HISTORY This Week EP 322: Never Give Up: The Anna May Wong Story
Episode Transcript

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. June 4, 1939. I’m Sally Helm.

At the bottom of the steps, someone hands Anna May Wong a huge basket of flowers. She smiles gratefully and tries to loop the handle of the basket over her shoulder—but it’s heavy, awkward, and she has to lower it to hang on her forearm. In her other hand, Wong is holding another bouquet of flowers. It feels like a classic freeze frame in the life of a movie star. She’s stepping off an ocean liner to greet her fans in Australia. She’s holding flowers, flowers, and more flowers. She’s wearing a floor-length fur coat.

In many ways, Anna May Wong is the classic Hollywood star. She’s glamorous and famous. She’s made some sixty movies that have been seen around the world. But in other ways, she’s completely singular. She’s the first—and at this time only—world famous Chinese American movie star.

Wong already has tons of fans in Australia. And in a newscast, she addresses her Chinese fans in particular, calling them, in Taishanese, her friends.

It’s a tranquil moment. She’s in a garden. Wearing yet another fur coat. But behind the scenes...Anna May Wong is reaching the end of her rope.

She told an Australian newspaper before her visit why she decided to come here now. “People insist upon looking at me as a freak,” she said. “Something akin to a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf...That’s the main reason I want to get away from Hollywood. I want to examine myself closely and find out if I have anything really to offer the public or whether I must just go on being regarded as a freak.”

Today: Anna May Wong. How did a Chinese American girl from a poor family defy expectations to become a movie star? And what’s fueling her Hollywood rebirth?

Michelle Kruisec: When I was shooting it was the anniversary of her 100 years of being in cinema. It just coincided on that same day. So, I really do feel like there is something in the air around her, because she has stayed in our culture. She's finding resurgence, like, that is her power.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s the 1990’s, and Shirley Lim is at UCLA getting her doctoral degree in history. She's planning to write about Asian American and Pacific Islander women. And as a part of her research, she starts to explore UCLA's world-renowned Film and Television Archives.
Shirley Lim: Once I realized that UCLA had very rare, hard to find, footage of movies by this Chinese American actress called Anna May Wong, I became very intrigued.

Sally Helm: At that time, Lim doesn't know much about Anna May Wong. There wasn't much written about her, outside a handful of articles. And even those articles:

Shirley Lim: They dismissed her as an unimportant marginal figure who always died at the end of every single one of her movies.

Sally Helm: But nonetheless, Lim books an appointment at the archive to watch some of Wong's films.

Shirley Lim: So, you know, the technician came and like, wheeled out all of these dusty 35-millimeter reels of Anna May Wong films and loaded up a film called “King of Chinatown” 1939 Paramount movies.

I'm peering into this teensy teensy little screen, the viewer screen, and lo and behold, here's Anna May Wong

She is playing a surgeon.

Anna May Wong Archival: Dr. Jones, will you let me take this case? Dr. Hansen has given permission.

Dr. Jones: Why, Dr. Hansen-

Anna May Wong: Dr. Jones, please, you must!

Dr. Jones: There's only one chance in a thousand we can save him.

Anna May Wong: Then give me that chance!

Sally Helm: Not a cartoon avatar of evil. Not a sappy ingenue destined to drown or be murdered or otherwise die. She's a heroic surgeon. A female surgeon, no less. In 1939.

Shirley Lim: I'm like, wait a minute. What's going on? Why is this woman at the Anna May Wong? Who's working class daughter of a laundry man, no formal education beyond high school, why is she playing a surgeon?

Sally Helm: Lim is fascinated. Fast forward 20-odd years: she's now written two books on Anna May Wong and is working on her third.
Shirley Lim: Really watching this movie you know, prompted, it's, oh my gosh. It's close to a three-decade love affair with Anna May Wong because it was like, oh, wow. It really got me to rethink the possibilities of what life could be like for a Chinese American woman before World War II.

Sally Helm: Lim sets out to learn everything there is to know about Anna May Wong. Like where she grew up—which, perhaps no surprise for a film star, turns out to be Los Angeles. As a kid, she worked for the family business—which was laundry.

Shirley Lim: Which is a classic profession for people of Chinese descent who were excluded from a lot of other ways of making a living at this time.

Sally Helm: Wong's work is tedious, and the hours are long. It's manual labor that leaves scars on her hands. But there are perks. When she delivers laundry bundles to customers, she gets good tips.

