

Shifting the Show

Labor in the Margins

In those days, there was only one Asian film actress, Anna May Wong. At the movies I used to keep my eyes peeled for her fleeting appearances on the screen.

—GRACE LEE BOGGS

*Out of a hundred Chinese who were going to and fro in the background of the China-Town [as extras in *The Red Lantern*], I considered myself the princess. I always assured myself that the camera wasn't looking anywhere else but at me . . . ! For two days that bliss lasted—then it was over. . . .*

For eight months I was the hundredth or two-hundredth of the Chinese.

But then—oh!—it still makes my pulse pound when I think of it: then a powerful assistant said to me: “Anna May, you will play a servant!”

No longer the hundredth, the two-hundredth. . . . No, the first, the only Chinese in the scene. . . .

Oh—I was so proud. . . .

*And one time—it was the day that I got a role in a film—I'll never forget the title!—a real role, the second female role: in *Dinty*.*

And I returned home—like a victor.

—ANNA MAY WONG

This chapter racks the focus to scrutinize the margins and the background, where Wong played supporting, minor, bit roles or served as an extra in a majority of her films and television shows. Wong's screen debut as an extra—one of a hundred similarly dressed Chinese girls carrying lanterns—in the Alla Nazimova vehicle *Red Lantern* (dir. Albert Capellani, 1919) was an anticlimax. As she recounted on multiple occasions, she felt deeply disappointed when her high expectations were dashed, replaced by the realization that she was completely invisible on the screen—even to herself.¹ The girl who sat in the movie theater looking for herself on the screen literally lost herself in the phantasmic silver-land. One might imagine

that Wong reiterated this primal moment of loss and frustration with a degree of gleeful vindication. For by the time she could recall this moment in interviews, she had already made a name for herself and, instead of being invisible, she had become hypervisible as *the* icon of exotic Oriental femininity. In her 1930 German interview quoted in the second epigraph above, the now cosmopolitan star-celebrity had recuperated from that primal moment, literally reimagining herself as the center—the “princess” that was the focus of the camera.

As her lifelong career demonstrates, hypervisibility and invisibility were two sides of one coin, constituting her fundamental dilemma that we still have to reckon with in our reassessment of her legacy. On the one hand, the public has been treated to proliferating audiovisual, photographic, and other media representations and multilingual coverage that hype her trendsetting fashions, enigmatic allure, humble background, and unyielding singlehood. On the other hand, much of the media frenzy (especially during her lifetime) expressed a purist and heteronormative urge to figure (or straighten) her out, to fit her into an a priori fetishized category—one that functioned as what I call a “media closet.”

This “media closet” magnified Wong’s consumable “freak” appeal while containing her challenge to heteronormative Orientalism and patriarchal ethnonationalism. My goal in this chapter, therefore, is to break the “media closet,” to shine light on her flitting yet unmissable screen appearances, so as to theorize the ways in which her physical, intellectual, and affective labor produced her paradoxical agency in the margins and the background. Wong’s marginal roles ranged from furnishing the “Oriental atmosphere” to supporting the white cast in white-centered narratives. Ostensibly fillable by any “Oriental” actor, these marginal roles acquired layered significance through Wong’s intriguing maneuvers. Indeed, Wong often managed to steal and shift the show by making these roles disturbingly poignant. In other words, the marginal space, under-scripted and apparently inert, could offer her unexpected leeway to re-reflect her threadbare minor characters with layers of unintended interpretive possibilities. Specifically, her performances could turn the marginal characters into sites of critiquing the center-stage narrative and its underlying ideologies. Such re-inflection characterizes her show-shifting authorship that turns upon mimicry and contestation.

This chapter joins Black film studies and feminist studies in taking up the marginalized space as the fertile site for mining subversive agency. Here are a few of my interlocutors. Miriam J. Petty examines the 1930s Black American performers, arguing that their “problematic stardom” (to use Arthur Knight’s term) actually “expressed agency and negotiated ideas about their lives and identities through acts of performance and discourse that incorporated and exceeded the cinematic frame.”² Desirée Garcia studies the race and gender power inequity in the dressing rooms of backstage musicals, concluding that Black revue dancer Jeni

LeGon mobilized her singing skills to portray an insubordinate Black servant who challenges her white mistress's stardom.³ Finally, Black feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick focuses on the margin as a material and conceptual terrain that is alterable through Black women's struggles and production of resistant spaces and geographies.⁴

Building upon this scholarship, I illuminate how the obscured margins and the background constitute *and* problematize the center all at once. I anchor my discussion in Wong's nuanced performances that not only stole the show in the sense of gaining attention (disproportionate to her minor roles), but also *shifted* the show by flipping the hierarchy of the center and the peripheries, the main narrative and the liminal energy. Her act of *shifting* the show redistributes seeing, sensing, and relating, thus reorients the screen geography, and reshuffles the visual episteme both diegetically and extradiegetically—all of which works to redress the power inequity underlying mainstream media industries and cultures.

To theorize the power of Wong's flitting and erased presence (*not* absence) in the margins and the background on the big and small screens, I mobilize the concept of the parergon as defined by Jacques Derrida. *Parergon* designates the frame of the work (*ergon*), which is the liminal zone that is not quite a part of the work, yet also not outside of the work. Supplementing the substance (within the frame) by giving it unity, the parergon serves to unfix the binary opposition between the center and the periphery, the work and the frame, threatening to reverse the order.⁵ Wong's work as a supporting actress demonstrates precisely such a reversal, akin to the effect of an anamorphic perspective. Once we rack the parergon into focus, a new method of sensing the moving images at the edges of the frame emerges. This new method leads us to problematize mainstream film history, and to pay attention to the role played by performer-workers who have been systematically marginalized, tokenized, and erased.

Confronting the history of marginalization is to generatively engage with archival lacunae. That is, many films that cast Wong in supporting roles have not survived; some of her early roles were not credited and are yet to be recovered; and when she was credited, existing documentation rarely goes beyond a mere mention of her ornamental value as part of the exotic *mise-en-scène*. This challenge is not dissimilar to what film historian Allyson Nadia Field encounters in her reconstruction of African American uplift cinema. Thus, while I utilize close analysis whenever possible, I also follow Field's urge to view audiovisual materials as "but one component of an expansive network of cultural traces that lead to its myriad functions." I share her method of "looking and thinking adjacently"—beyond extant cinema—so as to reconstruct a lost film and media history "out of surviving archival ephemera."⁶ By combining this method with attentive and caring "reparative reading" (Eve Sedgwick's term) of a wide range of print materials (including stills,

scripts, censorship records, publicity, exhibitions, and reviews), this chapter pieces together a discursive environment in which Wong carved out a critical parergon position vis-à-vis the center stage.

The chapter begins with establishing Wong's significant "fleeting appearances on the screen" (in the words of Grace Lee Boggs). I then unpack her parergon power in three interrelated dimensions. First, via her auxiliary characters, she mimicked and acted out the white female protagonist's desires, then went a step further to meta-cinematically problematize such desires. Second, Wong destabilized the white protagonist and narrative by collaborating with other decentered elements, including costuming, set design, and nonhuman characters. Third, Wong subtly channeled her real-life experience of exclusion into the diegetic realm, revealing the underbelly of white centrism. Finally, I bring the three dimensions together in Wong's "swan song" performance in the unaired pilot and a 1961 episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*, both set at the height of the Cold War in Hong Kong. Here, her parergon power undercut white centrism *and* patriarchal nationalism all at once.

THE FLITTING FIGURE ACROSS THE BACKGROUND

A 1925 article in the British fan magazine *Pictures and Picturegoer* aptly identified Wong's flitting yet captivating screen presence: "That she is an exceptionally clever actress one cannot doubt. She may merely *wander through a corner of the picture*, but she'll *register a hit every time*. Witness the delightful flashes of her *Lilies of the Field*."⁷ This writer's spotting of Wong in *Lilies of the Field* (dir. John Francis Dillon, 1924) is noteworthy because Wong was uncredited in the film and was unmentioned in the review of it by Robert Sherwood, the *Life* magazine movie critic who was to become an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. Sherwood did, however, praise Wong for her "rich" and "authentic" performance as the Mongolian maid in *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), in a review placed right next to his *Lilies of the Field* review.⁸ Wong remained unmentioned when *Lilies of the Field* was shown in China in 1926 and 1928.⁹ That her presence in *Lilies of the Field* was otherwise largely erased makes the British writer's comment on her "delightful flashes" that "register a hit" all the more thought-provoking.

A few years later, back in her home country, Wong's flitting yet eye-catching performances led a *Los Angeles Times* reporter to criticize the industry's waste of her talent. The reporter then proceeded to elevate Wong above the leading ladies: "The reviewers deplore the scant opportunities given Anna May Wong, whose brief appearances in pretentious pictures keep interest in her at high pitch and inevitably cause comparisons with those who play leads in the same pictures. The comparison is always to the credit of the Chinese actress, whose talents are thought to be wasted in the brief roles given her."¹⁰

Yet not all reviewers deplored Wong's wasted talent. One commentator considered her nonwhiteness alone sufficient to keep her in the auxiliary position. While her "exotic Chinese beauty" made her the go-to actress in any 10–20–30 melodrama with an "Oriental intrigue," this commentator believed that her "dark beauty appeared sinister by contrast with the nordic fairness of Laura La Plante in *The Chinese Parrot* and Dolores Costello in *Old San Francisco*. She has been a villainess and a vampire, but *her appearance will never let her be a heroine*."¹¹ According to this commentator, Wong was doomed to be the dark foil to the fair heroine; and her best option was no more than playing a sympathetic maid, as in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

A third voice could be found in a 1929 article, "Why Don't They Star?" The writer, Willard Chamberlin, mused over a host of non-starring actresses of different national and racial/ethnic backgrounds (French, Spanish, and Mexican as well as American), including Myrna Loy, Lupe Vélez, and Wong.¹² Chamberlin assessed Wong's value as "never [failing] to furnish *colorful Oriental beauty* to any role she plays," as illustrated in a Jack Freulich photo portrayal of her dance pose from *The Chinese Parrot* (dir. Paul Leni, 1927).¹³ Wong's role in this film required only "one day's work and featuring," since her character was killed shortly after the opening scene.¹⁴ Yet Freulich's set of photos portraying her dance poses were widely circulated, testifying to her powerful performance despite the brief screen time.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Chamberlin used the word *color* to explain the non-stars' allure. This led him to argue that these non-stars should be envied, for they had the opportunity to wear lavish costumes and play colorful supporting roles with abandon, while the stars were encased in rigid, narrative-driven costumes and acting styles. Furthermore, while stars came and went, these supporting performers could maintain a more lasting career.

