

Perpetually Cool

The Many Lives of Anna May Wong
(1905–1961)

Anthony B. Chan

Filmmakers Series, No. 103



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To All those Chinese girls
adopted by non-Chinese families.

May they find strength in
being Chinese.

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PREFACE

In the age of exclusion in Chinese America (1882–1943) and Chinese Canada (1923–1947), Chinese individuals with a strong sense of empowerment in the European American media were almost nonexistent until Chinese America's first movie star, Anna May Wong (1905–1961) or Wong Liu Tsong (Yellow Frosted Willow), appeared in *Shanghai Express* (1932). According to my relatives in Victoria, British Columbia, and Shanghai, Wong captivated the Chinese everywhere just by being there. No Asian American female film star has ever equaled her prolific career in film, stage, vaudeville, radio, and television before or after her death in 1961.

My parents, Steven and Rosy, were married in the same year that *Shanghai Express* appeared in theaters in Victoria and Vancouver. Born and raised in Canada and members of a merchant class in Chinese Canada, one of their few sources of entertainment was the movie theater. Like many Chinese in North America, the films they eagerly awaited, cherished, and from which they could escape the repercussions of the Great Depression and the consequences of racist acts were those that revealed people who actually looked like them. Anna May Wong was clearly one of those who looked like them.

Watching her repartee with Shanghai Lily and Mrs. Haggarty in *Shanghai Express* was almost like watching one of their neighbors on the wide screen.

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Here was a yellow woman holding her own against two white women. It was truly an extraordinary sight that almost never happened in the icy reality of interracial relationships, in which no yellow person could think or act equally to a white person in the 1930s. That Wong as Hui Fei, a Chinese, could brazenly speak in such a witty and cool manner while exuding a controlled rationality in this mind game was even more astonishing to Chinese living in a North America that precluded and subordinated them with discriminatory legislation and overt hostility.

For my parents and their generation, Anna May Wong was always an integral part of the family. Since she was the only female Chinese American film actress in Hollywood who actually became world famous, she eventually became an icon to the people of Chinese North America. Yet when her cinematic career as a lead performer ended with *The Lady from Chungking* (1942), her image disappeared. It was as if she were an apparition that appeared in more than sixty films and then evaporated like a short-lived butterfly.

In Hong Kong, where I worked as a television journalist, documentary filmmaker, and anchor from 1986 to 1987, the cinema is an integral part of the entertainment world. Newspaper articles sometimes referred to Anna May Wong as a Chinese American actress in the context of overseas Chinese film production originating from Hollywood. In the political environment of the 1980s, during which Hong Kong was conditioning itself to the fate of discovering its Chinese roots again as this city-state began its reintegration with China, I realized that the story of Anna May Wong was in fact the story of Chinese America discovering itself. She was the startling flash point in a Chinese America that sought agency and empowerment.

It was not until I began teaching documentary film production and Asian media systems at the University of Washington in 1991 that I thought to explore the possibility of a biography of Anna May Wong. I wondered why there had not been any extensive study of such a movie icon. As the first major Chinese American film star from Hollywood, her impact on Asian America was obvious. But only a paucity of movie-driven articles and her short memoirs existed on "Yellow Frosted Willow."

Sidetracked by my book *Li Ka-shing: Hong Kong's Elusive Billionaire* (1996), a four-part documentary film series on Asian Americans in Vietnam, and various administrative and teaching duties at the university, I began researching the Anna May Wong biography in earnest only in 1999. The wealth of material in English-, French-, and Japanese-language newspapers, her memoirs, and her own writings, especially during her sojourn in China in 1936 and collections at the New York Public Library, the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Library of

the British Film Institute, revealed a complex, witty, and sophisticated Asian American woman whose powerful intelligence, gift for languages, extraordinary ability to market her persona, and Daoist capacity to understand the world on her own terms transcended race, ethnicity, and citizenship.

Although the research material was extraordinarily rich, many of her films simply no longer existed. Fortunately, the film that revealed her first lead role, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922); her portrayal of the Mongol spy in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), which catapulted her to international fame; her finest and last silent film, *Piccadilly* (1928); and her tour de force performance in *Shanghai Express* (1932) were readily available. The textual analysis of these and other films such as *A Study in Scarlet* (1933), *Chu Chin Chow* (1934), and *The Lady from Chungking* (1942) divulged a penchant for perfection, a deft handling of difficult lines, a willingness to upstage the lead performers, a natural ability to consume the latest fashions as if they were simply tight body wear, and the capacity to exude a feverish sexuality. This was often exemplified by a hip, cool demeanor that beckoned and captivated the audience.

Writers will often mention that the act of writing is the act of exploration and discovery. This book is no exception, as I discovered through the act of examining Wong's life and career. She represented every Chinese who lived and worked in North America and who longed to come to terms with being Chinese in a Western country.

Writing is essentially a solitary endeavor, but the production of a book is not. Many people helped in the completion of this work. Many thanks to my research assistants at the University of Washington: Leah Altaras, Christy Aquino, Travis Brown, Cheryl Chu, Leah dela Cruz, Wai Ho, Melissa Lankhaar, Hazel Lin, Robert Newell, and Lauren Robison. Special thanks to Asako Yanai, who translated several passages from the Japanese. Thanks also to the University of Washington for granting me a ten-week sabbatical leave during which I was able to research and write the chapter entitled "Yellowface, Masks, and Stereotypes," and to the staff at the university's interlibrary loan division. As cinema studies librarian, Glenda Pearson was especially helpful. Albert L. Sampson of Seattle University and Kevin Kawamoto provided insightful editorial comments.

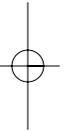
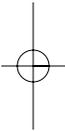
At Scarecrow Press, it was a pleasure to work with the noted film historian Anthony Slide, editor of the Filmmakers series. His vast cinematic knowledge helped to make this a better book. I also thank editor Rebecca Massa for her work in the completion of this publishing endeavor.

A contemplative home life is essential to productive writing endeavors. My companion of more than twenty years, Professor Wei Djao of North Seattle Community College, has always been there. Her book, *Being Chinese: Voices*



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from the Diaspora (University of Arizona Press, 2003), was the main intellectual inspiration behind this biography of Anna May Wong. Her good humor and meals of drunken pork tenderloin and lion heads also sustained me. Our daughter, Lian Djao Chan's, excursions into her own ethnicity, identity, and self-actualization witnessed all of our creative machinations. Life is good with no complaints when the act of creation can be exhibited and maintained.



INTRODUCTION

Lotus Flower,” “China Doll,” and “Dragon Lady” are just a few of the stereotypical appellations attached to Anna May Wong by European American and European producers, directors, critics, and journalists. As the first and most famous Chinese American movie star in the history of cinema, she was more than the images she portrayed in her films, stage productions, vaudeville acts, and radio and television shows over forty-two years.

Wong was the first internationally acclaimed Asian American female film star. She mesmerized audiences from Hollywood and London to Berlin, Paris, and Vienna with more than sixty films. Her stage career took her to Australia, Austria, Denmark, Italy, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Even more remarkable, she sometimes performed in the languages of the countries in which she worked. Her spoken German was legendary. Her cinematic demeanor was detached, cool, and hip. The woman had style!

This is a multifaceted story of the star as she grew up in Los Angeles during a time of social and political ferment when the Chinese revolution touched California. This period also was marked by the development of the Los Angeles laundry industry, which helped sustain her family, as well as by the emergence of Hollywood as a viable career alternative for some Asian Americans.

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Perpetually Cool is presented in three parts. The first chapters of part 1 chronicle Anna May Wong's life from her birth in Los Angeles, to her performance in early Hollywood films and her work in Berlin, London, and Paris during the 1920s, to her return to Hollywood in major films during the 1930s. She subsequently returned to London film studios for three films, followed by a contract with Paramount studios.

