Wong’s dragon lady costume was condemned by Chinese nationalists and raved about in American publicity writings.
The Art of Screen Passing:  
Anna May Wong’s Yellow 
Yellowface Performance in the 
Art Deco Era

Yiman Wang

There was a time when assimilation did quite strictly mean whitening. . . . You “made it” in society not only by putting on airs of anglitude, but also by assiduously bleaching out the marks of a darker, dirtier past. And this bargain, stifling as it was, was open to European immigrants almost exclusively; to blacks, only on the passing occasion; to Asians, hardly at all. —Eric Liu, The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker

The birth centennial of Anna May Wong (1905–61) has brought much scholarly and popular attention to the pioneering Chinese American film and stage actress, who was active in America and Europe through the 1940s. Thus it appears to be an apt moment to recover Wong’s legacy from the stereotypes of Madame Butterfly and Dragon Lady. The recent academic and popular revival of Wong has taken a variety of forms, including high-profile exhibitions of her films in large US cities; the publication of two biogra-
phies;\(^1\) a play titled \textit{China Doll};\(^2\) a companion book listing Wong’s oeuvre in detail, accompanied by excerpts from contemporary reviews;\(^3\) and a documentary film in progress;\(^4\) not to mention mushrooming fan Web sites and expanding memorabilia collections. The fact that all the biographies, plays, and documentaries about Wong, either completed or in progress, are authored by Asian Americans, with the single exception of Graham Russell Gao Hodges’s biography, signals a shared Asian American agenda in reviving Wong. This agenda involves staking out contemporary Asian American social positions and advancing a collective intervention into a white Euro-American hegemony of interpretation.

Wong’s recuperation represents a most timely enterprise of redressing the historical negligence accorded nonwhite performers in the Euro-American entertainment industry. My task in this essay, however, is not to join the celebratory chorus, but rather to dwell on the potential risks involved in fetishizing Wong by unproblematically suturing her into the Asian American saga of self-discovery. The Hollywood Walk of Fame at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and La Brea in Los Angeles features a life-size statue of Wong along with three other early Hollywood stars: Mae West, Dorothy Dandridge, and Dolores del Rio. Diane Negra has suggested that this public sculpture “work[s] to obscure what [it] overtly commemorate[s]” in that it “implicitly references immigration history, and posits a connection between the absorptive capacities of Hollywood and America itself.”\(^5\) Similarly, I argue that the easy splice of Wong with Asian American identity politics risks eliding the sociopolitical circumstances that overdetermined the actress’s figuration and reception both within America and beyond. Such decontextualization not only prevents us from adequately understanding Wong’s dilemma and unique strategy but may also lead to the problematic fetishization of the category of \textit{Asian American}, as if the naming itself guarantees visibility and empowerment to a minority group.

To make Wong’s legacy better serve Asian American interests, I would like to consider it from another perspective, namely, that of her performative strategy of passing, or more specifically, \textit{screen} passing. By \textit{screen} passing, I mean her ability to act and
overact in a wide range of racialized roles, by which she brings to the fore the stereotypical and Orientalist underpinnings of these roles. My proposal regarding Wong’s screen passing seems to contradict Eric Liu’s comments, quoted in the epigraph of this essay, that for Asians, passing or assimilation into American society is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, as my analysis will demonstrate, in an era of blatant racism and Orientalism, when Asian Americans hardly had any chance of becoming assimilated into the white mainstream (which is not to say that assimilation indicates complete success), Asian American actors were seldom judged by their performing skill, let alone their performative strategy. Instead they were often seen as a mere index of a homogenous Orient. Consequently, Wong’s screen passing has remained unrecognized and occluded by essentialist discourses in Euro-America and China alike. My aim is precisely to focus on Wong’s performative strategy and to highlight its repressed subversive potential. To my mind, Wong’s legacy best serves Asian American interests in the new millennium only when we fully understand why her performative strategy has been discursively repressed and how we can prevent such ignorance and misrecognition from being repeated.

My interest here is in understanding how the racial, ethnic, class, and national borders were conceived in Wong’s time, two decades before the emergence of the term *Asian American*, and how these conceptions worked together to defuse Wong’s performative strategy. I contend that it would be more productive to consider the conditions of Wong’s production and reception as they were perceived by herself, her reviewers, and her audiences (American and foreign), rather than simply fitting them into an a priori Asian American cognitive map. In the following discussion, I start with outlining the discursive environment of racism and Orientalism that circumscribed the deployment of ethnic actors in the Euro-American film industries during the interwar period. From there, I discuss how Orientalism converged with the various cinematic manifestations of art deco, retrenching Wong’s marginalization on and off the screen, despite her wide popularity with multinational film audiences. My analysis demonstrates that Wong’s marginalization was not simply due to a lack of atten-
tion to her on-screen presence on the part of Western audiences. On the contrary, rave reviews about the “little Chinese actress” abounded in the popular press. The problem is that these reviews, positive as they were, tended to reinscribe an essentialist discourse that rendered Wong’s acting mimetic instead of performative (in the sense elaborated by Judith Butler). In other words, whatever roles Wong played, her acting was unanimously seen as transitively and indexically related to what was imagined to be “Chinese” or “Oriental.” Such roles included Lotus Flower, the Chinese Madam Butterfly who drowns herself after being abandoned by her American husband in *The Toll of the Sea* (dir. Chester M. Franklin, US, 1922), the Mongolian slave girl scheming with the Mongol emperor in *The Thief of Baghdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, US, 1924), the scullery dancer killed for seducing a white man from a white woman in *Piccadilly* (dir. E. A. Dupont, UK, 1929), and the Dragon Lady plotting a white man’s death in *Daughter of the Dragon* (dir. Lloyd Corrigan, US, 1931).

Unlike post-1960s Asian Americans, who can more or less lay claim to a hybrid or hyphenated identity (which does not mean that such an identity is easily donned or easily understood), Wong had no access to such an interstitial ground. Throughout her life, she was defined by her Chinese “genes,” a racializing discourse that further justified the essentializing of her acting. To counterbalance the prevalent Orientalism and essentialism attached to her career, we must first do justice to the unique performative strategy of what I call Wong’s screen passing and her “yellow yellowface” performance. In the last part of the essay, therefore, I will elaborate on Wong’s ironic intervention and the sociopolitical significance of recognizing it as such. The purpose is not to depoliticize Wong’s acting, but to problematize those identity politics that rest on essentialism through a reframing of Wong’s pioneering legacy.