Chamberlin would not have expected Wong's non-star legacy to far exceed his definition of a lasting career. Nearly half a century later, for instance, she resurfaced, flitting across a TV screen in the home of a US colonel stationed in Iran in the late 1970s. As narrated by the colonel's daughter, Mary Flanagan, her parents enjoyed the "oldies" reruns on TV. One day, in the middle of a black-and-white gangster-style film, her dad jumped to his feet, pointed to a minor character in the background of the scene, and screamed, "Jesus God, it's Anna May Wong!" The father's excited spotting of Wong—as an uncanny time capsule, over a decade after her death and several decades after she flit across the background in the film—had no meaning for the children, for they "had no idea who this was or who, in fact, he had pointed to, since it was a *background actor in a passing scene*."¹⁶

That Wong's spectral resurfacing could cause so much excitement for the father testifies to her lasting impact. Yet her utter invisibility and unintelligibility to the younger generation foregrounds the importance of giving Wong's "delightful flashes" a context—that is, a context for Wong's already contextual position in

the background. How might we contextualize Wong's circumferential position to bring out her parergon power? I address this question in three dimensions.

FROM THE SUBORDINATE LOOK-ALIKE
TO THE PARERAGON AGENT

From the early stages of her career, Wong was fully aware of the precarious work conditions that forced her into the margins and the background (if she found work at all). In a 1925 interview, she observed, "It is hard to get into the pictures, but it is harder to keep in them. Of course, it is nice enough if one gets a five-year contract as some of the actors do, but freelancing which I do is not easy. You see, there are not many Chinese parts."¹⁷ Indeed, while Wong did have several multiyear contracts, some of them were cut short; and Wong pushed on as a freelancer for the majority of her forty-year career. Furthermore, her career was episodic, punctuated with multiple "disappearances" and "beginnings" that resulted from peripatetic travels for work opportunities and from involuntary "retirements."

Wong's departure from a conventional teleological success narrative forces us to address the question that Lauren Berlant powerfully poses: "What does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something? Would it be possible to talk about a biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)?"¹⁸ Following Berlant, I privilege Wong's episodic career to "dedramatize . . . epic into moment, and structure into gestures."¹⁹ With the gestural moments from the margins and the background, Wong carved out a multiperspectival, parergon position that reoriented the dominant colonialist gaze, simultaneously framing and unsettling the center stage, thereby generating what Berlant calls "incommensurable knowledges and attachments."²⁰ In this section, I study *Mr. Wu* and *Shanghai Express* to demonstrate how her character supported but also upstaged the white female protagonist and, ultimately, challenged the narrative premise of white heteronormativity.

In the MGM production *Mr. Wu*, Wong "achieve[d] a sympathetic role" as the maid.²¹ The protagonists are the Western-educated yet despotic Chinese Mandarin Mr. Wu and his daughter Nang Ping—yellowfaced, respectively, by Lon Chaney ("the man of a thousand faces") and French émigré actress Renée Adorée. Set in a mystical Chinese mansion with a lush Chinese garden, the narrative centers on Sino-British mutual xenophobia—specifically, Mr. Wu's honor killing of Nang Ping for her interracial affair with a British man, juxtaposed with the British mother's blatant white supremacy. Predictably, the film ends with the demise of Mr. Wu's family and the triumphant survival of the British family, who get to preserve the myth of white racial purity.

Interestingly, despite its nefarious portrayal of Mr. Wu and the now much-reviled yellowface practice, this film was enthusiastically introduced to China by a

Chinese film director, Ren Keyu.²² Ren had not seen the film (as it was still being edited, according to his article) but included four images, one of which showed Wong in a Chinese gown, posing with an American writer identified as “Bili” in Chinese and with Moon Kwan (Kwan Man Ching). Kwan was a Chinese film poet, writer, and film director who befriended Wong, honed his craft in Hollywood, and served as a consultant for D. W. Griffith’s *The Broken Blossom* (1919). Ren celebrated Lon Chaney’s transformative makeup as Mr. Wu, and the big production value of the manufactured Chinese setting. He also highlighted Wong along with Renée Adorée as the *two* leading actresses, despite Wong’s supporting position in the film. Ren’s passion reveals a fascination with Hollywood’s illusion-making techniques, ranging from set construction to yellowface makeup—a misplaced fascination in view of the power inequity underlying such techniques.²³

Still, Ren’s identification of Wong as a leading actress in the film inadvertently acknowledged the key role she played in shaping the film’s Orientalist fabrication, *and* in problematizing white supremacy, both on and off the screen. Kwan recalled that it was Wong who recommended him to the film’s director and producer, thus getting him hired as a technical consultant.²⁴ In this capacity, he recommended costumes, furnishings, and props for each scene, based on the film script. Most importantly, he lent the film’s set designer, Cedric Gibbons, a copy of his *Yanqin yiqing* 燕寢怡情 (Sensuous Living in the Boudoir)—an elaborately crafted book of twenty-four plates of paintings that depicted in detail the style of premodern China’s aristocratic domestic spaces, including architecture, garden design, furnishings, and clothing (figure 3.1).²⁵ To the extent that the paintings in this book significantly inspired the film’s set design, the “authentic” China constructed in the film became possible only through diasporic Chinese collaboration with Hollywood.

Aside from recommending Kwan to the film’s producer, Wong’s significance in this film mainly consisted in her on-screen performance as the maid Loo Song, a subtle echo of her Chinese given name Liu Tsong, which rehashed her conflation with her fictional role. This submissive maid role, however, was completely re-lected through Wong’s conspicuous overacting. The film script gave little description of the maid, except that Wong was to simply imitate each movement of Adorée’s mistress character.²⁶ This narrative hierarchy was undermined both by the publicity (playfully) and by Wong’s hyper-performativity (earnestly).

A *Photoplay* publicity image leveraged Wong’s “authentic” Chineseness to show Wong teaching Adorée how to eat with chopsticks off screen.²⁷ In this image, Wong and Adorée sit next to each other, looking alike in embroidered jackets and hairstyles, both holding a cup-like Chinese-style bowl, Wong eating with chopsticks while leering at Adorée on the left, Adorée holding the chopsticks to her mouth with a confused look toward Wong. This image playfully reversed Wong’s and Adorée’s diegetic relationship, seemingly giving Wong the due authority for *being* the authentic “Chinese.” Yet the behind-the-scenes revelation was yet another



FIGURE 3.1. Plate 2 from *Yanqin yiqing* 燕寝怡情 (Sensuous Living in the Boudoir), which Moon Kwan loaned to Cedric Gibbons, set designer for *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).

staging of the Orientalist fantasy. It cast Wong *performing* her Chineseness, but passed it off as her natural self, thereby obscuring Wong’s labor of playing Chinese and coaching Adorée—the labor that generated box office revenue for the studio.

Another publicity image in the film’s pressbook took the opposite strategy by playing on Wong’s modern flapper persona, contrasted with Adorée’s “Oriental” mistress character (figure 3.2). Entitled “The Chinese Flapper in American Clothes and the American Maid as a Chinese Flapper,” the image juxtaposed Wong wearing a “sports outfit” with Adorée in a richly embroidered Chinese costume from the film.²⁸ The “sports outfit” consisted of a dark-colored traditional Chinese men’s jacket that Wong reputedly had tailored from her father’s wedding gown, a gray

The Chinese Flapper in American Clothes and the American Maid as a Chinese Flapper



FIGURE 3.2. Publicity image from the *Mr. Wu* pressbook, juxtaposing Wong and Renée Adorée as “The Chinese Flapper in American Clothes and the American Maid as a Chinese Flapper.”

circular skirt, the obligatory flapper-style bucket hat, and dark pumps. Hands in pockets, Wong displays her elegant figure, turning toward the camera with a confident, inviting smile, one of her feet tilted slightly as if captured in motion. Adorée, on the other hand, is depicted in full-figure profile, completely turned away from the camera, hands clasped in front, helpless and withdrawn. The contrast suggests that Wong the flapper needed to labor and practice her “Oriental” manners just as much as Adorée did, albeit in different ways.

Indeed, Wong’s on-screen labor consisted not only in performing Chineseness (and authenticating the Orientalist film), but also, more importantly, in channeling *and* dismantling the white-centered interracial melodrama. A supporting actress playing the maid who was supposed to be the mistress’s shadow, Wong/Loo Song received disproportionate close-up shots that she milked with maximal effect. In scenes where Adorée/Nang Ping’s interracial affair is about to be discovered by the punishing Lon Chaney/Mr. Wu, it is Wong/Loo Song whose facial expressions cry

VIDEO 3.1. Wong, as the maid, emoting excessively in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.1>



VIDEO 3.2. Wong, as the maid, channels racist hurt in an emotional scene in *Mr. Wu* (dir. William Nigh, 1927).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.2>



out urgency and agony, as if channeling what the mistress could not or does not feel (video 3.1). Wong's maid thus becomes the expressive screen that visibilizes the feelings that narratively belong to the mistress. Far from being the mistress's shadow, the maid threatens to replace the mistress with her emotional overacting.

The most poignant scene highlighting Wong/Loo Song's affective labor is set at a garden party, where Mr. Wu asks his daughter Nang Ping to host the British Gregory family, as he watches secretly to confirm her affair with the British man, Basil (video 3.2). In this scene, unaware of Basil's romance with Nang Ping, the British mother fantasizes about her future grandson with "blue eyes and white skin" and golden hair "like sunshine." As she espouses white supremacist eugenics, the camera frames Wong/Loo Song next to the mother, making her the direct recipient of unbridled racism. Then a cut to Nang Ping's face shows her reaction of despair. As the mother carries on her monologue, a three-shot shows Nang Ping sitting on the left, Loo Song in the middle, standing next to and turning toward the mother, while holding Nang Ping's arm. Finally, the mother sits down next to Nang Ping, as Loo Song retreats into the background with wistful resignation. Loo Song's central position in the visual composition makes her a linchpin who

mediates, buffers, and manifests the feeling of dejection at being excluded from the white-centered heterosexual economy.

Richard Dyer identifies similar displacement of emotions from the white female protagonist to her black maid in *Jezebel* (dir. William Wyler, 1938). In the scene where Julie (Bette Davis) waits for her beau to return, she “no longer expresses feeling—she ‘lives’ through Zette [the maid played by one of the most prolific Black actresses in Hollywood, Theresa Harris]. Zette has to express excited anticipation, not in speech, but in physical action, running the length of a long stair and spacious hallway . . . —it is black people who bodily express her [Julie’s] desire.”²⁹ Dyer argues that such displacement oversexualizes the black female body to bear the excessive emotions considered inappropriate for the white mistress.

