

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Katie Gee Salisbury, author of *Not Your China Doll: The Wild and Shimmering Life of Anna May Wong*, to talk about Hollywood's first Asian-American movie star. So first, could you tell us a bit about her career?

KGS: So she was born 1905. Chinese-American. The way I counted, I would say she was third generation. So her grandparents actually were the first to immigrate from China during the gold rush to California, and then her parents were both born in California. And she happened to be born at a time when a lot of interesting things were happening in Los Angeles. So while she was a little girl, helping out at her father's laundry, making deliveries of clean laundry to various clients, she started noticing all of these film crews set up in the middle of the street making films. And it was just at that time that film studios from the East Coast had started moving to Los Angeles because they realized, the weather is so great all year-round, they could actually shoot films constantly. And so she happens to be there in that moment and also is intrigued by what's going on, starts skipping school so she can go to the nickelodeons and watching all of these silent films from reel-to-reel and then going home to practice the scenes she's just seen in front of the mirror. So she has this theatrical sensibility from a very young age, and by the time she's 11, decides that she's going to become a movie star. And with similar determination is figuring out how can I get myself into the movies? And so by age 13 or 14, she's doing her first extra uncredited role in a film called *The Red Lantern* with Alla Nazimova in 1919. And from there, little by little, she's working her way up through bit parts before she lands a leading role in 1922 in a film called *The Toll of the Sea*, which is actually the second film ever made in Technicolor. So that's the very early beginnings of her career. But really, she saw this thing, knew that it was for her, and was determined to do it no matter what. No matter what her parents said, no matter what society said, she was going to become an actress.

AT: And so one of the things that you talk about in the book is that difference between her family's expectations and her community's expectations compared to her own aspirations. And I do love that it sounds like she never let those expectations hold her back from doing what she really wanted to do. But there was definitely a cost for her as well.

KGS: Absolutely. One of the things I so admire about Anna May Wong was how independent and modern she was for her time. And we would have to remember, being a Chinese-American, but being any American woman in the early 1900s, no one expected you to have a career. Your whole existence was to get married and have children and take care of a family. And that expectation even was heightened even more so within the Chinese American community. And so, of course, that's what her parents wanted for her. And then she gets tied up in all this weird newfangled thing called the movies. And one of the other things, too, that I really tried to do in the book is take us back to that period because film was not an established art form. People didn't understand what it was. It was new technology. People didn't compare to the legitimate theater, which is what they would call Broadway,. It was seen as a lesser art made for the masses. People didn't think it would stick around, that it was trivial, stupid, dumbed-down. And so she's taking part in this thing that no one really understands or sees as a powerful industry the way we do now. So there's a lot of speculation and doubt. And like, "why are you doing this?" This is not a path that most people take with an end up successful, right? So that's not something her parents wanted to do. And the interesting thing, too, about her relationship with her father especially is that, the story of when she's born is that he doesn't come home because his wife has given birth to another daughter. And he, as a traditional Chinese man wants to have a son who's going to carry on his name. So he's now had two daughters by this wife, his second wife, I should mention.

AT: And just to be clear, when you say second wife, he did have a first wife back in China raising his firstborn son, which I also have feelings about, but that's not why we're here. (laughter)

KGS: Right. Yes. So Wong Sam Sing, Anna May Wong's father, had a wife back in China, and he had a son by her. So he had a son. But when he decided to go back to the US and said, "Well, are you going to come with me?" And she's like, "No, thanks. I'll stay here." Because she had a really nice life. He had earned all this money in America to send back to make her life comfortable. So she's like, "No, I'll stay here. You can go and keep supporting me and my son. But if you want to get remarried, marry a second wife, you can." And that was actually a fairly common thing in Chinese culture. And also, among people, immigrants who are going back and well, technically, her father's not an immigrant, but among Chinese-Americans who are still going back and forth between China. So yeah, so he's got this second family. And Anna May Wong also has some feelings about this, right? So here's the thing, they don't want her to make films. She's a young woman. They don't want her to be unchaperoned. They don't want her to be around men, which is a legitimate concern of any parent, right? But she starts making these films, and she's bringing home hundreds of dollars a week. And she's helping out with the family. So they can't really argue with the money, right? That part is undeniable. So they're like, "okay, well, maybe you can continue doing this for a little while, but eventually you're going to get married. Okay." And then at one point, I think her father wants her to send home her earnings back to the family in China. And that's kind of where she puts her foot down. She's like, "I'm not, I don't know, I've never met those people and they want to tell us how to live our lives. I'm not sending them my money." But she was very headstrong, but she has this relationship with her father. And I think in many ways they were very similar. And you could say that she embodies a stereotypical boy mentality, right? Because even by her own account, she's playing marbles with the boys and playing baseball rather than being with the girls' sewing circle, which she can't stand. So she has this very independent determined streak, which I think is part of what makes her such a fascinating character and why she becomes entrenched in Hollywood at such a young age.

