

On Anna May Wong
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For the past week, I've been caught up with Anna May Wong. Who's Anna May Wong? A week ago, I didn't know either. I get the film streaming service Filmstruck--kind of a classic movies version of Netflix--and there was a reference to some of her films and some pictures of her and it went from there.

Anna May Wong was a Chinese-American film star in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. I didn't know there had ever been a Chinese-American film star, but she was one. She was born Wong Liu Tsong in Los Angeles in 1905. Her parents had a laundry shop she helped out in it. She chose her stage name Anna May Wong as a teenager after somehow getting it in her head that she was going to be in the movies. That there were no Asian film stars as models or inspiration didn't stop Anna May from dreaming impossible dreams. And darned if, at seventeen, she didn't star in the first feature-length technicolor film ever produced, 1922, *The Toll of the Sea*, which drew heavily on the Madame Butterfly story. I watched it on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vuOQeVu10s>.

The Toll of the Sea was my first-ever silent film, and it was a fine experience for me. I had assumed silent films were schmaltzy, over-acted relics from a bygone era, but not so, at least not in this case. *The Toll of the Sea* held up by today's highest artist standards; it was far more than just a curiosity, which I had expected it to be. Anna May's performance was remarkably good, particularly for someone so young—radiant, true, nuanced, touching. A star was born. I bought a DVD of the film from Amazon; it's something I want to own.

Anna May followed up *The Toll of the Sea* with other silent films. She was tall, lithe, and very cool--great hairstyle with eyebrow-level, straight-across bangs, and pencil-thin eyebrows and

dark lipstick. And she was sexy. Catch her sensuous dance routine in the 1929 silent *Piccadilly*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njtyFAhJ6ZE>

Anna May smoothly made the transition to talking films. She hit it big in *Shanghai Express*, 1932, with German star Marlene Dietrich--here's a scene.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qR8gsz60Np8> She had a good number of top-billed roles in films throughout the 1930s and into the early '40s, though many of them were in what were called "B" movies, low-budget, second-tier films. Parts were limited for her. Romantic roles were out because she couldn't kiss a white actor, which was against the movie code back then. Also, for whatever reason, the common Hollywood practice was to cast whites in Asian roles. A big disappointment for Anna May was not getting a central part she so badly wanted in the movie version of the Pearl Buck book *The Good Earth*, which went to Luise Rainer.

Despite the limitations she worked within, Anna May became a prominent public figure. She was a talented actress and highly photogenic, and she possessed a graceful femininity, and with that came celebrity. She has a star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame. She was voted the most beautiful Chinese woman in the world. She had a superb, and striking, fashion sense, and was a regular on best-dressed lists. Arguably, Anna May Wong was the most famous Chinese person in the world during this period.

The sexual chemistry in *Shanghai Express* between Anna May and Marlene Dietrich, who was known to take to both men and women in a big way, was palpable and led to talk about Anna May being a lesbian. She never married, and her sexuality remained a matter of speculation throughout her career. She told interviewers who asked about her marital intensions that she was wedded to her art. Her biographer Graham Russell Gao Hodges (*Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, Palgrave, 2004) reports that she was involved with several Caucasian men--older, wealthy, and well-placed. Back in those

years, there were strong social taboos against interracial marriage, backed up by the law. She lived the last twenty years of her life with her brother in Los Angeles.

During a fallow period in Anna May's acting career, cameraman in tow, she spent the better part of 1936 visiting China, which got much media attention in both the U.S. and China. Chinese natives had ambivalent feelings about her: on the one hand, she was this glamorous, high-fashion Hollywood movie star, and on the other, many of the roles she played in films reinforced stereotypes of Chinese (demure Butterfly, scheming Dragon Lady). Anna May herself was frustrated by the parts she had to play in order to make a living in the film industry. Despite the mixed feelings about her, however, during her time in China, she was accorded treatment akin to that of visiting royalty. During her stay in the country, she was awarded an honorary degree from Peking University, the most prestigious university in China. Anna May was admirably active in supporting a variety of Chinese causes, including its war effort against the Japanese.

As the 1940s progressed, parts in films got scarce for Anna May, and finances became an issue for her. She managed some rental properties she had purchased when times were good, and clerked in her brother's gift shop. Her drinking escalated in spite of doctors' warnings about what it was doing to her health, including a serious liver problem, and she was a chain smoker. She experienced bouts of depression. In the early 1950s, she was the lead in a once-a-week, half-hour show on the Dumont television network—there was such a thing—called *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (her real name), but it was cancelled after a couple of months. In 1960, she had a small part in the film *Portrait in Black* starring Lana Turner. That same year, she got a part in a film version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway hit *Flower Drum Song*, but had to back out due to failing health.

On February 3rd, 1961, Anna May had a heart attack in her home and died. She was 55-years-old. Her cremated remains are

interred in her mother's grave in the Roseland Cemetery in Los Angeles with her Chinese name on the headstone.

Anna May Wong has touched my being for days now. I guess I should think more about why that is. But perhaps I should just let it be as a good--and, I sense, personally expanding--experience I'm grateful to have had and am having right now as I write these words. Yes.