Wong/Loo Song similarly channels emotions around the forbidden interracial affair for Adorée/Nang Ping so that the latter’s whiteness can be kept intact, and her yellowface is no more than a temporary masquerade. More importantly, Wong’s silent but intensely expressive performance allows her to appropriate the mistress position; and her agonized expressions register her real-life dejection caused by the Chinese Exclusion Act and the broader discriminatory society. Since it was Wong, not Adorée, who actually suffered from racism doubled with sexism, one might argue that Wong implicitly occupied the mistress’s position to give expression to her own struggles. Thus, the marginal role allowed Wong to symptomatically act out the hurt of gender-race exclusionism that was the unspeakable flip side of the diegetic Orientalist fantasy. While the visual composition and camera framing were not Wong’s design, it was her intense emotional performance (far beyond what was required of the maid role) that effectively enabled her to ventriloquize the mistress with her own struggles and precarity. Her excessive agony literally animated the central position, emotionally recoloring the stereotypical female protagonist, and injecting the US race-gender discrimination back into a white-centered fantasy.

Five years later, Wong portrayed a Chinese high-class courtesan, Hui Fei, supporting Marlene Dietrich in the latter’s star vehicle *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932). While some American reviewers saw Wong stealing the show, Chinese critics panned Wong for portraying a demeaning character in a “China humiliating film” (*ruHua pian* 辱華片), which resulted in the film being banned in China. This ban followed a string of Chinese protests against so-called *ruHua pian* (including Douglas Faribanks’s *The Thief of Bagdad* and Harold Lloyd’s *Welcome Danger*) since the 1920s.³⁰ My analysis of this film shows that Wong’s performance, this time through sardonic underacting rather than overacting, does the more important work of counterbalancing Dietrich’s glamour by staking out a space of opacity, thereby resisting both the film’s race-gender hierarchies and the Chinese government’s patriarchal ethno-nationalism. Before diving into Wong’s show-shifting performance, I will outline and refute contemporaneous discourses that either trivialized her role or stigmatized her as a performer.

A Hawaii-based Japanese American reporter, for instance, lamented that Wong “has no chance to display her ability [in *Shanghai Express*]. Her role is too small. . . . We’d like to see Anna May Wong in another effective role like that in ‘Daughter of the Dragon.’”³¹ For her Chinese detractors, Wong’s small role in *Shanghai Express* and many other films indicated her incompetence and her complicity with Hollywood. An article dated December 1931 referenced Hollywood’s China-humiliating record and preemptively lampooned *Shanghai Express* for defaming China and Chinese characters.³² The author specifically charged Wong with playing the “filler” (*chongren peijiao* 充任配角), described as “a debauched Chinese prostitute” (*yi xiajian bukan zhi jin* 一下賤不堪之妓女), in *Shanghai Express*.³³ Offered as further evidence of Wong’s complicity with Hollywood was her portrayal of an “un-Chinese” half-nude maid in *The Thief of Bagdad* and her “senseless” antiquated costume in a film identified as “Liang qinjia you Feizhou” 兩親家遊非洲 (Two In-Laws Touring Africa), which does not match with any of Wong’s films. The author concluded by urging the Chinese consul in the US to raise a protest against Paramount.

Importantly, an English translation of this article was brought to the attention of Paramount executive Jesse Lasky Jr. and alarmed him enough that he wrote to Colonel Jason S. Joy, director of the Studio Relations Committee, on January 14, 1932, asking Joy to “come over and look at the picture with us, and discuss contacting the Chinese Minister on this matter.”³⁴ The eventual ban on the film had far-reaching effects on the long-standing contentions among the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, the US State Department, the film studios, the Chinese Film Censorship Committee, and the Chinese government. Several years later, a long-term China-sojourning American government representative reflected upon Chinese protests against *Shanghai Express* and *The General Died at Dawn* (dir. Lewis Milestone, 1936), citing China’s “supersensitive nationalism” resulting from Hollywood’s repeated offenses that resulted in Chinese protests.³⁵

In the protests against *Shanghai Express* as well as the earlier *The Thief of Bagdad*, Wong came into the patriarchal ethno-nationalist crosshairs. One Chinese commentator, however, defended Wong, stating that “a film is fiction” and should not be taken literally, and that “the Germans do not blame Dietrich for playing a prostitute.” Still, the basis of the defense was the assumption that Wong was part of the Chinese “Self,” and hence for the Chinese to blame Wong would be no different from self-annihilation (*zixiang canshi* 自相蠶食).³⁶ When questioned about her participation in this *ruHua pian* during her China trip in 1936, Wong explained that her power was too limited to change the entire film, and that if she had rejected the role, the studio would have hired a Korean or Japanese actor to play it, which would have been even worse, as she would have lost the opportunity even to make some changes.³⁷

Wong did not specify what changes, if any, she managed to insert into *Shanghai Express*. Comparing screenwriter Jules Furthman’s second “white script,” dated October 9, 1931, and the “censorship dialogue script” dated January 25, 1932,

I suggest that she may have been responsible for making two important changes after filming started on October 12, 1931.³⁸ One change had to do with removing the subplot of her character Hui Fei's coupling with a Chinese man, which appeared in the October 9 script as a minor parallel to foreground Dietrich's Shanghai Lily's more glamorous romantic reunion with Dr. Harvey (played by Clive Brook). The other change concerned the use of two southern Chinese dialects—Taishanese (spoken by her) and Cantonese (spoken by the actors playing Chinese soldiers)—a choice that, while not in keeping with the film's setting on a train from Peking (present-day Beijing) to Shanghai (where totally different dialects were used), had contemporary cultural and political significance (as discussed below). These two changes problematized the heteronormative narrative and patriarchal ethno-nationalism, suggesting that Wong accomplished much more than enacting a "filler" role.

Diegetically, Wong's parergon power could be detected in the mirroring relationship between her character Hui Fei and Dietrich's character Shanghai Lily, and in the fact that *Shanghai Express* is one of the few of her films in which her character does not end up dead. Film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu describes Hui Fei's open end as an "unfinished product" that "opens up possibilities for how she is understood," since she cannot "be understood in the existing terms" of sex and race.³⁹ One of Wong/Hui Fei's open possibilities was/is her queerness, intimated by her cohabitation with Dietrich/Shanghai Lily in the same train compartment. Wedged between their first meeting (along with Leni Riefenstahl) at a 1928 ball in Berlin and their being symbolically torn apart by Hitler in 1937 (see chapter 2), Wong and Dietrich's pairing in *Shanghai Express* has stimulated speculations about the two actresses' interracial queer relationship.

Drawing upon what Sara Ahmed calls the social and sexual registers of queering, I understand Wong and Dietrich's potential queer relationship as being conjoined with the social register; that is, Wong/Hui Fei's rejection of heteronormative temporality and patriarchal ethno-nationalism. This rejection is coded in her intense, self-absorbed underacting and her injection of vocal-chirographic Taishanese into the film.

Wong's Hui Fei and Dietrich's Shanghai Lily are ushered in at the outset of the film as two sides of one coin of shaded and shady femininity. Framed through the external voyeuristic gaze, Hui Fei arrives in a porter-carried curtained palanquin that makes her completely invisible; and Shanghai Lily arrives in a car, her face partially peeking through the translucent veil. Their (half-)concealed visages are soon translated into abject shadiness as sex workers. The shared stigma lands them in the same car on the train, *and* in a first-class car that flaunts their transgression of the orthodox social mores. Wong's Hui Fei performs an additional transgression, that is, transgression against racial hierarchy, by inserting herself into the all-white first-class section of the train. The two women's subtle mutual recognition was scripted in these terms: as Shanghai Lily is "led into the compartment, glancing Hui Fei comprehends her profession. Hui Fei goes on with her game

(solitaire).⁴⁰ Their instant mutual recognition resembles the recognition between Wong's undercover dancer and Philip Ahn's undercover FBI agent in *Daughter of Shanghai* (see chapter 1). If that recognition suggests Wong's collaboration with other racialized performers to recruit a resonating nonmainstream audience, then the recognition between Wong's Hui Fei and Dietrich's Shanghai Lily implies a connection across the color line that not only makes fun of mainstream sexist codes of "respectability" (upheld by a snobbish white female passenger), but also potentially challenges their own heteronormative profession.

Having set up this transgressive interracial same-sex bond at the beginning, the film then spends its remaining time eradicating it in order to reinforce the color line and to ensure the white heterosexual reproductive future by pushing the narrative toward the coupling of Shanghai Lily and Dr. Harvey, her ex-lover. Within the diegesis, the explicit threat to white purism comes from Chang, a mixed-race rebel leader (yellowfaced by Warner Oland) who hijacks the train to force the Chinese government to release his officer. To this end, Chang holds hostage Dr. Harvey, who is tasked to operate on a VIP. By threatening to blind Harvey so as to "deprive [him] of the ability to distinguish between white and yellow," Chang coerces Shanghai Lily to offer him sexual service in exchange for Harvey's freedom.⁴¹ In other words, to preserve Harvey's sight (or racist outlook), Shanghai Lily has to yield to the mixed-race Chang's trespassing desire for a white woman, which contaminates white purism. But Chang's collapsing of the white-yellow racial hierarchy is forestalled by none other than Hui Fei. A rape victim of Chang, Hui Fei stabs him, thereby canceling "his debt" to her; but this action's unspoken rationale, which serves the film's ideological work, is that of saving the white couple for their heterosexual reproductive future. Hui Fei's narrative function is, therefore, white-serving, as a yellow woman who saves a white couple from a mixed-race man.

This diegetic hierarchy was registered in the inequitable extradiegetic star system. Despite their comparable screen time, records of the film's estimated production costs indicated that Wong's pay was \$1,800 per week for four and a half weeks, a meager total of \$8,100, or just over one-tenth of Dietrich's pay, and also significantly less than that of Oland and Brook. The cost of Wong's wardrobe totaled \$300, a fraction of Dietrich's \$1,625 glamour.⁴² Translated into their visual appearances, Hui Fei wears a long, plain gray gown with a Chinese-inspired cut and a Mandarin collar in most parts of the film, largely credited to Paramount's leading costume designer, Travis Banton; her unadorned hair is pulled back into a bun, the trademark China-doll bangs slicked into a single tuft on her forehead. Shanghai Lily, on the other hand, dazzles and tantalizes with a luxurious fur wrap, flamboyant feather accessories, and a peekaboo facial veil.

We see how this overdetermined hierarchy could be renegotiated, however, when we refocus on the ways Wong leveraged her service role and her parergon position to shift the show. In so doing, she deflected the white heteronormative temporality and rescripted the film with her own authorship. As described

previously, Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily are both introduced as stigmatized sex workers who are twinned and sequestered in the same car. They differ significantly in how they orient themselves vis-à-vis their surroundings, however. Shanghai Lily is associated with the gramophone player, its immersive music both deflecting irrelevant external scrutiny and inviting desirable attention, similar to her diaphanous facial veil and feather accessories that conceal to reveal, deflect to intrigue. In the film, Shanghai Lily readily shuttles between different spaces and temporalities. We learn about her past romance with Dr. Harvey and her transformation into a “notorious coaster”; and we are cued to desire her re-coupling with Harvey in the future—a unilinear temporal orientation that is crystallized in the wristwatch she buys for Harvey at the end of the film. Shanghai Lily’s self-absorption is ultimately galvanized toward legible white-centered heterosexual economy—the modus operandi of the narrative.