This biography is also the story of the patriotism of one Asian American woman who worked tirelessly against fascism during World War II. In addition to fund-raising, she starred in war films during the 1940s. In her final acting years from 1951 to 1960, Wong performed on television and was set to star in the movie version of *Flower Drum Song* when she died.

In part 2 Anna May Wong begins her enduring attachment to China and experiences life in Shanghai and other parts of Asia. The opening chapter is the story of seeking her roots when she ventured to China to discover that part of herself that was missing during her time in the United States. She lost her restlessness and was able to transcend her ethnicity, race, and citizenship. The later chapters reveal life in Shanghai and a philosophy based on family ties. In addition, Anna May Wong came to understand her place in the universe and began to think and live as a Daoist.

Part 3 concludes the book with textual analyses of Wong's signature films, from *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), and *Piccadilly* (1929) to *Shanghai Express* (1932), *A Study in Scarlet* (1933), *Chu Chin Chow* (1934), and *The Lady from Chungking* (1942). What resonates in all her films are the insidious racist ideologies of "Yellowface" and "Orientalism." Understanding these ideologies helps place her work in the context of forces that hampered her aspirations and career. Yet they helped Wong to understand the cinematic nature of European America, the pull of China, and her place on Earth.

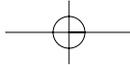
In the context of the unequal treatment fostered by "Yellowface" and "Orientalism," readers will note that I mainly use the term "European Americans" to refer to "white" Americans. In the United States, where race matters, this is an attempt to equalize terminology and to level the semantic playing field. Hitherto "white" Americans, denoting color, were juxtaposed against "Chinese" Americans, "Asian" Americans, or "African" Americans, revealing a geography and/or culture. By emphasizing "color" against "geography" and "culture," the term "white" American became unique and extraordinary. It was glaringly unequal in terms of common prerequisites of demarcation. In fact, the term "white" was a representation of power and authority, whereas "non-whites" were essentially powerless and subordinated. Representing "white" Americans as "European" Americans brings them into the common family of geography and culture. They become part of a European geographical and cul-

tural heritage in the same manner as Asian Americans are part of an Asian geographical and cultural heritage.

This book is an original and significant contribution to the cultural and film histories of the United States and to the cinematic development of Asian America and Asian American studies. From her first unbilled appearance in *The Red Lantern* in 1919 to her final role in the television series *Danger Man* in 1961, Wong transcended silent films, talkies, the London and New York stage, vaudeville, musical revues, and television. Magazines voted her the best-dressed woman in the world and the most beautiful Chinese woman on Earth. Heretofore, there has been no work of such magnitude about the first major Asian American female film star in the world.

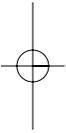
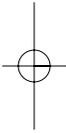
This biography is informed by the theories of Edward Said, Michael Omi, Howard Winant, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and David Wellman. Methodologically, it follows Robert Yin's case study research design. The book examines data gathered mainly from Anna May Wong's memoirs, film articles, extensive interviews in newspaper stories, and extant copies of her films.

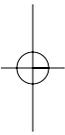
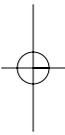
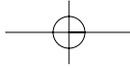
Perpetually Cool is timely not only because it examines the life, times, and body of work of the first and most famous Asian American female film star of the United States and even Europe, but also because it is written from a uniquely Asian American perspective and sensibility. This then is the story of a remarkable Asian American actor, writer, and philosopher with political substance, whose legendary humor was always filled with pithy advice.

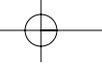


PART I

LIVING GLOBALLY







ONE

LOS ANGELES: A CHINESE AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

In 1904, Los Angeles was entering an era in which it would go from being a small, laid-back, palm-tree-lined Western city with big ambitions to a big city with bloated needs and gargantuan appetites. This transformation was energized by a mammoth oil boom between 1899 and 1900, which not only attracted a variety of characters like car dealers, gamblers, hookers, land speculators, lawyers, and prospectors from across America all scratching for a buck, but also new service enterprises like caterers, hotels, restaurants, and merchandise wholesalers.

Before the discovery of oil by Edward L. Doheny (1856–1935), the most widely speculative money explosion had been in real estate. Between 1887 and 1888, the buying and selling of land attracted a vast influx of people from other states and countries. Along with the salubrious weather, horizontal terrain, and wide stretches of land, the enormous fortunes from the “black gold” and gas discoveries and real estate speculation propelled Los Angeles into a fixation with the motor car. The twentieth century embarked on a glorious future, with the automobile as the chief mode of transportation. By 1905 more vehicles were found in the city than in any other community in the United States. In 1916 there were fifty-five thousand cars in Los Angeles county, one for every thirteen inhabitants.¹

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But Los Angeles was neither self-absorbed nor isolationist. In 1887, 2,212 carloads of citrus fruit were shipped to the frozen Midwestern and Eastern states and abroad. The city of Los Angeles alone had 700,000 orange trees.² Hunger for citrus fruit in the frozen climes of the United States swelled the incomes of the likes of orange king William Wolfskill and his estate as well as his industry colleagues to \$15 million annually. Other products in the food industry also exploded. By 1919 sugar beets yielded an annual profit of \$1,300,000, vegetables \$1,800,000, dried fruits \$6,640,000, and butter \$1,525,000.³ Bank deposits in the city grew from \$4 million before the booms to an annual average of more than \$25 million beginning in 1905.⁴ Between 1900 and 1912 bank clearings in Los Angeles grew from \$123 million to \$1.25 billion.⁵

From 1890 to 1900 Los Angeles's populace ballooned from 50,395 to 102,479. By 1904 the population was more than 160,000. While this new city on the make doubled its population, the number of Chinese Americans limped from 1,871 in 1890 to 2,111 in 1900. Of that number, 225 were born in the United States. An increase of 140 people in ten years attests to the effects of the Exclusion Act of 1882, a legalized elimination of the Chinese in America. By 1910 the population of the Chinese in Los Angeles had slipped to 1,967, a decrease of 144 people. Of that number, 473 were born in the United States.⁶ No doubt some of this collapsing populace in the city and the decimation of Chinese American communities in the country also resulted from the Scott Act of 1888, which denied Chinese American residents with permanent addresses the right of reentry to the United States after a brief sojourn visiting families in China or other places overseas.

Despite the Exclusion Act, a European American device to limit the number of Chinese in the United States, Chinese Americans remained steadfast in their attempts to live and prosper in the new world. Chinese American laborers knew that the European American laws to exclude them meant that families with wives and children could never flourish. In 1904, Chang Kiu Sing succinctly proclaimed, "they call it exclusion, but it is not exclusion. It is extermination."⁷

At the dawn of 1904 the Chinese American community in Los Angeles was under intense siege. It needed to redefine itself, establish a new identity, and create a more vibrant future, especially after the 1871 Los Angeles lynchings, when nineteen Chinese men and boys were viciously murdered by a rampaging European American mob. That violent event, the result of some European Americans bent on robbing Chinese American merchants, as well other acts of terror against Chinese Americans nationwide, eventually culminated in federal legislation in 1882 that banned Chinese immigrants from the United States. In 1902 the law was made permanent.⁸

The physical and legal attacks against Chinese Americans disrupted many families, causing schisms between the women and children in China and the men in Chinese America. Chinese American families with fathers, mothers, and especially children were a rarity not only in Los Angeles but also across the country. Any family in Chinese America was to be cherished.

The birth of a Chinese American child was usually a cause for celebration, even though it might not appear to be so in the beginning. Anna May Wong recalled:

My sister was named Wong Lew (Liu) Ying, but her arrival was not the signal for any rejoicing in the family. In fact, when father found out that his first child was a girl he was so disgusted that he didn't come home for days, mother says. And when he did come home, he wouldn't even look at the baby for some time. Lew Ying was certainly considered a loss.

