

Putting on Another Show

Spotlighting Anna May Wong in Theater

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GLAMOUR ON THE SPOT: PREFIGURING 1930s WHITE GLAMOUR

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

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

Well received for her performance in *On the Spot*, Wong gained the opportunity to revisit her role in *The Circle of Chalk* in special matinees at the Shubert Theatre in December 1930.⁴¹ Yet a widely syndicated Associated Press article in December 1930 announced that she had two jobs lined up in Europe after finishing *On the*

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

Wong returned to the play when it ran on the West Coast in August and September 1931 at the Belasco theater in Los Angeles (and in La Jolla). This stage commitment caused the filming of *Shanghai Express* to be postponed from October 1 to 12.⁴⁵ In 1932 and the first half of 1933, Wong toured extensively in the US with other actors such as George Sidney and Una Merkel, doing variety shows in multiple languages, taking advantage of her multilingual ethno-cosmopolitanism. She also tried to revive *On the Spot* in Honolulu, but it “fell through, but I might do it later.”⁴⁶ By mid-1933 she was back in Europe, busy making films and giving vaudeville shows for a year before returning to the US in mid-1934 for a Paramount contract. In 1938, she starred in *Dangerous to Know*, the film adaptation of *On the Spot* (discussed in chapter 1).

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

Brokaw observed the phasing out of 1920s American ingenue icon Mary Pickford and the rise of glamorous femininity as personified by the “sullen and exotic Swede” Greta Garbo.⁵⁰ Film historian Patrick Keating linked this shift to “the decline of American sentimentality in the wake of the Great Depression.”⁵¹ Other film scholars attribute the new sexually assertive femininity to the studios’ efforts to stay solvent during the Depression, before the Hays Code was formally implemented in 1934. Jerold Simmons and Leonard Leff, for instance, identify the studios’ turn to “sex pictures” following the banning of gangster films in September 1931.⁵² The shift to sophisticated femininity boosted the stardom of Garbo and made the newly imported Marlene Dietrich her stiff rival, prompting *Photoplay’s* Hilary Lynn to espouse an “elusive mysterious power ‘X.’”⁵³

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marlene Dietrich

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

Miss Dietrich and Miss Wong, almost unknown stars, while Leni has become Hitler's favorite.

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

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

Anna May Wong

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

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

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

Leni Riefenstahl

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

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

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

Of her relationship with Hitler, even the most skeptical quote an article on "Hitler's Lover," which a Paris newspaper published in the "great anniversary" of the German dictator. The article quoted Mrs. Riefenstahl as saying, "The Reich leader could not love except platonically. The paper was banned immediately from the newstands."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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



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

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

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

FROM AN “ORIENTAL” “FREAK” TO A MIGRATORY PERFORMER-WORKER

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

“People insist on looking at me as a freak—something akin to a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf. *I want to be an actress, not a freak.* I want to feel that people go to see my pictures because I perform well, not just because I am an Oriental.”

The Australian vaudeville opportunity would allow her to find out whether “I have anything really to offer the public or whether I must just go on being regarded as a freak.”⁸⁰

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Aside from Farmer, Wong also worked with other artists, including her teacher Parry Jones, a Welsh operatic tenor, on her “A Jasmine Flower” number; Anton Dolin, “Britain’s greatest ballet dancer,” on her dance act in *Chu Chin Chow*; and Katherine DeMille (Cecil B. DeMille’s adopted daughter), who choreographed a dance for her stage act in early 1934.⁸⁵ With these efforts, Wong ventured into a domain that she had not been professionally trained for, and that was perceived as atypical for her ethnic background. Katherine DeMille voiced blatant discrimination: “[Wong] can’t dance and she can’t sing. But she has the world’s most beautiful figure and a face like a Ming princess, and when she opens her mouth out comes Los Angeles Chinatown sing-sing girl and every syllable is a fresh shock.”⁸⁶ In the face of such discrimination based on her race, gender, and class background that was already apparent in the London theater critics’ disparagement of her American accent in 1929, Wong remained unfazed. She recognized her limitations, yet still pushed on with continuous training.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Similar fetishization governed Wong's reception in Northern Europe during her tour in early 1935.⁹⁵ On February 13, 1935, a report in the Oslo newspaper *Aften-posten*, "Anna May Wong Is Coming on Sat.," described the elaborate set design for Wong's show: director Paulsen "[remade] the Mill [Røde Mølle in Oslo] into China. From the door and all the way in, it'll be China, spectacular decorations." Paulsen called this makeover "the finest and most authentic frame around Anna May Wong." A director and impresario named Woronowsky described Wong's performance as "Sing, dance, reenact excerpts from her movies, change costumes, one more delicious than the other. The best of all is perhaps her excerpts from *Shanghai Express*. You remember that—where she plays a half caste. Then she sings a Chinese song with Chinese music with Chinese dress, all genuine, all authentic,

