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Anna May Wong: Chinese-American Actress

Katherine Anielak

The United States' film industry has an extensive and rich history that also offers insight into the development of American culture. However, the history of Hollywood includes many cases of discrimination, racism, and the use of stereotypes within roles. Films reflect societal constructs and beliefs, including stereotypes that European Americans had against non-white immigrants and citizens. Asian-Americans especially suffered from stereotypes and discrimination within the United States in the early 20th Century. Such stereotypes and racism appeared in both the films produced in Hollywood, and within Hollywood and the film industry itself. Anna May Wong, the first Chinese-American film actress, experienced many forms of discrimination and racism throughout her career as an actress. Even though she was a highly popular actress, she was not free from the scrutiny of European-Americans and the ingrained biases that they held towards people with Asian heritage. Although Anna May Wong starred in multiple movies and gained popularity, she continually faced discrimination and racism within the film industry throughout her career, both in Hollywood and in Europe, demonstrating the long history of discrimination and racism towards non-white actors within the film industry.

Anna May Wong was born on January 3, 1905, to Wong Sam Sin and Lee Gon Toy in Los Angeles.¹ Her birth name was Wong Liu Tsong, but her family and friends often called her Anna May. Her parents were born in America, and they raised Anna May Wong and her siblings

¹ Graham Russell Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 1, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fNDU4NzgwX19BTg2?sid=e9aac288-bb6a-4c31-ad7a-5e38cd5ef6f4@sessionmgr103&vid=0&format=EB&rid=4>.

near Los Angeles' Chinatown.² Her parents had faced discrimination throughout their lives, despite being born in America themselves, which led to their suspicions against European-Americans, who were the source of discrimination against Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans. The implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which extended into the 20th Century, enforced specific discrimination against Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans and demonstrated anti-Chinese sentiments within American society.³ With the extension of this discrimination throughout American society, Anna May Wong would continually experience different forms of racism and discrimination throughout her life. During her childhood, her family had very firm beliefs, and while her parents had been born in America, they still followed traditionally conservative Chinese practices within their lives.⁴ Both of her parents adamantly disapproved of the film industry, distrusting its motives.⁵ However, this did not stop Anna May Wong from dreaming about becoming a film actress. The film industry captivated her and, against her parents' wishes, she continued to pursue a career as an actress. As Karen J. Leong explains, "her choice of acting as a career in itself challenged preconceived notions of what it meant to be a Chinese American woman," thus showing how her contributions to film were a milestone for Chinese-American women in film, even though there were many hardships within Hollywood due to her ethnicity.⁶

² Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905-1961)* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 14, https://books.google.com/books?id=CUJI-hFSGNIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³ James A. Baer, "Chinese Exclusion Act," *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (2014): 1, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=a36854c1-eb3d-4840-b275-c1cd6501716d%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=96397213&db=ers>.

⁴ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 22-23.

⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

⁶ Karen L Jeong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 57.

Her experience with the film industry began in 1919, as a 14 year old, when she served as an extra in the Nazimova film, *The Red Lantern*.⁷ While Wong only played an extra on set, this experience further sparked her love for the cinema. After serving as an extra on multiple sets in her teen years, Wong experienced further difficulties with her parents over her pursuit of acting. While attending high school, which her parents encouraged, Wong suffered a bout of sickness.⁸ During her recovery, she was introduced to Marshall Neilan, a prominent Hollywood director, and was offered an opportunity to star in his film, *Dinty*.⁹ *Dinty* served as Wong's chance to evolve from an extra on film sets to a Hollywood actress. While her parents did not approve of Wong's choice to become an actress, they allowed her to accept roles, which contributed to the family's financial situation. Later, after years of disapproval, Wong's father eventually came to accept and support her career, and Wong herself came to learn that both her family and culture would be sources of solace and peace during her times of stress as an actress.¹⁰ While Wong entered Hollywood with high hopes, she would soon be introduced to many of the stereotypes and negative beliefs that European-Americans had towards those who had Chinese heritage. As Graham Russell Hodges explains, Wong was "introduced...to the dismal perceptions westerners had of Chinatown and its residents...[and] that Chinatown harbored treacherous gangsters."¹¹

⁷ Yiman Wang, "Anna May Wong: a border crossing 'minor' star mediating performance," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2008): 92.
<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=b5156a55-4b4e-49f5-8e5e-eb25eb700a69%40sessionmgr101>.

⁸ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 24.

