

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, multi-lingual archival research, and addressing the lacunae in existent archives through the lens of speculative historiography, I show how Wong’s paradoxical and non-teleological 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 *intertextuality* 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. Intertextuality 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

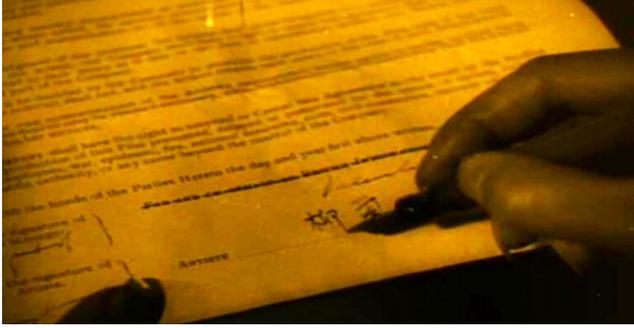


FIGURE 1.1. Wong signing her own Chinese name in *Piccadilly* (dir. E. A. Dupont, 1929).

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 distancing 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, "Orientially 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"—"Orientially 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 cangan 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 distancing 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 distancing 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 霜柳黄 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, constructing 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 banged hand inscribing her Chinese autograph 霜柳黄, 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 mediator 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 racist 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 displaying 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).



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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 mis-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).



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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 hypervisibility 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-banded 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 emblemizes 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 non-partisan 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 distancing 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 anachronistic 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 distanced 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 "Orientals" 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 overlaid 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 distancing, 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.