Shirley Lim: And what's really charming about the Anna May Wong story. Well, there's everything is charming about the Anna May Wong story, but what's really charming is that she would take the tip money and use it to go to the movies.

Sally Helm: Where, you might say, she met her destiny.

It's the 1910s, and the movies are a new, enthralling form of entertainment. They’re silent. But that's what makes them a social event. Sometimes there’s a live band. And most of the time, there’s a loud audience.

Shirley Lim: People were very engaged you know, yelling things at the screen, reacting.

Sally Helm: Anna May Wong falls in love with the movies. And gets to wondering how they are made. The answers are right at her doorstep. Movies are filmed night and day around her hometown of LA. While Wong is supposed to be in school, she sneaks onto film sets instead.

Shirley Lim: This is all sort of part of Hollywood legend, but she was called a curious Chinese child because she kept going to the movie sets and pestering, you know, whoever he could find to let her onto the set to try to be an extra or to work on a movie.

Sally Helm: Incredibly, this works. She lands a few roles as an extra when she's just a teenager. And then: a breakthrough.

Shirley Lim: She hits the jackpot early at age 17. She stars in her first Hollywood movie called, “The Toll of the Sea.”
**Sally Helm:** The music you’re hearing is actually from the opening scene of that 1922 movie. The 1922 story is about an American man who travels to China and falls in love with a character named Lotus Flower, played by Anna May Wong. At the end of the movie, he abandons her. She’s brokenhearted. It’s one of the many predictable, tragic roles she’ll be asked to play throughout her career. But nevertheless…Anna May Wong is electric.

**Shirley Lim:** Oh my gosh. She is so young and adorable. She’s really captivating. You know, her eyes light up or they look sad depending on the moment, it's very clear that the camera adores, Anna May Wong,

**Sally Helm:** Her acting is subtle and natural—which is a contrast to the exaggerated styles of the time.

**Shirley Lim:** Very much during the silent era. you can read a shriek on people's face. You can see the eyes practically, you know, popping open and practically, popping out of the sockets,

**Sally Helm:** But that’s not Wong. And her elegant performance wins her more roles. She lands a supporting part in the action-packed movie, "The Thief of Baghdad." She gets the role of Tiger Lily in the first film version of Peter Pan. She's beginning to establish herself in the glamorous world of Hollywood. And she sets her sights on one day starring in her own A-list movie.

**Shirley Lim:** But after 1924, her roles become increasingly minor. And in fact, one could almost say deteriorate into being, stereotypical type casting, you know, sort of playing “evil” Oriental characters.

**Sally Helm:** Like in the 1927 movie "Old San Francisco" her role is “flower of the Orient."

**Shirley Lim:** She doesn't even really get a proper name in this movie. And her role is pretty much one of practically a white slaver Madame, you know.

**Sally Helm:** A Madame who tries to sell the white leading lady into slavery.

Anna May Wong is fed up with this kind of one-dimensional role. With an industry that can’t see past her race. She’s 23 years old and it feels like her acting career is fizzling out. This is when she could use the thing that all young actors dream of, “the big break.” And then, in true cinematic fashion, a German writer approaches Wong with a script that he’s written just for her—starring her.

But it requires her to uproot herself from the comforts and familiarity of Los Angeles, her home—and go to Berlin.
Wong barely hesitates. In 1928, she and her older sister, Lulu, travel to New York and get on a ship that crosses the Atlantic to Germany. They arrive in Berlin and are amazed at what they see.

**Shirley Lim:** It's really, really heady interesting, exciting place to be because here's Los Angeles, you know, at that time it's a bit of a backwater, right. And here she is thrust into one of the most cosmopolitan adventurous societies, that ever existed.

**Sally Helm:** There are grand, debaucherous Cabarets. Elaborate balls where people dressed in drag. Evening parties where all the guests were in the nude.

And the city is also alive with a bustling film industry. German Expressionism is expanding film’s visual and dramatic vocabulary, which is influencing cinematic stylists like Alfred Hitchcock. Anna May Wong is thrust into the center of it with her first film, “Song.”

**Shirley Lim:** And they've heard so many wonderful, amazing things about Anna May Wong that a lot of famous people in the German film industry actually come out to the studios to witness her weep on demand.