⁹ Dan Thomas, "How Miss Frosted Yellow Willows Came Back to Hollywood—a Star," *Omaha World Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), Aug. 16, 1931, Pg. 41.
<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/image/v2%3A1106B5BBD4B623A8%40EANX-NB-1360A0748C3F3DAE%402426570-135DA9B3AD699A7B%4040-135DA9B3AD699A7B%40?p=WORLDNEWS&hlterms=anna%3B%20may%3B%20wong>.

¹⁰ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 27.

Thus, the stereotype that Chinese immigrants were criminals or villainous characters was widely accepted in early 20th Century American society. While acting in the film *A Tale of Two Worlds*, Wong experienced discrimination against non-white actors first-hand. Leatrice Joy, the white lead actress, was cast as a Chinese character. In the movie, Joy's character received threats from another Chinese character, also played by a white actor. In the end, the white male protagonist rescues Joy's character. While Joy's casting as a Chinese character was a form of racism in itself, the portrayal of a Chinese man within the film highlighted American perceptions of Chinese men. *A Tale of Two Worlds* contributed to the stereotype that Chinese men were "barbarians" and would attempt to harm white women, thus demonizing men who had Chinese heritage.¹² The demonization of Chinese characters followed Wong throughout her career, limiting her options for roles. One form of discrimination that she faced throughout her career was type-casting, or playing the same type of role, and receiving stereotypical roles for a Chinese-American woman. Other forms of discrimination included losing leading roles to white actresses and facing racist descriptions in American critiques, articles, and advertisements.

First of all, Wong often received stereotypical roles that portrayed Chinese women in a negative light. Even though Anna May Wong dreamed of playing many different roles, in early Hollywood, Asian roles were limited and were often highly stereotypical, demeaning, or even demonizing. Wong's first majorly successful film, *The Toll of the Sea*, especially reflected the racism that Chinese-Americans faced. According to Karen J. Leong, "Chinese women, as seen through the lens of orientalism, were hypersexual and lacked maternal instinct."¹³ Thus, Chinese women were over-sexualized

¹² Ibid, 28.

¹³ Jeong, *The China Mystique*, 11.

by European-Americans due to their differences in appearances and racial backgrounds. However, while Chinese-American women were often sexualized, interracial relationships were taboo, and were not widely accepted in early 20th Century American society.¹⁴ *The Toll of the Sea* reflects the disapproval of interracial relationships within American society in the 1920s. Within the film, when the male lead leaves China, he also leaves Anna May Wong's character behind due to his companions' insistence that it was "inappropriate" to bring a Chinese woman home as a potential lover.¹⁵ While Wong received many accolades for her role in this film, it still highlighted a dilemma that non-white actors and actresses faced within early Hollywood. Despite the obstacles that she faced, Wong continued to receive roles in films and worked diligently to give her best performance in each. Wong attempted to use her roles to portray a "Chinese persona...in ways that the western director and screenwriter were unlikely to understand."¹⁶ Thus, she attempted to keep her culture and heritage alive in her roles, even if the western audience would not understand it. However, Chinese communities often viewed Wong in a negative light, finding her portrayals of Chinese characters fake and poor representations of Chinese culture and women.¹⁷ Thus, Wong was constantly under scrutiny on both sides, adding to the stress she experienced as an actress.

Wong also experienced type-casting throughout her career, often based on her race. As Claire Love, Jen Pollack, and Dr. Alison Landsberg explain, a common stereotypical role that

¹⁴ Ibid, 71.

¹⁵ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 33.

¹⁶ Ibid, 34.

¹⁷ Misa Oyama, "The Asian Look of Melodrama: Moral and Racial Legibility in the films of Sessue Hayakawa, Anna May Wong, Winnifred Eaton, and James Wong Howe" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley – ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 108, <http://0-search.proquest.com.rosi.unk.edu/docview/304900365?accountid=8115>.

non-white actresses were cast in was that of “the vamp.”¹⁸ A character who was “the vamp” was “exotic, luxurious, and escapist...[with] sexual allure [carrying] the connotation that she was a man-eater,” even to the point of tricking men and destroying their lives.¹⁹ The term “exotic” applied to non-white women, and served as a stereotype to set other races apart from white women, turning them into the “other.” Through this stereotype, non-white women were portrayed as sexually provocative and deceptive and were thus poor partners for white men.²⁰ This further distanced races from one another, reiterating that interracial relationships were not particularly accepted in American society at this point in time. Anna May Wong received “vamp” roles on multiple different occasions. Wong’s character in *The Thief of Baghdad*, which premiered in 1924, especially fit the “vamp” stereotype. Wong was cast as a devious Mongolian slave who plotted against her mistress.²¹ This particular role portrayed Asian women in a poor light and re-enforced stereotypical characteristics and actions for an Asian character. Wong’s role in *The Thief of Baghdad* demonstrated ingrained racism within American society in three ways. First of all, Anna May Wong was a Chinese-American woman, yet she was cast as a Mongolian slave. This is a typical, recurring problem within Hollywood, where an Asian actor or actress receives an Asian role, but casting directors ignore the differences between Asian cultures and people. Mongolia and China are different nations,

