

The Show Must Go On—in Episodes

(Now You See Her, Now You Don't)

I have been very busy getting settled and running back and forth to the M.G.M. studio. Have made two tests for the "Lotus" part. From all appearances Miss Rainer is definitely set for the part of Olan. No use bucking up against a stone wall. Practically, every one [sic], including my friends, seems to feel that I should take the Lotus part "if there is lots of money in it."

—ANNA MAY WONG

In the letter to Fania Marinoff quoted above, Wong narrated her latest efforts and frustrations. These included the busy-ness of lobbying for the role of the female protagonist, O-lan, in MGM's mega-production *The Good Earth* (adapted from Pearl S. Buck's best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, published in 1931); her frustration at being relegated to testing for the concubine role, Lotus; and her bitter resignation with the "stone wall" of white Hollywood that barred her way, instead casting the German-born Luise Rainer as the female lead. Rainer would go on to earn an Academy Award for her yellowface performance of O-lan, her second Best Actress Oscar in a row.

Although the casting of *The Good Earth* was not Wong's first or last experience of being passed over in favor of a white actress, it has come down in history as one of the most scandalous illustrations of Hollywood's exclusionism. It was also undoubtedly a watershed event in Wong's life-career that directly triggered her 1936 China trip and significantly transformed her screen personae. This chapter argues that Wong's exclusion did not make her a mere helpless victim of the system; rather, her agency found expression despite invisibilization. She actively negotiated with MGM, a major Hollywood studio, and then strove to regroup after being rejected. Through her China trip and her subsequent *claim* on her modern Chinese identity, she made a bid for spokesperson status for contemporary China,

especially Chinese femininity, in competition with MGM's *The Good Earth*. Not only defying Hollywood's racism, she also questioned the Chinese government's dismissive rejection of the working-class Chinese diasporic communities from which she came. Her assertive claim as a spokesperson for modern, nationalist China went in tandem with her ironic subversion of China's patriarchal ethno-nationalism, reinforcing her interstitial position that was critically distanced from any essentialist identity coercion.

By tracking how Wong navigated her forced disappearance from the casting of *The Good Earth*, this chapter also advances a broader understanding of Wong's entire career, characterized by multiple disappearances and rebeginnings. This episodic pattern underscores her grappling with the precarious conditions through waiting, stalling, exiting, repositioning, retraining, rerouting, and rebeginning. This episodic career, made up of brief and all-too-often truncated episodes, resembles staccato music that is composed of short, spiky, and noncontinuous notes. Just as the staccato music elicits intensified emotions, Wong's episodic career was saturated with intense feelings of anticipation, disappointment, frustration, fatigue, anger, resignation, joy, and angst. Taking seriously the episodic pattern, I work against unidirectional teleology and instead work toward a method of understanding "failures" and thwarted trajectories as the precondition for rupturing and reshaping the status quo. It is these "failures" and truncations that made possible Wong's off-center authorship, enabling her to rewrite the terms of visibility and invisibility, and to challenge mainstream representational regimes.

This emotionally charged, episodic, staccato pattern similarly characterizes the careers of all minoritized performer-workers who interact with mainstream entertainment systems. My tracing of Wong's persistent yet nonteleological disappearances and reappearances, therefore, offers an analytical framework to better understand an unconsummated career as a testimony of resilience, resourcefulness, and resistance of the white and male erasure of the racialized and gendered labor and aspirations of minoritized performer-workers. In chapter 2, I delineate an obscured genealogy of early-twentieth-century border-crossing ethnic female performers based on their largely parallel career paths. Here, I highlight instances of convergences and interconnections between marginalized ethnic performers and media workers. Wong's off-center authorship rested precisely upon collaborating with other ethnic performers and media workers to coproduce her relational agency.

This chapter unfolds in four parts. First, I outline the circumstances of Wong's episodic, staccato career pattern, setting the stage for her China turn, which did not indicate an easy realignment with her "Chineseness," but rather deepened her misfit neither-nor (neither Chinese nor American) position that resisted normative identity politics. I then delve into Wong's three post-China-trip media works to analyze how she narrativized her trip and addressed

her Sino-American publics through her opaque position and correlated multifocal perspective.

THE EPISODIC, STACCATO CAREER:
DISAPPEARANCES AND REBEGINNINGS

Wong's first departure from exclusionary Hollywood in 1928 led her to interwar Europe, where she quickly became an international star/celebrity. With her newly minted cosmopolitanism, she was welcomed back to the US in 1930, soon starring in the Broadway show *On the Spot* and making her first Hollywood talkie, *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), in which she starred as Fu Manchu's daughter, catering to "shiver-lovers" with a full supply of "thrill and chills."¹ Next up was the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *Shanghai Express*, in which she gave a show-shifting performance that decenters Dietrich and her character's hetero-romance. By 1933, she was playing a minor role in a B movie, *A Study in Scarlet* (dir. Edwin L. Marin). The burst of opportunities to cash in on her European-made fame had already waned.

Before doing *A Study in Scarlet*, she was already meeting rejections: "My Honolulu offer to do 'On the Spot' fell through, but I might do it later."² She lost the bid for the Chinese female protagonist in *The Son-Daughter* (dir. Clarence Brown and Robert Z. Leonard, 1932) to a white actress, Helen Hays: "I guess I look too Chinese to play a Chinese."³ Meanwhile, she kept busy that year, performing on the variety stage in Chicago in May 1932; in Albany, New York, and the Bronx in June; and in New York City in July, with Jack Benny as the MC, along with comedienne Una Merkel. In August 1932, *Modern Screen* announced that Wong, a freelance actress, was slated to play in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (dir. Frank Capra, 1933), a film set in warlord-torn China, starring Barbara Stanwyck as a missionary's fiancée captured by General Yen, yellowfaced by Swedish-born Nils Asther.⁴ This, again, did not materialize. The Chinese female role of General Yen's maid-mistress went to Toshia Mori—a Japanese-born Columbia contract player and a 1932 WAMPAS Baby Star (along with Ginger Rogers and thirteen other awardees).

By June 1933, Wong had arrived in London, embarking on a busy schedule of vaudeville shows across the UK (see chapter 2), while starring in three films: *Tiger Bay*, *Chu Chin Chow*, and *Java Head*.⁵ Her successful second trans-Atlantic trip shows that her cosmopolitanism was inextricably linked to the marginalization and exclusion she encountered in the US. The confusing journalistic coverage of her plans and whereabouts, as outlined below, indicate her struggles with precarity and uncertainty between finishing *A Study in Scarlet* in early 1933 and arriving in London in June 1933.

At the end of March 1933, she was reportedly planning a European visit that was to be followed by a brief return to Hollywood in summer, and then a personal-appearance tour of South America. On April 11, director Harry Lachman threw a farewell party for her in anticipation of her trip to London on the coming Friday.

Yet it was not until over a week later that her American passport was finally issued; and by May 1, she was said to have reached Southampton via the ocean liner *Europa*. A May 8 update, however, stated that Wong, supposedly in Europe, actually had gone to Shanghai to make a film with Moon Kwan, whom she had recommended to MGM as a technical consultant for her film *Mr. Wu* six years ago.⁶ In early June, she was spotted in Chicago, “paus[ing] on her way from Hollywood to Berlin at the Golden Temple of Jehol at a Century of Progress Exposition,” as evidenced by a photo.⁷ A few days later, she was reportedly seen in London, “welcomed by the mob” as Bebe Daniels was.⁸ While in London, before deciding to accept an “English offer,” Wong was still hoping Lawrence Langner would produce *The Circle of Chalk* and cast her in New York.⁹ Taken together, these varied reports suggest that Wong’s work in Britain was both a turn toward other possibilities and a detour from her original plan, resulting from lack of work in the US. But this “disappearance” from the US ended up becoming a pivotal episode in her career, enabling her to build a multilingual vaudeville repertoire and collaborate with British musicians, vocalists, and dance coaches to improve her skills (see chapter 2).

A few months after returning to America in June 1935, Wong started negotiating with theatrical producer Morris Gest to perform in the Broadway staging of *Lady Precious Dream*.¹⁰ This was first adapted from a classic Chinese play by Chinese playwright Hsiung Shi-i 熊式一 for the London stage in 1935. Wong saw Hsiung’s version in January 1935 at Langner’s recommendation. She declined Hsiung’s offer of the lead role, due to a commitment to vaudeville performances in Italy, but asked Langner to consider staging it in New York.¹¹ Wong’s negotiation with Gest regarding this play ended unsuccessfully, however; and Gest’s Broadway version ended up with an almost all-white cast. It ran from January to April 1936, with Helen Chandler as the female lead and, significantly, with costumes designed by Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, the renowned Peking Opera actor who specialized in playing female roles.¹²

Wong’s biggest setback, however, was her exclusion from *The Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1937). Buck’s novel chronicles a Chinese farming family’s saga from the north to the south and back, persisting through poverty, drought, wealth, warfare, and death; and this film adaptation promised to jettison clichéd Orientalism by turning attention to “real” Chinese people. The female protagonist, O-lan, anchors the drama by keeping the family together even after her estranged husband, Wang Lung, uses the hard-earned family wealth to take a concubine named Lotus. MGM’s production of the film version, starting in 1933, was a tortuous process that spanned four years and cost two and a half million dollars, going through the hands of four directors and two producers (Albert Lewin succeeding Irving Thalberg upon the latter’s death in 1936). The production also involved at least five stakeholders whose interests did not fully align, but who all understood the high stakes of this film. Their interactions made the film a veritable Sino-American intergovernmental, intercommunal, and interracial media event. This complicated

dynamic also led Wong to undertake the China trip in 1936. Those five stakeholders were American mainstream press, MGM, the Chinese Nationalist government, the Asian American communities and their print media, and Wong herself.