**Hollywood Orientalism in the 1920s**

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is a process of “substitution and displacement” that seeks to construct an internally consistent
knowledge system about the Orient, while rendering the material and geographical Orient completely irrelevant and absent in dominant discourse. The period from the 1920s to the 1940s, Anna May Wong’s period of greatest activity in Euro-American film industries, was marked by what Timothy Tseng calls “political Orientalism.” Unlike the previous two types he identifies—“patrician Orientalism” and “commercial Orientalism”—political Orientalism emerged in the 1880s and “recast desire-imbued and ambiguous representations into an exclusionary and segregationist discourse.” It provoked the missionary emphasis on “cultural-social assimilation” and the Americanization of Asian Americans. In the 1920s, Protestant advocates turned toward sociological study for evidence of the assimilability of Asian Americans.

The gap between the segregationist discourse and the missionaries’ assimilationist efforts meant that Asian Americans during this period faced extreme uncertainty in terms of their sociopolitical positioning in American society. Unlike the European stars whose “probationary” whiteness confused neat classification when they were imported into Hollywood, the all-too-visible racial difference of Asian Americans worked to reinforce the racial divide. Furthermore, the “inscrutable” Oriental Other was stigmatized by the “yellow peril” discourse that acquired currency after Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905—the first ever Oriental triumph over the West. Consequently, assimilation or passing was ruled out as an option for Asian immigrants in America.

Such was the discursive and sociopolitical environment that Anna May Wong encountered when she struggled her way into Hollywood in the late 1910s. Born a third-generation Chinese American in 1905 to a Cantonese laundryman’s family on Flower Street, right on the edge of Los Angeles’s Chinatown, she described herself as an avid moviegoer who knew as a teenager that she wanted to become a movie actress, not a laundrywoman. She received her first role as an extra in *Red Lantern* (dir. Albert Capellani, US, 1919) thanks to her cousin, James Wong Howe, who was to become an important cinematographer in Hollywood. Wong’s ensuing screen career was filled with frustration over Hollywood’s racist Orientalism, which relegated her to minor,
exotic roles in which she frequently decorated the mise-en-scène, seduced the white protagonists, and played the villain, only finally to receive the punishment of death, upon which white middle-class supremacy was ostensibly restored.

Wong was simultaneously hypervisible and invisible as a “Hollywood Chinese” in the cinema of the 1920s. Throughout her life, she was constantly labeled as “Chinese.” American publicity writings described her as “a Chinese girl,” a “little Chinese star,” and a “Chinese flapper.” Rob Wagner, Wong’s family friend and a newspaper columnist, suggested that she should ‘can’ her Hollywood feathers and be Chinese. . . . [She should] burn incense in her hotel room, to add to her exotic charm.” Another report describes her as a “Chinese although born in San Francisco [sic],” who was “much in demand in pictures everywhere an Oriental girl is needed.” European reviews echoed this rhetoric. German reviews applauded Wong’s acting as “resolutely Chinese” and raved about her as an “exquisite Oriental maiden” with “porcelain loveliness” and “exotic pulchritude.” British reviewers seemed more sensitive to her American upbringing by stressing her “American timbre” and her Western “mental outlook” cloaked under her Chinese exterior. Nevertheless, the internal-external binary remained unchanged, splitting Wong between two essentialized poles that were then bifurcated as the Chinese exterior and the American interior. The insistence on Wong’s (if not complete) Chineseness was so strong that when a British author, Marjory Collier, described Wong as a body in which “East meets West,” the assumption remained that East and West could be unproblematically separated from each other. Wong’s body was seen as being split by two poles, rather than as an interstitial or hybrid body. One of the most extravagant tributes to Wong that ends up exemplifying Orientalism can be found in the art director Ali Hubert’s description of her: “Externally, she appears American: smart, confident, and chicly dressed. But inside, she is purely Chinese, wearing long hair, and believing in reincarnation, convinced that in her next life she will swing as a humming-bird on the branches of a pepper-tree.”
Contrary to Hubert’s characterization, whose reference to ancient China was meant to endow Wong with a mythic aura, contemporaneous Chinese discourses described her either as a desirable model of modern Western fashions or as a condemnable example of desinicization. In any case, for the Chinese public, the recognition of her Americanization coexisted with the assumption that she was unavoidably Chinese. This position was clearly represented in *Liangyou (Young Companion)*, a Shanghai-based, bilingual popular pictorial published between 1926 and 1946, which featured Wong as a celebrity figure on the cover page, as well as the interior pages, in 1927. Significantly, all the Chinese captions omitted her nationality and simply referred to her by her Chinese name, Huang Liu-shuang (or Wong Liu Tsong in Cantonese). Given the fact that many of her pictures were showcased among images of contemporary Shanghai film actresses, the self-sufficiency of Wong’s Chinese name itself implies that her nationality was taken as self-evidently and transparently Chinese. The latent assumption was explicitly reaffirmed in the English captions. For example, one picture from 1929 is identified as “Dance poses by the Chinese star, Anna May Wong, who is appearing in a German film”; another from 1933 reads, “Miss Anna May Wong, Chinese actress in Hollywood, returned to America from a prolonged trip in Europe.” In both cases, Wong is unproblematically styled as Chinese, albeit a highly mobile Chinese who might function as a cosmopolitan model for modern Chinese women.

Wong’s presumed Chinese identity inevitably fed into negative criticisms as well. As anticolonial and nationalist discourses surged in the early 1930s (partially due to Japan’s large-scale invasion of China), Wong came to serve as the whipping girl of the nationalist critics. She was berated for playing roles that reflected negatively on China’s international image. Her screen images most vehemently criticized for humiliating China include the Mongol slave girl in *The Thief of Baghdad* and the Chinese prostitute in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, US, 1932). Indeed *Shanghai Express* was banned by the Nationalist Party’s Film Censorship Committee, and Wong’s appearance in Hol-
lywood cinema in general was considered despicable. *Dianying shibao (Film Times)*, for example, commented on a photograph of Wong dancing with an extravagantly feathered headpiece in these terms: “The so-called Chinese film star Wong Liu Tsong who is traveling in America—how can she represent China in this way?” Another image, lifted from the Ross Verlag series of photograph postcards, showing Wong kneeling and holding a colossal vase in an Oriental setting, was accompanied by this comment: “The good-for-nothing Wong Liu Tsong has again become other people’s puppet. Who knows what she has in her gourd” (or, Who knows what she is up to!).

