

The 1920s film starlet whom Hollywood shoved off the screen

In *Not Your China Doll*, a rich biography by Katie Gee Salisbury, Anna May Wong emerges as a thrilling actress and Asian-American trailblazer

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§1 The early days of Hollywood produced some remarkable women, but Anna May Wong – the Asian-American actress whose “wild and shimmering life” story is told in Katie Gee Salisbury’s *Not Your China Doll* – was in a class of her own. Wong was the first non-Caucasian Hollywood star, and for decades, the only one from an Asian background.



§2 As an actress who started out in the last decade of the silent era, Wong had to contend first with the advent of talkies, and later with the shift of focus away from cinema screens to television. Luckily for her, she was an early mistress of reinvention, and someone for whom fame was not the driving force. Rather, as Salisbury, a magazine writer and photographer, makes clear, Wong was driven by both the desire to practise her art and the awareness that she was in the unique position of being able to represent her race on the big screen. As a fellow Asian-American, Salisbury is particularly interested in Wong’s self-image.

§3 In 1905, Wong was born Wong Liu Tsong in the Chinatown of Los Angeles, where her family owned a laundromat. Wong grew up working in the family laundromat, attending California public school, and taking extracurricular Chinese language classes. Wong often skipped school and used her lunch money to see movies, leading her to decide at age nine that she would become a movie star. At age eleven, she settled on the stage name Anna May Wong, and at age fourteen, she scored her first role as an extra in *The Red Lantern*. Wong continued to appear as an extra in numerous films while simultaneously attending high school until 1921, when she dropped out to work full time as an actress.

§4 Wong’s big break came in 1922, when she landed her first leading role at the age of seventeen in *The Toll of the Sea*, one of the first movies made in Technicolor. Wong continued to pursue leading roles, but she was habitually cast in supporting roles or in stereotypically Asian roles. She was entirely boxed out of the romantic leading roles she sought, owing to anti-miscegenation laws that forbade her from sharing an on-screen kiss with an actor of another race. The Wong who emerges from Salisbury’s lively and admiring account is a character who brimmed with resilience, intelligence and wit. Even as a teenage starlet, she wasn’t afraid to stand up for herself: she caused a delay to production on *The Thief of Bagdad* after she experienced a racial slur on the set. “She pursued everything she wanted in life with a determination,” Salisbury writes. “She didn’t force things, but she didn’t quit either.”

§5 In 1924, Wong created her own production company, Anna May Wong Productions, with the intention of making films about her culture; however, the company was short-lived, as Wong was forced to shutter it due to her business partner’s unethical business practices. Meanwhile, Wong was critical of Hollywood’s refusal to cast Asian performers as Asian characters, saying, “Rather than real Chinese, producers prefer Hungarians, Mexicans, American Indians for Chinese roles.” In 1928, frustrated with the lack of possibilities for her in

Hollywood, Wong **shipped off** to Europe, later joking, "I think I left America because I died so often."

§6 In Europe, Wong became a **bona fide** star, appearing in numerous hit films (including 1932's *Shanghai Express* opposite Marlene Dietrich), plays, and even operas. In one play, she starred opposite Laurence Olivier; in others, she spoke fluent French and German dialogue. In a 1933 magazine interview, she explained her move **across the pond**: "I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain—murderous, **treacherous**, a snake in the grass. We are not like that."

§7 In the early 1930s, Paramount Studios contacted Wong abroad, promising her leading roles upon her return to the United States. The promise would prove a disappointment, as she was still asked to play **stereotypical** Asian roles in B-movies. During the making of *Dangerous to Know*, when the director of the picture asked her to use Japanese **mannerisms** in her portrayal of a Chinese character, Wong **outright** refused.

§8 In 1935, Wong was dealt the most severe disappointment of her career when she was passed over for the leading role of O-lan in *The Good Earth*, Metro Goldwyn-Mayer's screen adaptation of Pearl S. Buck's award-winning novel about the hardships of life for Chinese farmers. Wong was asked to **screen-test** for the role of the concubine Lotus, to which she told the studio, "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."

§9 Wong took the screen test and was offered the part of Lotus, but refused. For the part of O-lan, MGM instead chose the German actress Luise Rainer, using make-up and yellow-face to make her appear Chinese. Rainer won an Oscar for the role; Devastated, Wong embarked on a year-long tour of China in 1936, where she hoped to reconnect with her heritage. Much to her **dismay**, she was **spurned** by Chinese reporters, who criticized her for what they viewed as her complicity in Hollywood's **derogatory** characterization of Chinese women. She later lamented, "It's a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I'm too American, and by American producers, because they prefer other races to act Chinese parts."

§10 In 1942, Wong retired from Hollywood, though her retirement wouldn't **stick**. When World War II broke out, she devoted her time to war relief for China. In the 1950s, she returned briefly **to the public eye** with *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, in which she became the first Asian American to play a leading role in an American television series. In 1960, she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, yet her film comeback was a return to the racist stereotyping that **dogged** her entire career, as she played a maid in *Portrait in Black*, starring Lana Turner.

§11 In 1961, Wong died of a heart attack at age 56. Today, she is credited with **paving the way** for Chinese-Americans in Hollywood, and her extraordinary life has been examined in a number of biographies. In 1959, Wong said, "When I die, my **epitaph** should be: 'I died a thousand deaths.' That was the story of my film career. Most of the time I played in mystery and intrigue stories. They didn't know what to do with me at the end, so they killed me off."

§12 Although her acting career never fulfilled its potential, Wong doesn't emerge as a tragic heroine in her new biography. This Anna May Wong is a solo flyer who – more than anyone before, or for a long time after – helped to **dismantle** the Chinese stereotypes favoured by Hollywood, and paved the way for the Asian-American stars of today.