¹⁸ Claire Love, Jen Pollack, and Alison Landsberg, Ph.D., “Silent Film Actresses and their Most Popular Characters,” last modified April 6, 2017. <https://www.nwhm.org/articles/silent-film-actresses-and-their-most-popular-characters>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Karla Rae Fuller, “Hollywood goes Oriental: CaucAsian performance in American cinema” (Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University – Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 1997), 45, <http://0-search.proquest.com.rosi.unk.edu/docview/304390364?accountid=8115>.

²¹ Ibid.

with very different customs, beliefs, and people, yet Anna May Wong received a Mongolian role despite her Chinese descent. This highlighted Hollywood's habit of grouping races together based on society's set, biased categories.

Secondly, Wong played an underhanded and deceptive character. This fit the stereotype of "the vamp," but also further displayed stereotypes that European-Americans had against Asian-American women. They portrayed Asian characters as deceptive in order to establish a difference between Asian characters and white characters, thus establishing an "other," or an enemy, based on the character's race. This reflected the suspicious attitudes towards Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans held within society in the early 20th Century.²² Thirdly, this role set Anna May Wong as a slave girl plotting to harm her mistress, played by a white woman. This further established an "other," reiterating the perceived differences between whites and non-whites, both on and off screen. Wong's role further demonstrated the forced stereotype that Asians had the potential to be deceptive and harmful towards European-Americans. Acceptance of this stereotype in the cinema continued to demonstrate the depth of the biases that Americans held towards those who were of non-European descent. Thus, Wong's role in *The Thief of Baghdad* highlighted many factors of discrimination and type-casting that she faced throughout her career.

Wong's role in *Forty Winks* further highlighted the stereotypes against Asians held in 20th century American society. Her character tricks a man in order to steal his keys and later causes more treachery and mischief.²³ Wong, again, played a deceptive character that portrayed an Asian character as a trickster who harmed European-Americans. Wong portrayed deceptive

²² Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 3-5.

²³ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 51.

characters more often than not, her roles thus forcing her to provide the audience with fuel for the continuation of their biases towards Asian-Americans. As Glenn Norio Masuchika explains, Anna May Wong was “stereotyped as either the ‘evil Dragon lady’ or the ‘demure, obedient daughter’ and found few other positive roles.”²⁴ Thus, she continually experienced discrimination within Hollywood based on her Chinese heritage, displaying the deeply rooted racist attitudes within early Hollywood.

While starring in the film, *Mr. Wu*, Wong faced multiple forms of discrimination and racism. The loss of a leading role to a white actress was one of the most prominent. Renee Adoree played Nang Ping, a Chinese woman who falls in love with a white man. However, Adoree was portraying a Chinese character when she herself was white, thus showing that even for a Chinese main role, white actors and actresses were cast and simply wore make-up that portrayed a look that fit European-American stereotypes of an Asian look.²⁵ As Hodges explains, Adoree’s portrayal of Nang Ping “revealed caricatures of Chinese females,” through her presentation of her character as “childishly vulnerable while sexually ambitious.”²⁶ This further displays how, even when an Asian-American actress was not cast in the available Asian role, the white actress who was cast would still fulfill the stereotypes that European-Americans had of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans. While Adoree played the lead role within *Mr. Wu*, Anna May Wong, on the other hand, played Adoree’s maid, thus reducing her to another servant role within a film.

²⁴ Glenn Norio Masuchika, "'Yellowface' in Movies: A Survey of American Academic Collections," *Collection Building* 32, no.1 (2013): 31. <https://0-search.proquest.com.rosi.unk.edu/docview/1282130988/fulltextPDF/991324C45B164614PQ/1?accountid=8115>.

²⁵ Ibid, 31-32.

²⁶ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 55.