Negative criticism punctuated her visit to China in 1936, rendering her “homecoming” an uncanny experience, documented in her self-description, titled “My Self-Portrait” (“Wo de zishu”), which was translated into Chinese and featured in *Liangyou*. Thus Wong’s public persona was not only racialized and sexualized but also nationalized and gendered. Her behavior and figuration as a Chinese woman became metonymically representative of China’s international image, subjected to coding and policing in accordance with China’s nationalist agendas.

The production and dissemination of Wong’s Chinese identity in China and Euro-America can be traced to the burden of representation, which holds an American-born Chinese actress responsible for supposedly authentic, realistic, or positive depictions of China through screen acting. The discourse of representation was naturalized in two steps. First, Wong was consistently identified and conflated with her roles. Second, these roles were seen as directly reflecting the Orient (and China more specifically). As a result, Wong was positioned as a spokesperson for the Orient and China and subjected to Orientalist exoticization and nationalist interpellation at the same time. The fixation on Wong’s Chinese connection circumscribed her figuration and reception from the 1920s to the 1940s, not only in Euro-America but also in China.

In addition to her supposed Chinese genes, a number of factors also contributed to Wong’s figuration and reception. The two most important determinants are the art deco aesthetic and
cross-racial/ethnic casting, which were crucial to Hollywood’s casting and representational scheme in the 1920s. In the next section, I discuss how essentialism and Orientalism converged with art deco aesthetics to further entrench Wong’s Chineseness.

**Art Deco and Yellowface Performance**

The film scholars Mark Winokur and Lucy Fischer have examined the importance of art deco in fashioning Hollywood’s aesthetics from the 1910s to the 1930s. Described by Fischer as “a popular international trend that surfaced between the 1910s and 1935 and affected all aspects of world design,” art deco eclectically borrowed and combined elements from the mechanical, the avant-garde, the primitive, the exotic, and the Oriental, especially Chinese and Japanese visual culture. In terms of gender ideology, Fischer argues that the “female fixation” manifested in art deco designs was symptomatic of social anxieties about the emergent New Woman (254). In addition, art deco’s attraction to the primitive and the exotic signaled the era’s Orientalist and colonialist fantasies (254). Interestingly, whereas Orientalism relegated Wong to marginal, ethnic roles, the art deco aesthetic that drew on Orientalism allowed white actors unprecedented freedom to cross racial lines.

According to Mark Winokur, an important aspect of the art deco aesthetic is the yellowface practice that “provides a vehicle within which whites can play out a fantasy of otherness.” Moreover, yellowface and racial masquerade embody the American “fantasy about the ability to create not only one’s persona, but also one’s origins.” Following Winokur, Greg Smith argues that “such racial masquerade not only gives whites the potential to try on Other subjectivities, but it opens up possibilities of expression that are generally repressed in mainstream white America” by displacing extreme expressions onto the less civilized racial Other. The conspicuous rift between the white actor and the racialized role suggests that visual pleasure and the structure of the American film do not necessarily depend on the mimetic “assumption that actors hold a productive, transitive relation to their images on the
screen,” as Richard deCordova has put it. On the contrary, the intransitive relationship between the star body and the character’s body may stimulate fantasy and curiosity.

Such on-screen racial masquerade can be seen as a form of passing and, more specifically, of what I am defining as screen passing: the hyperbolic performance of a race or ethnicity different from that of the actor. Contrary to conventional racial passing, which hinges on erasing all traces of performance and disguise, screen passing in the form of yellowface or blackface masquerade highlights the white actor or actress behind the racially marked screen persona. Despite the difference, both racial passing and screen passing end up reproducing what Frantz Fanon calls the “racial epidermal schema.” That is, both paradigms suggest that one’s social identity and relationship with other social subjects and the entire environment are ultimately tied up with one’s skin color. A white actor can masquerade as an ethnic character without fear of becoming one because he or she does not change his or her complexion but simply blackens it (in the case of blackface) or reshapes the facial features by taping and stretching them (in the case of yellowface). Conversely, a so-called mulatto can pass as white only when his or her exterior visible body is light enough. The skin or the epidermis in both cases serves as the center of signification and the site where one’s racial identity is lodged.

By this logic, racial masquerade is strictly reserved for the white actor. As a color that is “no colour because it is all colours,” whiteness constitutes the “source of its representational power,” according to Richard Dyer. Thus when a white actor acts in yellowface or blackface, he or she is taken as a skillful performer of someone apparently not him- or herself, hence the impossibility of conflating the actor with the role of the racial Other. For a non-white actor, however, his or her transitive and mimetic connection with racialized roles remains fixed. In these terms, Wong’s acting could only be evaluated on the basis of how Chinese it appeared to be. Her reputation in Euro-America was due to the public’s fascination not with her performing skill but rather with her Oriental appeal. European women sought to pass as the little Chinese actress by copying her trademark bangs and applying special
lotions to achieve the Wong complexion. In America, Wong’s hairdo became so definitive of the “Oriental” look that when she turned down the role of the maid in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (dir. Frank Capra, US, 1933), her replacement, Toshia Mori, was made to wear a wig in imitation of Wong’s hairstyle. The lighting was also carefully arranged to conjure Mori as Wong. The art deco aesthetic, therefore, worked with Orientalism to retrench Wong’s presumed Oriental quality.

While Wong was confined to racialized roles, art deco’s Orientalism fully encouraged white actors’ screen passing. Thus Fischer observes that Myrna Loy succeeded in her yellowface performance in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (dir. Charles Brabin, US, 1932) because she represented a “counterfeit vision of the Oriental woman.”

The reason that a counterfeit (Loy) was favored over a “real” Chinese (heritage) actress (Wong) has to do with the rejection of history and realist representation by the audience of the period. As Winokur puts it, Wong’s “version of Art Deco does not work because she is authentically Asian; history begins to creep back into her character with an unacceptable realism. . . . Wong’s career must fade in a climate in which Loy’s can flourish.”

The escape from realism and history is consistent with the art deco aesthetic, which decontextualizes icons and objects and repackages them for decorative purposes. Given such an aesthetic, Wong was both welcomed and rejected for the same reason, namely, her “authentic” Chineseness. Seen as a Chinese, she was authentic and thus desirable. Yet she had less mobility within the shifting Orientalist imaginary than the white actresses had through their yellowface performance. The contrast between Wong and white actors can thus be understood as one between marked authenticity and universal plasticity.