**Sally Helm:** It’s one of Wong's talents: crying on cue

**Shirley Lim:** It's really incredible.

**Sally Helm:** And when “Song” premieres, it's a hit.

**Shirley Lim:** You know, there's crowds everywhere, it's absolutely. it's insane. And berlin is where she finally fully realizes that she's a film star.

**Sally Helm:** After two more films in Berlin, Anna May Wong heads off to do vaudeville in Paris. Then she moves on to the theaters of London. In one play, her co-star is the famous British actor, Lawrence Olivier. He gets second billing, after her.

**Shirley Lim:** While she's in London, she's a huge sensation. You know, she walks into parliament, and they stopped debate because they're all staring at her.

**Sally Helm:** And even better, the critics are raving about her performance.

**Shirley Lim:** They loved her dancing. They loved her figure. They loved her portrayal of the main character.

**Sally Helm:** But they had one big criticism.
Shirley Lim: What really shocked the London theater critics is Anna May Wong, American, California, accent.

Sally Helm: Up until now, most of Wong's movies have been silent. This is one of the first times audiences are hearing her voice. And it could’ve gone better. One critic derides it as a “yankee squeak.”

Shirley Lim: You know, and she kind of asked, she's like, okay, what did they expect an English accent? You know? And then of course I ask, you know, what a Chinese accent have been more authentic to their ears?

Sally Helm: But Wong decides—okay. An English accent is a status marker. And I’m an actor. I’ll adapt.

Shirley Lim: This is her American can-do attitude. She then actually hires an accent coach to teach her an upper class, upper crest English accent.

Sally Helm: Wong wasn’t the only star thinking a lot, at this moment, about her voice. She’s trying to make the leap from the silent era…to talking films. Many other movie stars have tried and come up short. But Wong has her European theatrical credentials. A growing fan base around the world. And her newly adopted trans-Atlantic accent. So, in 1930, she boards an ocean liner and returns to the United States. Where she signs a deal with Paramount Pictures to star in two talking films.

Shirley Lim: And this is where her voice lessons become crucial

Anna May Wong: If I stay, will my hair ever become golden curls and my skin ivory? It’s only a passing fascination.

Sally Helm: Audience’s love Wong’s 1931 movie, Daughter of the Dragon. This time, the critics don’t talk about a “yankee squeak.” But audiences do have a big criticism for Wong’s co-star, Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, has been a big star in the silent era. But in this film—

Shirley Lim: He's considered to be completely unintelligible with a thick Japanese accent.

Sally Helm: Hayakawa will struggle for years to land other parts, but not Anna May Wong. She soon gets one of her best-known roles as the secret hero in the 1932 movie Shanghai Express. Wong’s character kills the villain and helps save the leading lady.

Wong Archival: You better get her out of here. I’ve just killed Chang
**Shirley Lim:** It's an A list. Main Hollywood feature, big star Marlena, Dietrich gets nominated for academy awards. So, you can really see Anna May Wong career picking up in the sound talking era.

**Sally Helm:** She is poised to achieve new Hollywood heights. And then in 1935, MGM announces plans to adapt the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, “The Good Earth,” into a blockbuster movie.

It’s the story of a Chinese farming couple in the early 20th century who struggle through love and heartbreak, famine and revolution. The part of O-Lan will surely be a life-changing role for whoever lands it. And it’s a perfect fit for Anna May Wong. She’s a seasoned veteran of the screen. An actor at her peak. A proven favorite with audiences across the globe. And the only Chinese American star with that kind of stature.

She auditions multiple times for the lead role of O-Lan. And then, as they say in the business, comes the plot twist.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Anna May Wong is this close to her goal of starring in an A-list Hollywood movie. MGM’s The Good Earth. And then …

**Shirley Lim:** Well, the long and the short of it is she does not get cast in the Good Earth so why does Anna May Wong not get the roll?

**Sally Helm:** The answer to that question has to do in part with new censorship guidelines in Hollywood, popularly known as “the Hayes Code.” The code tells movie studios what is and isn’t acceptable to show on the screen. One of the things deemed unacceptable: interracial marriage. Which of course has been taboo or outright banned for decades in many US states. And now, if directors want to make a movie with, say, a Chinese leading character who was married, they are officially required to use two actors of the same race. In practice, this meant a lot of white actors playing Asian roles. Which was known as "yellow face."

**Shirley Lim:** Somebody who is not of Asian descent, dawn's makeup, hair styles, clothing, mannerisms, in order to portray an Asian role.