Then to make matters worst [sic], I was born second in the family, on January 3, 1905. Not only did my father have two girls on his hands, but mother, my sister and I all contracted the measles as a crowning insult. It is a wonder that father ever did get over that. Luckily he had four sons born later, or he might never have been reconciled to his Los Angeles family.⁹

According to the Western calendar, Anna May Wong was born in 1905.¹⁰ Her Chinese name at birth was Wong Liu Tsong, translated as Frosted Yellow Willow. However, the fact that her birth date, January 3, came before the Chinese New Year, which was often between January 23 and February 21, meant that she was born in the Chinese year 1904. Because of this, Wong was born in the Year of the Dragon (1904) and not in the Year of the Snake (1905). That she became a "dragon lady" in some of her films was mere coincidence; it had nothing to do with her year of birth and its attachment to the "dragon" year. This was a fact that would have been lost on the European American directors in their zeal to characterize Wong as a conniving, manipulative, and unscrupulous Chinese femme fatale in films.

During the year of Wong's birth, the Los Angeles Chinese community did not crumble even under the threat of annihilation as a result of various European American acts of law and physical brutality. It continued to be a regional center for Chinese politics. In fact, such small entrepreneurs as Sam Sing Wong (1858–1949), Anna May Wong's father, intersected with China's reformers, revolutionaries, and antiexclusionists. In many ways, the Los Angeles Chinese community, which was a significant player in the overseas Chinese diaspora, was a product of the clash between China and the West during the nineteenth century.

CHINESE POLITICS

The cataclysmic event of the Opium Wars (1839–1842) defines China even today. With the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) mortally wounded by Western military power, contending forces like reformers and revolutionaries inevitably appeared to either rejuvenate or replace the foreign Manchu monarchy. One of these reformers was the constitutionalist Liang Qichao (1873–1929), who traveled for seven months in 1903 to three Canadian cities and twenty-eight cities and towns in the United States to learn about North American culture and government while soliciting Chinese American support. Invited by the *Bao-huang hui* (Protect the Emperor Society), a reformist, antirevolutionary group, Li visited Los Angeles on October 22, 1903, and other Chinese communities, with a prolonged stay in San Francisco.¹¹ In his travel memoir, *Xin dalu youji jielu* (*Selected Memoir of Travels in the New World*), he expressed disgust especially with the filth of San Francisco Chinatown and slammed the Chinese Americans for being too regional and not nationalistic enough. He also derided the Chinese Americans who:

can be clansmen, but not citizens. I believe this all the more since my travels in America. There you have those who have left villages and taken on the character of individuals and come and go in the most free of the great cities and enjoy all that they have to offer, and still they¹² cling to the family and clan systems to the exception of no other things.

Obviously for Liang Qichao this seven-month sojourn did not reveal the true nature of the lives of Chinese Americans in the United States, who had to contend with its discriminatory laws and European American violence. Rather than seek out the root cause of the state of Chinese America, Liang simply blamed its inhabitants for their sorry plight. No doubt merchants and business owners like Sam Sing Wong received these elitist words with either indifference or disdain.

The most direct impact of Liang Qichao's visit on Los Angeles was his endorsement of the Western Military Academy, founded by Homer Lea (1876–1912) in 1902. With tuition and supplies paid for by the Qing government through the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association or the Chinese Six Companies in San Francisco, the academy trained a total of 120 Chinese cadets. Located at 627 West Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles, its avowed aim was to provide Western military education to Chinese officers for the Imperial Army in China. In other cities like Boston, Chicago, Denver, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, European American officers were dispatched

by the Brigade Headquarters in Los Angeles to drill companies of Chinese recruits. In 1905 the first fifty-eight graduates of the Western Military Academy with training in modern European American drill, troop deployment, and logistics marched in the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena.¹³

With the Western Military Academy acting as a publicity arm of the *Baohuang hui* as well as training Chinese cadets, Chinese America was more inclined to support the reform movement rather than the revolutionary cause of Sun Wen (Sun Yat-sen, 1866–1925), the inspirational father of the Chinese Republic. In 1906 the revolutionaries could only attack the reformists through their Hong Kong-based newspaper, *China Daily*.

The debate over which group should revitalize China played well in Chinese America across the United States. In Los Angeles, where Lea's Western Military Academy played a prominent role among some European Americans, the constitutional monarchists of the *Baohuang hui* had legitimate foreign support. The capitalist ideas of the Protect the Emperor Society resonated with many Chinese American merchants and entrepreneurs. But by 1908 Chinese Americans were cognizant of Liang Qichao's elitist and condescending attitude to them, as revealed in his *Selected Memoir*. The revolutionaries were beginning to infiltrate many quarters of Chinese society, especially the government armies in Wuhan. More important, Sun Wen's band of iconoclasts became more adept at organizing infrastructure, gathering support, and raising funds. Many Chinese Americans began to perceive the revolutionaries as a viable and distinct alternative to the Qing Dynasty, which had done little to protect them against racist European American laws and physical violence.

Homer Lea also began to see the withering of Chinese American support for the *Baohuang hui*. In 1908, when Sun Wen visited Los Angeles, Lea offered him his support.¹⁴ After the Wuhan uprising, which precipitated the fall of the Qing Dynasty on October 10, 1911, the revolutionaries, now firmly organized in the *Zhonghua gemingdang* (Chinese Revolutionary Party), descended on Canada and the United States, seeking support and funds. Even the cofounder of the Chinese Republic, Huang Xing (1874–1916), visited Los Angeles in 1914 to solicit money and to pay his respects to the wife of Homer Lea, who became a widow in 1912.¹⁵

ANTIEXCLUSION BOYCOTT

While the Protect the Emperor Society and the Chinese Revolutionary Party brought China's politics into the lives of Chinese Americans, the antiexclusion

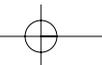
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crusade of Reverend Ng Poon Chew (Wu Panzhao, 1866–1931), which began in 1904, revealed the extent of Chinese and Chinese American rage against an unjust and thoroughly racist piece of legislation. No exclusion act has ever been passed in Congress against any other racial or ethnic group in the United States.

At the age of fifteen, Ng Poon Chew emigrated to the United States in 1881, one year before the Exclusion Act was promulgated. While working as a house boy in San Francisco and San Jose, he studied English. With his scholarly inclinations, vast interest in ideas, and a penchant for advocacy and social change, he eventually became a Presbyterian minister before settling in Los Angeles in 1894. To introduce Christianity to Chinese Americans, the Presbyterian church board appointed him minister of the Chinese Presbyterian Mission at 214 North San Pedro, where he began to formulate his ideas about the injustice and unfairness of the European American exclusion laws. To disseminate these provocative notions about immigration, Chew founded the *Chung Sai Yat Po* (*Chinese Western Daily*) in 1898. This was the first Chinese-language newspaper that would be read widely throughout Chinese America until 1946.¹⁶ At first the tabloid was very tame, with stories about Presbyterianism and Christianity. By 1904 the paper reflected Chew's increasingly progressive ideas against European American exclusionists and their actions.¹⁷ His anger was succinctly revealed in the following diatribe:

[W]e are now stuck with an Agreement, nominally to protect the Chinese in the United States, but [which] in fact attacks Chinese, whether they are merchants or officials, teachers, students or tourists, [they] are reduced to the status of dogs in America. The dogs must have with them necklaces [their registration] which attest to their legal status before they are allowed to go out [into the streets]. Otherwise they would be arrested as unregistered, un-owned wild dogs and would be herded into a detention camp. . . . This is analogous to the present plight of the Chinese in America. Though the treaty was designed to prohibit labor and protect officials, students and merchants, now the U.S. Government is attempting to expel all Chinese.¹⁸

Assisted by journalist Patrick Joseph Healy, Ng Poon Chew wrote *Statement for Non-Exclusion*. He advocated that China boycott such products as cotton cloth and kerosene coming from the United States. Chinese Americans, especially in San Francisco, took up his call for a ban on American products in China and in Chinese America unless the laws excluding Chinese immigrants to the United States were rescinded.¹⁹ As the main advocate of the antiexclusion campaign, Chew traveled across the country in 1905 urging people to support the boycott while slamming the European American exclusion laws. He was even able to speak to the House of Representatives and was granted an audience with Presi-



dent Theodore Roosevelt. This sideshow of meeting European American politicians, however, was merely to placate the Chinese forces of the boycott. In 1906 the U.S. government not only ignored entreaties by Ng Poon Chew and the Qing representatives but also dismissed the efforts by the Chinese Six Companies in San Francisco, which had established the Anti-Treaty Society (*Juyue zongju*). If China, which was in a semicolonial situation in the early twentieth century, had been in a more powerful position, and Chinese Americans had had a larger population, more money, and more political clout, the results would have been different.