Wong was a highly talented actress, but she was surpassed by a white actress “simply because she was a white woman playing ‘yellow face.’”²⁷ Furthermore, casting a white woman in an Asian role would increase the acceptability of starring with a white, male lead. Along with this, if the villain against this character was Chinese, it further displayed an Asian “other” as an enemy to European-Americans. Wong experienced many instances where a white actress surpassed her for a role, including but not limited to her role in *The Crimson City*, among other films.²⁸ As Karen J. Leong explains:

The ideology of whiteness as manifested in the film industry assumed the Euro-American actors are talented enough to perform roles that did not reflect their own identities or experiences; it also assumed that nonwhite actors could not perform roles beyond their social identities and lived experiences.²⁹

Thus, it was believed that white actresses possessed a talent greater than their non-white counterparts that allowed them to capture another racial identity within a role, but non-white actresses were not believed to have the ability to replicate this talent. Not only did this hold white actresses in a superior light to non-white actresses, it also undermined the efforts that non-white actresses made and also diminished their talent and abilities. Thus, the loss of leading roles to European-American actresses was a highly visible form of discrimination and racism towards actresses without European descent, and Anna May Wong personally experienced this discrimination many times throughout her career.

²⁷ Ibid, 55.

²⁸ Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 17.

²⁹ Jeong, *The China Mystique*, 72.

While Hollywood itself posed many forms of discrimination on Anna May Wong, there were other forms of racism, discrimination, and stereotypes that she faced outside of Hollywood. The perceptions of journalists and critics offer many examples of racism within America. As Wong's popularity as an actress grew, journalists and critics took an interest in observing her work. However, throughout her career, journalists and critics often used language that emphasized stereotypes against Asian-Americans. In the April 22, 1928 issue of *The Film Daily*, an excerpt on *The Crimson City* states that "Anna May Wong and Sojin [are] right in their native element."³⁰ Grouping all Asians into one sphere instead of realizing their diversity demonstrates a form of racism through categorization. First of all, *The Crimson City* was set in China. Anna May Wong, while having Chinese ancestry, was still an American, and the account emphasizing that she was "in [her] native element," demonstrates how European-Americans believed anyone with Chinese descent fit into a certain category or stereotype.³¹ Furthermore, Sojin Kamiyama, the Japanese actor mentioned in the excerpt, also received praise that he was "in his native element," while acting in a Chinese setting.³² This further displays how European-Americans grouped Asians together, neglecting to realize the many distinct cultures within Asia. Racial categorization such as this led to the development of inaccurate stereotypes that classified Asians in the eyes of American society. Thus, Asian-American actors were subject to type-casting for their looks, and were also subject

³⁰ "Crimson City," *The Film Daily* (New York, NY) April 22, 1928, Pg. 8, col. 3. <https://archive.org/stream/filmdaily4344newy#page/760/mode/2up>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

to European-Americans using a blanket term and idea for all Asian people, neglecting the differences among each subset of people and erasing individuals from the equation.

Unfortunately, there were many instances where critiques, articles, and other excerpts used demeaning language while describing Wong. In fact, instances of the use of derogatory terms for non-white actors occurred frequently. For example, in the February 26, 1928, issue of *The Film Daily*, in an excerpt on the film *The Streets of Shanghai*, the author uses the term, “Chink,” to describe one of the Chinese characters.³³ This term is a highly derogatory way to refer to someone with Chinese ancestry, which was also used as a blanket term within American society for any person of Asian descent. Derogatory terms such as these have since become unacceptable to use within American society. However, in the early 20th Century, derogatory racial terms were acceptable to use and even publish in nationally distributed journals. Thus, while working in early Hollywood, Asian actors and actresses faced many forms of racism. While Wong was not specifically described with this derogatory term in this specific journal, she did experience other demeaning descriptions throughout her career. In an issue of *The Film Daily* from March 11, 1924, an advertisement for *The Fortieth Door* describes Anna May Wong as “the vamp of the harem.”³⁴ This relates back to a role that stereotypically depicted Asian women: the vamp. Therefore, due to the discrimination that Asian-Americans experienced at this time, Wong faced limited film roles to pursue in Hollywood. In an issue of *Life* from 1922, Robert E. Sherwood’s review of the film *The Toll of the Sea* provides another instance of discriminatory language against Wong. Within this review,

³³ “Streets of Shanghai,” *The Film Daily* (New York, NY) Feb. 26, 1928, Pg. 6, col. 1. <https://archive.org/stream/filmdaily4344newy#page/392/mode/2up>.

³⁴ “Advertisement: The Fortieth Door,” *The Film Daily* (New York, NY), March 11, 1924, Pgs. 16-17. <https://archive.org/stream/filmdaily2728newy#page/954/mode/2up>.

Sherwood highlights how Anna May Wong is “not a white girl,” and actually “chooses her color and sticks to it throughout,” thus emphasizing her Chinese heritage while ignoring the fact that she is, in fact, American as well.³⁵ Thus, critiques and journals observing Wong’s work often provided discriminatory language and demonstrated the attitudes of the majority of European-Americans at the time.