Hui Fei, on the other hand, safeguards her opacity and eventually recedes from the margins into oblivion at the end of the film. Her immersion in *solitaire*, a one-person game, indicates self-sufficiency that fends off any external attention, echoing her initial appearance as an invisible figure behind the palanquin curtain. Her simply cut costumes bespeak a taciturn demeanor. She speaks with curt intensity, and only when spoken to, when aggressed against, or when called upon to translate the Chinese orders (more on this later). At the end of the film, surrounded by Western journalists drawn to her sensational killing of the rebel leader Chang, she summarily dismisses them in her impenetrable Taishanese—“Stop bugging me”—then walks off screen all by herself.⁴³ Her evasion of news-mongering clinches recalcitrant self-absorption. Most importantly, her solitary exit is the polar opposite of what was scripted in Furthman’s October 9 script, in which she was paired off with her “prospective husband, a young Chinese merchant who wears European clothes.” In rejecting the same-race heteronormative coupling, she not only refuses to play the minor replication of Dietrich’s white glamorous reunion with Harvey, but also departs from the anti-miscegenationist heteronormative reproductive order altogether.

Hui Fei’s opacity was performed by Wong in ways that exceeded this supporting character’s utilitarian function. The scene where Hui Fei stabs Chang, for instance, demonstrates explosive intensity that renders its narrative function of ensuring white coupling irrelevant. In this heavily shadowed revenge scene (video 3.3), we watch the stabbing taking place behind a diaphanous drape. With the facial expressions obscured, we are more tuned in to the visceral impact of Wong/Hui Fei’s forceful repeated stabbing, accompanied by her grunting and the sound effect of the dagger plunging into flesh, followed by Chang’s collapse with a loud thud.

Remarkably, contrary to Shanghai Lily and Harvey’s kissing scenes that were either shortened (in Ontario) or eliminated (in Japan) by censors,⁴⁴ Hui Fei’s excessive stabbing on camera, although unnecessary for the narrative purpose,

VIDEO 3.3. Wong, as Hui Fei, engages in a graphic act of stabbing in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.3>



was kept intact. It gives a glimpse into not only Hui Fei's rage, but also Wong's physical and emotional labor in executing this act of killing, not for the perfect look (as her own "perfect" death act analyzed in chapter 1), but for the sheer, shocking pleasure of getting away with it. Indeed, Wong/Hui Fei's apparent relishing in the repeated stabbing accentuates her pleasurable ownership of the dragon lady stereotype, even just for the moment. We may go further to argue that Wong exploited, then shifted, the narrative agenda (of eradicating Chang's racial transgression) to unleash energy that was ateleological and independent of the diegetic premise. This energy bespeaks Wong's performative agency, even from the peripheries of the screen.

We may further unpack Wong's parergon power in what the censorship dialogue script describes as her "Chinese" lines, which she delivered in Taishanese. Throughout the film, Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily both occasionally speak a foreign language (Taishanese and French, respectively), especially when they serve as impromptu interpreters when the train is held up. These occasions lead Hui Fei to translate the rebel soldiers' Cantonese (close to but different from her Taishanese) to English, and Shanghai Lily to translate between French and English for the French major. The two women's bilingual ability suggestively echoes their sexual promiscuity. Their dual defiance of linguistic and sexual purity evokes *traduttore* and *traditore*, Italian words whose similar pronunciations indicate the easy sliding from the translator (*traduttore*) to the traitor (*traditore*).⁴⁵

Despite this similarity, they deploy the foreign language with different implications. Shanghai Lily's translation straightforwardly facilitates communication between Chang the rebel leader and the French major. Hui Fei's Taishanese, however, does not just facilitate communication, but also signals the performativity of the Taishanese and Cantonese situation. A comparison of the October 9, 1931, white script with the January 25, 1932, censorship dialogue script shows the addition of Cantonese/Taishanese lines, possibly added by Wong, who joined the filming on October 12, 1931. In the October 9 script, Hui Fei is to translate Chang's supposedly Chinese orders into English, but she speaks Chinese only on one

occasion (upon receiving a telegram from her potential husband—a detail removed in the film). In the censorship dialogue script, Hui Fei translates only once, and not for Chang. And her Taishanese lines are added in two scenes: at the end of the film when she dismisses the reporters, and in the scene where Chang forces himself into her car to sexually harass her.

In the latter scene, added after the October 9 script, Chang makes advances, speaking in what is supposed to be Chinese, and Hui Fei tenses and asks in English, “What do you want?” Chang then switches to English, “It’s a long journey and a lonely one,” and tries to embrace her. Hui Fei fights loose, orders him in Taishanese to “get lost quickly,” and pushes him out.⁴⁶ Since there is no evidence that a Chinese technical consultant was hired, and Paramount decided not to show the script to the Chinese Embassy,⁴⁷ it is reasonable to speculate that Wong, the only credited performer who knew Chinese, was responsible for creating the Chinese lines and decided to deliver them in her ancestral Taishanese, a variant of Cantonese—the dialect most commonly used among Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth to early twentieth century. These Taishanese and Cantonese lines not only reinforced Hui Fei’s rejection of heterosexual harassment, but also implied Wong’s twofold debunking of Hollywood’s Orientalism and China’s linguistic nationalism.

First, the Taishanese and Cantonese lines exposed Hollywood’s yellowvoice practice “that constructed and evoked orientality in ways perceptible by the ear rather than the eye.”⁴⁸ As the vocal side of the yellowface package, yellowvoice characterized Oland’s impersonation of Chang. Unlike Emile Chautard, a French actor who played the French major for whom *Shanghai Lily* provides translation, Oland was Swedish and could only phonetically and ineffectively imitate some Chinese sounds that may have been taught by Wong herself (given the absence of a Chinese language coach). Thus, what the mainstream English-speaking audience assumed to be an exotic altercation between Hui Fei and Chang was actually more like Wong’s monologue, for Oland’s make-believe yellowvoice was not a language and needed no translation or response. Devoid of communicative function, Wong’s Taishanese became emphatically performative. It outed Hollywood’s vocal-visual racial masquerade that erased real differences by reducing them to exotic—even nonsensical—sounds, looks, and mannerisms.

Furthermore, Wong’s injection of Taishanese-Cantonese into the narrative debunked the Chinese government’s linguistic nationalism. In 1932, roughly coinciding with *Shanghai Express*, China’s Ministry of Education designated Mandarin Chinese the nation’s official language, known as *Guoyu* 國語, literally “the national language.” The goal was to promote linguistic purism so as to reinforce homogenizing nationalism at the expense of regional linguistic diversity. Such linguistic nationalism coincided with the Chinese film industry’s transition from the silent era to the sound era. While some of the early Cantonese talkies achieved great popularity both in China and among diasporic Chinese communities (such as *Baijin long* 白金龍 (The Platinum Dragon), dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1933), China’s

Motion Picture Censorship Committee quickly prohibited Cantonese talkies, describing them as vulgar and inferior in quality. Resistance from Cantonese filmmakers and critics ensued, lasting into the 1940s.⁴⁹

Wong herself highlighted her plan to study Mandarin Chinese during her 1936 China trip. In 1931–32, when *Shanghai Express* was made, she may not have been fully aware of China's surging linguistic nationalism, but likely was cognizant of the perceived inferior status of Cantonese and Taishanese, and of their incongruity with the film's setting on a train from Peking to Shanghai, where either Mandarin Chinese or Shanghainese would be used. Thus, Wong and the uncredited Cantonese-speaking cast not only mobilized their foreign-language abilities, but also underscored the sociopolitical and cultural significance of these southern dialects among Chinese diasporic communities. Such significance powerfully refuted the Chinese government's purist linguistic nationalism.

Wong's function in the film, therefore, was not auxiliary but parergon—that is, the frame that structured the center while also destabilizing the very ideological premise that made the center the center. Wong staked her parergon position literally in the framing device of the film, the opening credit sequence. Stereotypically Orientalist on the surface, the credits are nevertheless reinscribed by Wong. When the white letters appear on the screen, listing scriptwriter Jules Furthman, cinematographer Lee Garmes, and gown designer Travis Banton, we see in the background another layer of inscription—a heavily shadowed sheet of paper on which some Chinese characters are inscribed in black ink, and a woman's hand holding a brush, tracing out more Chinese characters (figure 3.3). This writing hand bears Wong's trademark long nails, confirming her absent presence in this framing sequence.

This act of Chinese inscription evokes the close-up shot of Wong's Chinese autographing in *Piccadilly* (see chapter 1). The key difference is that, in this credit sequence, Wong literally produces the shadowed *background* that sets into relief the bright white English credits in the foreground, mirroring her supporting role for Dietrich. Yet, just as her taciturn but intensely edgy performance shifts the show, her writing in the credit sequence calls attention to itself, for her ideograms do not add up, but rather look like a random assembly of signs that both invite and repel further scrutiny. A closer analysis reveals that Wong's ideograms do not simply indicate chirographic Orientalism, but rather signify her Chinese transcription of the English names based on Taishanese pronunciation. Thus, her Chinese writing is illegible to those who speak only English or Mandarin Chinese; but it addresses those who understand her Taishanese writing/speech, generating a feeling of non-nationalist recognition and connectedness.

By hybridizing the Mandarin Chinese ideogrammatic writing with Taishanese pronunciation into a third method of sign making, Wong creatively renames the scriptwriter, the cinematographer, and the gown designer, thus



FIGURE 3.3. Wong's hand inscribing with a Chinese brush the transliterated Chinese names of the screenwriter, the cinematographer, and the costume designer in the credits sequence of *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932).

symbolically re-authoring the film. Her writing hand in the background and on the left edge of the frame virtually frames the film, emblemizing her parergon position between visibility and invisibility. This amphibious site of authorship structures and queers the center-stage white drama. It also stakes a centrifugal diasporic position that evokes chirographic-vocal Chineseness only to rupture its homogeneity. Dwelling in the margins and intersections, and refusing to align with any hardbound identity markers, Wong leveraged the parergon position to support, only then to ditch, white heteronormativity and Chinese patriarchal linguistic nationalism simultaneously.

If Wong's supporting roles before World War II often mirrored the female protagonist only then to outshine the latter, as in *Mr. Wu* and *Shanghai Express*, this would cease to be the case in her postwar films. Due to her aging and the industry's endless quest for fresh faces, Wong's postwar film roles were invariably middle-aged maids in wealthy white families. Her scenes tend to be brief and glamour-free; still, she managed to score a memorable presence, evoking the "delightful flashes" characterizing her early supporting roles. In the next section, I turn to Wong's two postwar films, *Impact* and *Portrait in Black*, in which her maid roles resemble the television servants that L. S. Kim studies, in that they all operate in the visual peripheries to maintain the white middle-class norm.⁵⁰ I push it further to theorize Wong and her telltale background in two dimensions. The first has to do with Wong's channeling of her real-life diasporic experience to historicize and re-inflect the maid role. The second hinges on her maid character collaborating with a nonhuman actor, the background décor, and the overall set design

to produce an atmosphere that displaces the white female protagonist from her own home.