CHINESE LOS ANGELES

During the early 1900s, when Anna May Wong entered the world, the global politics and immigration conflicts that linked China to the United States and demanded fundamental social and political change were prevalent in Chinese Los Angeles. The community was developing its own unique culture, with a Chinese-language newspaper that became the cornerstone of news from China and Chinese America. A telephone exchange helped bring people together in a more convenient and speedier way. Three temples provided institutionalized worship, and a Chinese theater offered Chinese opera with twenty-five performers to the approximately two thousand Chinese Americans living in the six blocks that would be known as Chinatown. The theater group was the Jok Wah Ming Company from Hong Kong and was housed on Court Street.²⁰ For a small populace with such cultural institutions, social activism, and political dimensions, Chinese Los Angeles at the turn of the twentieth century sustained a vital and energetic community.

In 1900 there were two or three Chinese restaurants. By 1910 eateries had expanded to fifteen establishments. From three produce houses out of forty-three in the city, Chinese American produce companies exploded to seventeen out of a total of 155 in 1910.²¹ No doubt the establishment of the City Market, incorporated on April 13, 1909, helped the produce market in Chinese Los Angeles. More Chinese Americans held shares (40,885) in the enterprise than any other ethnic group. Led by produce dealer Louie Gwan, this was the first attempt at organizing a business venture in the Chinese community on such a large scale.²² By 1922 there were 184 shops owned by Chinese Americans. By 1923 there were “four large warehouses in the district, a large garage, two small factories, and several wholesale houses.”²³ With the advent of Hollywood and the movies, this vital, energetic segment of Chinese America would become part of a new European American industry.

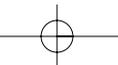
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Within this growing Chinese American community, the Chinese Six Companies, based in San Francisco, advocated on behalf of the people and businesses in Chinese America from 1860 to 1910. Until the establishment of an effective Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., it served not only as the arbitrator in major disputes consigned by regional associations but also as the formal registrar of all Chinese Americans in the West. Throughout its history the Chinese Six Companies fought against European American anti-Chinese laws in numerous court appearances. It organized many campaigns, protests, and boycotts against injustices suffered by Chinese Americans. It also shipped bones back to China, hired private police and security to protect Chinese businesses, and helped the Qing and Republican governments establish Chinese-language schools in Chinese America. In 1913 it succeeded in breaking the stronghold of criminal elements like the tongs (organized gangs) by negotiating a Chinese Peace Society. Until 1910, when the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was established, the Chinese Six Companies also intervened in business disputes. No doubt entrepreneurs like Anna May Wong's father, Sam Sing Wong, were influenced by this powerful capitalist regulator.²⁴

As a leading member of Chinese Los Angeles by virtue of his ownership of a laundry, Sam Sing Wong was well aware of the political dynamics, social innuendos, cultural forces, and commercial constraints that affected his family. The visits of Liang Qichao, Sun Wen, and Huang Xing to Los Angeles exposed the grim politics of China to Chinese Americans, who often cynically viewed the arrival of these luminaries as merely a plea for cash donations. Ng Poon Chew, however, was a genuine political crusader working tirelessly and spending his own money on a cause that affected all Chinese Americans.

LAUNDRIES

As the proprietor of a business, Sam Sing Wong and his fellow laundry owners were often targeted for funds by the reformers and revolutionaries. If these Chinese iconoclasts did not approach Sam Sing Wong individually, they would have negotiated through his occupational guild, the Chinese Laundry Alliance.²⁵ This business association was essential for entrepreneurs like Sam Sing Wong, who needed regulations to protect them from competing among themselves. Individual laundries were allocated to certain areas. In San Francisco, businesses could not be less than ten doors from each other. This stress on competitive distance was probably in effect in Los Angeles as well and may ex-



plain why Sam Sing Wong's laundry was on North Figueroa Street, some blocks away from the main Chinese American business community. The guild also served its members by threatening force or violence against freelance rivals who were without guild sanction. In addition to setting competitive limits so that everyone would prosper, the laundry guild attempted to protect its members from the racist sentiments of European Americans.²⁶ The guild even went to court against unjust laws. In 1911, Los Angeles enacted a zoning ordinance banning laundries from specific districts.²⁷ Since many Chinese American laundries were already flourishing in these areas, this demonstrated blatant racial discrimination. The lawsuits of Quong Wo, Sam Kee, and Hop Wah against these regulations²⁸ attracted the attention of Los Angeles's Chinese laundry workers and owners, including Anna May Wong's father.

As a business, the laundry trade was easily established and accessible. After the Chinese were driven out of work by European Americans in cigar factories, fruit farms, gold mines, jute and woolen mills, railroad track labor, and road repair and construction, what was left was washing clothing, peddling vegetables, or setting up an eatery. Traditionally women's work, the occupation of washing clothing did not attract macho European American men, who feared a loss in social standing if they opened a wash house. Without much choice, Chinese American men filled this need for clean clothes. By 1890, sixty-four hundred Chinese Americans worked in laundries across California. Since China had no public wash houses, many learned the trade in the United States by apprenticing at a laundry or working as a house servant in a European American residence.²⁹

As a service trade, laundry attracted the ambitious and agile bent on carving out a living on their own. Many Chinese Americans had no choice but to engage in self-employment. The start-up cost was usually from \$75 to \$200 depending on the rent and equipment. A small empty store or an annex in an otherwise occupied shop would suffice as a locale. Access to a steady source of water, enough soap (usually Swift Pride Washing Powder),³⁰ serviceable irons, a wood stove that generated enough heat to boil water and heat the irons, a trough to eliminate soiled water, laundry wringers, areas to dry the clothing, and a sign to advertise prices and hours of business were other necessities.³¹ In 1896 there were thirty-five laundries in Los Angeles owned by many with the surnames Wong or Lew.³² No doubt Sam Sing Wong was one of the thirty-five.

Without access to European American banks or lending institutions, capital was often raised through the Chinese Six Companies or, in the case of Sam Sing Wong, through his friendly family association, the *Wong Kong Har Tong*, which included those with the surnames Wong and Ng.³³ The Wong family

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association was the largest in Canada and the United States. While Anna May Wong may not have called upon this association during her travels throughout North America, she certainly had access to its many branches by virtue of her surname and her father's family affiliations.

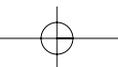
With support from family associations and the occupational guild, the laundry trade could provide a living wage of from \$50 to \$70 weekly for its proprietors.³⁴ Between the 1880s and the early twentieth century, these wash houses formed the bulk of the commercial activity in Chinese California. Customers were usually European Americans, bringing in much sought after revenue from outside the Chinese American community.³⁵

By the time Anna May Wong and her sister Lulu and brother James were hauling soiled laundry to their father's North Figueroa Street shop, it was a thriving business.³⁶ If Sam Sing Wong's business approached the occupational standard of the early twentieth century Chinese American laundry, the personnel inside the establishment would include two or three hired help as well as Wong himself. Their tasks were separated into washing, ironing, and delivering. "The bigger laundries had large cylindrical dryers while the smaller ones hung their clothes outside to dry. Everything was ironed by hand. Tall cast-iron stoves were constantly fueled by wood or gas to keep the irons hot. When an iron resting on a stove top became cool, the laundryman returned it to the stove then grabbed another iron next to it. As many as a dozen irons would be resting on the stove ready for use."³⁷

EARLY DAYS

The activities of the laundry played an influential part in Anna May Wong's early upbringing. She experienced the daily toil and long hours of her parents as they attempted to stave off poverty in European America. This type of work with its small monetary rewards and strenuous labor convinced Wong that this life was not for her. It was probably not the wish of her parents, either.