At the film's gestation stage, Wong was considered the most likely candidate for the female lead. Grace Kinsley, a *Los Angeles Times* film columnist, cited an "authoritative source" stating that Wong was "likely to play the lead," and "in fact she is quite sure to if W. S. Van Dyke directs it."¹³ Referencing Kinsley, a San Francisco-based Japanese American newspaper further confirmed Wong being the "logical one" due to her "fitness for the role," "undoubted acting ability," purported ancestral connection with the region of the fictional characters, and ability to speak the local Chinese dialect.¹⁴ One of the earliest reports on Wong's exclusion from *The Good Earth* also came from this Japanese American newspaper, in September 1934, as a one-liner: "Anna May Wong not considered for a role in Good Earth."¹⁵ This most likely referred specifically to the role of O-lan, given that Wong was screen tested for the supporting role of Lotus the concubine in late 1935. The MGM record on December 10 of that year described Wong's screen test as Lotus "a little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make [male protagonist Wang Lung's] infatuation convincing; however, deserves consideration." On December 14, the screen test note read: Wong "deserves serious consideration as possibility for Lotus—not as beautiful as she might be."¹⁶ Another Chinese American tested for Lotus was Mary Wong, who was found to be "impossible for Lotus, not sufficiently attractive."¹⁷

While under "serious consideration" for Lotus, Wong was losing both hope and interest in the film. Writing to Fania Marinoff on December 16, 1935, she expressed bitter resignation at losing the bid for the female lead ("No use bucking up a stone wall"). She mentioned doing two tests for the Lotus part, but felt strongly inclined to carry out the original plans of going to China instead of playing Lotus.¹⁸ Indeed, she was already preparing for her China trip in September 1935 by reading diasporic Chinese writer and humorist Lin Yutang 林語堂's newly published best-seller *My Country and My People* (1935), so that she would not "feel too much a stranger when going to Vaterland."¹⁹ Shortly after her Form 430 application was approved, she sailed for China in January 1936.

Wong's disqualification for the female lead has been attributed, correctly, to the anti-miscegenation law, which meant that Paul Muni's casting as the male lead prohibited the casting of a nonwhite actress to play his wife, O-lan—or, for that matter, his concubine Lotus. Another important factor was the intervention of China's First Lady, the Wesleyan College-educated Madame Chiang (Soong May-ling 宋美齡), wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石. As has been noted by multiple historians, *The Good Earth* held an important position both in the Sino-American relationship and in Hollywood's diplomatic history. The Chinese Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek strictly monitored the film's location shooting in China (led by George Hill) at the end of 1933; the

footage was examined by China's Central Film Censorship Committee before it was permitted to be shipped to the US.²⁰ The Chinese government also stipulated six requirements and sent representatives (General Tu Ting-Hsiu 杜庭修, later replaced by Mr. Huang Chao-Chin 黃朝琴) to MGM to oversee and ensure a positive depiction of China.²¹ The sixth stipulation, expressing hope that "the cast in the picture will be all Chinese," was relinquished by the Chinese government for being "impracticable." The implication was that the Chinese government was more concerned with a positive narrative and characterization than with ethnic Chinese performers' right to play Chinese characters. Thus, Hollywood's entrenched yellowface practice went unchallenged.

Given the Chinese Nationalist government's investment in the film, it is unsurprising that Madame Chiang specifically advised against casting Wong as the female lead.²² If MGM excluded Wong on account of the anti-miscegenation law, the Chinese government ostracized her on the grounds of her questionable reputation and diasporic working-class background, which were deemed at odds with the government's escalating promotion of a modern image of China.

Wong's exclusion from *The Good Earth* has been cited by post-civil rights Asian American historians and critics as a scandalous illustration of Hollywood's racism, sexism, and overall exclusionary ideology. Yet we must be careful not to anachronistically attribute this critical sensibility to Wong's contemporary Chinese American communities. The San Francisco-based Chinese American magazine *Chinese Digest*, which was the first English-language magazine by and for American-born Chinese, dedicated a special issue in March 1937 to *The Good Earth*, celebrating the "faithful" and "minute" screen adaptation of "one of the greatest novels of our time."²³ The editorial, penned by male editors who were elite business and community leaders committed to promoting traditional Chinese culture, enthusiastically "ventured the hope" that with *The Good Earth* representing the motion picture industry's "most supreme achievement thus far," the cinema had reached "fulfillment."²⁴ The authors were not concerned with Wong's exclusion from the film; rather, they expressed excitement about unprecedented Chinese American participation in the production, and the opportunity to gain a glimpse into the workings of a major Hollywood studio. In "An Inside View of the Motion Picture Studio" and "Who's Who among the Chinese in 'Good Earth,'" each recruited Chinese American was introduced, including art technician Frank Tang and technical adviser James Zee-Min Lee.²⁵

Ching Wah Lee, cofounder of *Chinese Digest*, who was cast as Ching, the best friend of Wang Lung (Paul Muni), penned a series of articles describing the "Chinese aspect" of the filming process.²⁶ He detailed MGM makeup artist Jack Dawn's yellowface techniques with much interest.²⁷ When asked about the cast of the film, Lee concurred with the Hollywood logic that Muni and Luise Rainer were "stars" with "a huge following which goes to all their shows and are never disappointed." Regarding the "Chinese players," Lee matter-of-factly remarked

that “except for Anna May Wong, Willie Fung, Jimmy Howe, Bruce Wong, and half a dozen others, the Chinese cast [in the film] looks like a Hollywood Directory of Chinese players.”²⁸

Chinese Digest did cover Wong in a number of news snippets in the mid- to late 1930s, reporting on her multilingual performances in Europe,²⁹ her new interest in Chinese theater and cinema during her China trip,³⁰ a three-year contract with Paramount upon returning from China,³¹ her starring role in *Daughter of Shanghai* (supported by Ching Wah Lee as her character’s father),³² her election to the executive board of the Motion Picture Artists’ Committee and her plan to mount a benefit affair for refugees in war-torn China,³³ her moving out of an apartment that overlooked a Japanese garden (due to the Sino-Japanese conflict),³⁴ her attendance at the dedication ceremony for New Chinatown in Los Angeles,³⁵ and her participation in a Motion Picture Artists’ Committee rally (along with none other than Luise Rainer) calling for a boycott of Japanese goods.³⁶ Yet, overall, Wong was not seen as more deserving of a Chinese role than either a Caucasian or another Chinese American actress (such as the Hawaiian-born Columbia graduate Soo Yong). Like the Chinese government, the Chinese American community leaders’ unproblematic acceptance of yellowface casting (on account of the white actors’ popularity and acting skills) contrasted with their criticism of negative portrayals of Chinese customs or characters. This discursive climate contributed to the apparent lack of community support for Wong’s candidacy for a role in *The Good Earth*.

More importantly, Wong’s nonpreferential treatment by her contemporary Chinese Americans may have had to do with her *interstitial* position of neither-Chinese-nor-American. This neither-nor *experience* was shared by all Chinese Americans, caught between the US Chinese Exclusion Act and the surging Chinese nationalism that demanded the diasporic Chinese’s allegiance to the “motherland.” Different from Wong’s neither-nor position, however, the community leaders sought to alleviate the misfit status by converting it into a both-Chinese-and-American vantage point to promote the community’s bridging function. Ching Wah Lee, celebrated as “Mr. Chinatown” in San Francisco, described the second-generation Chinese Americans as a “mighty conflict of cultures”—that is, as American as they were Chinese—and “a decided asset” to American society.³⁷ He worked as a cultural mediator, helping define the Chinese American identity by studying and introducing Chinese culture and art to white Americans, and leading Chinatown tours to introduce a real-life Chinese American community.³⁸ Still, hampered by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the desired hybrid Chinese American identity failed to save the Chinese American community from being treated as separate from the mainstream. At the same time, the strong language-culture-kinship linkages with ancestral hometowns in China (and with Chinese culture in general) lent this community to being harnessed by China’s rising nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Following the 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1960s civil rights movement, the hybrid Chinese American (and Asian American) identity became institutionalized and recognized as a triumph of the struggles for diversity.³⁹ Yet the task of replacing the pathologized neither-nor misfit with the uplifting both-and, two-way fit remained incomplete to the present day, as evident in the resurgence of anti-Asian racism triggered by COVID-19. One reason for such entrenched anti-Asian racism-sexism, paradoxically, has to do with the overvaluation of assimilation or becoming “American,” which requires that minoritized subjects fit into the American mainstream only to naturalize and reinforce the mainstream as the norm, thus leaving the white premise of the mainstream unchallenged. Furthermore, the desire for assimilation counterproductively legitimizes the scrutiny that targets the minoritized subjects. Thus, assimilation is an impossible project. By pathologizing the neither-nor experience as a failure, the assimilation drive disavows this experience, failing to recognize or mobilize the critical potential of the interstitial position where difference is generative and game-changing, and must not be rendered palatable.