THE TELLTALE BACKGROUND:
THE “ORIENTAL” MAID, THE IMMIGRATION PHOTO,
AND THE OBJECT-SUBJECTHOOD OF THE ATMOSPHERE

Impact (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1949), a postwar film noir, revolves around an adultery-murder intrigue engineered by a wife with her lover against her dotting husband. The film eventually delivers poetic justice—the wife duly exposed and the husband who has escaped narrow death ready to marry a female garage worker who has nursed him back to health. This resolution becomes possible only after the family’s maid (played by Wong) decides to help retrieve the crucial evidence against the wife.

As the maid driving the narrative, Wong (after more than four years’ “retirement”) received much publicity in the film’s pressbook, which sought to revive and cash in on her “Oriental” appeal (again).⁵¹ The “attractive Chinese star” was described as leading the supporting cast, playing a loyal maid, “an important featured role” “whose testimony at a murder trial adds to the film’s stirring climax.”⁵² Wong’s performance was positively reviewed in *The Hollywood Reporter*, but only to the extent that it added authenticity.⁵³ Interestingly, her prolonged retirement was attributed to the wicked “Oriental meanies” that she rejected, choosing instead to do lectures on Chinese customs and Oriental beauty habits for women’s clubs.⁵⁴ Yet the fundamental reason for Wong’s forced retirement was Hollywood’s discriminatory racism and sexist agism, as Wong made clear in an interview, saying that she was happy doing a film again, “instead of being just a technical advisor as I was during the war years.”⁵⁵ She specifically praised the director: “For once the director Arthur Lubin thought a Chinese could play a Chinese part,” instead of casting a Caucasian actor in yellowface.⁵⁶

If Wong found vindication in this grand comeback, her maid character does not seem to merit too much excitement as yet another service role for the white heteronormative narrative. My interest, however, lies in the pivotal scene where she suddenly leaves the white couple’s house and her immigration photo turns up in the San Francisco Immigration Office and is presented in a close-up shot for the scrutiny of her diegetic searchers who stand in for the film’s audience (figure 3.4). Her diegetic searchers are the female garage worker and the detective who believe that the maid can find the key evidence to clear the husband’s name. Their locating of her immigration photo takes the drama from white San Francisco to labyrinthine Chinatown, where the searchers track her down after a suspenseful chase sequence.⁵⁷

Considering that the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 when the US and China became allies during World War II, allowing a quota of 105 Chinese to



FIGURE 3.4. The maid's (played by Wong) immigration photo, discovered in the San Francisco Immigration Office in *Impact* (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1949).

immigrate to the US each year, *Impact*, released in 1949, was one of the earliest films to dramatize the historical shift of Chinese legal immigration regardless of class background. Diegetically, the maid's gratitude for the husband's good deed for her and her Chinese family seems to hint at his sponsorship for her escape from China, which was embroiled in civil war as the filming was underway. When the film was released in April 1949, the Communist Party was rapidly overpowering the ruling Nationalist Party, and China was to become a socialist country six months later, in October, catalyzing the Cold War era and America's McCarthyism. The maid's immigration to the US with the white man's help at this historical juncture thus signals the upcoming Cold War tension. Unsurprisingly, the film portrays the maid as thankful, hardworking, cooperative, and compliant with the recently implemented immigration laws. Prefiguring the post-1960s East Asian "model minority" stereotype, the maid repays the white man by eventually deciding to work with the court to clear his name, thereby upholding the white family's heterosexual mores and eventually dispelling the noir atmosphere of the film.

All these elements portend a happy picture of new Chinese immigrants being successfully integrated, at the cusp of the Cold War era, to serve and uphold the US white bourgeois and patriarchal system. Yet this future of assimilation through hierarchization is unsettled by Wong the performer-worker, who stamped the domestic worker character with her own photo and signature. The diegetic immigration photo, excavated in the San Francisco Immigration Office, is emphasized visually through a close-up shot *and* sonically with a sudden burst of "Oriental" music that insinuates the alien atmosphere into the alien-controlling bureaucratic office. In the photo, Wong as the maid is framed in a frontal medium close-up, her hair worn in two low side buns, her neck encased by a dark-colored, austere mandarin collar, suggesting the character's working-class background. In addition to the photo and signature, the immigration card carries data—visa issue date, place of issue, and visa number—that serve to surveil Chinese immigrants as data-fied individuals.

The glamour-free photo forms a stark contrast with Wong's interwar glamour shots; more importantly, it ineluctably (even if inadvertently) resurfaces the history of Chinese women's immigration to the US and subsequent struggles in the adopted country. As an American-born Chinese, Wong was technically not an immigrant herself. Still, her life and career were significantly impacted by the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was particularly strict on the immigration of laborers and women. In 1924 the US Border Patrol was created, as an agency within the Department of Labor, to specifically regulate Chinese immigration to the United States across the US-Mexico border. Under these draconian strictures, ethnic Chinese born in the US had to file and obtain approval for Form 430—Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status—prior to their foreign travels, so that they would be allowed to return to the US (figure 3.5). Wong's paperwork for over two decades, starting from 1924, testifies to the long-term repeated labor imposed on all ethnic Chinese to prove their legitimacy to an exclusionary racist system.⁵⁸ In chapter 1, I discuss Wong's Chinese autographs—a form of chirographic Orientalism she reiterated on many occasions, from 430 forms to gifted photos and signatures in films. Similarly, her photos in these legal forms constitute the historical backstory of the domestic worker character's immigration photo in the film, amplifying this ostensibly trivial detail with a haunting past. These documents bear witness to Wong's precarious situation as a racialized freelancer compelled to constantly travel for work opportunities.⁵⁹

To have an immigration-style photo taken for the film, even just for the fictional scenario, could be yet another reminder of her struggles. In other words, Wong's own experience with the exclusionary American society, which long preceded the fictional maid's ability to benefit from the new, post-1943 immigration law, adds a historical backstory to her character, revealing the latter not as a model minority facilitator of the white patriarchal order, but rather as a working-class Chinese woman whose arrival in the postwar US resurfaces the specter of racism and sexism in the long history of US immigration.

Not only did Wong the performer-worker inject the Chinese immigration travails into her newly immigrated domestic-worker character, but her insistent singlehood also calls out her character's queering misfit with the heteronormative narrative. In each Form 430 file, Wong answered "No" to the formulaic question "Have you ever been married?" As I argue in chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter with regard to *Shanghai Express*, Wong's solitary status signals a position that challenges, queers, and exits from white-male-centered heteronormative temporality. In *Impact*, Wong's solitary position similarly adds an ironic spin to her character's service to white patriarchal heteronormativity. Despite her scripted function, the domestic worker's singlehood, redoubled by Wong's lifelong single position, introduces a departure from the norm.

Wong further shapes her character with her own fashion sensibility. She wears floor-length, form-fitting dresses cut in a hybrid style of Chinese qipao and

Form 430 APPLICATION OF ALIENED AMERICAN CITIZEN OF THE CHINESE RACE FOR PREINVESTIGATION OF STATUS DUPLICATE

用所之證憑實立返而外由國美離欲生土為專稟此 稟號貳

Los Angeles, Calif. U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Local file 14036/120 IMMIGRATION SERVICE Los Angeles, Calif.,
December 16, 1935.

To Judson F. Shaw
Officer in Charge, Immigration Service,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Age 30 Height 5 ft. 6 1/2 in.
(in shoes)
Marks mole back of neck;
pit mark on forehead;
small scar inside of
left thumb.

Sir: It being my intention to leave the United States on a temporary visit abroad, departing and returning through the Chinese port of entry of San Pedro, California I hereby apply, under the provisions of Rule 16 of the Chinese Regulations, for preinvestigation of my claimed status as an American citizen, submitting herewith such documentary proofs (if any) as I possess, and agreeing to appear at such time and place as you may designate, and to produce then and there witnesses for oral examination regarding the claim made by me.

This application is submitted in triplicate with my photograph attached to each copy, as required by said rule. (Wong Lew Song)

Respectfully,
Signature in Chinese 王 露 芳
Signature in English Wong Lew Song
Address 2424 Wilshire Blvd
Los Angeles, Calif.

相 簽 詢 委 亦 憑 國 九 而 來 人 遊 欲 委 管
三 名 問 員 親 據 出 款 回 亦 出 外 暫 員 理
屬 稟 口 之 與 呈 世 之 茲 即 埠 入 邦 離 知 外
上 供 公 證 上 所 例 依 由 而 之 今 美 之 人
並 照 辦 人 查 有 在 三 談 去 港 由 國 我 入
附 例 房 到 驗 之 美 十 埠 將 華 出 現 口

船落可方稟號查回換房辦公委員委口入人外理管到親要先之船落未稟此

La Angeles, Calif
Jan. 2, 1936

This application having been approved, this duplicate is delivered to the applicant (with appropriate indorsement written across the margin of the photograph), who must exchange it at the office of the immigration officer in charge at the port of departure for the original.

THIS DUPLICATE IS OF NO VALUE FURTHER THAN TO IDENTIFY THE HOLDER AS THE PERSON WHOSE STATUS HAS BEEN INVESTIGATED.

DEPARTED
S. S. " San Hoover + by Boyd N. Reynolds
14-72 JAN 27 1936
Raymond M. Long
Inspector in Charge, Immigration Service, Los Angeles, Calif.

FIGURE 3.5. Wong's photo and signature on Form 430, dated January 2, 1936, for her trip to China (the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files Folder 17-10457, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Riverside, CA).

Western gown, which underscores her sleek elegance, evoking her costuming in *Daughter of Shanghai* and *Dangerous to Know*, and departing from the conventional simple outfit befitting a domestic worker (as suggested in the immigration photo). After leaving the white family, she wears an elaborate Chinese-style jacket in her uncle's house, and later, in the courtroom, a form-fitting Western suit dress matched with a broad-brimmed hat, high-heel pumps, and trendy cat-eye shades. Interestingly, she wore the same type of cat-eye shades when arriving at New York's LaGuardia Airport in 1951, presumably to star in her own TV series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*.⁶⁰ By overlaying her own fashion sensibility on her character, Wong distances her portrayal from that of a real-life domestic worker.

From her pareragon position, Wong stamps her character with her signature imprint, including her immigration travails, deviance from heteronormativity, and sartorial performance. As a result, the diegetically restored white bourgeois

domestic order, buttressed by the postwar assimilation of new immigrant laborers, stands exposed as no more than a fantasy predicated upon continuous race-gender hierarchization.