Besides the everyday drudgery of laundry work, Anna May Wong, as a child of Chinese America, was connected to the politics of China with its reformers and revolutionaries and the politics of the antiexclusion movement in Chinese America by the fact that her parents and their friends and acquaintances were part of the Chinese Los Angeles. She may not have understood the nuances of these political dimensions as a young Chinese Californian, but they would always be part of her Chinese American culture and



may have even contributed to her eagerness to visit China and absorb its culture in 1936.

As the second daughter of Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee, she was the favorite of her father. In later years she described her childhood feelings for her father:

My father, whose name is Wong Sam Sing (the last name comes first in Chinese) stayed in Michigan Bluffs working in the mines, until he was nineteen years old. He must have been very popular with the children of the town, for when I was a little girl he showed me a lot of pictures taken with them gathered around him. I was very jealous, having always been my father's favorite daughter, and tore the pictures up! I didn't want any rivals for my father's affection.³⁸

Wong's family came from the *Taishan* district (*Toishan*, also known as *Sunning* and *Xinning*³⁹) in Guangdong province. Her grandfather, Leung Chew Wong, arrived in the United States during the 1850s as part of the great wave of Chinese immigration that exploded from 20,026 in 1852 to 63,000 in 1870.⁴⁰ Like the other economic refugees from China, Wong was attempting to escape the devastation of the Taiping Rebellion (1854–1860). Much of the famine and destruction that resulted from this civil war occurred in central and southern China.⁴¹ Wong went straight to Michigan Bluffs outside of Sacramento, where gold had been discovered at John Sutter's Mill in 1848. There Wong opened a store with four other Chinese immigrants. The place doubled as a gambling outlet at night. Before he drowned trying to save a woman who had fallen into a well, Wong and his wife had given birth in 1858 to Anna May Wong's father in Michigan Bluffs.⁴²

Sam Sing Wong worked in the mines until the age of nineteen. When he went to China is unclear, but it is known that he was thirty-one when he married his first wife in *Taishan* in 1889. His son by his first wife was born in 1890. He soon returned to California and married a second time. His first wife and son remained in China. Between the births of his first son in 1890 and his first daughter in 1900, he and his Oakland-born Chinese American wife, Gon Toy Lee, moved to Los Angeles.⁴³ Gon Toy Lee was born in 1887.⁴⁴ She was in her early teens when she married Sam Sing Wong, probably in 1900. While living in Los Angeles, Wong rented a building and established a laundry at 241 North Figueroa Street, five to six blocks west of central Chinese Los Angeles, which was bounded by Macy, Alameda, Aliso, and Los Angeles Streets.⁴⁵

NORTH FIGUEROA STREET NEIGHBORHOOD

The laundry was the key to the Wong's family prosperity and stability in an increasingly hostile and unfriendly European America. The business was prosperous enough that the family took a house on Flower Street rather than live on the premise of the laundry, which was common in other Chinese American households with businesses. Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee were also preparing for a family. Later they returned to live in the North Figueroa Street residence.

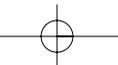
As a family unit, Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee flourished with the birth of daughter Liu Ying or Lulu in 1900, Liu Tsong or Anna May (who was born in the Flower Street house) in 1905, and the family's first son, James Norman, in 1907. A third daughter, Liu Heung or Mary, was born between 1908 and 1912, a second son, Frank, in 1913, and a third son, Roger, in 1916. A fourth daughter, Meahretta or Margaretta, was born in 1920 but died while still an infant, and in 1922 the fourth son, Richard, came into the family.⁴⁶

Since the family lived and worked in the Flower Street and North Figueroa Street neighborhood outside of the main Chinese American community, their friends and neighbors reflected global America. As the only Chinese American family in the North Figueroa Street neighborhood block, the Wong family was surrounded by neighbors who came originally from England, French Canada, Germany, Mexico, Poland, Russia, and Spain. As a child Anna May Wong interacted daily with her Chinese American family and children from Canada, Europe, and South America.⁴⁷ She recalled:

Probably my earliest memory is of playing with some English children who lived next door to us for several years. Until I went to public school it never occurred to me that I wasn't of the same nationality as all the children in the neighborhood. We all played games together and romped with no thought of color or creed to disturb us.⁴⁸

Anna May Wong was popular enough with the neighborhood children that she was even invited into their homes. On one occasion her discovery of a piano at the home of one of her playmates left her bemused:

I remember, though, that I was very shy as a little child. I had been taught to be decorous, and to carry myself with dignity. [At one house I] became interested in their piano. The mother of the family said that I might touch the black and white keys which particularly enchanted me. So I climbed up on the piano stool. I must have perched on one edge of the stool, for suddenly to my consternation and dismay, I toppled over onto the floor, stool and all.



I was covered with humiliation. I felt that I was disgraced forever, in the home of my friends and that probably I would not be permitted to play with them anymore, because of such undignified conduct. What would my parents say when they found out that I had tumbled off a piano stool and gone sprawling on the floor, before the mother of my playmates? Was this the way Wong Lew Song (Wong Liu Tsong) rewarded her parents, when they sought to make a proper little girl of her?

Probably an American child would have laughed, or cried over her bruises, would have blamed the piano stool for falling over her. But with the Chinese child, I had behaved, according to my upbringing, in an unbecoming manner. I had disgraced myself and my family. It was a tragedy to me, and though I was such a tiny child, I have never forgotten it.⁴⁹

Fearing the loss of her neighborhood playmates, Anna May Wong afterwards went gingerly around them for awhile.⁵⁰ “Luckily, my playmates didn’t view the accident in so serious a light. I was too embarrassed to approach them for several days, but presently found, to my great relief, that even a girl who fell off a piano stool might still play with them.”⁵¹

SCHOOL DAYS

Lulu and Anna May Wong were brought up speaking English as a way of communicating with their English-speaking neighborhood pals. Anna May said that she “spoke English from my earliest childhood, and when my sister and I were old enough, we entered the California Street School, one of the public schools in Los Angeles.”⁵² Since California Street was one of the major intersections of North Figueroa Street, where the family laundry was located, this school was within easy walking distance for Lulu and Anna May and accepted Chinese American students. Despite the racist laws and negative attitudes against the evolution of Chinese American families in the United States, by 1929 elementary schools such as the California Street School and the Macy Street School, as well as Custer Avenue Intermediate and Lincoln High Schools, all accepted Chinese American students. By then more than two out of three school-aged Chinese Americans attended Los Angeles public schools.⁵³

At many of these European American public schools Chinese children were given Western first names as the very first symbol of assimilation into the larger culture. Thus the oldest Wong sister, Liu Ying, may have been given the name Lulu by a European American teacher. No Chinese would have given

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the name Lulu to Liu Ying because the name “Liu” was the generational name for all the daughters of Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee. That was why Anna May was Liu Tsong and Mary was Liu Heung. The teachers at the elementary school where Liu Heung attended may have given her the name Mary. Liu Tsong, however, was not given the name Anna May Wong by a teacher at the California Street School. Wong recalled that the “doctor who brought me into the world named me ‘Anna’; my Chinese name is Tsong. When I was old enough to begin to think about a career, I added ‘May’ to ‘Anna’ partly because we (daughters) had all four letter names and I wanted to be different and partly because it made a prettier signature.”⁵⁴ She also remarked that “I liked the suggestion of springtime in ‘May’.”⁵⁵