**Sally Helm:** That's what happens in the case of The Good Rainer. The leading role goes to white actor Luise Rainer.

**Luise Rainer Archival:** No, we’ll not sell the land. We’ll keep it. And when we return, we’ll still have the land.
Sally Helm: In 1938, Rainer will win an Oscar for her role in this movie. Anna May Wong is disappointed...and fed up with Hollywood. So, she decides, I'm just going to make a film myself.

Shirley Lim: I mean, this is one of the things I really, really love about her because she's not going to let Hollywood casting dictate her mood or her life. She says pretty much to hell with Hollywood, I'm off to China.

Sally Helm: Wong plans to make her first and only trip to China—and to make a movie about it. A travelogue starring herself.

Shirley Lim: She directs, she produces, she acts in, her own film about China. Granted, it's more of a homemade travel movie, but she makes it.

Sally Helm: The movie isn’t shown in theaters, but there’s still significant buzz around Wong’s trip. And it comes at a time when Hollywood attitudes are changing.

In 1937, war breaks out between China and Japan. The US backs China. Now seen as an ally, America begins to change its prejudiced views on China, and Chinese Americans. Hollywood reacts to that.

Anna May Wong convene take advantage of her Chinese heritage, her interest in painting a sympathetic portrait of the Chinese

Sally Helm: Wong strikes another deal with Paramount for a series of movies. They're not big budget. But there's a huge advantage: this time, the characters aren't the simplified roles she's so often had to play. In “Daughter of Shanghai,” she plays the crime-solving heroine:

Anna May Wong Archival: There’s nothing to be gained by seeing him. Did my father ever discuss the name Hartman with you?

Sally Helm: In “Dangerous to Know,” she’s a wealthy hostess:

Anna May Wong Archival: Nothing.

Man: You’re a strange person, TK. You want nothing. I’ve never met anyone who wants nothing.

Anna May Wong: I possessed everything within my reach, so I’ve stopped wanting.

Sally Helm: Then she plays a California surgeon:

Anna May Wong Archival: Dr. Jones, will you let me take this case? Dr. Hansen has permission.
Dr. Jones: Why, Dr. Hansen-

Anna May Wong: Dr. Jones, please!

Sally Helm: That's the 1939 film that Shirley Lim first watched in the UCLA Archives. King of Chinatown.

Shirley Lim: In that movie, Anna May Wong character is a Patriot who fundraises for the war effort in China, but this is seen as a completely patriotic actions for her as an American.

Sally Helm: Her career is back on an upswing; Wong is invited to Australia to star in a vaudeville show.

Shirley Lim: So being an intrepid adventurer. She's like, sure, I'll go to Australia.

Sally Helm: She's hoping for the chance to once more prove herself as an actor. But the show gets poor reviews and Wong heads back to Hollywood and to even more disappointment. The movie industry is about to change again because of the war. This time, not in her favor.

Shirley Lim: Ooh, World War II causes shifts in the movie industry.

Sally Helm: Studios are suddenly putting their time and money into male-oriented war movies. In this environment, Wong is barely able to squeak out a few small roles.

Shirley Lim: She doesn't get starring roles anymore in Hollywood, whether A list or B list. You know, let's be frank, she's an aging actress in an industry that then and now tends to uphold younger women as, beauty standards.

Sally Helm: Things get worse for Wong in particular after the war, when China becomes a communist country. No longer are they America's ally; they're America's enemy.

Shirley Lim: Her Chinese American body is one of her greatest selling points, but it can also be one of her greatest limiting factors when China is demonized.

Sally Helm: Anna May Wong goes years without acting work.

Shirley Lim: She is somebody who has stated that work is the best therapy of all. And the work is not coming her way.

It is really, really hard going from being the toast of the town, wherever she goes, crowds following, to going to practically a screeching halt in her career.
**Sally Helm:** Many accounts say she fell into a depression. Some say she became a heavy drinker. In the coming years, she resorts to selling her favorite jewelry to make ends meet. She develops liver disease.

**Shirley Lim:** It's really tough on her mental health, but can I just actually interject and say that she's Anna May Wong. So what she does, she actually then starts to work in television.

**Sally Helm:** That’s right. One more comeback. In 1951, she becomes the first Asian American to have a starring role in a television series, “The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong”

**Shirley Lim:** She plays this gallery owner, detective who goes around the world solving crimes.

**Sally Helm:** Shirley Lim would love to see it. But the show was the property of the little-known Dumont Network. And Lim told us, sometime in the 1970s, they got rid of their back catalog, including Wong’s show.

