

The Woman on the New Quarter

Clink! Clank! A quarter falls to the concrete ground. Rays of sunlight reflect off a woman's countenance ingrained in the coin. Do you recognize Anna May Wong's face? In 2022, a series of quarters were minted to commemorate Anna May Wong and her activism. She was born on January 3, 1905, in the Chinatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Although she grew up in a diverse community, Wong and her elder sister were both teased for their race and gender. Hatred for Chinese individuals had been on the rise long before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. To this day, it remains as the only immigration act that stated the targeted group by name. Anna May Wong's life was full of struggles against racism, sexism, and depression, but she always bounced back.

By some miracle or flip of a coin, Anna May Wong's passion for acting began in her teenage years. She would skip school to watch movies being made and repeated the scenes she saw at home. Despite great disapproval from her parents, Wong dropped out of high school to fulfill her dream as an actress. She auditioned for lead roles but was always given supporting ones. Wong claimed, "[Hollywood] producers prefer Hungarians for Chinese roles." Later on, she met Marlene Dietrich, a German singer and fellow actress, and they became fast friends. Both actresses dressed in tuxedos and top hats as a form of collective resistance against society's stereotypes of women. After returning to the United States, they featured in the movie "Shanghai Express" as women of ill repute. Norms in the acting and fashion industry were changing, in part to Wong and Dietrich.

Despite Hollywood's continued rejections, she pushed through and started her own company called Anna May Wong Productions. Unfortunately, it was closed down when her business partner was caught using bad business practices. Wong decided to leave for Europe and starred in plays and silent films such as "A Circle of Chalk", "Piccadilly", and "The Flame of Love", just to name a few. Despite the discrimination she endured in the United States, she remained a loyal patriot. When WWII broke out, she auctioned off her costumes to raise funds for war relief. However, moviegoers were either at the front lines or being more frugal with their money, which resulted in the lack of job opportunities and led Wong into a spiral of depression and alcoholism. The determined Anna May Wong rose up in the mid-90's and reappeared in multiple television shows. In 1960, she was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame as the first Asian-American actress. Her health declined later on, and she died of a heart attack at the age of 56. Without her resilience and determination, she would never have left behind a legacy of over sixty films.

Many actresses such as Lucie Liu, Brenda Song, and Gemma Chan, followed in Wong's wake. Audiences were reminded of the extraordinary talents of Asian-American women every time Wong was featured as the leading actress in movies. She challenged Hollywood's tradition

of portraying Chinese women as passive or evil characters by refusing to play stereotypical roles in “The Good Earth”.

Actress, producer, and director Jenna Ushkowitz said, “[Anna May Wong] paved the way for me.” Although things have improved, roles for Asian-American women are still limited. Ushkowitz has been rejected multiple times from roles “meant for” White actresses. Just because of her ethnicity, she has been pigeonholed into roles as a sidekick or tech nerd. Asian-American artists and producers are pushing for change in racially imbalanced Hollywood. Organizations like the Uplift Initiative are supporting and mentoring producers from under-represented ethnicities to help accomplish their dreams. Wong’s spirit is embodied in the changing atmosphere in the film industry as demonstrated in Michelle Yeoh’s portrayal as Evelyn Quan Wang in “Everything Everywhere All at Once”, which won her the Academy Award for Best Actress. Nine decades since Wong’s time, Michelle Yeoh finally broke through the glass ceiling and became the first Asian actress to receive this honor in 2023.

Anna May Wong’s duel against a segregated Hollywood shows us that you can follow your passion, but you have to strive for it. Every time you see her on the new quarter, think of her story, one of resilience, pride, and advocacy. She challenged systemic discrimination through collective action, demonstrated her perseverance, and continues to inspire young actresses to pursue their dreams.

Works Cited

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