This critical potential was precisely what Wong achieved by turning her experiential neither-nor dilemma into a position of critical disidentification. The neither-nor position enabled her to question homogenizing identity categories, be they Chinese or American. In so doing, she performed and anticipated what Kandice Chuh calls a postcolonial and transnational “subjectless” critique that leverages “categorical flux” to challenge “naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities.”⁴⁰ Wong’s critical neither-nor disidentification also evokes the concept of opacity as theorized by Édouard Glissant. Writing from a postcolonial Caribbean perspective, Glissant describes opacity as unknowability and untranslatability to the dominant colonialist epistemology. He argues for the “right to opacity,” that is, the right to be fundamentally nontransparent, different, unreducible, and unintelligible to the dominant mode of knowledge extraction.⁴¹ This “right to opacity” upends the colonialist terms of visibility and the system of hierarchy.

Understanding Wong’s neither-nor position as opacity and as a position of de-essentializing critique enables us to better understand how she regrouped following her exclusion from *The Good Earth*, and in what ways she further developed her nuanced, multi-registered audience address. I explore these questions by turning to three media works that arose from her 1936 China trip. They are (1) Wong’s photo shoots and travelogue footage documented with her own equipment and in collaboration with Newsreel Wong (aka H. S. Wong or Wang Xiaoting), a Shanghai-based newsreel photojournalist; (2) the 1957 ABC TV episode titled “Native Land,” featuring her 1936 China travel footage overlaid with her narration, two decades later, addressing the postwar American audience; and (3) the MGM short revue film *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937), in which she paraded Chinese fashions with an ironic twist. Ostensibly facilitating intercultural translation, these media works quickly flip into a charade that reasserts the

poetics of opacity, upends Orientalist epistemology, and recruits synchronic and diachronic resonating collaborators and audiences, with the effect of rewriting the terms of visibility and relationality.

ANNA MAY WONG VISITS SHANGHAI:
NEWSPAPERWOMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER,
AND (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHER

In May 1930, at the height of the international fame Wong achieved in interwar Europe, journalist Marjory Collier lamented the “grim joke that brought a creature of two such different worlds under the Kliegs” only to dispose of her in the “inevitable screen end . . . death.” She then pointed out that Wong had other options. “She could take herself and a cameraman to China and show us delights undreamed of by Hollywood. . . . She could take us to their gardens, show us some of the world’s finest mountain scenery, give us a glimpse of the descendants of the geniuses who created the Sung vases and the K’ang Hsi plum-blossom jars.”⁴² Collier’s whim turned out to be prescient. Six years later, excluded from *The Good Earth*, Wong traveled to China with a cameraman, Newsreel Wong, and with her own Leica camera and lighting equipment. The resulting media works were uniquely significant in revitalizing her career, demonstrating her agency in shaping the Sino-American relationship at key historical junctures, and traversing media technologies from amateur filming to postwar television, as well as engaging with journalism and photography.

As if echoing Collier’s suggestions, Wong spent her China trip “gathering material for the production of a Chinese play in the United States or Europe,” and considered the “possibilities of a film dealing with modern China,” one “that would bring out the striking contrast between the old and the new.”⁴³ She envisioned herself as “a Chinese travel guide” who would “show tourists about large Chinese cities with their irreconcilable Eastern and Western elements. In this way . . . the incredible contrasts could be portrayed without asking her audience to stretch their imagination to the breaking point.”⁴⁴ The mediator role she envisioned, however, turned out to be nothing close to a transparent bridging between China and America. Rather, her media works demonstrated the difficulty of negotiating from an interstitial position that insisted on disidentifying from both China and America, and yet claiming knowledge about both. Thus, what Wong brought back to her American public was not cinema vérité-style scenery “undreamed of by Hollywood,” but rather her version of China produced from her position as a traveler, a “newspaperwoman,” an estranged “daughter of China,” a learner, a photographer, and an (auto)ethnographer.

From the outset, Wong’s China trip was far more complicated than a conventional, nostalgic root-searching and root-identifying narrative. It was a strategic move that led to her *shuttling* between frustrations in the US and alienation in

China, as encapsulated in a 1937 article, “Third Beginning,” published nearly one year after her return from China.⁴⁵ In this article, Wong explained her rejection of the concubine role in *The Good Earth*: “I’ll be glad to take the test, but I won’t play the part. If you let me play O-lan, I’ll be very glad. But you’re asking me—with Chinese blood—to do the only unsympathetic role in the picture, featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters.”⁴⁶ Frustrated, she traveled to China because “I had to be sure whether I was really playing a Chinese or merely giving an American interpretation of one. So—I saw China. Much to my surprise, I needed a dialect interpreter, for I spoke Cantonese and so in Shanghai was at a total loss, with Shanghai-ese [*sic*] being spoken on all sides.”⁴⁷

This feeling of alienation, coupled with her decision to “see China,” her ancestral country, meant that her China trip could not be a simple matter of becoming Chinese, culturally or emotionally. Rather, it bespoke her entangled struggles as she learned to optimize her interstitial position and to differentially address her American and her Chinese publics (including her Chinese detractors). With this trip, Wong pivoted her exclusion from Hollywood to refashion herself as an authoritative China spokesperson (without becoming Chinese)—in competition with MGM’s *The Good Earth*. Although outshone by *The Good Earth*, which was released to rave reviews, the impact of Wong’s trip and travelogue footage proved long-living, morphing through media forms across two decades, enabling her to transform the “cultural diplomat” role into that of a producer of interstitial knowledge *and* affect.

Wong carefully planned to document her China trip. At a stopover in Honolulu, she excitedly announced to a Japanese American journalist: “So now, I’m a newspaperwoman too.”⁴⁸ She had been invited to contribute articles about her China impressions to the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁴⁹ Aside from authoring newspaper articles; doing interviews; meeting with Chinese cultural workers, politicians, and Euro-American expatriates; and orchestrating photo shoots, Wong used her Leica camera and an arc lamp to cocreate her travelogue footage with Newsreel Wong and others.⁵⁰ Her itinerary and activities in various Chinese cities, largely mirroring (albeit at a much smaller scale) the MGM crew’s extensive location shooting and prop acquisition for *The Good Earth* two years before, constituted an alternative presentation of modern China, and especially of Chinese femininity. Thus, Wong’s China trip enabled her to compete with MGM for the “China spokesperson” status.

Like the MGM crew, Wong toured Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, and Suzhou; but Wong also went to southern China and Hong Kong. On drastically different scales and budgets, both Wong and the MGM crew worked with Newsreel Wong to conduct their respective on-location, quasi-ethnographic filming. During the MGM crew’s location shooting, Newsreel Wong provided consultation and helped film the sound effects with his Movietone equipment.⁵¹ That Anna May Wong worked with Newsreel Wong during her China trip suggests not only the latter’s linchpin

position in (co-)filming American film and newsreel footage in China, but also Wong's flexible mobilization of available resources for her own purposes.

Wong and the MGM crew also similarly focused on acquiring objects or "props" that they saw as representative of the "real" China. While the twenty tons of properties procured by the studio crew—ranging from "a complete farm, with house and all equipment (even three water-buffalo!) to costumes, children's toys, and the minutest details of everyday life"—facilitated MGM's construction of a verisimilar setting in *The Good Earth*,⁵² Wong's "props," mainly qipao dresses and Peking Opera costumes,⁵³ enabled her performance of modern urban Chinese femininity spiced with operatic exotica in her post-1936 films and stage plays. Off the screen and stage, Wong's Chinese wardrobe also played an important role when she wore or auctioned off parts of it in support of China's Anti-Fascist War with Japan.

To strengthen her bid for the China spokesperson position, Wong the estranged "daughter of China" consistently presented herself as an eager learner of traditional and modern Chinese customs and culture with the goal of updating her portrayal of Chinese characters for the US audience. She hired a female teacher to coach her in Mandarin Chinese, just as she practiced King's English, German, French, and other European languages during her previous travels. She also demonstrated agency in controlling what was presented to the Chinese and American publics, and how to address them. A salient occasion illustrating her self-positioning both as a learner and as being in control of image making was her visit to the Peking Dramatic School (Beiping Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao 北平中華戲曲專科學校) in present-day Beijing, where she engaged in photography and filming.

During a visit, she used her arc lamp to enhance the photographing of a young actor, Song Dezhu 宋德珠, playing the White Snake spirit in the act of "Jinshan si" 金山寺 (The Golden Mountain Temple) from *The Legend of the White Snake*.⁵⁴ She also sat for a group photo taken at the Dramatic School (figure 4.1), which shows Wong, the visitor, taking up the prominent position in the middle of the front row, wearing a qipao and holding an open paper fan, beaming a smile at the camera.⁵⁵ Her central position and confident demeanor, reinforced by the stately authority conveyed by the large fan, renders her the symbolic master. Meanwhile, Li Boyan 李伯言, the actual master and the vice principal of the school, is demurely perched to the left in the front row, with a closed fan. All the students in the front and back rows surround Wong. Wong's occupation of the master's position as the only woman in an otherwise all-male photo signaled an anomaly. The fact that the photo did not include the school's female students, who appeared in the film footage later used in the 1957 ABC TV episode "Native Land," suggests the photo's adherence to the Peking Opera's all-male tradition, which renders Wong's presence doubly transgressive.