**Shirley Lim:** They actually loaded it up onto a barge and dumped it into the East river. It is the holy grail. So, if anybody listening out there ever find, or has any copies of this TV series, get in contact with me.

**Sally Helm:** In 1957, jumping off of her starring TV role, Anna May Wong convinces ABC to air that China travelogue on a TV show called “Bold Journey”:

**Archival:** Bold Journey, your television passport to the exciting, colorful world of adventure.

**Sally Helm:** It's nationally broadcast. And the network invites Wong to appear live and narrate the movie as it plays to a studio audience.

When Wong steps onstage, it’s clear that she’s not the same figure who had once transfixed the world.

**Shirley Lim:** She really looks shockingly nervous. Her eyes dart all over the place, she seems really uneasy

**Sally Helm:** Disease has taken its toll. But, ever the professional, Anna May Wong gets on with the show. She narrates her travelogue with pride:

**Anna May Wong Archival:** This is one of my favorite pictures of my father. He was so happy that day to be with his family from the West to the East. Though I’ve been to many places around the world, this first and only trip I made to China was the most meaningful.
Sally Helm: In 1961, comes one more turn of the plot. Wong is honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. And incredibly, despite her failing health, she is about to land a significant part in the movie, “Flower Drum Song.”

Shirley Lim: She's really, really excited. An A-list Hollywood movie, big budget, lots of publicity. This is what is going to bring her back, into the Hollywood, a list that she has deserved her entire career.

But what's so hard is that before filming even starts on “Flower Drum Song,” Anna May Wong dies.

Sally Helm: In 1961, at the age of 56, she dies in her sleep of a heart attack.

Anna May Wong is gone…but, in typical Anna May Wong fashion, she is still making another comeback. This year, the US Mint will put her on the back of the quarter, making her the first Asian-American to be featured on U.S. currency. Check your change, you might see her! There also is a new Anna May Wong Biopic in production. Plus, a 2020 Netflix Series called “Hollywood” features her as a character:

Archival: I spoke to my agent; he still thinks I’m delusional because no one at the studio seems to know anything about “Angel of Shanghai.”

Sally Helm: Actor Michelle Kruisec plays her in the show.

Michelle Kruisec: I felt this great affinity for her. She started when she was 11. I started when I was 11, I started to see so much similarity in the way she was up against Hollywood and what I felt I had been facing in my own career.

Initially I felt that her figure was tragic that her story was tragic,

Sally Helm: But as Kruisec learned more about Anna May Wong--got closer to her—inhabited her—she started to see that the tragedy and setbacks weren't the central thing. It was the way Wong responded.

Michelle Kruisec: I started to see that her reaction to obstacle was to pivot and reinvent herself.

Sally Helm: This came at a crucial time in Kruisec’s own career.

Michelle Kruisec: I was really writing a lot about invisibility visibility at the time. And I was having dreams of not having a face.
Sally Helm: Kruisec felt tired of fighting to be cast as a lead, not a sidekick. Much like Anna May Wong.

Michelle Kruisec: I always die in every part I do, or I'm always sick or I'm always the villain there's something wrong with me, you know, it chips away at you, so I had really been in a place in my career where I was questioning. Who I was and when I looked at her story, she never gave up, you know, to the very, very bitter end. You know, she died reading a script. That's when I started to realize. Reframe my own experience. That I wasn't doing it for other people, and I wasn't doing it for the industry that I was simply doing it for myself.

Sally Helm: Kruisec said, it was a real turning point. Inspired by the career of a woman who never stopped working … and never stopped reinventing herself.

Michelle Kruisec: For me, her legacy will overpower any kind of failure that she may have felt. And when I think about my artistic process, I actually have a thing on my, or on my visual wall, which is, never forget. And I feel like the never forget is never forget Anna May Wong.

CREDITS:

Thank you to our guests, Professor Shirley Lim and Michelle Kruisec for speaking with us for this episode.

This episode was produced by Julie Magruder, sound designed by Dan Rosato, and story edited by Jim O’Grady. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press, Morgan Givens, and me, Sally Helm. Our Senior Producer is Ben Dickstein. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. And our executive producers are McCamey Lynn and Jessie Katz. Thanks for listening and we will see you next week.