Now I turn to Wong's housekeeper role in yet another comeback film, *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960), to rack the focus further into the background and the margins. Here Wong enacts a housekeeper who occasionally flits across the background as part of the ornamental and mysterious atmosphere of the film. Just as the atmosphere is invisible yet permeating and indispensable, so are the "atmospheric" extras and supporting actors. If the setting of *Impact* was changed from New York and Los Angeles to San Francisco to avoid bad weather and heavy smog, Wong's background housekeeper in *Portrait in Black* shows that the diegetic "atmosphere" she conjures is as important as the literal environmental conditions.

A Lana Turner vehicle shot in Eastmancolor on location (again) in San Francisco, *Portrait in Black* resembles *Impact* in reiterating the adultery-murder intrigue, but without the happy ending of heteronormative recoupling. In *Portrait*, the San Francisco shipping mogul's wife (Turner) schemes with her lover, her family doctor (Anthony Quinn), to kill her invalid wealthy husband at the beginning of the film. Instead of consummating their affair, however, the adulterous couple are haunted by a string of blackmail letters—each congratulating her on the success of the first "murder" (of her husband), then of the "second venture" (killing her husband's assistant)—until things spiral out of control, ending in the frenzied doctor plummeting from her upstairs window to his death.

Portrait in Black turned out to be Wong's big-screen swan song; she died prematurely the following year. Publicity and reviews rehearsed Wong's perennial dilemma of being simultaneously hyped and dismissed for her "Oriental" mystique. To exploit Wong's comeback after another prolonged absence from the big screen, publicity erased her previous comeback in *Impact*, touting *Portrait* as her return for "one of the top roles" after seventeen years' "vacation" following *Lady from Chungking* (1942).⁶¹ The caption for a December 15, 1959, publicity photo swooned over Wong's unchanged beauty, describing her role in *Portrait* as the "woman of mystery" "as usual."⁶² Wong's niche appeal led to her two-week, seven-city film tour, along with Lana Turner and producer Ross Hunter, starting in New York and culminating in the film's Chicago world premiere.

Paradoxically, Wong's much-publicized "mystery" easily flipped into tongue-in-cheek reception. One reviewer dismissed her performance as "merely inscrutable as the suspicious housekeeper," and her "mysterious" demeanor suggested that she could "keep her own counsel as easily as a Buddha figurine."⁶³ Indeed, her character was compared to the "inscrutable East" by another minor character in the film, and her words to mere "fortune cookie" messages. Not only clichéd, Wong's role as the aged housekeeper was also very limited and easily missed. Like the maid in *Impact* who is a postwar immigrant laborer, the housekeeper in *Portrait* is also brought to the US from Hong Kong as a servant by the

shipping mogul. But she no longer serves a narrative function; and her presence is relegated to flitting across the background executing mundane duties, with only occasional expressive scenes.

Such flitting appearances evoke exactly what Mary Flanagan recalled in her family anecdote cited in the first section of this chapter, regarding her father's excited spotting of Wong scurrying across the background in an "oldie" aired on television in late-1970s Iran. The father's excitement of being surprised by his memory of another time (the past), another place (the US), and another medium (film), all channeled by the spectral Wong, starkly contrasts with Mary's utter befuddlement. As if anticipating the intergenerational gap, the film's publicity sought to win the young postwar filmgoers by evoking the nostalgia of their "mothers and fathers" for Wong, the "first and best of the Oriental beauties."⁶⁴

Yet Wong's significance far exceeded the white audience's phantasmic attachment to a largely forgotten "Oriental" icon that was re-commercialized for the Cold War-era entertainment industry. At the production level, Wong's housekeeper in *Portrait* is especially meaningful in comparison with another Universal-International production, the much better-known *Imitation of Life* (dir. Douglas Sirk, 1959). Both films were produced by Hunter and starred Turner, supported by Sandra Dee as her daughter. They also shared the costume designer Jean Louis, borrowed from Columbia, the director of photography Russell Metty, and the composer Frank Skinner. Most important for my analysis is that both films feature a housekeeper/maid of color, but of different "colors"—the African American Juanita Moore in *Imitation* and Wong in *Portrait*. The mirroring of Moore and Wong is especially poignant, considering that Wong's role was a new addition in the film adaptation of the original stage play. Producer Hunter decided to change the character of a butler to an "Oriental housekeeper" because "I hate mysteries in which somebody has a chance to say 'The Butler did it!'"⁶⁵ Wong's "Oriental housekeeper," therefore, carries the dual valence of gender and racial makeover from the male butler in the mystery-suspense genre and from the Black housekeeper in *Imitation of Life*. Additionally, Wong's housekeeper in *Portrait* grows from her own character repertoire of maids and hostess-mistresses throughout her career.

In view of this layered backstory and the noir narrative, Wong's housekeeper sets out to problematize the white drama from the paragon position; and she does so precisely by working *with* the background and contributing to the atmosphere. The term *atmosphere* designates the mood conjured by the set design; but it was also used by Hollywood studios in the first half of the twentieth century to refer to extras (oftentimes nonwhite) who were recruited to enhance the "authentic" exotic setting for a white-centered film. This Hollywood usage suggests that the extras and minor performers were treated as inert quasi-objects or props who simply existed, without much activity or agency.

Countering the studio practice of thing-ifying the Other, the minimally paid and non-individuated "atmospheric" extras and typecast supporting actors



VIDEO 3.4. Wong, as the housekeeper, silently flits across the middle ground in *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.4>



revalorize their thingness by collectively conjuring the environment that enables, enlivens, and sometimes destabilizes the central drama. In *Portrait*, Wong's housekeeper shuttles between the drama and the atmosphere, dwelling in intermediary zones such as the mansion's grandiose doorway, a staircase, and a wall-phone area. From this mediatory zone, the housekeeper connects the interior and the exterior, the upstairs and the downstairs, the background and the foreground, confounding the naturalized hierarchy between the object and the subject. Animated by her shuttling movements, the objecthood of the doorway, the staircase, the wall phone, and the rest of the set design all intervene in the white human drama, recasting it as being constituted *and* de-constituted by its environs.

Wong's very first appearance in the film encapsulates her pivotal mediatory role even as an apparent walking prop. As Lana Turner's wife converses with her husband's assistant in the foreground, we see Wong's housekeeper silently floating across the screen from left to right in the middle ground to answer the door off screen (video 3.4). Two things stand out in this short scene. First, Wong's housekeeper is the only moving character in this static scene; her spectral flitting across the screen momentarily redirects audience attention from the conversation in the foreground to her character's intermediary middle ground. This effect is impactful due to the shallow focus that compresses the spatial layers, rendering them almost interpenetrable. Second, the figure of the housekeeper, clad in a simple loose-fitting black jacket matched with her black hair, starkly contrasts with the bright color schemes of the background and the foreground, the former consisting of yellow carpeted stairs and the elaborate white metalwork of the staircase rail, and the latter featuring Turner's character encased in a light green brocade gown with a tight bodice mimicking the qipao style. Sandwiched between the Eastmancolor-enhanced foreground and background, Wong's housekeeper evokes the black-and-white era anachronistically inserted into the 1960 film technology. Thus, Wong's onscreen



FIGURE 3.6. Asian décor (the porcelain figurine, the painting on the back wall) “misplaced” in the Western-style bedroom. Frame enlargement from *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

appearance is both silently passé and obtrusively present. Such out-of-time-and-placeness, or what I have theorized as “anachronotope,” reshuffles the temporal and the spatial ordering, disorienting the diegetic central drama.

As the film unfolds, we see how the anachronotopic Wong/housekeeper installed in an opulent white family actively collaborates with the set design and a nonhuman actor to create an “atmosphere” that slowly destabilizes the guilt-ridden widow (Turner) in her own home environment. The film’s much-publicized, luxurious set design includes the mansion, its furnishings, and Turner’s and Dee’s gowns and multimillion-dollar jewelry on loan from David Webb. Art dealer Martin Lowitz’s gallery was credited for providing oil paintings, especially those covering the walls of the doctor’s apartment. What was not mentioned in the publicity or the film credits, and yet became conspicuous in the film’s *mise-en-scène*, was the omnipresent Asian décor in the mansion, including paintings of different styles, figurines, and Buddha sculptures.

(Faux) Asian décors have commonly been featured in Hollywood productions set in an Asian location or enclave. In analyzing *The Cheat* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1915), starring Sessue Hayakawa as an art collector,⁶⁶ Daisuke Miyao argues that “Japanese taste” in combination with European Japonisme reshaped white American middle-class consumption, such that “the collection of Asian art was an integral part of these [white] women’s assertions of their social positions both as cultural leaders and as New Women.”⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, *The Cheat* exploits Japonisme while presenting a cautionary tale against American New Women’s overconsumption of “Oriental” decadence. *Portrait in Black*, however, offers no justification for such a heavily “Orientalized” set design, except for a tangential mention of the shipping-tycoon husband’s business with Hong Kong. We may easily dismiss the heavy use of Asian décor as Orientalism that backfired, since it clashed with the Western architectural style and furnishings (figure 3.6). Yet Wong’s forceful mediatory performance suggests that she, as the housekeeper, synergizes with



VIDEO 3.5. Wong, as the housekeeper, performs with the Siamese cat to undermine the authority of Lana Turner as the wealthy widow in *Portrait in Black* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.5>



the Asian décor to reinforce the misplaced “Oriental atmosphere,” which dissolves the intended dramatic illusion and eventually unravels the white drama. Culminating her collaboration with the Asian décor is her pivotal scene with a Siamese cat, which literally dethrones Turner’s wealthy widow from her own home space.

In this scene (video 3.5), Turner’s widow hears a noise in her recently murdered husband’s bedroom, then finds his hospital bed being raised inexplicably. Shrouded in heavy shadows, she is circling up to the bed when the husband’s cat, Rajah, suddenly jumps onto the pillow on the left; a cut to the cat’s front shows him growling at the wincing widow, who picks him up in fear and hurries to put him out of the bedroom door, her image now literally ensnared in the giant shadows of the elaborate metalwork of the stair rail. Footsteps off screen follow, triggering her high-angle perspectival shot of Wong the housekeeper appearing like an apparition far down at the foot of the stairs, her face and body cast in heavy shadows by the back lighting. A medium close-up framing then shows her wearing a heavily embroidered gown with a large jade decoration at the neck, drastically different from the simple black outfit she wears in the rest of the film and reminiscent of the imperial gown she wore in her Broadway play *On the Spot* (see chapter 2). Wong’s half shadowed face and sudden appearance suggest kinship with the Siamese cat. The white embroidery on the dark ground of her gown also matches the cat’s coat. Furthermore, Wong as the housekeeper affectionately cuddles Rajah, who runs downstairs to her, in contrast to the Turner character’s paranoia.