The public persona Wong produced in these photo shoots was simultaneously studious and assertive. The studious aspect fit with her declared goal of re-recognizing her ancestral land so as to create positive Chinese characters on the

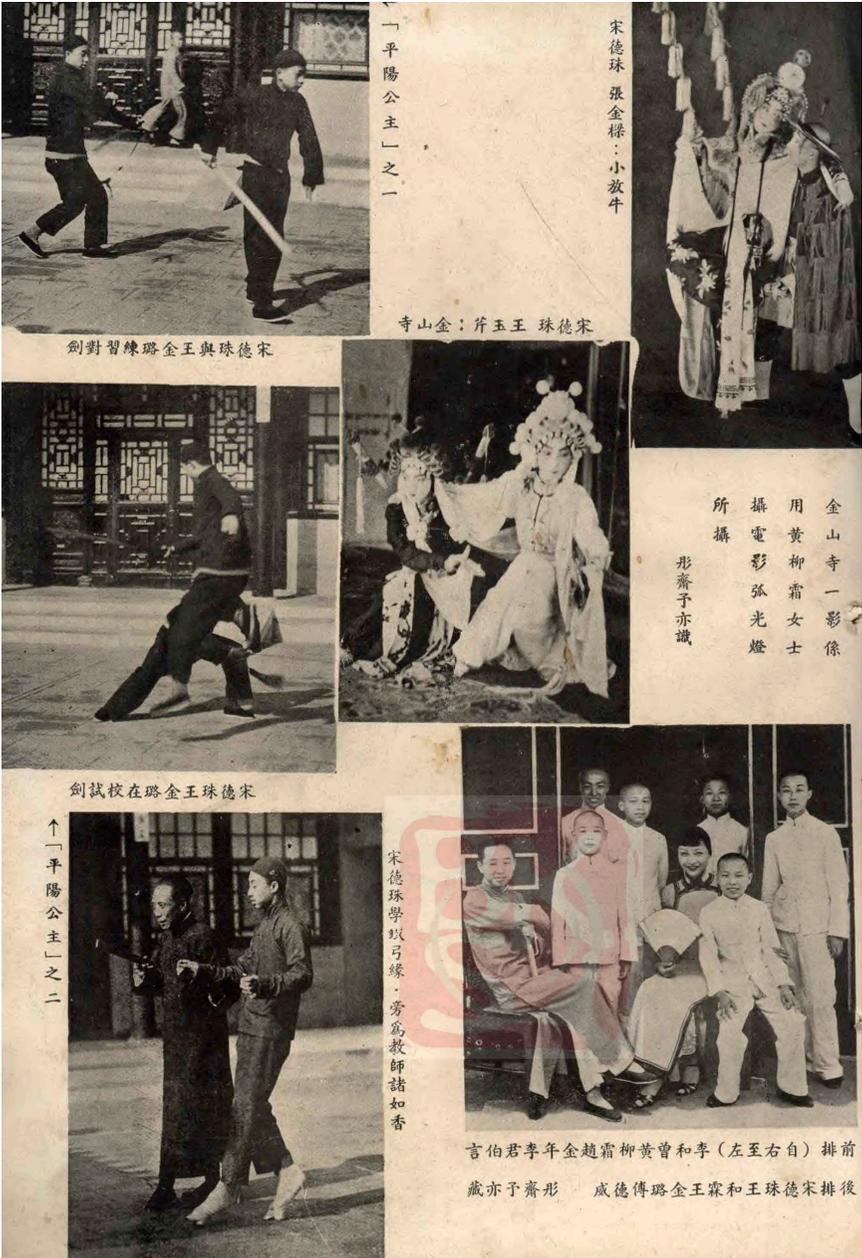


FIGURE 4.1. (Bottom right) Wong posing in a group photo at the Peking Dramatic School (Beiping Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao 北平中華戲曲專科學校) during her 1936 China trip. Published in *Shiri xiju* 十日戲劇 (Peking Opera Decadaily) 22 (Mar. 31, 1938): n.p.

screen. The assertive aspect imparted her confidence as a wannabe spokesperson for China. This dual register characterized her interstitial position, which she constantly recalibrated between earnest engagement and careful distancing, so as to best interface with a spectrum of public expectations. We see this more amply illustrated in her Shanghai travel footage, especially at the moment when she autographed her Chinese name for her Chinese host.

Assembled under the title “Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China,” the eight-minute silent travelogue was largely filmed by Newsreel Wong for Hearst Metrotone News.⁵⁶ Although it was unaired, according to a Hearst newsreel index card, the Hearst sponsorship indicates that the footage was filmed with an American audience in mind. In 1938, Wong planned to show the five reels of film made in China (which likely included the footage for Hearst Metrotone), combined with her fund-raising wardrobe auction for China War Relief.⁵⁷ With the American public as the target audience, the footage was filmed with a quasi-ethnographic approach, featuring Wong the celebrity arriving on location, so to speak, then interacting with the local people and environment. “Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China” opens in February 1936 with Wong arriving at the dock in a fur coat matched with a “cat-head” hat, speaking while being photographed and filmed by international journalists on the deck. A cut shows her entering the Park Hotel Shanghai, wearing the same hat, but a lighter jacket dress, indicating a different season. The rest of the footage was filmed during her April–May stay in Shanghai, following a trip to Hong Kong, Manila, and Changon (Wong’s ancestral hometown in Guangdong province, where she visited her father, who had returned to his hometown in 1934). Wong was shown in different summer qipao dresses that she had tailored in Shanghai. In all locations she stood out, due to her height, big strides, swinging arms, and ease with the camera—looking toward it just enough to acknowledge and engage with the audience. Her difference was noted by local pedestrians, who were shown stopping to gaze at her or looking directly into the camera.

Wong’s dual address in the footage, to her Chinese public and to her anticipated American audience, became most conspicuous in the scene of autographing. Evoking the scenes in *Piccadilly* where she smuggled in her Chinese signature and *Tiger Bay* where she traced out her Chinese name with chalk (see chapter 1), the autographing scene in the travelogue footage also acquired new meanings as it was reenacted in the Chinese context for both Chinese and American audiences. Here she was visiting Shanghai’s Star Film Studio, accompanied by the studio’s managers, producers, directors, and main actors, including Hu Die (Butterfly Wu), the 1933 China Movie Queen. Wong, slender and tall next to Hu, proudly sported her newly acquired light-blue silk qipao,⁵⁸ followed and surrounded by the studio’s personnel—all gathering in front of a studio building in a medium-long shot. A cut to close-up shots shows Hu and Wong conversing with smiles and gestures. This is followed by a medium shot of Wong writing in a Chinese book with a brush (figure 1.3). While we are not privy to what she actually wrote in the footage, a journalist’s

report titled “Jottings on Anna May Wong’s Visit” made it clear that Wong was requested to write her Chinese name with a brush (see chapter 1).⁵⁹ As she traced out the strokes in a medium close-up framing, studio boss Chang Shih-chuan (S. C. Chang) 張石川 and publicity manager Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲, along with Hu Die, watched with great interest. Upon finishing her writing, she looked to Chang, who nodded with approval, then looked to the camera with a big, triumphant smile.

Wong’s smiling look toward Chang, then toward the camera, encapsulated her address to two audiences—the Chinese audience represented by her on-camera studio hosts, and the American audience anticipated through the release of the footage. Collaborating with Newsreel Wong, Wong offered her Chinese persona for the Sino-American double gaze. Her greeting to the anticipated American audience specifically invited the latter to see her Chinese knowledge endorsed by her Chinese hosts. The fact that her travel footage was not formally released in America until being reedited for the television episode “Native Land” in 1957 meant that her audience address was not only transnational and transcultural, but also poignantly diachronic (more on this in the next section, on “Native Land”).

Equally important were Wong’s efforts to establish a rapport with her Chinese public. By proudly displaying her Chinese calligraphy with a brush—a symbol of classic literati refinement—Wong gratified her curious Chinese hosts, journalists, and the broader public. She also accepted the challenge to speak Mandarin Chinese by playfully reeling off the numbers one, two, three (etc.). She literally donned modern urban Chinese femininity by modeling a qipao dress tailored in a famous fashion shop in Shanghai. While visiting the Star Film Studio, she had an extensive conversation with Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962), a preeminent dramatist and film director from whom she learned about Chinese theater. All of this indicated her adoption of modern Chinese femininity and earnest engagement with Chinese culture and entertainment.