The demonstrated obliviousness to Wong’s performative strategy, as opposed to the ready recognition of white actors’ racial masquerade, characterized not only Hollywood Orientalism but also the Chinese authorities’ reception of Wong. According to Wong, a clear double standard was applied to her and Warner Oland, the Swedish-born Hollywood actor best known for impersonating the two major Orientalist prototypes of Chinese men, Fu
Manchu and Charlie Chan. While the Chinese authorities berated Wong for playing humiliating roles, they warmly welcomed Oland during his visit to China, despite his despicable role of (as?) the villain Fu Manchu.⁴⁶ Given the Chinese public’s (mis)understanding of Wong’s Chinese identity, the double standard can be explained according to the following reasoning: Since Oland was not Chinese, he was only acting or pretending to be a Chinese, and such “unrealistic” acting did not need to be taken mimetically or seriously.⁴⁷ Wong, on the other hand, a born Chinese, appeared directly interchangeable with her roles, and therefore responsible for their derogatory quality. Like Western Orientalism, this rationale reproduced Fanon’s “racial epidermal schema,” reifying race and ethnicity and reinscribing the East-West dichotomy.

By this logic, white actors’ yellowface performance, in accordance with the art deco aesthetic, delivered exoticism that verged on the fantastic and the impossible, whereas Wong’s presence (in her Chinese costumes and interlacing her lines with a few words of the Taishan dialect from south China) supplied an exoticism associated with the authentic and the plausible. The mutual interdependence of hyperbolic exoticism and authentic exoticism is crucial to the success of an Orientalist film. Given the overriding debilitating conception and reception of the Hollywood Chinese, I am concerned with how to revisualize Wong’s performative strategy. The key lies in deessentializing Wong’s acting and conceptualizing it in terms of screen passing and yellow yellowface performance.

**Wong’s Screen Passing and Yellow Yellowface**

The notion of yellow yellowface is derived from the concept of black blackface proposed by Arthur Knight. In his study of American minstrelsy on the stage and the screen, Knight argues that “black blackface formed around—and worked to release or ameliorate—a knot of anxieties, tensions, pressures, and contradictions in the lives of blacks in America.”⁴⁸ Black blackface effectively reinscribes the black-white dyad in cases where Irish and Jewish immigrants and mulattoes blackened their faces in min-
strel shows, thereby obliterating the ethnic middle term between black and white. Nevertheless, by imitating and appropriating the conventions of blackface, black blackface can also foreground the performative constitution of apparently biological and physiological categories. As Houston A. Baker Jr. argues, there are two “authentic” African American literary tactics that deal with the dominant binary standard, that is, “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery.”49 Mastery of form is illustrated in the African American appropriation of the blackface minstrel mask, which, according to Baker, “took images that fueled the minstrel theater and used them to draw attention to the contours, necessities, and required programs of his own culture,” as demonstrated by Booker T. Washington’s writings. Such “manipulations of form” create “rhetorical possibilities for crafting a voice out of tight places” (33, 36). Unlike mastery of form, the deformation of mastery “refuses a master’s nonsense” and “returns—often transmuting ‘standard’ syllables—to the common sense of the tribe” (56). As Knight elaborates, deformation of mastery “appropriates the tools and terms of the ‘master’ and uses them for his own ends; . . . the consequent ‘sound’ will be nonsense to many but perfect sense to some.”50

The combination of the two tactics allows us better to understand how Wong’s yellow yellowface performance worked as a strategy in challenging Asian Americans’ situational dilemma in the 1920s. This strategy denaturalized the category of the Asian by mimicking and highlighting the process of producing stereotypical Asian images. In other words, to assess adequately the significance of Wong’s mastery of the yellowface form and the deformation of mastery, one must pay special attention to the ironic excessiveness of her acting, which is necessarily performative on two levels. First, as an American-born Chinese whose knowledge about China was highly mediated by Pearl S. Buck’s fiction and other popular Western stereotypes of the East, she relates to her Chinese (or otherwise racialized) roles only in a highly imaginary manner.51 Second, the Chinese and other racialized roles that Wong played are themselves hyperbolic and often demonic, so that any actress cast in these roles would have to
act—or overact—in a most dramatic fashion. What distinguished Wong’s acting from ill-calculated overacting is that hers was not simply dramatic but was self-consciously so. Self-reflexive performativity, according to Judith Butler, constitutes the fundamental route of fabricating and sustaining identity through corporeal signs. In Wong’s case, the corporeal signs that she used to fashion an Oriental persona included skimpy or excessive costumes and exaggerated headpieces that suggested exoticism, her trademark China-doll bangs, and heavy-handed mannerism. As my analysis of a key moment of cross-dressing in *Piccadilly* will make clear, Wong’s appropriation of these corporeal signs through her character demonstrates her performative problematization of the Orientalist role.

Granted, many of these signs were derived from the art deco aesthetic and were commonly employed by Euro-American Hollywood actresses, especially in the context of blackface or yellowface acting. Indeed, given the racial gap between the actor and the role, such corporeal signs constituted a crucial aspect in the game of cross-racial role-playing. Nevertheless, in these cases the estranging effect does not translate into an ironic perspective. On the contrary, it is managed in such a way that it both safeguards the real-life racial hierarchy and encourages temporary, on-screen confusion between fantasy and reality, thereby reinforcing Orientalism. One way in which this temporary confusion produced by Hollywood yellowface—a highly artificial device—was channeled toward believability (if not verisimilitude) was to cast white actors with little recognizability. David O. Selznick, for example, sought to minimize the incongruity in yellowface by casting two Europe-imported actors for the Chinese peasant couple in *The Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, US, 1937). The fact that they were not yet well known to the American audience and were good actors made their yellowface effective, according to Selznick. In this way, the mimetic principle was both suspended and preserved.

Unlike the Orientalist yellowface practice, Wong’s adoption of stereotypical corporeal signs should be read as an ironizing strategy, rather than merely a transitive impersonation of what she essentially is. The extravagance of the art deco idiom thus did
not simply signal Orientalism at its extreme; it also created a hypothetical site where Wong could play the Orientalist game by inserting herself into these props (as one of them) and at the same time play against the game by exposing its artifice and excess.