Local papers also featured discriminatory language in critiques and reviews. For example, in the *Omaha World Herald* on August 16, 1931, Dan Thomas used the word “exotic” to describe Anna May Wong and follows this by calling her a “little Chinese girl.”³⁶ Both of these terms for Wong’s description are quite stereotypical and demeaning. First of all, using the term “exotic” for Wong displayed how European-Americans viewed Asians, and Asian-Americans, as “the other.” They labeled Asians “exotic” in order to establish differences between the races, reducing Asians and Asian-Americans to a lower status than European-Americans, and encouraging a one-dimensional view of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans. Using the phrase “little Chinese girl,” the author highlighted Wong’s Chinese ancestry while ignoring the fact that she was also American. Highlighting her Chinese descent and ignoring her American birth demonstrates how European-Americans did not view people with Asian ancestry as Americans, even if they were born in the United States. This explains how European-Americans continually viewed Asian-Americans, especially Chinese-Americans, as “the other,” leading to constant discrimination against them.

³⁵ Robert E Sherwood, “The Silent Drama: ‘East Is West’ ‘The Toll of the Sea’ ‘Anna Ascends’ ‘Hungry Hearts,’” *Life* 80, no. 2094 (Dec. 21, 1922): 26, <http://0-search.proquest.com.rosi.unk.edu/docview/90839895?accountid=8115>.

³⁶ Thomas, “How Miss Frosted Yellow Willows,” 41.

Due to the discrimination that Anna May Wong faced in America, she decided to move to Europe to play more major roles with less type-casting for her race. As Hodges explains:

First, although she was making good money, she dreamed of becoming a great actress and felt limited by Hollywood casting decisions. Second, American racial conventions required that if she felt any romantic interests, which were always present in Hollywood productions, she had to die by the end of the script.³⁷

She originally moved to Germany with her sister, Lulu, in 1928, hoping to find more opportunities in roles within the European film industry than she had found in the American film industry.³⁸ Germany did not have many Chinese immigrants, or many citizens with Chinese heritage, thus limiting their experience with people within this race. Therefore, in order to incorporate Anna May Wong into films, Eichberg, a popular German director, incorporated Hollywood's Orientalism, leading to a marginalization of Wong's characters reminiscent of her experience in America.³⁹ Thus, Germany had more of a stereotypical view of Chinese characters due to their exposure to Hollywood films. In spite of this, Wong experienced less type-casting and discrimination in the European film industry than she had in Hollywood. However, she was not completely free from racism or stereotypes set by European society. For example, in a critique in the August 1929 issue of *The Times* in London, the critic suggests that a play set in China had an "exotic" atmosphere.⁴⁰ Thus, American and English society shared the stereotype that Asian nations were "exotic." Stereotypes or categorizations such as these established those

³⁷ Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁰ "The Circle of Chalk." *The Times* (London, England), January 8, 1929, Pg. 10.
<http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/67t5T9>.

with Asian ancestry as an exotic “other,” creating a societal difference between Asians and the Americans or Europeans who made this assumption. Thus, this was a common stereotype that Americans and Europeans had for Asia and its inhabitants. Further demonstrating this specific stereotype, a critique in the August 1934 issue of *The Times* in London suggests that Anna May Wong suited an “exotic setting” due to her Chinese heritage.⁴¹ This, again, displays a stereotype that both European-Americans and Europeans forced upon those with Asian heritage through the use of the media and other publications, further demonstrating the types of racism that people with Asian heritage faced each day. So, while Anna May Wong experienced less discrimination and racism while in Europe, it was still present, just in more subtle ways than in America.

Anna May Wong’s experience in Hollywood is an example of the discrimination and racism that has plagued the American film industry since its creation. While Wong received roles and gained popularity, she often played stereotypical characters that reflected racist attitudes within America in the early 20th Century. After years of discrimination in the American film industry, Wong moved to Europe to expand her career. However, while discrimination was less visible in Europe, it still existed, demonstrating similarities between the mindsets of Europeans and European-Americans. Wong’s career demonstrates how Asian-American actors and actresses continually faced type-casting, discrimination, racist descriptions, and stereotypical roles throughout the 20th Century. Overall, even though she faced discrimination and obstacles throughout her career, Anna May Wong paved the way for Asian-American actresses within the American film industry.

⁴¹ “New Films in London.” *The Times* (London, England), Aug. 21, 1934, Pg. 8.
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