She further drew upon her broad knowledge of Euro-American film techniques to advise on lighting and makeup while visiting the Star Studio’s filming set where a detective movie, *Jingang zuan* 金剛鑽 (The Diamond Drill, dir. Xu Xinfu 徐欣夫, 1936), was being made.⁶⁰ When asked to comment on Chinese cinema, Wong suggested making more cost-efficient “landscape films,” since the Chinese dramatic films she had seen tended to be under-edited, possibly due to the low budget that made too many outtakes unaffordable.⁶¹ By building conversation and collegiality with Shanghai filmmakers and dramatists, Wong explored work opportunities in China, which she had been planning while preparing for the trip to China. Coinciding with her travel, the Chinese American magazine *Chinese Digest* reported that the scarcity of Chinese roles in American films led Wong to study Chinese opera under the tutelage of Mei Lanfang and also to study Mandarin Chinese with the hope of gaining success on the Chinese stage in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other cities.⁶²

During and shortly after her China trip, Chinese-language news intermittently anticipated her involvement in Chinese filmmaking. She reportedly had appeared

in *Jingang zuan*⁶³ and planned to open a film school in China. Upon her arrival in Hong Kong, Moon Kwan and Joseph Sunn Jue, who had cofounded the Grandview Film Company in San Francisco in 1933 and moved it to Hong Kong in 1935, stated they would invite Wong to play in two talkies during her Hong Kong visit.⁶⁴ Wong also mentioned receiving “offers to do pictures” in Shanghai and Hong Kong, but planned to stick to her original purpose for the trip—namely, to study Mandarin Chinese and Chinese customs and traditions, as well as writing articles about the trip (presumably for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle*).⁶⁵

Ultimately, however, Wong did not succeed in expanding her career to China. In an interview after returning to Los Angeles, she attributed this to her foreignness in China: “I am convinced that I could never play in the Chinese theater. I have no feeling for it. It’s a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I’m too American.”⁶⁶ Shirley Jennifer Lim attributed Wong’s misfit in China to her fundamental self-identification as an American “modern girl.”⁶⁷ Yet Wong’s feeling of being disadvantaged was only one side of the story. The other side was that she leveraged her “stranger” perspective to maintain opacity so as to refuse any essentialist identity alignment, be it Chinese or American. This enabled her to enact and juxtapose multiple identity types, engaging with identity-specific expectations while also commanding a critical gaze that mocked these expectations. In so doing, Wong fashioned a multi-perspective authorial position as a performer-worker.

Twenty years later, in her ABC television episode “Native Land,” Wong’s interstitial multi-perspective position became the key for remediating the 1936 travelogue footage for her Cold War-era American audience. Not only did her authority as a China spokesperson outlive that of *The Good Earth*, but also her mediator role had morphed into self-reflexive multifocal shuttling across space, history, geopolitics, media forms, and her own episodic life-career. This self-reflexive multifocal authorship debunked the presumed transparency in intercultural mediation, replacing it with opacity—that is, the refusal to align with digestible and essentialist identity positions.

“THE CHINESE-LOOKING LADY IN A FOREIGN DRESS”:
FROM 1936 CHINA TO THE POSTWAR
AMERICAN TV SCREEN

“Native Land” (1957), an episode of the ABC TV travelogue series *Bold Journey*, roughly coincided with the lawsuit filed by John Henry Faulk against Aware Inc.—a right-wing organization that specialized in blacklisting suspected pro-communist entertainment personalities. Faulk was a CBS Radio comedy show host who was fired for alleged “un-American activities.” Although he eventually won his case against Aware Inc., the case encapsulated the paranoid McCarthyism against

communist countries, including the People's Republic of China, founded in 1949. In chapter 3, I argue for Wong's disidentification from Cold War America's patriotic indoctrination through her outspoken amah character in *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. In "Native Land," Wong directly addressed the Cold War-era American television audience by remediating her pre-communist Chinese travelogue footage. Straddling seismic shifts in geopolitics, history, media technologies, and her life-career, Wong in "Native Land" refashioned her authorship and audience address not only in the aftermath of her exclusion from *The Good Earth*, but also in the wake of red-baiting McCarthyism.

"Native Land" came during a prolonged hiatus in Wong's big-screen acting, which led her to actively search for television opportunities (see chapter 3). Four days after "Native Land" was released on February 14, 1957, Wong gave an interview, reiterating criticism of the negative stereotype of Oriental femininity that Hollywood had imposed on her. She also described her retirement (prior to the comeback in "Native Land") as the necessary "soul-searching" time for her to meditate, study, learn, and ultimately to "be revitalized, refreshed, reborn."⁶⁸ With this new self-understanding, she announced, "I am going to act in parts that suit my age. They will be roles into which I can inject some understanding, some sensitive feeling, for I want acting to be pleasure for me again."⁶⁹ Her hope for new, suitable roles in television embodied her persistent endeavor to sustain an episodic acting career across different media platforms. And her reclaiming of pleasurable acting (as opposed to merely reiterating stereotypes) anticipated her self-refashioning as a "character actress" (see chapter 3). Arguably, the pleasure of becoming a character actress began in "Native Land," in which she channels her younger self touring China while addressing the Cold War-era American television audience.

On January 23, 1957, Wong wrote to Fania Marinoff, excitedly anticipating her upcoming trip to New York for a TV deal that was to feature her personal appearance "in connection with my first visit to China film."⁷⁰ This TV deal became "Native Land," an ABC television episode that aired at 9:30 p.m., prime time, on February 14, 1957, and was rerun on March 9. In the same letter to Marinoff, Wong proudly described this TV episode as "the springboard for the beginning of their [ABC's] new season's series," *Bold Journey*. "Native Land" would "repeat the setup" of a successful local showing of her "first visit to China film" that was accompanied by her personal appearance and narration. Seeing herself as "the only well known name and my film on China having been so enthusiastically received," Wong expected a big publicity campaign for this episode.⁷¹ The ABC press department described "Native Land" as Wong "present[ing] her films of life in China before it was hidden behind the Bamboo Curtain."⁷² In this setup, the older Wong (the featured guest) played the native informant explicating and mediating the 1936 footage (featuring her younger self as a traveler); and John Stephenson, the show's host, anchored and stood in for the general American television audience. Their conversational style promoted a casual, living-room feel for the television audience.

On the surface, “Native Land,” as an episode of *Bold Journey*, followed the show’s self-branding as “your television passport to the exciting colorful world of adventures as seen through the eyes of the real people.” Stressing authentic experiences of exotic foreign lands, each episode was narrated by a guest who was also the traveler who had “photographed [the footage] with their own 16mm cameras.”⁷³ Designed to be family friendly, the show hoped to serve a pedagogical purpose: “Through such viewing, parents can share with their children a common interest and experience, and gain some understanding of what is discussed in school.”⁷⁴ Consistent with the family-friendly ethos, the show was sponsored by Ralston Purina, whose commercials for its Chex breakfast cereals, featuring Lee Goodman from the company, punctuated each episode, advertising the “crunchy” product catering to “grown-up” taste.

Packaged as family-friendly education (about pre-World War II China), Wong’s “Native Land” nonetheless differed from most of the adventure episodes in this show. Rather than reveling in remote places mystified as eternal and primitive, “Native Land” turned upon the urgency to grapple with change, precisely as the disappeared old China was nostalgically presented (and present-ed) on screen while the actual, present People’s Republic of China was off-limits to American explorers. Host Stephenson reassured the audience that Wong’s film was “not new” and was therefore untouched by China’s recent political turmoil, and thus possessed the “beauty” of “rekindling the memory of China that was, and probably will never be again.”⁷⁵ Yet just as the past was not lost, the present could not be disavowed. As Wong migrated from her 1936 travelogue footage into the 1957 “Native Land,” she conjured an accordion of enfolded layers of temporality and spatiality, addressing Cold War American families from a multifocal perspective.

Wong’s authoritative mediator status is established at the outset of “Native Land.” Stephenson introduces her as the world’s most well-known “Chinese woman,” the “international motion picture favorite” who visited “the native land of her parents” after establishing herself as “a Hollywood leading actress.” Wong is to serve “as our guide on tonight’s journey” to a “slumbering giant in peaceful tranquility” in a “heartwarming episode.” A close-up shot of a large book shows Wong’s English name printed on the left page, and the title “NATIVE LAND” printed on the right page. Thus, Wong is positioned as not only the tour guide, but also the author of the “book” (or the show). This authorship comes at a price, though, as the title “Native Land” induces the audience to associate Wong’s nativity (or root) with China, thus reinforcing the white American stereotyping of East Asian-heritage persons as perpetual foreigners.

This stereotype is upended by Wong’s multifocal perspective and interstitial positioning throughout the entire show. Upon entering from screen right, she greets Stephenson in Taishanese: “*Gung hei*,” she says, which means “congratulations” (often used as a New Year’s greeting). Yet she she mistranslates it for her American audience as “greetings” (used for any occasion). This subtle “error”



FIGURE 4.2. Wong in the *Bold Journey* episode “Native Land” (ABC TV, 1957), wearing a head scarf embroidered with her Chinese name, sitting in front of a rope structure (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

instantly debunks her transparency as a mediator, and instead foregrounds her freewheeling translation and playful audience address. Analogously, her outfit displays an idiosyncratic assemblage of quasi-Chinese elements, including a light-colored brocade jacket and square black headwear that drapes backward to her shoulders, its top front decorated with her Chinese name in white embroidery. During the show, she is seated in front of a rope structure partially covered with netting, suggesting a half-folded sail (figure 4.2). All of these elements contribute to her performative Chineseness for the American audience.

Having visually displayed her quaint “Chinese” appearance, Wong then turns around to displace this image by recounting two anecdotes that highlight her misalignment with the Chineseness she encountered in 1936. In the first anecdote, she is perceived in rural China as not a real person, but a “robot,” a “flicker” in the picture, and a “white devil.” In the second anecdote, she orders tea in the Park Hotel Shanghai, expecting something authentic, only to be given an American-style tea bag. If the first anecdote stresses her strangeness or ahead-of-time-ness to the rural Chinese who are unfamiliar with modern film technology, the second anecdote mocks her own American stereotype of the “authentic” China, which is rebutted by the latter’s Westernization and coevality. From the outset, Wong underscores the misrecognition between the Chinese and herself, embodied in their mutually alienating and alienated gaze. Thus, she makes clear that she performs the role of a

tour “guide” in “Native Land” with an ironic twist. Even as she introduces the travelogue footage in a quietly authoritative voiceover, she simultaneously foreignizes herself as a tourist and quasi-ethnographer strategically performing Chineseness. Thus, she addresses the postwar American audience by presenting herself as a fellow American *and more*—that is, as a seasoned migratory performer-worker constantly shuttling within the interstitial space.