Wong’s ambivalence allows us to view her dancing roles in a new light. Films that cast Wong as a dancer include *The Chinese Parrot* (dir. Paul Leni, US, 1927), *Piccadilly*, *The Flame of Love* (dir. Richard Eichberg and Walter Summers, Germany/UK, 1930), *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Willis, UK, 1934), *Chu Chin Chow* (dir. Walter Forde, UK, 1934), *Daughter of the Dragon*, and *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, US, 1937). The frequent casting of Wong as an exotic dancer is significant. Besides functioning as a narrative mechanism that provides visual spectacle, the role of an exotic performer often provides the opportunity for her yellow yellowface performance. An illustration can be found in *Piccadilly*, in which Wong plays Sho-sho, a Chinese scullery maid-turned-dancer from London’s Limehouse district, who manages to climb the social ladder into the white world only to meet her death at the film’s end. The crucial moment at which Sho-sho exerts absolute power over her white boss and her Asian boyfriend takes place when, after being hired to dance in the nightclub, she demands an Oriental costume composed of a revealing, feminine bodice and an exaggeratedly phallic headpiece. In the dynamic triangle between Sho-sho, her envious boyfriend Jim (King Ho-Chang), and the profiteering boss Valentine Wilmot (Jameson Thomas), whom Sho-sho desires, Sho-sho clearly holds the commanding position. She first persuades the Asian man to don the androgynous costume and display it to the boss. Then she succeeds in making the boss purchase it at an inflated price by declaring that she shall either dance in this costume or not at all. The profit she generates for the club through exotic dancing demonstrates that she knows exactly what white society desires to see. Moreover, she voluntarily caters to that desire on the condition that the white nightclub boss cover the cost, and of course he eventually falls prey to her seduction.

In this process, Sho-sho seemingly goes along with the Orientalist fantasy by exhibiting herself as an Orientalist object.
Nevertheless, she makes it clear that she is the one who selects the corporeal signs, and she proffers the fantasy at an expensive price. Sho-sho’s maneuver is quasi-sadomasochistic—a quality transferred to and embodied in Jim’s forced donning of the androgynous costume. Forced to wear the odd costume, he protests by striking a highly feminine pose, with a limp body and an arm akimbo, while squinting at his onlookers, Sho-sho and Valentine. His simultaneous obedience (to Sho-sho’s order) and defiance toward the exoticizing gaze make him a perfect proxy for Sho-sho/Wong herself. By utilizing Jim as her own double, Sho-sho demonstrates to white society how a racialized person (man and woman alike) must adopt the master’s form and learn to enjoy the humiliation while sneering at his or her own enjoyment and the humiliation itself. By having an Asian man strike a tableau-like posture that prefigures and epitomizes the situational dilemma of a minority actor, Sho-sho can then enact this dilemma through detailed steps in the remaining film. In short, by making Jim wear the androgynous costume, Sho-sho does not simply reproduce the Orientalist image of the sexually ambiguous (even feminine) Chinese man but she also complicates this image by sadomasochistically turning the Chinese man into a mirror of herself, at once subservient and defiant. Such sadomasochism ultimately, potentially, preempts and defuses the pain of Orientalization and sexualization.

The doubling of Sho-sho and her Asian boyfriend can be further extended and read as an allegory of how Wong negotiated her status as a Chinese in the Euro-American cinema of the 1920s and early 1930s. If the mimetic assumption of a transitive connection between Wong and her roles contributed to an obscuring of Wong’s performative strategy, the same conflation takes place in Piccadilly, except that this time Wong appropriates and re-strategizes the conflation for her own purpose. The telltale moment occurs when Sho-sho signs “Wong Liu Tsong” in Chinese (instead of “Sho-sho”) in the club contract, as if Wong and Sho-sho were one and the same. One may argue that an English audience not familiar with the Chinese language would not pick up on this detail and would thus fail to identify Sho-sho with Wong. Precisely because of this, I argue, the Chinese signature acquires
two contradictory meanings. On the one hand, Wong’s Chinese writing, like her Taishan dialect and her supposedly Chinese costumes, is an example of the common practice of citing “Oriental” details, as if these superficial details sufficiently represented the racial and cultural Other known as the Orient. Thus by signing her real name in Chinese, Wong seems to reinforce the discourse of reification. On the other hand, since the non-Chinese audience was and is not expected to recognize (or to know) Wong’s real name on the contract, the Chinese signature suggests that Wong smuggled something unexpected, even uncanny (in the sense of it being at once familiar and strange), into the film. Through this unexpected and uncannily indexical signature, Wong inscribes her agency into the film in two ways: first by acknowledging her personal presence in the film via the proxy of Sho-sho, and second, and more important, by metaphorically authoring the entire film. That is, by foregrounding Orientalist typecasting, which renders her exchangeable with an Oriental role, Wong manages to reorient it so as to assert her agency as an author and initiator of actions. Thus, like Sho-sho, who problematizes the Orientalist fantasy by visualizing and displaying it to white society by making the latter pay a dear price (for the Oriental costume), Wong twists and satirizes Orientalist typecasting by pushing it to an extreme (having the character sign Wong’s own name) whereby she becomes the author and the agent (rather than the passive recipient of actions), even if such agency is a double-edged sword.

The same twist invites us to rethink her publicity’s repeated emphasis on the fact that Wong used her personal Chinese wardrobe in performances, a discursive emphasis meant to reinforce her affinity and natural fit with her racialized roles. This comforting assumption, however, can easily become its own opposite, insofar as not only her roles but Wong herself can be seen as constructed according to Orientalist essentialism. In other words, it is not Wong’s Chineseness that endows her acting and roles with authenticity, but the other way around: the racialized roles render her everyday conduct exotic and theatrical. To push this further, one may argue that by clothing her characters in her own Oriental costumes, Wong did not simply naturalize her transitive
bond with the roles but also highlighted the constructedness of the Orientalist fantasy. In these terms, she achieved two things at the same time: collaborating in the production of the Orientalist fantasy and, more important, highlighting her self-conscious fabrication and reification of the fantasy.\(^\text{56}\)

The double valences of Wong’s maneuver as character and as star exemplify the paradox of her performative strategy, or what I call her yellow yellowface performance, which is simultaneously occasioned and occluded by Orientalist modes of representation and reception. To clarify further Wong’s paradoxical agency, I refer to Josephine Lee’s analysis of Asian American actors’ stage acting and to Susan Sontag’s study of the camp aesthetic. According to Lee, the pleasure for Asian American actors in reenacting stereotypes lies in “shar[ing] with us as audience the thrill of being inside what is deeply shameful.”\(^\text{57}\) Furthermore, “even though the role of the stereotype is familiar and detestable, the casting of the Asian body is enough to ensure a kind of welcome disruption, an illicit pleasure that sets up a key tension between stereotype and performer” (101; emphasis added). The goal is to expose the stereotypes “as human constructions rather than essential beings” (103).