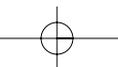
LEARNING MUCH

The California Street School provided Lulu and Anna May with ample opportunities to learn about European America and its many quirks. At first the two sisters looked forward with much anticipation to school. Anna May said that, “I was going to enjoy school very much. I would learn my lessons well, and be an obedient student, so that my teachers as well as my parents would feel that I fully appreciated my opportunities.”⁵⁶ Valuing education, their parents were very helpful. Wong enthused:

I was very much thrilled to be going to school, not realizing that it was going to mean torture to me before very long. My parents brought me slates, pencils and books with pictures of bright red apples and gaily colored birds. Goodness knows what all, in them. I learned the alphabet, and how to write ‘This is a Cat. This is a Dog!’ I learned to write my name, laboriously, in English. With a whole-souled devotion, I bent over my books as, I had been taught, a proper student should do.⁵⁷

While growing up around the Figueroa Street laundry, Wong understood the value of diversity. She was surrounded by it. She later explained:

Having played with white children, it seemed perfectly natural to be surrounded by them in school. I had straight black hair and black eyes. They had brown, blond or red hair, hazel or gray eyes. This meant nothing to me. The children in school looked just about like my playmates next door. I was certain that I would enjoy knowing them, when I overcame my shyness enough to mingle with them. They could come to my house and, if they



liked, play with my toys. My mother would give them cookies. My father would always welcome them, even show them the delightful mysteries of the laundry. My father has always been kind to children.⁵⁸

While walking home one day the two sisters were deep in thought about the day's activities, musing about the delights of learning and chatting about their hopes of acquiring knowledge and experience that would help them become successful and earn their parents' praise. Anna May and Lulu had not yet made any friends at the school. It was still early in the school year. But they were optimistic that this would be just a matter of time.

Then came the knife stab which, even today, has left a scar on my heart. A group of little boys, our schoolmates, started following us. They came nearer and nearer, singing some sort of a chant. Finally, they were at our heels.

"Chink, Chink Chinaman," they were shouting, "Chink, Chink, Chinaman."

They surrounded us. Some of them pulled our hair, which we wore in long braids down our backs. They shoved us off the sidewalks, pushing us this way and that, and all the time keeping up their chant: "Chink, Chink, Chinaman. Chink, Chinaman."

When finally they had tired of tormenting us, we fled for home, and once in our mother's arms we burst into bitter tears. I don't suppose either of us cried so hard in our lives, before or since.⁵⁹

This first racial incident that Lulu and Anna May Wong experienced was almost a rite of passage for young Chinese Americans growing up in European America. No Chinese American entering European America has ever escaped it. European American attempts to demean, degrade, and assert power seemed to be the experience in both overt and subtle ways of every young Chinese American outside of Chinatown. As Wong sought roles in her film career, she began to experience European American racism in more indirect ways, like being passed over for obvious Asian roles that went to a "Yellowface" Myrna Loy in *The Crimson City* (1928) or Luise Rainer as O-lan in *The Good Earth* (1937). Being shunted aside in Hollywood was almost like reliving the early chants of "Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman."

Lulu and Anna May Wong asked their father why the "little boys [had] pulled our hair, driven us from the sidewalk?"⁶⁰ The sisters noted that their father was forlorn to discover that his eldest children had experienced racism so early in their lives. With one on each of his knees, he explained to them that those remarks were meant to shame them because they were Chinese Americans. But he insisted that they should "be proud always of our people and our

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race. Then he told us that our position in an American community must at times be a difficult one. Perhaps it was just as well for us to find this out now, while we were still young.”⁶¹ He said “accept everything in life as it comes. Hold no malice in your hearts toward anyone.”⁶²

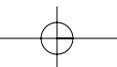
When she was in her late teens Anna May Wong would not heed her father’s advice about “accepting everything in life and holding no malice in her heart.” Her decisive action at such a young age would galvanize her attitude to racist acts. She called this event one of the “psychological mileposts” in her life, and she ceased to be on “the defensive”:

When I was about 17, a truck came booming down the street and the driver yelled for me to get out of the way. He called me “Chink.” To my surprise I blazed back a remark equally insulting at him and he wilted. That was the turning of a corner for me.⁶³

Even at such an early age, Wong was developing the street smarts that would carry her to international fame. As a woman and a person of color in European America, she knew that if she did not speak up on her own behalf, no one would. Even if the notion of Chinese Americans as “model minority” had been prevalent at that time, Wong would never have qualified.

MISSION SCHOOL

The name calling, tormenting, and meanness that Lulu and Anna May’s European American male classmates subjected them to continued when they returned to the California Street School the next day. They were pinched, pushed, and slapped. Even the European American girls joined in and made sport of the Wong sisters, who turned the other cheek in the grand Christian manner and suffered in stoic silence. Since the European American teachers never intervened to stop the racial bullying, every day became an escalation of this schoolyard intimidation. Anna May Wong remembered that “we lived in such terror that we couldn’t keep our minds on our lessons. We became ill with fright. All of our bright dreams of making friends with our schoolmates, of standing well in our lessons, of winning the approbation of our teachers vanished. We were just two hunted, tormented little creatures, and presently our parents realized that they must find some escape for us.”⁶⁴ If the Wong girls’ European American classmates were intent on driving out this modicum of diversity at the California Street School, they succeeded. But the more terrifying aspect of this story that has haunted many other Chi-



nese Americans in public schools was the overt approval of racial activities by the teachers and administrators.

Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee were searching for other educational possibilities in Los Angeles. Certainly they believed in the efficacy and usefulness of education, which could open doors to a better life for their children. If they had been the usual conservative and traditional Chinese or Chinese American parents, they would not have stretched their attention and resources for mere daughters. In the idealized version of Chinese life, a family based on patriarchal relationships was the norm. Daughters were often educated, but only in domestic skills like cooking and sewing as prerequisites to their inevitable marriage. But the family of Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee was atypical. The parents nurtured both daughters and sons in their pursuit of a good life in the United States.

Finally they discovered that the Chinese Mission School in Chinatown would take their two daughters as students. This new school gave the Wong sisters their first glimpse of Chinese Los Angeles as they studied and played with other Chinese American children. As the major vehicle for converting the Chinese and Chinese Americans to Christianity, mission schools played a large part in the dissemination of the English language and European American culture. In 1923 Nora Sterry, principal of the Macy Street School in Chinatown, observed that “the mission schools, which are largely attended during the day by the younger children, have night classes for adults. These classes, which have been in existence for nearly half a century, have been of great civic value in as much as they taught English to many men.”⁶⁵

At the Chinese Mission School, Lulu and Anna May studied the same curriculum as that found at the California Street School. But this segregated school was completely Chinese American. Among the more common subjects, they were given a generous dose of arithmetic, English, geography, and history by European American teachers. To inculcate them with the culture of European America, students were smacked with a ruler if they spoke Chinese. Anna May later exclaimed that “right and left, we were smashing the traditions of our forefathers.”⁶⁶

The daily operation of a typical mission school was routine and structured. In a 1926 *Los Angeles Times* story, Myra Paule wrote that “one boy wrestles with fractions, another scratches his head over complicated verbs of the English language which stick out their tongues at rules. The smaller girls learn to sew and sing psalms. Unfortunately, at the same time, they find ‘American’ names more euphonious. Tea of the olive skin becomes Joan; Oi is Rose.”⁶⁷

At the Chinese Mission School in 1912 the Wong sisters most likely encountered similar experiences as those Chinese American students in 1926.