Two interconnected themes run through Wong’s remediation of her 1936 footage: image making and the composite nature of the images. A curious Chinese practice of posthumous portrait painting that Wong highlights in the show emblemizes Wong’s composite approach to “Native Land” and to her self-imaging. As Wong describes to Stephenson and the audience, the Chinese get portrayed only after death, when a painter brings a book of a hundred facial features, each appearing in different shapes and indicating different ages, from which the descendants select the version of each feature closest to that of the deceased; the painter then paints a “composite” portrait based on the selections. Wong’s description of this “composite” portraiture prefigures present-day computational recombinant creation from a data bank. Yet it also undergirds Wong’s self-imaging and her method of assembling “Native Land” by gleaning and recombining her 1936 travelogue footage. By assembling the footage into a trajectory of traveling from Shanghai through Suzhou to Beijing and concluding with her visit with her father in their ancestral village of Changon (which actually took place before her Beijing trip), “Native Land” constructs Wong’s homecoming and “native” turn while also allegorically serving as a portrait of the deceased China, as seen and composited by Wong.

Within this composite portrayal of China, Wong highlights her composite image making in China in collaboration with Newsreel Wong and some locals, by calling attention to her location filming sessions (so to speak). These sessions also double as her ethnographic capturing of seemingly spontaneous happenings. In this process, the distinction between the exotic local Other (Chinese people and customs) and the scopophilic foreign Self (Wong) is evoked only to be re-composited when both parties are involved in the filmic mutual gaze. This is illustrated in Wong’s dry-humor revelation to the American audience that the local Chinese were puzzled by her looks and wondered “who is that foreign-looking or the Chinese-looking lady . . . in foreign dress”—a composite misfit indeed! By turning the joke on herself (being subjected to the Chinese gaze and disqualified as a “native informant”), the older Wong calls out her younger self’s strangeness, which led her to “go native.”

The footage then shows her younger self visiting Shanghai’s famous silk and tailor stores to have qipao dresses custom made. A star/celebrity who is also a learner, a tourist, and a quasi-ethnographic filmmaker, Wong displays her process of transforming into a “native” *on camera* and *on location*. As her voiceover emphasizes, her younger self eagerly planned to “get the pictures” of the authentic tailoring



VIDEO 4.1. Wong visiting a tailor shop in Shanghai in 1936, in footage shown in the “Native Land” episode (1957) of *Bold Journey* (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.1>



process. She insisted on having measurements taken in the store—that is, *on the authentic location*—instead of having the tailor do it in her hotel (which would be like a movie set). Commenting on the tailor’s bewildering skill of marking the measurements by tying knots on a string, shown in the footage, the older Wong quips, “How he can tell which knot is what knot I know not,” thus playfully underscoring her foreignness *and* her performative native turn *for* the film (video 4.1).

Continuing the theme of self-imaging in the double sense of self-refashioning and filmmaking, we see the younger Wong staging another scene in her Beijing “bungalow” (her domesticating translation of *siheyuan* 四合院, Beijing’s traditional residential compound with houses built around a rectangular courtyard) situated in an “alley” (her translation of *hutong* 胡同). In this scene, the local merchants brought a variety of goods (fabric, fans, paintings, etc.) to her courtyard for her selection. Yet the older Wong reveals that the real purpose was filming: showing her going through the beautiful Chinese objects as Newsreel Wong filmed her comically draped with a large pile of fabric, evoking the scene where she is decked out in the elaborate multiple pieces of the Chinese wedding gown in *The Toll of the Sea* (see chapter 1).

The process of staging and filming depended on collaboration not only with Newsreel Wong, but also with the locals who agreed to be filmed. During the footage of her tour of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the older Wong’s voiceover praises her guide, a local male teacher garbed in a traditional gown, for being



FIGURE 4.3. Wong filming a funeral procession in China in 1936 with her Kodak 16mm camera, in footage shown in “Native Land” (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

“most cooperative” in being filmed. The Chinese, Wong tells us (reiteratively throughout her career), disliked being filmed, for fear of losing their souls to the camera. Perhaps Wong regularly revived the myth of the soul-snatching camera to emphasize the incommensurability between her career choice and the “Chinese” tradition. But her comment on the teacher’s cooperation in this instance also underscored her collaborative authorship in obtaining the footage.

Her distanced yet collaborative image making also characterized some of the more ethnographic scenes, such as a funeral procession and a wedding ritual. One brief shot by Newsreel Wong showed the younger Wong turning her Kodak 16mm camera toward a wealthy family’s funeral procession (figure 4.3). This *mise-en-abyme* setup indicates that Wong likely filmed some of the footage used in “Native Land” when she was not in front of the camera. If the funeral scene is more typically ethnographic, the scene of a wedding ritual illustrates Wong’s interest in not so much capturing the exotic spectacle as underscoring that the ostensible exoticism was actually a composite of variant elements, analogous to the composite ancestor portraiture and her own image making. In the wedding sequence, the older Wong narrates that an American-educated Chinese bride she knew is marrying a man from a traditional family, leading to a “composite” ceremony in which she is dressed in pink (merging the Chinese red and the Western white), riding in a car from her home, then changing midway to a traditional sedan.

The bride's emergence from the sedan was clearly staged. As the sedan parked facing the camera, the curtain was lifted by the amah who helped the bride out; the latter then stood, letting the camera scan up her body. A close-up, toe-to-top tilt shot highlights her ornate wedding gown, almost in an Orientalist fashion, which, however, is derailed as Wong's amused voiceover points out the irony that the American-educated bride is not weeping to show her sorrow over leaving her parents (per the ritual). Another irony is the fact that the bride was filmed full frontal and presented to the American audience, even as Wong's voiceover explains the tradition that the bride must be completely covered and not seen by anybody (including her husband) until the wedding night.

The discrepancy Wong highlights in her narrative not only illustrates the bride's departure from the traditional wedding ritual, but also suggests her willing collaboration with Wong and Newsreel Wong in the filming. Arguably, Wong, who had spent her career developing her signature "Oriental" (dis)play for the Western gaze, would have found a mirror image in the Western-educated bride. Sharing the bride's ironic dis(play) and recomposition of the ritual through her own convivial filming, Wong transformed the seeming ethnographic footage to mock a casual tourist glance *and* confront the Orientalist gaze with her and her subject's shared female practice of deviation.

The central quasi-ethnographic section in "Native Land" shows Wong's visit to the Peking Dramatic School just a few days after arriving in Beijing. This visit was to significantly shape her performance career; and Wong's narrative of this footage illustrates her gender-oriented collaborative authorship. Writing to her American friend Bernardine Szold-Fritz on May 19, 1936, she talked about visiting the Dramatic School (which she also called Children's Theater, because all the students were children) that morning for the third time; and she planned to pay a daily visit as part of her education.⁷⁶ Wong not only photographed the actor Song Dezhu's performance and sat for a group photo (figure 4.1), but also witnessed Peking Opera training at close range. The older Wong comments on a training session where a male teacher taught a female student "how to be [or play] a girl," for Peking Opera traditionally was performed by an all-male cast, and male actors specializing in female roles (such as Mei Lanfang) had established an elaborate system of body language to convey various female types and emotions (video 4.2). The footage also shows the younger Wong visiting the backstage where Song Dezhu put on the "lotus feet" (shoes) to imitate women's bound feet, then dressed his head in five steps for his female character—all captured in close-up shots.

While the older Wong plays the native informant by offering many details to the American audience, she also reinserts her outsider position into the narrative by recalling her inadvertent violation of the actors' "superstition" about their untouchable prop beards. It was as an inquisitive outsider that she interacted with the teachers and students at the Dramatic School to coproduce the sneak-view footage of the backstage. Indeed, working with foreigners on their filmmaking



VIDEO 4.2. Wong visiting the Peking Dramatic School in Beijing in 1936, in footage shown in the “Native Land” episode (1957) of *Bold Journey* (credit: UCLA Film & Television Archive).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.2>



ethnographic tours was by no means a novel experience for the teachers and students at this school. The school was founded in 1930 by preeminent Peking Opera performance artist Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋 (1904–58), who appointed the school principal Jiao Juying 焦菊隱 (1905–75), a dramatist well versed in both traditional Chinese opera and modern spoken drama who later obtained a doctoral degree in drama in Paris. Under Jiao’s leadership, the Dramatic School spearheaded a new pedagogy. It reformed traditional operatic education by terminating apprenticeship (and corporal punishment), adopting a curriculum of diverse subjects, including foreign languages, and, most importantly, pioneering coeducation (contrary to the traditional male-only practice). Due to its modern operatic education, the school attracted foreign visitors such as Wong herself. The training scenes showcased in her footage were, therefore, no esoteric secret; on the contrary, such scenes were put on display for foreign tourists and their ethnographic gaze. For instance, Kodachrome footage identified as being filmed in 1938, possibly by another foreign visitor/tourist, similarly shows this school’s students training in the courtyard where Wong did her filming.⁷⁷

The difference was that Wong’s footage demonstrated more sustained involvement, as indicated by the heavy use of close-up framing as well as her presence in front of the camera (filmed by Newsreel Wong) *and* possibly behind the camera. Her close-range observation indicated a special interest in male students impersonating female roles (following the Peking Opera tradition), and in

female students learning from a male teacher to act like a woman (reflecting the newly instituted coed system). This interest in gender performance and performativity, combined with her procurement of operatic costumes and headgear, inspired her post-China-trip performances on screen and stage (see chapters 1 and 2).⁷⁸ The ostensibly quasi-ethnographic footage, therefore, went beyond cursory Otherizing scopophilia to embody Wong's engagement with the Chinese locals to build collaboration from her position as a sojourning outsider and observer-participant.