The strategy of subversion through ironic, tongue-in-cheek reenactment operates somewhat like a camp aesthetic, which Susan Sontag has defined as conspicuous stylization. Stylization, according to Sontag, “reflects an ambivalence (affection contradicted by contempt, obsession contradicted by irony) toward the subject-matter. This ambivalence is handled by maintaining, through the rhetorical overlay that is stylization, a special distance from the subject.”\(^\text{58}\) An illustration of such campy stylization, according to Sontag, can be found in Josef von Sternberg’s later films, which manifest “an ironic attitude toward the subject-matter (romantic love, the femme fatale), a judgment on the subject-matter as interesting only so far [as] it is transformed by exaggeration, in a word, stylized” (19). Among these later films, Shanghai Express occupies a significant position. Arguably, this film’s ironic stylization comes not just from von Sternberg’s hallmark authorial style (with the uncredited help of the Chinese American cinematographer James Wong Howe) and Marlene Dietrich’s jaded
sophistication as the seductive but lovelorn Shanghai Lily but also from Wong’s campy passing as a reformed Chinese prostitute who speaks Taishan dialect, sports her trademark bangs, wears a long Oriental gown, shares a first-class compartment with Dietrich, and quietly kills Oland’s bandit leader after being raped by him.

Understood as camp, Wong’s yellow yellowface impersonation of the Chinese prostitute, and multiple other racialized roles, was fundamentally opposed to the mimetic assumption of Wong’s “authentic” Chineseness. To adopt and adapt Lee’s and Sontag’s terms, Wong ironized and “camped-up” the deeply shameful roles, characters who mostly ended up being punished for transgressing racial and social boundaries. Thus Wong could be said to have derived “an illicit pleasure that sets up a key tension between stereotype and performer [herself].” This allowed her to carve out a multivalent screen space wherein racial and ethnic stereotypes are simultaneously exhibited for the entertainment-seeking audiences and subverted for those sensitive to her ironic and campy stylization.

The danger of Wong’s ironic performance going unrecognized, or of her subversion being misread as submission, is an issue directly addressed in another Chinese American intervention, namely, David Henry Hwang’s Tony Award–winning play, M. Butterfly (1988), and the 1993 film adaptation of the same name by David Cronenberg. Hwang’s subversive rewriting of the Madame Butterfly story begins with his resignification of the word *butterfly*. To be “butterflied,” observes Hwang, refers to a white male being deceived by an Asian woman into thinking she’s submissive when actually she’s running the show. The plot in *M. Butterfly* hinges on a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, mistaking a Chinese Peking Opera actor and female impersonator (and, as it turns out, a spy for the Chinese Communist Party), Song Liling (played by John Lone in the film), for his Madame Butterfly. The ultimate revelation of the Madame as a cross-dressed M. (monsieur) proves so traumatic that Gallimard, imprisoned for his entanglement with his lover/spy, must fill in the vacated female/Oriental/self-sacrificial role by himself masquerading as Madame Butterfly and duly committing suicide in the presence of other inmates.
Meanwhile, as he dies, Song, Gallimard’s Chinese madame/monsieur, heads back to China on a passenger plane, saddened but safely released from the Orientalist myth. The Orientalist myth that begins with feminizing/fetishizing the Oriental Other thus flips to the opposite pole, that is, feminization/fetishization of the Occidental Self. In other words, the projection of anxiety and abjection onto the Other is inevitably deflected back on the self, with self-annihilating consequences. The tragedy and travesty of *M. Butterfly* lies in the demonstration of how the reified Orientalist image devastates not only the ostensibly powerless Oriental but also the dominant, supposedly empowered Occidental. In Cronenberg’s words, *M. Butterfly* is less about the deception of one person by another than about “the deception of two people by themselves.”

I shall add that Gallimard’s deception by Song stems from his preexisting self-deception, which in turn is promoted by the Orientalist myth of Madame Butterfly, along with its gender, racial, and colonial asymmetry. It is Gallimard’s fixation with this myth that causes his ultimate destruction.

Not coincidentally, Song’s deceptive Madame Butterfly intrigue is inspired by none other than Anna May Wong. Among his bedtime reading materials is *Hollywood: The Smartly Different Screen Magazine*. The copy he has in hand features, on the cover, a tight close-up photo of Wong with her trademark bangs and her chin propped up on her hands, eyes looking straight at the camera. The accompanying blurb states, “Anna May Wong’s Chinese Love Code.” When discovered reading this magazine, Song declares, “I’m changing myself into a different person.” The implication is multiple. On the literal level, he shares Wong’s profession and sees acting as a constant identity transformation. On the historical level, as required by the Peking Opera convention, Song, the female impersonator, must transform himself into a woman by cross-dressing and adopting a highly constructed and intricately coded feminine demeanor. On the diegetic level, as a spy for the Chinese Communist Party, Song justifies his Westernized lifestyle and feminine persona as necessary accoutrements for donning a false identity, one that will enable him to insinuate himself into the Western world represented by Gallimard. The most important
implication in the context of my argument, however, is Song’s self-conscious realization of Wong’s subversive potential. If Wong’s mimicry and ironization of the “Chinese love code” have remained largely unrecognized, Song brings them into public consciousness. By mimicking and reenacting the Madame Butterfly myth, Song transforms it into an M. Butterfly trap, thereby demonstrating how Orientalism can in fact backfire and destroy those who create and sustain the Orientalist myth.

Importantly, insofar as Gallimard motivates most of the perspectival shots in Cronenberg’s film version, he stands in for the audience in the latter’s experience with the myth/trap. Gallimard’s self-deception can therefore be regarded as analogous to the audience’s self-deception, both of which result from the refusal to recognize the ideological agenda behind the myth. In this sense, Gallimard’s pathetic suicide (as an attempt to perpetuate the Madame Butterfly myth) stages the price the Orientalist audience will have to pay for their complicity with the myth. By having Song adopt Wong’s tactic of mimicry and act out its destructive potential, M. Butterfly foregrounds the importance of Wong’s yellow yellowface performance. By watching how Gallimard dooms himself by his persistent blindness to Song’s butterflying performance, modeled on Wong’s mimicry of the “Chinese Love Code,” the audience is urged to become sensitized to the performative strategy that the Oriental Other deploys as a way of contesting Orientalism. If Wong’s yellow yellowface performance was short-circuited due to the lack of an appropriate audience, M. Butterfly seeks to reenergize it by consciously cultivating an audience that recognizes not only the fundamental damages of Orientalism but also the ironic counterstrategies waged from inside.