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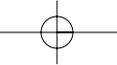
Anna May in particular refused to attend the sewing circle. She remembered that, “I handled my needle awkwardly, stuck it in my finger instead of the doily on which I was laboring, and finally gave up in disgust.”⁶⁸ Instead, she gravitated to baseball and was considered a “slugger” with the rest of the “home run hitters.” She shot marbles with the boys. But after classes ended, the Wong sisters returned to Figueroa Street and the family laundry. Anna May lamented that she could not play shuttlecock with her pals from Chinatown.⁶⁹

CHINESE SCHOOL

Between 1912 and 1917 Lulu and Anna May Wong had the opportunity to see their schoolmates after their classes at the Chinese Mission School, which finished at 3:00 P.M. But this was not to play shuttlecock or any other games. Their father decided that “something must be done with so an unnatural daughter”⁷⁰ (Anna May), with her penchant for European American games. So he sent both daughters to Chinese school, which emphasized the learning of not only *Guangdong hua* (Cantonese) but also Chinese culture and civilization.

Unlike the mission schools, Chinese language and heritage schools originated in 1848 in the United States. Informal Cantonese language classes were taught to both adults and children across Chinese America. In 1884 the Chinese Six Companies started the Qing school, with tuition adjusted to a parent’s economic situation. At fifty cents a month, even the poorest family could send their children to school. Reminiscent of the curriculum found in Qing China, it was taught by teachers who were licentiates with degrees equivalent to the B.A. or provincial graduates with degrees similar to the Western M.A. Without access to quality European American schools, students in Chinese America were given the opportunity to study for the same provincial and central examinations as students in China. Chinese education in San Francisco in particular was to provide recruits to the Qing bureaucracy.⁷¹

It was not until 1905 that the Qing government dispatched an envoy to determine the actual language needs of the Chinese American communities.⁷² In 1908 Liang Jinggui headed a delegation to provide curricular advice to leaders in Chinese America. Chinese-language schools opened in Sacramento, New York, and later San Francisco. These schools were set up because Chinese American leaders saw a real need for teaching the Chinese language in the United States rather than compelling those Chinese Americans born in the United States to return to China for their education. From a commercial per-



spective, spoken Chinese was also needed to conduct business in the Chinese American communities across the country.⁷³ With rampant racial discrimination against Chinese Americans in the European American workplace, even those with university degrees from institutions in the United States needed proficiency in the Chinese language to secure vocational opportunities in Chinese America.⁷⁴

Lulu and Anna May attended Chinese school in Los Angeles for five years after their regular classes at the Chinese Mission school adjourned for the day. That was a total of ten hours of education per day, with the day beginning at nine in the morning and ending at seven in the evening. Besides learning to read, write, and speak the southern Chinese dialect of Cantonese, they were also exposed to the Chinese classics and history. The Wong sisters began to understand the importance of family values and their relationship with each other and with society. The standard Chinese school curriculum included the *Trimetrical Classic*, the *Thousand Words Classic*, and the *Incentive to Study*. Later students would open the pages of the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* of Kong Qiu (551–479 B.C.E.), also known as Confucius in the West. In those books they would learn the efficacy of the Five Relationships, filial piety (*xiao*), and practical learning.⁷⁵ These philosophical tracts and Wong's later excursions into Daoism helped shape her philosophy of life.

The teacher of Chinese language and culture was sometimes as grim as the extent of the curriculum. For many Chinese American students, he was a bane to be endured. Wong revealed that “the teacher sat at his desk, a bamboo stick beside him. If one of the pupils showed signs of restlessness or disobedience, whack went the stick across the hands of the offender. Serious disobedience was punished in a severe manner—and not across the hands either.”⁷⁶

By the time Lulu and Anna May began attending Chinese school, the Qing Dynasty had collapsed in 1911 and a new Republic of China emerged a year later. Chinese teachers who were Confucian scholars with a license or provincial degrees were now anachronistic in China but even more so in Chinese America. If any were employed at the local school in Chinese San Francisco or Los Angeles, they were put in charge of the education of children born in the United States whose attendance at Chinese school was more at the will of the parents than a result of the enthusiasm of the young. Anna May, however, empathized with the plight of the Chinese teacher in Chinese America. She exclaimed that he certainly “doesn't have it as easy as American teachers do. Not only did he have to devote nearly every hour of every day to teaching, but he lived in a small room partitioned off at the back of the school room. Here he cooked his own meals, and slept. There certainly wasn't much variety in his life. It's not much wonder that he was often stern with us and whacked

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us with the bamboo stick.”⁷⁷ Even at the age of twelve or thirteen, Anna May Wong understood life’s hardships and vagaries.

Chinese school was a period of play, whenever the Wong sisters could manage it within a ten-hour school day. Only thirty minutes, from 3:00 to 3:30 in the afternoon, was allowed outside of school. That was the time it took to walk from the Chinese Mission School to the Chinese school, with only a pause to gulp down a bowl of noodles bought at a nearby cafe for five cents.

Every day in Chinese Los Angeles meant new adventures. Anna May saw the real Chinatown, not the stereotypical one depicted in the media or existing in the minds of outsiders. She was an insider in the life of Chinese America. She revealed that:

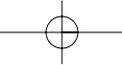
Going to Chinese school, I met many children who lived down in Chinatown. I played in the streets, I mingled with the people there, and so to me it does not seem the mysterious place that it does to Americans. I accepted it as a matter of course—the narrow streets lined with grimy buildings, the shops where Chinese herbs and drugs were sold, the gambling places where white men and Chinese mingled, the overcrowded tenements where the Chinese lived, sometimes entire families in one room, the gaily painted chop-suey restaurants with their lanterns a soft, many colored blur in the dark.

I was glad my parents didn’t live in Chinatown, but only as any child might be glad to live in a house with lawns and gardens around it rather than a crowded tenement.⁷⁸

Going to school in Chinese Los Angeles had one distinct advantage over attending school in another suburb or even another city. That was the presence of Hollywood, and Wong took advantage of all that Tinseltown had to offer. It was in Chinatown that she first nurtured the astonishing and untraditional idea of becoming a movie star.

NOTES

1. Paul C. Johnson, ed., *Los Angeles; Portrait of an Extraordinary City* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Lane Magazine and Book Company, 1968), 21. For the land boom, see Lynn Bowman, *Los Angeles: Epic of a City* (Berkeley, Calif.: Howell-North Books, 1974), 186–87.
2. Harry Carr, *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1935), 197.
3. Carr, *Los Angeles*, 197.
4. Charles D. Willard, *The Herald’s History of Los Angeles City* (Los Angeles: Kingsley-Barnes & Neuner, 1901), 351–52.



5. Louis B. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 5.

6. Figures from 1890 to 1904 are from the United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of census, eighth through sixteenth censuses, 1860–1940, cited in Roberta S. Greenwood, *Down by the Station: Los Angeles Chinatown, 1880–1933* (Los Angeles: University of California, Institute of Archaeology, 1996), 9. See also Christopher Rand, *Los Angeles: The Ultimate City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 34; William Mason, “The Chinese in Los Angeles,” *Museum Alliance Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1967): 16.

7. Chang, cited in Victor Nee and Bret de Bary, *Longtime Californ’: A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 55.

8. Peter C. Y. Leung, *One Day, One Dollar: Locke California and the Chinese Farming Experience in the Sacramento Delta* (El Cerrito, Calif.: Chinese/Chinese American History Project, 1984), 6.

9. Anna May Wong, “The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl,” *Pictures* (August 1926) and (September 1926), at http://www.mdle.com/Classic_Films/Feature_Star/star49e2.htm (accessed July 31, 1998).

10. Some sources still give 1907 as the year of Anna May Wong’s birth. This discrepancy may have come from her obituary in the *New York Times*, which stated that she was born in 1907. “Anna May Wong Is Dead at 54: Actress Won Fame in ’24,” *New York Times*, 4 February 1961, 3. Since then, many works have cited her birth date erroneously as 1907, including Helen Zia and Susan G. Gall, eds., *Notable Asian Americans* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), 414; Geraldine Gan, *Lives of Notable Asian Americans* (New York: Chelsea House, 1994), 83–91.

11. Key Ray Chong, *Americans and Chinese Reform and Revolution, 1898–1922* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1984), 52–55.