Wong's travelogue footage ended with her visit with her father (who had returned from the US in August 1934) in their ancestral village, Changon, accompanied by her sister Ying and youngest brother, Richard. The closing long wide shot shows Wong, dressed in an elegant long qipao, back to the camera, supporting her aging father as they stroll into the setting sun filtered through trees. Accompanying this atmospheric shot, the older Wong, her father now dead, tells Stephenson that her one and only trip to China was the "most meaningful" among her many cosmopolitan travels. Her tone of nostalgia seems to deliver the show's promise of having an ex-film star of "Chinese extraction" (Wong's jocular self-identification) guide Cold War-era American families on a heart-warming tour to her father's "native land," which is now tucked away in another time as well as another space.

And yet, since the travelogue footage was silent and was not publicly shown in the late 1930s, its surfacing in 1957 on the television screen, enlivened by the older Wong's voiceover, means that the past became visible and legible only through the present recomposition and remediation. The entanglement of absence and presence, and of different spatiotemporalities, both highlights the historical shifts and resists unilinear temporality. Thus, "Native Land" does not simply transform Wong's travelogue footage into a vehicle for teaching ordinary Americans about a friendly "old China" that was irreversibly replaced by America's Red enemy. Moreover, Wong seizes this opportunity to interrupt a linear progression and insist on the continuous relevance of an episode of her career. This past-present composite is encapsulated in the juxtaposition of the two Wongs from different historical eras, with her double gaze first inscribed in the 1936 16mm film, then in the 1957 television show. In these inter-temporal and cross-media processes, Wong occupies multiple positions as a star, a quasi-ethnographic filmmaker, a cosmopolitan traveler, a controversial Chinese "daughter," an American exotic icon, and, ultimately, a peripatetic performer-worker and a tongue-in-cheek mediator who performs the "native informant," addressing and greeting the public from an interstitial position unaligned with any essentialist identity.

From the 1936 travelogue footage that resulted from her exclusion from *The Good Earth* to "Native Land," which signaled her relaunching of television acting following the 1951 foray into *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, Wong weathered episodes of disappearances to chart out labor-intensive rebeginnings while

maintaining active interactions with different publics. In the next section, I continue to explore Wong's multi-registered audience address in another media work derived from her China trip.

“I THOUGHT I COULD BRUSH UP ON MY MANDARIN”:
INSIDE JOKES AND INTERACTIVE AGENCY
IN THE MARGINS

Produced by Louis Lewyn Productions, distributed by MGM, and released on April 3, 1937, just over two months after *The Good Earth's* premiere on January 29 in Los Angeles, *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* is a short musical revue set in a garden tea party cohosted by the actress Elissa Landi and the comedian Charley Chase. Its Orientalist extravaganza decked out in a loud color scheme makes it the polar opposite of *The Good Earth's* mud-caked realism. Yet they share the full-blown yellowface costuming, the makeup, and the fixation on Oriental exotica (albeit in different forms). Indeed, *Hollywood Party* could be understood to cash in on American audiences' surging interest in China as a result of *The Good Earth's* spectacular success and, ironically, Japan's escalating war on China.

In *Hollywood Party*, the hosts and a large number of ensemble actors stage yellowface pyrotechnics marked by quaint costumes, coolie hats, folding fans, taped “Oriental” “slit eyes,” and contrived yellowvoice and body mannerisms, in a mish-mash “Oriental” setting crowded with a faux-Shinto shrine, man-carried sedans, bamboo blinds, miniature pagodas, and other “Oriental” bricolage. Cohost Chase, yellowfacing the fictional “Charley Chan Chase the magician” in a faux-Manchu robe, manneristically twitches his Fu Manchu-esque mustache, speaks with the Hollywood-concocted yellowvoice, and announces the song-and-dance numbers with bogus “Oriental” magic tricks. The revue numbers put on display for the diegetic tea-party guests and the film audience are clownish verging on campy, as illustrated in the yellow-clad Ahern Sisters' dance caricaturing “Chinese” bowing and kowtowing against the background of a miniature pagoda, the Al Lyons Band dressed in faux-Manchu gowns and hats, and the Marcus Show Girls posing as dancing-and-singing hula girls.

Wedged right in the middle of this cringe-worthy Orientalist frenzy is Wong's first screen appearance following her China trip. In this under two-minute snippet (in the twenty-minute film), Wong gives a quiet and witty fashion show of the exoticized, yet modern, feminine chic dresses that she has recently acquired from China. Cued by Elissa Landi striking a mini gong, Charley (Chan) Chase introduces Wong as a “China lady of fashion.” A cut directs the audience's attention to closed yellow bamboo blinds, flanked by two Chinese women dressed, respectively, in purple and green silk jacket suits. As one woman strikes a standing gong accompanied by nondiegetic, stereotypically chirpy pentatonic music, the other woman pulls open the blinds, revealing Wong, seen through the slats, dressed in a long blue qipao,

VIDEO 4.3. Wong modeling dresses she had procured in China, in *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.4.3>



standing with her back to the camera, left arm akimbo, in front of a Chinese-themed background drape, as if she were part of the Orientalist setting (video 4.3).

This brief tableau full shot prefigures Wong posing as a mannequin modeling the Peking Opera woman warrior costume at the beginning of *Daughter of Shanghai* (released eight months later, in December 1937). Anticipating the fully developed strategy of mobilizing a fashion parade as subversive “Oriental” (dis)play in *Daughter of Shanghai* (chapter 1), Wong in *Hollywood Party* uses the brief snippet to explore the agency of self-objectivization. Opening the fashion parade in a tableau pose, she objectivizes herself as a prop modeling other props—the exotic costumes—only then to break out of the objecthood to directly address the mainstream white American audience (both diegetic and extradiegetic). At the same time, she interacts with the two Chinese-heritage women in the stage margins to coproduce a beguiling show of Chinese femininity.

Stirring out of the tableau pose, the blue-clad Wong detaches from the background behind the blinds, turns around, and walks to the foreground toward the camera, as the chirpy pentatonic music continues. Then a cut takes us to behind the blinds, offering a medium framing of her wielding an obligatory Chinese folding fan of matching blue color as she addresses the camera/audience, stating that she was so impressed by the “smart and vivid” Chinese ladies in their “beautiful modern dresses” that she decided to “go completely Chinese in my wardrobe.” She goes on to teach the American audience about the blue qipao she is modeling, describing it as an “afternoon dress in the famous Peking blue from the former capital now called Peiping.” Here Wong avoids using the foreign-sounding Chinese term *qipao* (or the Cantonese equivalent *cheongsam*), and instead domesticates it into an American-friendly “afternoon dress,” which is not a Chinese concept. Yet she also strategically retains the exotic visual appeal of the dress by branding it as “Peking blue.” Additionally, she shows off her up-to-date knowledge of China, telling the audience about the imperial capital city’s name change from Peking to Peiping.

The next costume Wong displays, after the purple-clad Chinese woman briefly shuts the blinds, is a silver cape, “a blending of the very old and the very new; the material is tribute brocade from the imperial palace made along the latest western lines.” Taking off the cape, revealing a bright yellow qipao, Wong momentarily turns to the green-clad Chinese woman on the right, speaking in Chinese. The latter responds in English, “I’m sorry but I only understand Cantonese,” whereupon they share a hearty laugh. After the brief Chinese interlude (more on this later), Wong turns to the camera to face the mainstream white American audience, her big smile slowly replaced by a straight, authoritative face as she smoothly segues to introduce her yellow qipao as a “dress from Peiping,” made of “the famous imperial yellow with a dragon, the symbol of the old China.” As Wong smilingly closes this information capsule while elegantly opening the folding fan, a cut takes us back to a full shot of her—seen through the blinds with open slats. Wong’s quietly witty fashion show is followed by a performance by the Al Lyons Band, with all the musicians yellowfacing in gaudily colored, make-believe Manchu robes and hats.

Short as it is, Wong’s fashion parade sabotages the yellowface extravaganza in the rest of the revue film, but not because one is authentic while the other is fake. Rather, the critical difference is one between satirical identity performance and racist caricature. By self-reflexively and sartorially performing Chineseness, Wong satirizes not only American Orientalism but also Chinese linguistic nationalism. She seizes the stage offered by *Hollywood Party* to display her new knowledge about Chinese fashion and culture so as to play the China spokesperson. Meanwhile, she also leverages her Chinese knowledge to playfully challenge the very notion of authenticity, debunking the Western-centric epistophilia about China on the one hand and the Chinese Nationalist government’s homogenizing construction of Chineseness on the other. In introducing the fashions, she underscores the hybridization of the old and the new, the imperial Chinese brocade and the Western cut (for the cape). Thus, she does not so much reinscribe the ancient China mystique as render it a playable and mutable icon that could be grafted onto the Western fashion idiom to produce composite Chineseness. Such composite objects constructed by Wong’s embodied and discursive mediation demonstrate how the ostensibly binary notions of the East and the West, the object and the subject, the old and the new, necessarily reshape each other, instead of simply blending or clashing with each other.