**Conclusion: Toward a Paranational and Postethnic Identity**

When we shift from seeing Wong’s performance as authenticating vignettes utilized to foreground white actors’ yellowface virtuosity toward fully recognizing her acting as a subversive form of screen passing, we can start to understand the significance of her
parody of Hollywood’s Orientalism during the art deco era. As an excessively passing body suspended and shuttling between two worlds both on and off the screen, Wong troubles (rather than reproduces) binaries by mimicking and underscoring the process of passing. In this light, it is necessary to revise Winokur’s observation that Wong’s art deco performance necessarily failed because her very presence reinserted unwelcome history and “unacceptable realism” into an escapist (audio)visual paradigm. To begin with, just because Wong looked Chinese, her presence did not necessarily evoke reality and history more than white actors’ did. The question, then, is how properly to describe and understand the politics to which Wong’s Hollywood Asian status might give rise. I address this question by turning to another diasporic Asian intervention, in which a diasporic Asian woman’s linguistic choice exemplifies postethnic identity politics.

While reflecting on her “not speaking Chinese” despite her Chinese heritage, Ien Ang, a Chinese Australian critic, sees the ostensible deficiency and betrayal of her ancestral culture as instrumental to formulating a “postmodern ethnicity.” I quote her argument at length below:

This postmodern ethnicity can no longer be experienced as naturally based upon tradition and an ancestry; rather, it is experienced as a provisional and partial site of identity which must be constantly (re)invented and (re)negotiated. In this context, diasporic identifications with a specific ethnicity (such as “Chineseness”) can best be seen as forms of what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism”: “strategic” in the sense of using the signifier “Chinese” for the purpose of contesting and disrupting hegemonic majoritarian definitions of “where you’re at”; and “essentialist” in a way which enables diasporic subjects, not to “return home,” but, in the words of Stuart Hall, to “insist that others recognize that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power.”

In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics.
The analogy between Ang and Wong (despite their temporal distance) is striking, as suggested in their shared ambiguous status and linguistic “deficiency.” Like Ang, who speaks no Chinese, Wong spoke no Mandarin. While her father complained of her American accent when she did try to speak Taishan dialect, the Americans were surprised to see that she could speak and write English without difficulty. In response, she retorted, “But why shouldn’t I? I was born in Los Angeles.” Her anomalous position and misrecognition took another turn when she visited China, speaking her Taishan dialect with “such a marked American accent,” and finding that her lack of Mandarin and Shanghai dialect led to “the strange experience of talking to my own people through an interpreter.” Whereas Wong’s ability to speak Taishan dialect made her a Chinese speaker, her inability to speak or understand Mandarin—the official language—rendered her linguistically deficient, and therefore suspicious, from the hard-core nationalist perspective. This leads to a de facto situational analogy between Ang and Wong. Thus Ang’s articulation of strategic essentialism within postmodern ethnicity provides a useful framework for our understanding of Wong’s political significance as an Asian in this relatively early period of Hollywood.

Like Ang’s resistance of easy identification with any ready-made ethnic, cultural, and national identity categories, Wong constantly vacillated between emphasizing her American identity, on the one hand, and claiming her Chinese bond on the other. Her shifting self-positioning and redefinition challenged an a priori nation- or race-bound identity. Such situational distance from reified categories allowed her to deliver her stereotypically Orientalist roles not only with dignity (as Wong’s reviewers and scholars have emphasized), but perhaps more important, with irony.

Affirming Wong’s campy performance is not meant to invalidate the politics of representation, or to discredit Chinese nationalist critics’ anticolonial and anti-Orientalist enterprise, which was well justified as part of the independence movement. Rather I aim to disabuse the customary mimetic assumption that Wong was transitively linked to her roles, or that she must serve as a representative of China (perceived either as the exotic Orient or
the struggling semicolon). For this purpose, I propose an alternative approach to Wong’s pioneering status, that is, to emphasize her ironic ethnic masquerade under the cultural, social, and political circumstances specific to interwar Euro-America. By living out the risks and opportunities embedded in geopolitical and ethnic passing in a specific historical era, Wong demonstrates how essentialist discourses (including nationalism on the Chinese side and Orientalism on the American side) and performative screen passing interacted with and contested each other. Her afterlife, or the visual and filmic traces she left behind, continues to caution her audiences against the mimetic fallacy and urges them to explore paranational and postethnic identity formations. Such alternative identity politics do not transcend national and ethnic allegiances, but rather become possible only in contradistinction to such allegiances. As such, they call into question reified conceptions of nation, race, and ethnicity. The purpose of this project is, therefore, to address the problematic of representation and to lay the groundwork for a subtler and more discerning approach that will enable us adequately to consider the multifaceted interactions between cinematic representation and identity politics, between national politics and transnational mobility, without subsuming one term into the other. This, I believe, constitutes the beginning of our strategic repositioning of Anna May Wong’s pioneering legacy.

Notes


7. The denial of her American identity, despite her birth in Los Angeles, was literalized in the fact that her American citizenship was considered suspicious according to the Chinese Exclusion Act effective 1882–1943. See Wong’s 1927 “Form 430, Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status,” in Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, n.p.


13. For an important in-depth discussion of the yellow peril in Hollywood, see Gina Marchetti, Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).


15. See Wong’s autobiography, “The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl,” Pictures, parts 1 and 2, August and September 1926. I have not been able to access the August and September issues of Pictures. However, part 2 of Wong’s writing is available online at www.spankingart.com/Books/MemberArea/Autoby/wong.htm (accessed 2 August 2005).


17. Philip Leibfried, “Anna May Wong,” The Silents Majority (1995), available at www.mdle.com/ClassicFilms/Guest/Wong.htm (accessed 21 March 2001). Leibfried’s article is no longer available online. However, his other writings on Wong are easily accessible. See, for example, Leibfried and Lane, Anna May Wong.

Wong in the American Imagination” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1999), 143; italics added.


22. In fact, a number of British reviews of her film and theatrical acting commented negatively on her Californian accent, which prompted Wong to take expensive elocution lessons in order to acquire the “King’s English.”


