

Daughter of Shanghai

By Brian Taves

“Daughter of Shanghai” is unique among 1930s Hollywood features for its portrayal of an Asian-focused theme with two prominent Asian-American performers as leads. This was truly unusual in a time when white actors typically played Asian characters in the cinema.

Anna May Wong was the first Asian-American woman to become a star of the Hollywood cinema. Appearing in some 60 movies during her life, she was a top billed player for over thirty years, working not only in Hollywood, but also in England and Germany. In addition, she was a star of the stage and a frequent guest performer on radio, and would headline the first American television series concentrating on an Asian character, “The Gallery of Mme. Liu-Tsong” (Dumont, 1951).

Born in 1905, Wong was the daughter of a Chinese immigrant who ran a Los Angeles laundry. A career in the movies began in the typical manner of the time; she saw a local film crew at work and knew at that moment the life she wanted to pursue. She overcame family opposition and by her 16th birthday was described as a “star” by the press. Wong embodied a Chinese beauty that was new to Hollywood films and beguiled spectators in Europe and the United States, who accepted her in any type of role, whether playing hero, villain, or victim. The frequency with which portraits and articles about Wong appeared in magazines, demonstrated the incredible popularity she had with the mainstream Caucasian audience. The evidence of press coverage strongly suggests that moviegoers had more progressive inclinations than the conservative studio chiefs and producers who made the casting decisions.

As simultaneously a star, yet one whose roles were necessarily limited, at least in the studio’s view, by ethnicity, Wong’s career oscillated between major roles and character parts or exotic bits in Chinatown or far eastern scenes. As a result she played the romantic lead in “The Toll of the Sea” (1922), a seductive spy opposite Douglas Fairbanks in “The Thief of Bagdad” (1924), and a barmaid temptress in “Across to Singapore” (1928).



Anna May Wong is back again—er, pardon us—beginning again in a series of detective stories, the first of which is “Daughter of Shanghai.”

An article about Anna May Wong’s latest role in “Daughter of Shanghai” appeared in the December 1937 edition of the fan magazine Modern Screen. Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

Her career ascended with the coming of sound, and she returned triumphantly to the United States after a series of starring roles in England and on the continent. The Sherlock Holmes story “A Study in Scarlet” (1933) was changed to feature Wong as the detective’s nemesis. Edgar Wallace wrote his play “On the Spot,” about a gangster and his Chinese mistress, for Wong, and it was later filmed as “Dangerous to Know” (1938). “Daughter of Shanghai” was a picture written for her, as Paramount followed up a well-publicized trip Wong made to China.

In “Daughter of Shanghai,” she plays a woman attempting to uncover the murderer of her father, in the process exposing racketeers illegally smuggling Chinese aliens into the United States. The whole picture was shot in just over a month, and suffers from the budgetary limitations along with the use of many thriller clichés. The plot admittedly resembles a screen serial by placing the heroine in a series of perilous predicaments, but this was also one of the

few forms available at the time for a woman to display her own courage and self-sufficiency.

Wong's costar and on-screen romantic interest in "Daughter of Shanghai" was Philip Ahn. He plays perhaps the first Asian FBI agent seen on the screen, a part all the more interesting since the immigration racket is shown as controlled by Caucasians but broken by members of the very race it exploits. Ahn was the same age as Wong, and they were High School friends, but he had begun his screen career only two years before, in 1935. He was more fortunate, in a way, than Wong; never becoming a lead player, Ahn was able to freely accept any part from a major character role to a bit, guaranteeing steady employment until his death in 1978.

At the last minute, Paramount wisely assigned "Daughter of Shanghai" to director Robert Florey, a French émigré who was also an enthusiastic devotee of Far Eastern art. Many of his masks, swords, costumes, and furnishings decorate the sets in this picture. Florey had directed in Switzerland, France, Morocco, England, and Germany, and earlier in the same year as "Daughter of Shanghai," he had made his second journey to China and Japan. Before the Sino-Japanese war began, Florey hoped to interest Hollywood in making movies on location, spending several months shooting footage from the streets of Shanghai to the Japanese film studios, and some of that film still survives. He had adapted "A Study in Scarlet" specifically for Wong in 1932, and he directed her next picture, "Dangerous to Know." This masterpiece is largely forgotten today because it is out of television circulation and held by only one archive. Florey's direction of "God is My Co-Pilot," a

China-based story of the Flying Tigers during World War II, made it one of the most popular movies of 1945. He was also a lifelong friend of costar Ahn, using him in a number of other pictures and television shows. Most notably, Florey cast Ahn as a character based on Ho Chi Minh, when writing and directing the first Hollywood movie on the Vietnam conflict, "Rogues' Regiment," in 1948.

In the four years after "Daughter of Shanghai," Wong's career continued although she steadily focused more of her time on China war relief. She appeared in two 1942 war films for Producers Releasing Corporations, "Bombs Over Burma" and "Lady From Chungking," depicting the role of the Chinese woman on the mainland during the conflict. Like many talents, regaining a post-war Hollywood career proved problematic. She appeared again in supporting roles, both in features and as a television guest star. She died at a relatively youthful age, in 1961. Today, Anna May Wong is beginning to enjoy the following she deserves.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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