Interestingly, when Rajah runs downstairs, an over-shoulder shot from the housekeeper’s perspective shows a large white relief sculpture on the background wall upstairs right in the center, literally pushing Turner’s character to frame left, where her white-gowned body is absorbed into the white background. The relief



FIGURE 3.7. Wong in costume, holding the Siamese cat, in the *Portrait in Black* pressbook.



FIGURE 3.8. Wong in costume, holding the Siamese cat from *Portrait in Black*, in *Time* magazine (June 20, 1960).

sculpture depicts a horse with a raised hoof facing a giant Asian-style vase containing a large bouquet of plum flowers that fill the top part of the sculpture. The composition of this shot highlights the affinity between Wong the regally costumed housekeeper, the white Asian décor, and the exotic Siamese cat actor, who together construe an alien and alienating “atmosphere” that sends Turner’s character fleeing into her bedroom. Unsurprisingly, this sequence that reorients (and re-Orients) the environment signals the very first implicit indictment of the widow’s guilt for her husband’s death.

It is noteworthy that the Siamese cat was treated as a veritable actor, whose casting was publicized on December 7, 1959. Producer Hunter described the ideal cat candidate as “a dramatic actor, sort of a four-footed Marlon Brando,” not “a comic” like Rhubarb;⁶⁸ and the cat’s first qualification was to “know how to manipulate the controls of an electrically operated hospital bed.”⁶⁹ Two weeks later, another piece of publicity (dated December 21, 1959) broadcasted Turner’s cat phobia—her “toughest scene in the film: merely had to enter a room, pick up a Siamese cat from a bed, carry it to the hall and drop it. She not only has a phobia about cats, she is also allergic to them.” Contrary to Turner’s feline phobia, Wong’s natural ease with the Siamese cat was widely publicized. Two photos, in the film’s pressbook and in *Time* magazine, depicted her in character cuddling the cat; she was dressed in the imperial gown and the housekeeper outfit, respectively, posing in front of two Asian paintings used in the film (figures 3.7 and 3.8). In the pressbook, the

Wong-and-cat photo (with Wong in the gown) was used to suggest a pet supplies tie-in. Such publicity undoubtedly exploited the film's "Oriental" mystery, enacted by Wong *and* by the Siamese cat.

Publicity stunts aside, Wong's collaboration with the fictional Rajah most certainly benefited from her real-life companionship with a Siamese cat named Bu-Bu, whom she inherited in 1952; and she jocularly talked about making him live the "Wong way."⁷⁰ Two years later, she described Bu-Bu as a "character cat full of surprises" who was "almost human and scares me sometimes."⁷¹ Wong's playful coinage "character cat" prefigured Hunter's search for a cat who was a "dramatic actor" *and* anticipated her own postwar self-refashioning as a "character actress" for television (more on this in the next section). While there is no evidence that Bu-Bu played Rajah in this film, Wong did write about the bliss of getting to collapse in her own garden accompanied by "the birds, bees and the cat" after returning from her publicity tour for *Portrait in Black*.⁷² And her companionship with Bu-Bu (and another cat, Smokey) undoubtedly facilitated her easy collaboration with Rajah in constructing the "Oriental" mystique and claiming authority in the white domestic space, with the effect of displacing the white-centered narrative of guilt and paranoia.⁷³

Wong's collaborative performance with other-than-human elements in the margins and the background of *Portrait* enabled her to carve out a parergon-based yet pervasive atmosphere that worked to upend the central drama. In the next section, I explore how Wong rebegan (again) via the new medium of television, giving yet another iteration of the "Oriental" maid, this time supporting Barbara Stanwyck's American expatriate character in the NBC series *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (September 1960–September 1961). Wong's maid in the episode "Dragon by the Tail," aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961, turned out to be her last performance; she passed away on February 3. As if following Bu-Bu the "character cat full of surprises," Wong refashioned herself as a character actress for the new medium of television. It is as a parergon character actress that she mounted a counter-discourse to the Cold War US patriotism advocated in her *Barbara Stanwyck Show* episode.

THE CHARACTER ACTRESS REBEGAN ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Wong refashioned herself as a character actress for television while rehearsing for her amah/maid role in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. At the same time, she was also doing two TV stints in 1959, making guest appearances in "The Lady from South Chicago" (dir. Paul Stanley; aired November 2) and "Mission to Manila" (dir. Bernard Girard; aired November 23), two episodes of the TV series *Adventures in Paradise*, produced by 20th Century Fox Television and broadcast on ABC.⁷⁴ Wong was pleased when the series' producer praised her for adding "a needed exotic and

colorful touch” and invited her to do more. Aside from improved job prospects suggesting her successful transition to TV, one wonders what Wong might find satisfactory in doing these add-on Orientalist touches. The answer could be her conscious transformation into a character actress around this time. In an October 1959 letter, she described the character part as “most interesting as it calls on one’s imagination and *does need much work by oneself to orient oneself* in that character to feel at home.”⁷⁵ Just over a month later, she formally announced her “transition” from “leading roles to character parts,” including roles in television shows, “even Westerns like ‘Wyatt Earp’—and I find character roles are more fun.”⁷⁶

Film historian David Lazar identifies two types of Hollywood character actors—those who “brought an indelible character with them from film to film, so [they] could make an impression quickly, . . . simply . . . by appearing” and those whose “essential personality was effaced as they disappeared into each new role.”⁷⁷ Wong’s performance as a character actress went beyond these two poles. Evoking her comment on Bu-Bu the “character cat” being “almost human”—that is, out of the feline character⁷⁸—I understand her performance as going out of character by applying “imagination” and “much work.” In other words, she solidified her signature performances by rerouting the minor stock roles with layered race-gender negotiations. By disidentifying from and resignifying the phantasmic Oriental roles, she could, paradoxically, “feel at home” with them. Wong’s excitement as a character actress stemmed precisely from the ability to imaginatively recreate the ornamental add-on roles, and furthermore to shift the central narrative by leveraging her parergon position.

Notably, Wong’s transformation into a character actress came after a series of efforts to transition to the bustling television industry. She was the first Asian American to have her own series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (dir. William Marceau, 1951), produced by DuMont Television Network, which also made her the first female lead on television.⁷⁹ A *New York Herald Tribune* reporter stated that “the exotic actress” hoped to use “her own television program” “to blaze a trail in this medium for members of her race as she did in motion pictures.”⁸⁰ Named after her Chinese name, the show featured Wong as an Oriental antique dealer doubling as a detective, whom she described as “a good girl against bad men,” “a combination of ‘The Daughter of Fu Manchū,’ ‘The Daughter of Shanghai’ and ‘The Daughter of Dragon.’”⁸¹ Considered unsuccessful and severely panned for poor production, the show folded after just one season, which comprised ten episodes aired between August 27 and November 21, 1951. One reviewer rehashed the British criticism of Wong’s vocal acting in *The Circle of Chalk* from more than two decades earlier, disparaging her “Americanese” as unbecoming to her Oriental role.⁸² Such entrenched Orientalism indicated precisely how Wong continually defied pigeonholing across time and media forms.

Despite the truncated TV show, Wong took advantage of this opportunity to “learn TV the hard way.”⁸³ Adjusting to the less glamorous TV production set, she preferred that television shows be filmed (instead of transmitted live), for “it gives an artist an opportunity to correct any fluffs and the lighting will be more effective than the crude lighting that live shows permit.”⁸⁴ She also realized that “whether we like it or not, television is here to stay,” as she witnessed many film studios in Los Angeles switching to making films exclusively for television broadcasting.⁸⁵ Two months after telling Fania Marinoff about Los Angeles studios’ switchover, she had successful meetings with television agencies in Los Angeles, and hoped to do a mystery TV series on film, with a preliminary plan of doing three half-hour shows in one week, which, she wrote, would not leave much time for retakes, but at least would offer more effective lighting, especially for a mystery series.⁸⁶ This plan did not materialize; nor did the two offers she received in late 1952—to be mistress of ceremonies for a TV series showing old-time Chinese mystery films, and to play the “maid companion” to Ginger Rogers in a Paramount film.⁸⁷

In 1953, Wong continued to search for work in television. She admitted to catching “televisionitis”—that is, becoming glued to the set and getting lazy, after finally acquiring a TV set.⁸⁸ She also drew inspiration from Tallulah Bankhead, who experienced “television christening” after claiming that “television has no father” in *The Big Show* on radio. Bankhead sensationalized her resolve as “hav[ing] the tiger by the tail,” so she “must carry on or perish.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Wong decided to “take the bull by the horns”—that is, to continue reaching out to those who were “contemplating Oriental production or productions with Oriental characters.”⁹⁰ That Wong’s job prospects were limited to “Orient”-related projects indicated the structural uneven ground for her in comparison to Bankhead. While they both enjoyed cross-Atlantic celebrity at their prime, Bankhead was wooed by radio, theater, and television, enabling her to accomplish a notable post-film performance career. Wong, on the other hand, had to proactively seek out radio and television opportunities, which, when materialized, were sporadic and marginal, replaying her film career of disappearances and multiple rebeginnings.

Unlike Bankhead, who could choose to accept television as “another taunt, another challenge” and to ride on “the wheels of progress,” Wong—a racialized, aging, and now asexualized freelance performer-worker—could not jump on the bandwagon of media technological progress or readily benefit from it. Her criticism of live television shows’ technical inferiority and witty coinage of “televisionitis” indicated her reservations about the new medium. Thus, her venture into television is best understood as the necessity to survive in white- and male-centric showbiz and to remain financially solvent by rising to the occasion, just as she had managed to transition to the talkie era and variegated stage performance genres earlier in her career.⁹¹ Her effort to “carry on,” therefore, was not the diametrical opposite of “perishing,” as it was for Bankhead, but rather a sliding of the scale.

Wong's efforts yielded some TV appearances in the mid- to late 1950s, including in *The Letter* (dir. William Wyler, 1956), adapted from a short story by Somerset Maugham; "The Chinese Game" (dir. Buzz Kulik, 1956), an episode of the CBS series *Climax*; and "The Deadly Tattoo" (dir. Paul Nickell, 1958), again for *Climax*. In January 1959, she was offered a "recurring part through a 26 week series," but was disappointed that "they want my name more than what dramatics I can offer."⁹² It was in late 1959, after doing the two aforementioned episodes of *Adventures in Paradise*, that she expressed excitement and explicitly repositioned herself as a character actress.