26. For instance, she appeared prominently on the cover page of *Liangyou (Young Companion)*, June 1927, and the first page of *Liangyou*, August 1927. She was also featured in other issues, accompanied by short articles written by herself or Chinese reviewers.


29. See *Dianying shibao (Film Times)*, 15 July 1932, n.p. By contrast, the same dancing costume was described as “gorgeous and dancing” and “strikingly set[ting] off the Oriental beauty of Anna May Wong” in the caption to a publicity photo for *Daughter of the Dragon*. The description appears at the bottom of the publicity photo. Author’s collection. All unmarked translations are mine.


32. A rare exception to such nationalist discourses came from Yao Sufeng, a main contributor to the “Everyday Film” column in the Shanghai-based Chen bao (Morning Paper). In an article titled “Wong Liu Tsong Bears the Disgrace for China” (“Huang Liushuang ti zuguo shouzui”), Yao opposed the idea that Wong humiliated China through her Hollywood acting. On the contrary, he argued that it was not Wong who had disgraced China, but the other way around—the weak Chinese government had rendered Wong helpless in America, so much so that she had to take whatever roles offered her in order to survive. Unfortunately, Wong had to serve as a scapegoat for her motherland. In the end, Yao states, “We Chinese might as well get disappointed in ourselves, rather than in Wong.” This article was originally published in Nanjing zaobao (Nanjing Morning Paper), 14 February 1936, and was reprinted in Dianying huabao (Film Pictorial), no. 27 (1936): 5.

33. With the eruption of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Chinese publicity writings about Wong took a more positive turn, commending her fund-raising efforts (such as selling her wardrobe and modeling for a fashion show in New York City in November 1940). See “Wong Liu Tsong: A Patriotic Daughter Who Does Not Forget Her Roots” (“Huang Liushuang: Bu wang qi ben de aiguo nu’er”), Mingxin banyuekan (Star Biweekly), 1938, 12. The subtitle of this article reads, “Selling her clothes to raise funds during the anti-Japanese War. Who can say she is a film star without a motherland?” Interestingly, although it was featured on the “Hollywood” page and cites Wong as saying that she had been too Americanized to feel comfortable about Chinese customs, this article nonetheless insisted on her Chinese essence by comparing her with a married-off daughter who was now welcomed back to her maternal home. This mother-daughter trope effectively diminished Wong’s American upbringing by symbolically resinicizing her and harnessing her for the nationalist discourse, this time around as a role model.


42. Richard Dyer, “White,” *Screen* 29 (1988): 45. Importantly, the “white” here should not be understood as a self-evident biological term; rather it designates a sociocultural construct, the specific intention and extension of which have been constantly redefined in accordance with the ideological needs at particular historical moments. Thus not all white-looking actors enjoy the same degree of freedom in racial masquerade.
43. Leibfried, “Anna May Wong.”

44. Fischer, *Designing Women*, 232.


47. Interestingly, publicity sometimes focused on Oland’s convincing impersonation of a racial Other. According to a report, his performance of a biracial (half-Asian, half-white) rebel in *Shanghai Express* was so convincing that an old Chinese extra, who had never played in a film, took Oland to be a boy he used to know back in his Cantonese hometown and started to converse with Oland in Cantonese. See “Even Chinese Think Oland Is Oriental,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 10 February 1932. It is hard to determine whether this confusion really happened or was simply made up to pique the audience’s interest in Oland’s racial masquerade. The emphasis on the Chinese extra’s lack of experience with acting, however, suggests that his confusion might have had more to do with naivety, even media illiteracy, than with Oland’s verisimilar performance.


50. Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*, 175.

51. This is not to say that a China-born-and-raised Chinese actress would need less artifice in playing Chinese roles. This assumption would not only reproduce the essentialist logic, this time based on geographical proximity (if not race and ethnicity), but also deny the heterogeneity of being Chinese. Rather my purpose is to highlight the crucial significance of artifice and
performativity in acting in general, so as to problematize the mimetic understanding of the transitive connection between the actor and the role.


53. As far as I know, Travis Benton did not do Wong’s costuming, although he played a crucial role in Hollywood art deco, which might have indirectly inflected Wong’s costuming.

54. Selznick’s use of yellowface in *The Good Earth* was particularly poignant in that Wong, considering herself the ideal actress for the leading female role (the loyal wife of a Chinese peasant), had actively lobbied for it. Ironically, she was asked to play not the leading role but the seductive concubine of the peasant. Wong’s typecasting in the secondary role that merely supplies “authentic” yet negative attractions reinforces Fischer’s and Winokur’s argument that the flourishing of yellowface went hand in hand with Wong’s degradation.


56. Her excessive performance not only challenged Orientalist racial assumptions but also unsettled the gender binary through cross-dressing on and off the stage. A 1932 photo of Wong by Carl van Vechten, for example, shows her cross-dressed in suit and top hat, while drinking from a glass. In *Daughter of Shanghai*, the disguise is redoubled. In order to track down a coolie-trafficking group, Wong’s character first disguises herself as a dancer from Shanghai so as to gain access to the group leader, then cross-dresses as a male coolie to escape from the group. If Wong’s cross-dressing on the screen showcased her versatility, the offscreen cross-dressing testified to her participation in the performative conventions of the time. As an Orientalized actress confined to Oriental(ist) roles, Wong’s histrionics were self-consciously opposed to reification and pigeonholing.


63. Wong, “True Life Story.”


66. In a 1931 interview, she stated, “My face has changed because my mind has changed. I look like the people of the West—except in some moments of despair and stress, then I fall back on the Oriental philosophy, which is not to resist.” Quoted in Neil Okrent, “Right Place, Wrong Time: Why Hollywood’s First Asian Star, Anna May Wong, Died a Thousand Movie Deaths,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1990, 96.

67. Facing her Chinese fans during her China trip, Wong commented on her newborn sense of Chineseness in these terms: “I seemed suddenly to be standing at one side watching myself with complete detachment. It was my Chinese soul coming back to claim me. Up to that time I had been more of an American flapper than Chinese. That was also the turning of a corner.” Quoted in Harry Carr, “I Am Growing More Chinese—Each Passing Year!” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1934, quoted in Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, 49.

**Yiman Wang** is currently an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and visiting assistant professor of East Asian studies and cultural studies at Haverford College. Her works have appeared in *Chinese Films in Focus: Twenty-five New Takes* (2003), the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, and *Film Quarterly*. 
Jim, the Asian man, tries on the exotic costume, posing as a woman to his “spectators in Piccadilly.”