005. <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1022536-1,00.html>.

This article from TIME offers a closer look into Anna May Wong's social and home life, as well as career both in the United States and outside. The article not only details the public's depiction of Anna May Wong as the first famous Chinese-American actress in Hollywood, but also digs deeper into the true meaning behind the inaccurate roles she was forced to portray for a bit of fame.

Rugo, Lily. "Anna May Wong's Life and Legacy." ECAASU. Last modified March 18, 2018. <https://www.ecaasu.org/editorial/2018/3/18/anna-may-wongs-life-and-legacy>.

This article documenting Anna May Wong's life was originally posted on *RugoWrites* and reposted (with permission) onto the ECAASU's website to convey its importance to Asian American culture. Author Lily Rugo offers a closer, more detailed look at Wong's life before and after film, and even includes direct quotes from interviews with Wong herself throughout her career.

Smith, S.E. "Remembering Anna May Wong." *this ain't livin'* (blog). Entry posted September 6, 2014.

[http://meloukhia.net/2014/09/remembering\\_anna\\_may\\_wong/](http://meloukhia.net/2014/09/remembering_anna_may_wong/).

This source discusses Anna May Wong's reputation in both the United States and China especially, and details the unfortunately miniscule legacy left behind as a forgotten piece of Hollywood history. This source, though highly opinionated, provides a passionate example of pop culture preservation.