It is hard to empirically track down how Wong’s contemporary, predominantly white audience received her subtle sabotage of race-gender stereotyping that was, after all, the main attraction of *Hollywood Party*. Publicity showed that American theater exhibitors recommended this film for “good comedy” and “outstanding” colors, suitable for “general patronage.”⁷⁹ Although Wong was listed as one of the personalities paraded in the film, it was the “comedy” or the blatant yellowface caricatures that were highlighted. Interestingly, Wong had collaborated with Charley Chase in comedy shorts earlier in her

career, possibly when she was a Hal Roach contract player (more on this in the Refrain).⁸⁰ Yet, in contrast to Chase, whose long-term contract with Roach as a comedian led the audience to see his yellowface performance as entertaining, Wong was recognized largely for her straight-faced “Oriental” authenticity. It is therefore all the more important to look to the margins and the background to appreciate Wong’s double entendre through interacting with other racialized co-players on the screen, and how such interactions might help recruit a resonating alternative audience.

This collaborative authorship is crystallized in the Chinese interlude described above. In this interlude, inserted into her fashion parade, Wong abruptly interrupts her English introduction of a silver cape and turns sideways to speak Chinese to the green-clad Chinese co-player in the margin. The latter responds in idiomatic American English with a smile, “I’m sorry but I only understand Cantonese.” Wong smiles back and remarks with mock disappointment, “Oh, I thought I could brush up on my Mandarin.” They both laugh heartily as Wong turns to face the camera and the mainstream white audience, and then, without missing a beat, straightens her face and segues to introduce the yellow qipao she reveals under the cape. During this flitting and opaque Chinese interlude, Wong deftly collapses the center stage and the edge of the screen/stage space (or the parergon), working with the supporting Chinese female co-player to simultaneously claim *and* debunk the homogeneous authentic Chinese identity.

I have argued elsewhere that this Chinese interlude constitutes “a make-believe performance amenable to multiple, potentially contradictory, interpretations.”⁸¹ For the mainstream white audience, Wong’s untranslated Chinese side talk reinforces her opacity as the “inscrutable Oriental.” Her subsequent comment—“Oh, I thought I could brush up on my Mandarin”—then leads the white audience to believe that she has just spoken a Mandarin line to her Chinese co-player. This belief clinches Wong’s updated and upgraded modern Chinese identity, following her much-publicized Mandarin lessons in China. With this linguistic upgrading (given the Chinese government’s promotion of Mandarin as the national language), she presents herself as a spokesperson for modern China (especially modern Chinese urban femininity), contesting *The Good Earth*, which excluded her but was endorsed by the Chinese government.

In the meantime, Wong’s Chinese interlude mocks the Chinese government’s homogenizing linguistic nationalism. For she and her Cantonese-literate co-player share the tacit understanding that her Chinese line is not Mandarin (as they make it out to be, for the white audience), but something close to her ancestral Taishan dialect. In other words, when the female actress in the margin feigns inability to understand Wong’s “Mandarin,” they coproduce a side show to convince the white audience of Wong’s Mandarin capability and, by extension, her new alignment with the Chinese government, in order to align with Hollywood’s newfound support for that government. Thus, their shared laughter implies an inside joke, legible only to



FIGURE 4.4. Mise-en-abyme spatial demarcation in *Hollywood Party in Technicolor* (1937) (frame enlargement).

a similarly marginalized ethnic audience who could see that Wong's make-believe "Mandarin" Chinese is for the gullible. By smuggling Taishanese into the show and passing it off as Mandarin, Wong, in collaboration with another ethnic performer and resonating audience, exploits the burgeoning Sino-American rapprochement, only then to surreptitiously displace China's homogenizing nationalism with a supranational and diasporic lingua-culture rooted in southern Chinese dialects.⁸²

Wong and her co-player's collaboration links the center stage (occupied by Wong in her fashion parade) and the margins (occupied by her co-player), collapsing the spatial demarcation within the mise-en-abyme screen frame. In Wong's fashion show, we see layers of frames—the screen frame, the frame of the bamboo blinds flanked by the purple and green-clad ethnic Chinese female performers, the square Chinese-style drape, and the make-believe ornate doorway in the *background* behind the blinds (figure 4.4). Yet when Wong and her co-player interact across the edges, they collapse and de-binarize the center and the margins, much as Wong did when she shifted the show from the parergon position (see chapter 3).

This center-margin traversing extended beyond the diegesis. Since *Hollywood Party* existed in the shadow of the mega-production *The Good Earth*, which had premiered two months earlier, Wong's collaboration with the ethnic Chinese

co-player took place in the margin of the margin, bespeaking the complex entanglement between the center and the periphery, between visibility and invisibility, between the star/celebrity and the performer-worker. It is in the interstice between exclusion and inclusion that Wong and her Chinese co-player develop their speech “in a forked tongue”—that is, speaking as authentic spokeswomen for modern Chinese femininity on the one hand *and*, on the other, as tricksters juggling multiple identity positions, sharing inside jokes and laughter. When their collaborative side show elicits and fosters a more discerning viewership, such tacit mutual recognition spreads further through the circulation of glance, wink, laughter, and verbal asides. We see this circulation further fleshed out in *Daughter of Shanghai*, in the dance sequence where Wong’s character’s sideways glance meets with that of Philip Ahn’s character (see chapter 1). These sideways interactions echo what Glissant theorizes as the “right to opacity,”⁸³ resisting mainstream scrutiny (whether it aims at interpellation or Otherization), thereby demanding altogether different terms of visibility with matching strategies of discernment and attunement.

Wong’s reshaping of the terms of visibility and spectatorial sensibility arose from her episodic career. Contrary to the British journalist John Newnham’s description of Wong’s willful disappearances and reappearances,⁸⁴ Wong’s disappearances were imposed by Hollywood’s marginalization and exclusion (as amply illustrated by the casting of *The Good Earth*), which also forced her to regroup and retrain herself while seeking opportunities elsewhere, as demonstrated by her China trip, which in turn led her back to the big and small screens in the US. Her episodic disappearances and reappearances enacted what Lauren Berlant calls the “dissociative poetics” that taught her to navigate systemic negativities, and to use the disappearances as “a potential hub” of “lines of flight” so as to “better show up even for these relations that one also finds unbearable because one must bear them.”⁸⁵

Wong’s episodic career was persistent, resilient, and anachronotopic. Rather than pursuing a telos-driven forward and upward trajectory, it scrambled chronology and teleology through reiterations (with differences) and multiple rebeginnings and reorientations. It also foregrounded the physical, intellectual, and affective labor of waiting, frustration, retraining, and regrouping. Thus, even as she was striving for center-stage roles, she inevitably straddled the center, the periphery, and the off-screen/stage spaces, shattering the naturalized hierarchizing optic. Wong’s diegetic and extradiegetic shuttling between these differentially weighted sites resembles what Ashon Crawley calls “centrifugitivity” in relation to Black Pentecostalism. Centrifugitivity conjoins centripetal and centrifugal movements, asserting dissent and descent simultaneously as the grounds of social gathering.⁸⁶ Similar to Wong’s episodic, anachronotopic, oftentimes off-center, and even invisibilized career, centrifugitivity privileges “indeterminacy of meaning” by moving “not simply in a linear, forward progression but also vertically, down and up, askance and askew.” Such a nonteleological dynamic gravitates toward “otherwise

worlds of possibility,” necessitating an “ongoing anticipatory posture, an affective mode of celebratory waiting.”⁸⁷

This “ongoing anticipatory posture” accurately captures Wong’s investment in her actual and potential audiences, with expectations of making contact beyond the entrenched system of Otherization and interpellation. Understood in the *longue durée* during and since her lifetime, Wong’s Chinese interlude from *Hollywood Party* shows that her episodic yet persistent life-career is one of constantly reaching out and building toward multi-sited publics with whom to foster synergistic transformative politics from the centrifugitive margins. The surging interest in Wong over the past two decades is clear evidence of her success in speculating and recruiting expanding audiences who are learning to critically engage with her complex legacy.

By recruiting an expanding public through the sideways audience address, Wong redefines authorship in two critical aspects. First, she debunks the individualist and autonomous notion of authorship, and instead highlights the call-and-response with similarly marginalized co-performers and resonating viewers. Second, her centrifugitive performances dwell on the tension between the center and the margins, hypervisibility and invisibility, compliance and defiance—thereby underscoring the paradox of agency. That is, her situated agency is inevitably entangled with constraints and negotiations. Her paradoxical authorship is quintessentially intersubjective and relational, stemming from her multifocal and anticipatory interactions with her co-players and resonating audience. Her peek-a-boo intervention and multiple rebeginnings retrain the viewers’ eyes to look differently, teaching them to coproduce a centrifugitive sensory field and interactive minoritarian agency.

Wong’s centrifugitive neither-nor position, combined with eclectic leverage of resources, dovetails with a postcolonial and poststructuralist sensibility. In the next chapter, I probe the ways in which present-day critical viewers (including film critics and media practitioners) respond to Wong’s time-capsule “greetings.” At the heart of my discussion is how such diachronic call-and-response reanimates and re-composites Wong’s legacy to address issues surrounding social equity and justice in our own time.