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

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

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

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

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

tour as part of the “Highlights from Hollywood” ensemble, arranged by Frank Neil, the general manager of the Tivoli Circuit since 1934.¹⁰³ Shirley Jennifer Lim understands Wong’s Australian tour as an opportunity to enact glamorous “settler-colonial racial modernity” that made her the de facto cultural ambassador for China, which in turn facilitated Chinese Australians’ struggle for “cultural citizenship.”¹⁰⁴ Building upon Lim’s argument, I ask: What enabled Wong to project modernity and glamour? How might we historicize her modernity and glamour by taking into account not only her popularity (as Lim emphasizes), but also the challenges she encountered in Australia? How did she calibrate the ambassadorial gesture, given her ambivalent relationship with China? And, finally, in what ways did her Australia tour partake in the broader landscape of border-crossing popular-cultural production enacted by nonwhite female performers in the first half of the twentieth century?

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

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

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

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

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

The shared experience of marginalization also connected Wong and Nina Mae McKinney, who undertook a vaudeville tour in Australia in 1937.¹⁰⁷ Both their visits defied Australia's 1928 policy that stipulated "total prohibition of colored performers from entering the Commonwealth," even though this policy eased in the 1930s.¹⁰⁸ Further indicative of their subjection to gender-race discrimination was that they were both slighted by ABC (the Australian Broadcasting Commission) as subpar stage performers. Correspondence between the Tivoli Theatre and ABC indicated that, in anticipation of Wong's visit, Frank Neil offered Wong's service (based on her "international reputation and the expected drawing power") to ABC at seventy-five pounds per broadcast, once a week. E. Chapple, acting federal controller of music at ABC, responded that he knew Wong only through *Shanghai Express* and that "it is quite possible she may not be a success on the stage, as was the case with Nina May [*sic*] McKinney."¹⁰⁹ Referencing McKinney's perceived failure as a precedent, Chapple suggested that Wong's act be viewed before any arrangements were made with Neil.¹¹⁰ No follow-up communication was documented, which suggests that no contract materialized.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Publicity of her 1939 vaudeville tour similarly recognized her *performance* of the “Oriental” effect, as she was repeatedly described as not a Chinese, but a California-born Hollywood star whose first China visit was not until 1936.¹¹⁷ Shirley Jennifer Lim reads such publicity as making Wong a desirable model for Chinese Australian women struggling for their cultural citizenship in White Australia. Wong’s identity, however, was more complicated, given her peripatetic travels and interstitial self-positioning. Her distancing from any *a priori* identity position means that hers could not be reduced to American cultural citizenship. Rather, she maintained multiple vantage points befitting a migratory performer-worker. The interstitial positioning enabled her to diagnose Hollywood’s limitations in comparison with other film industries. It also facilitated her flexible engagement with international publics to not only reinforce her transnational stardom, but also foster an open and discerning spectatorial horizon.

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

While in Australia, Wong directly interacted with the gender-race-diverse audiences, which not only publicized her stage work but also helped foster a resonant audience with long-term impact. She spoke to the *Australian Women’s Weekly* about the exotic forty-three-course banquet she enjoyed in Shanghai, and attended activities at Radio Women’s Club of Victoria as a “guest of honor” decked out in “a mink coat with an attractive tamarisk pink turban.”¹²⁰ In Melbourne, she was welcomed with a dance party organized by the local Young Chinese League on June 10, 1939.¹²¹ A month later, she was greeted by the New South Wales Chinese Women’s Relief Fund and the Young Chinese League at the Sydney train station.¹²² Upon arriving in Sydney and being welcomed by Consul-General Chun-Jien Pao and his wife, Edith, Wong was filmed giving a brief speech for radio broadcasting. In

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

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

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

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

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

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

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