12. Liang Qichao, *Xin dalu youji jielu* (*Selected Memoir of Travels in the New World*), 122, cited in K. Scott Wong, “Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain,” *MELUS* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 4.

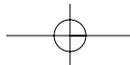
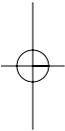
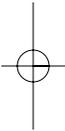
13. Liang Qichao, *Xin dalu youji jielu* (*Selected Memoir of Travels in the New World*), 68–72, cited in Wong, “Chinatown,” 4; L. Eve Armentrout Ma, *Revolutionaries, Monarchists, and Chinatowns* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 108–13; Bowman, *Los Angeles*, 340.

14. Ma, *Revolutionaries*, 132.

15. Chun-tu Hsueh, *Huang Hsing and the Chinese Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), 171.

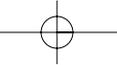
16. Greenwood, *Down by the Station*, 29. For an extensive analysis of Ng Poon Chew’s *Chung Sai Yat Po*, see Sun Yumei, “From Isolation to Participation: *Chung Sai Yat Po* [*China West Daily*] and San Francisco Chinatown, 1900–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1999).

17. Greenwood, *Down by the Station*, 28–29; Corinne K. Hoexter, *From Canton to California: The Epic of Chinese Immigration* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1976), 188–89; Elmer C. Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 111.



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18. Ng Poon Chew, cited in Hoexter, *From Canton to California*, 189.
19. Ma, *Revolutionaries*, 33–34, 100.
20. For population figure, see Thomas A. McDannold, “Development of the Los Angeles Chinatown, 1850–1970” (master’s thesis, California State University, Northridge, June 1973), 21; For Chinese Los Angeles, see J. M. Scanland, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 1926; Frank J. Taylor, “The Bone Money Empire,” *Saturday Evening Post*, (24 December 1932): 48; Franklin S. Clarke, “Seats Down Front,” *Sunset Magazine* 54 (April 1925): 33; Bruce Hensell, *Sunshine and Wealth: Los Angeles in the Twenties and Thirties* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), 90.
21. Mason, “Chinese in Los Angeles,” 16.
22. George Yee and Elsie Yee, “The Chinese and the Los Angeles Produce Market,” *Gum Saan Journal* 9, no. 2 (1986): 5–8.
23. Nora Sterry, “Housing Conditions in Chinatown Los Angeles,” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 7, no. 2 (November–December 1922): 74.
24. William Hoy, *The Chinese Six Companies: A Short, General Historical Resume of Its Origin, Function, and Importance in the Life of the California Chinese* (San Francisco: The Consolidated Benevolent Association [the Chinese Six Companies], 1942), 19–23.
25. Greenwood, *Down by the Station*, 21.
26. Thomas Chinn, ed., *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1974), 63; Paul Ong, “An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California,” *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 103.
27. Los Angeles California Ordinance 21, 996 (new series), 1911, cited in David E. Bernstein, “Lochner, Parity and the Chinese Laundry,” *William and Mary Law Review* 41 (December 1999): 19.
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29. Paul Ong, “Chinese Laundries As an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California,” *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* (1983): 72.
30. Roberta S. Greenwood, “The Overseas Chinese at Home: Life in Nineteenth Century Chinatown in California,” *Archaeology* 31, no. 5 (September/October 1978): 44.
31. Garding Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown* (Los Angeles: n.p., 1948), 186–87; Wen-hui Chen, “Changing Socio-Cultural Patterns of the Chinese Community in Los Angeles” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1952), 336–37; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 93.
32. Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown*, 187–89; Chinn, *History of the Chinese*, 63; “How It Is Done,” *The Land of Sunshine* 6 (December 1896): 58; McDannold, “Development of the Los Angeles Chinatown,” 47.
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34. Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown*, 188.
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36. Rob Wagner, "Two Chinese Girls . . ." Stenographic Notes of a Recent Broadcast, *Script* 14, no. 390 (November 21, 1936): 4, 28, 4, cited in Karin Janis Leong, "The China Mystique: Mayling Soong Chiang, Pearl S. Buck and Anna May Wong" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, spring 1999), 349–50.

37. Lani Ah Tye Farkas, *Bury My Bones in America* (Nevada City: Carl Mautz Publishing), 79.

38. Wong, "True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."

39. For more on the other four counties, see Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), 35.

40. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 79.

41. For a succinct analysis of the Taiping Rebellion and its impact on central and southern China, which was the key motivating factor persuading Chinese workers and merchants to immigrate to Southeast Asia, North America, and parts of Africa, Australia, and South America, see Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver, B.C.: New Star Books, 1983), 33–36.

42. According to "Funeral for Father of Anna May Wong," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 October 1949, 5, Sam Sing Wong was ninety-one when he died in Los Angeles in 1949. If that is correct he was born in 1858.

43. Leong, "The China Mystique," 346.

44. For details of Gon Toy Lee's birth and death, see "Injuries Fatal to Mrs. Wong," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1930, 5.

45. For the proximity of North Figueroa Street and Sam Sing Wong's laundry business to the center of Chinese Los Angeles, see the map of Los Angeles Chinatown in Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown*, 7.

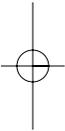
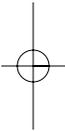
46. In 1931 when Anna May Wong returned from her first sojourn in Europe, she was met by James at the Los Angeles railroad station. He had just graduated with a master's from the University of Southern California, which would put his age at twenty-four, if the normal duration of two years for the completion of a master's immediately following the bachelor's is assumed. Also greeting Anna May were Frank, who had just graduated from high school, making him eighteen in 1931; Roger, who was fifteen; and Richard, who was nine. "Screen Star Has Her Homecoming After Much Delay," *Seattle Daily Times*, 6 September 1931, 14. A 1920 census recorded a daughter born to Sam Sing Wong and Gon Toy Lee named Meahretta or Margaretta, who was never mentioned by Anna May Wong, probably because she died as a newborn. Leong, "The China Mystique," 117 n 6.

47. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 Population, Los Angeles County, CA, April 16, 1910*, United States Department of Commerce and Labor; Bureau of the Census; *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 Population, Los Angeles County, CA, January 19, 1920*, United States Department of Commerce and Labor, cited in Leong, "The China Mystique," 346, n. 8, 347, nn. 9, 10.

48. Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."

49. Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."

50. Helen Carlisle, "Velly Muchee Lonely," *Motion Picture Magazine* 34, no. 2 (March 1928): 101.



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51. Carlisle, "Velly Muchee Lonely," 101.
52. Carlisle, "Velly Muchee Lonely," 101
53. Greenwood, *Down by the Station*, 29–30.
54. Wong, cited in Alice Tildesley, "I Am Lucky That I Am Chinese," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 June 1928, 3.
55. Wong, cited in Harry Carr, "I Am Growing More Chinese—Each Passing Year!" *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1934, 3.
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65. Nora Sterry, "Social Attitudes of Chinese Immigrants," *Journal of Applied Sociology* (July–August 1923), 326–27.
66. Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."
67. Myra Paule, "Chinese Mission Times Amid Squalor," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 1926, 20.
68. Paule, "Chinese Mission," 20.
69. Wong, cited in Tildesley, "I Am Lucky That I Am Chinese," 3.
70. Wong, cited in Tildesley, "I Am Lucky That I Am Chinese," 3.
71. Chinn, *History of the Chinese in California*, 68; Charles M. Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 29–32; Hoy, *Six Companies*, 1–29.
72. Theresa Hsu Chao, "Chinese Heritage Community Language Schools in the United States," in *A View from Within: A Case Study of Chinese Heritage Community Language Schools in the United States*, ed. Xueying Wang (Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Language Center, 1997), 4.
73. Yuen Chih Yuen, "A Story of the Education of Chinese Immigrants," *Chung Sai Yat Po*, 26 December 1947 to January 1948, cited in Chen, "Changing Socio-Cultural Patterns," 303.
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76. Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."
77. Wong, "The True Life Story of a Chinese Girl."
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