Commenting on Wong's "Asian/American femme beauty" on television, Danielle Seid points out its intimate intertwinement with "legacies of racial-sexual stereotype," and its effect of "smooth[ing] over the contradictions of an increasingly multicultural U.S. empire."⁹³ More specifically, Seid argues that Wong's self-making entrepreneurial resourcefulness, reflected in her authoritative matriarchal characters in *Adventures in Paradise* and *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, could be coopted to construct the Cold War-era Asian American model minority image, thus playing into America's neoliberal multiculturalism, even as it enabled "Asian/American women's gendered and sexual citizenship."⁹⁴

This argument accurately captures Wong's TV characters' *function* in the scripted narratives, which catered to conservative, white American middle-class family values. Yet if we refocus on what Wong brought to the table (rather than what she was scripted to do), and how her television performance added to her long career of strategic race-gender performances, we can gain a better understanding of Wong's reworking of her televisual "character parts" through imagination and labor. Wong's self-repositioning as a character actress at the end of 1959 came at the very end of her life-career and right on the brink of the codification of the hybridized Asian American identity. It powerfully encapsulated her lifelong de-essentializing critique of national borderlines and patriarchal ethno-nationalism, both of which underwent further entrenchment on both sides of the bamboo curtain during the Cold War era.

Wong's end-of-life performance as a character actress was also particularly poignant as her youthful visage transformed into a weathered flesh-and-bone landscape, one that was sculpted by labor, stress, disappointment, and resilience across time and space—all congealed in superimposition. This aging and weathered body had become an archive that telescoped her character types, acting skills, reiterative signature performances, and episodic disappearances and rebeginnings. Her end-of-life performances show how corporeal enunciations, historical and geopolitical forces, and performative agency and practices exert pressure upon each other. Her last performance, in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*—a reenactment of the "Oriental" maid in Hong Kong, the interstice between the Cold War rivals—throws into relief precisely how she bodily occupied and animated the parergon position on the small screen to counter Cold War ideology.⁹⁵

Wong played the Hong Kong maid, or “amah,” in footage used in both the unaired pilot of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*, titled “Hong Kong and Little Joe” (dir. Richard Whorf, 1960), and the episode “Dragon by the Tail” (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired Jan. 30, 1961). Production records indicate that she worked at two different times: rehearsing on November 10 and shooting from November 11 to 13 in 1959, and rehearsing and shooting again on September 23 and 26, 1960. The 1959 footage shot for “Hong Kong and Little Joe” was later transformed into “Dragon by the Tail,” adding footage shot in September 1960.⁹⁶ The morphing of “Hong Kong and Little Joe” into “Dragon by the Tail” incorporated feature-film elements in response to the emerging TV economies of scale (such as the larger and better-quality TV screens opening up the medium to a richer, wider-shot feel).⁹⁷ In the context of my analysis, the transformation foregrounded Cold War propaganda in “Dragon by the Tail,” which led to significant changes in Wong’s performance.

Both the unaired pilot and the episode are set in Hong Kong, a British colony, and Macau, a Portuguese colony—the East Asian playgrounds of Little Joe (Barbara Stanwyck), a Chinese-born American woman known for her scandalous career as a gambler and trader in “everything except her American passport.”⁹⁸ They both contain the narrative of Little Joe cheating in a Macau casino for quick funds to rescue an American ship captain captured by Red China. The framings of the narrative, however, are completely different. In the unaired pilot, Little Joe’s rescue act is purely an “affair of the heart,” which only leads her to realize that the captain is stringing her along for her money, with no intention to marry her. It ends on an ambivalent semi-romantic note, with Wong’s amah introducing Mr. Takamoto, who presents Little Joe with the gift of a pearl necklace. In “Dragon by the Tail,” however, Josephine Little (previously known as Little Joe) begins her rescue act as a half-minded effort to help the American government, since the captain was captured while trying to deliver a Chinese American scientist out of Red China. But she ends up a fully converted patriot, giving an impassioned lecture on American loyalty in the face of Red China’s threat. Stanwyck reportedly extemporized the patriotic speech, which left her in tears, leading House Un-American Activities Committee chairman Francis E. Walter to endorse “Dragon by the Tail” as an “encouraging, heart-warming and inspiring” entertainment. Stanwyck was praised for being “an American patriot speaking from her heart” and fighting back against the “red move” in the entertainment industry.⁹⁹

My focus, however, is on the flip side of Cold War indoctrination, as embodied by Wong’s paragon killjoy amah, who queers and questions the delusions ranging from Little Joe’s heterosexual fantasy to Josephine Little’s loyalty declaration. Her killjoy affect stemmed from the specific sociohistorical status of the “amah” character, unlike the fantastical Orientalist “maid” types Wong enacted in her early career, and more grounded than her postwar new-immigrant maid characters in *Impact* and *Portrait in Black*. The word *amah* refers to a specific social sector of female domestic workers who were part of the expanding population of Chinese working-class women in postwar Hong Kong. Many of the amahs fled from



VIDEO 3.6. Wong, as an amah working for Barbara Stanwyck/Little Joe, intervenes in the latter's decision-making in "Dragon by the Tail," an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961).

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politically turbulent and famine-stricken mainland China in the late 1950s to early 1960s to find work in Hong Kong, which was experiencing its first postwar economic takeoff, thanks to its opportune position as the most important trading port in the Far East (since mainland China had closed itself off to the capitalist world). Amahs were live-in maids who typically remained single and provided for their families in mainland China. The single migrant amahs residing in their employers' homes raised a host of issues, including class disparity intertwined with intimacy, the domestic workers' wages and degree of independence, their precarious (il)legal status, their gendered labor, their aging and care, and the ways they reshaped the family and kin structure of China.¹⁰⁰ The *Barbara Stanwyck Show* episodes only tangentially incorporated this postwar phenomenon of live-in female domestics, offering barebone scripting of the amah as "of an indeterminate age and wear[ing] the single braid down her back signifying her unmarried state."¹⁰¹ Wong's authoritative enactment, however, delivered an aging yet outspoken amah with gusto, mocking the script's description of her as Little Joe's "faithful Chinese amah."¹⁰²

In the pilot and the episode, Wong's amah ostensibly follows Stanwyck's character closely, promptly offering a cigarette or carrying her stuff. Yet, similar to the mimicking maid in *Mr. Wu*—who actively mediates, even ventriloquizes, her mistress's feelings—the amah turns out to be an uninhibited killjoy. Her interceptive authority is conveyed in the ways she delivers the lines and also visually anchors some key scenes, from the margins and the background. This is illustrated in two scenes that are largely identical in the pilot and the episode. In the first scene (video 3.6), Little Joe visits an effeminate Chinese quasi-spy (played by Philip Ahn) to seek help in rescuing the American captain captured by Red China. Wong's amah follows Little Joe into the room and is quickly framed out. As Little Joe expresses her desire to rescue the captain, a cutaway shot brings the amah into the center foreground, her eyes dramatically rolling, displaying sarcastic disapproval of her mistress's foolish sense of duty prompted by her American identity. A few moments later, she jumps into the frame, speaking loudly and trying physically to stop Little Joe from risking her life to raise the money needed for the rescue.

VIDEO 3.7. Wong as the amah anchors the gambling scene in “Dragon by the Tail,” an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, aired at 10 p.m. on January 30, 1961).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.3.7>



In the second scene (video 3.7), Little Joe cheats at a card game in Macau to obtain the rescue funds. With Little Joe seated at the table in the foreground, the camera frames Wong’s amah squarely in the center, albeit in the background, so that we see her anxious facial expressions in reaction to her mistress’s every move. This is accentuated by a cutaway shot to a medium close-up framing of her reacting with increasing anxiety following the previous close-up shot of Little Joe’s hand surreptitiously swapping out a card. Thus, the impact of Little Joe’s action is mediated to the audience through her knowing amah’s facial expressions, as the other card players are kept in the dark. In both scenes, Wong’s amah begins as an unobtrusive marginal or erased presence; but she either anchors the frame from the background or abruptly jumps into the foreground, augmenting or interrupting the central drama through vivacious vocal-visual acting.

Ultimately, in both “Hong Kong and Little Joe” and “Dragon by the Tail,” Wong’s amah exceeds her servant status to forcefully deconstruct the central narrative. In “Hong Kong and Little Joe,” she deflates Little Joe’s hetero-romantic fantasy by mocking the latter’s self-delusional trust in the swindling American captain. Considering Wong’s signature subversion of self-sacrificial “Oriental” femininity, her amah’s chastisement of Little Joe’s passivity in the heterosexual relationship registers her unreserved outcry against the sexist construct of the pining, vulnerable female type. In “Dragon by the Tail,” as the central narrative switches from patriarchal hetero-romance to American patriotism, Wong’s amah turns to protest against Cold War indoctrination by repeatedly trying to stop Josephine Little from taking risks for “a country you don’t even live in.” While she has fewer lines and scenes in “Dragon by the Tail” than in “Hong Kong and Little Joe,” Wong’s amah seizes every opportunity to assert her presence and dissent from her mistress’s views. In a scene added to “Dragon by the Tail,” Wong’s amah and Stanwyck’s Josephine Little are positioned at a window against a panoramic backdrop representing a bay view in Hong Kong. They each occupy half a screen, Josephine Little seated on the left, the amah standing on the right, pacing with agitation, loudly urging her mistress to flee with the money instead of further “risking your life for



FIGURE 3.9. Wong as the amah, taking up an authoritarian position vis-à-vis Stanwyck's Josephine Little in "Dragon by the Tail" (dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1961), an episode of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (frame enlargement).

your country" (figure 3.9). Here Wong/amah takes up space as her mistress's equal, even an authoritative counselor, although she is excluded at the end for Stanwyck/Little's loyalty speech to be valid.

Wong/amah's dissent from patriarchal nationalism, Cold War politics, and the heteronormative fantasy makes her a quasi-anarchist killjoy. Enacting the Hong Kong amah dwelling in the margins of the screen and the interstice of the Cold War empires, Wong propels intense enunciation, a piercing gaze, sarcastic facial expressions, and a critical stance. Four decades after her screen debut as an extra lost in one hundred fungible Chinese girls in the Alla Nazimova vehicle *The Red Lantern*, Wong seems to have circled back to her first "breakthrough"—that is, to "play a servant"—"No longer the hundredth, the two-hundredth. . . . No, the first, the only Chinese in the scene."¹⁰³ From this early-career excitement at playing the No. 1 servant to her end-of-career self-positioning as a character actress who exercised "imagination" and hard work to "feel at home" with "character parts,"¹⁰⁴ Wong crafted a method of dis-identificatory and critical enactment of the maid roles. This method turns upon *corporeal* positioning—that is, orienting her body toward these roles, putting them on but not merging with them, reshaping them with her own sociopolitical experiences. In so doing, her body became a palimpsest screen and an archive that rehearsed, explored, and (re)assembled strategies of leveraging the parergon position to both construct and challenge the presumptive seat of authority at center stage. This is also how, as a supporting performer-worker, she shifted the show, redistributed agency, and reshuffled the sociopolitical hierarchy.

In the next chapter, I further rack the focus to study how Wong navigated exclusion when she lost “Chinese” roles to white actresses, turning these forced disappearances into new possibilities of visibility, and visibility *on different terms*. These instances exceed the victim discourse to demonstrate Wong’s labor and strategies of living with and weathering through precarity while retraining to carry on a life-career that was significantly episodic.