AT: One of the reasons that, as I understand it, the family had these concerns in particular is when we look at the intersections of race and gender in Hollywood, and beyond, of this time, she was very much being exoticized, being sexualized. You talk about how her costume looked compared to the white woman who actually got to be the protagonist because she was white, even if she was often in yellowface, which we'll get into later. But you do understand when you're reading this book that it's not an unfounded concern because, as you said, the movies are new, right? And it's not considered respectable. And then on top of that, you've got her practically naked, particularly by the standards of the day. I'd be concerned, too. So how were the intersections of race and gender playing out in not just her early career, but later as well?

KGS: Right. That's a very good point. As you mentioned, if you watch *Thief of Baghdad*, out of all of the actors in that film, especially as a woman, she's wearing probably the skimpiest outfit. The only person who's wearing less might be Douglas Fairbanks himself because he's bare-chested. But that aside, she's wearing a very skimpy two-piece. But 1924, that's not what normal women are wearing down the street. So in that sense, it was very risqué. And there's a funny story about how when her father went to see the film, her siblings asked him afterwards, "so what do you think, Dad, what do you think of the film?" And all he said was like, "brrr," like, "makes me feel cold," right? That was his little dig at her. Like, why are you wearing so little clothing in this movie? Which I'm sure she understood the implications of that statement. So yeah, that is a theme early on in her career where she is playing a lot of exotic dancers in skimpy outfits, see-through skirts, all sorts of things. And the thing that really gets to her, though, is that part of these roles is the fact that because she's exoticized, she can't play the leading lady, right? She's always a bit player. And very often as the bit player or as the forbidden fruit, essentially, the exotic girl you can never actually kiss or consummate your relationship with, she often dies. And so this continues throughout the 1920s. So by 1928, she's really fed up with it and eventually receives an offer to make films in Germany, which she takes. But to your question, this is something that continues to happen through her career. And you see throughout the arc of her life that her understanding of her profession as an actress and what she wants and is willing to do evolve. In the beginning, it's just about getting into the movies, just getting into the movies, making a name for yourself. It's like, I'll do anything, which

is, I think, the attitude of most people who are starting out and they just really want to be a part of something. And of course, she was also a teenager. She's 14 when she's in her first, doing her extra work, first leading role at 17, *Thief of Baghdad*, she's 18. So she's very young and of course she's a young, attractive young woman. And in a way, I'm sure she wants to use that to her advantage, but there's not as much of a reflection on "what does my image mean when people see it on screen?" And that question really becomes a bigger and bigger one throughout her career, especially when she goes to China later in the 1930s, she gets a lot of criticism about like, "why did you portray us, the Chinese people in this way?" So she starts to realize that whether it's fair or not, because she's one of the only Asian actresses on screen that's being seen across the world, she represents Asian women everywhere. That's an impossible thing to do, but that is essentially what her career was at that point.

AT: It's interesting when we look at the Chinese press or other Chinese or Chinese-American people basically blaming her because Hollywood is racist. I know Hattie McDaniel, who was the first African-American actor to get an Oscar, for *Gone with the Wind*, she got similar criticisms from the Black community because she routinely played maids, essentially variations on a maid, and she basically said that she'd rather play a maid than be one. And it seems very notable that not just, you're blaming this person as the face of Hollywood racism that they have basically no control over, obviously. But they're also a lot less critical of both the white decision-makers who could actually make a difference, as well as the white actors who are in yellowface, because I don't know exactly when the Hays Code kicked in, in this time period that we're talking about over the course of her career. But basically the Hays Code said things like you couldn't have any person of color and a white person having a romance. That was one of the justifications for yellowface was, "well, we have to have two white actors doing this interracial portrayal." But they were doing it long before that. I feel like the Hays Code sucks, but we can't blame the Hays Code when they were doing this a long time before that.

KGS: Right, no, and they were doing it before the Hays Code. So the Hays Code was created in 1930 but not really enforced until 1934. But you're right, the whole thing is completely illogical. If you're not allowed to show interracial relationships, then why do you have any stories that feature them? Why would you have actors play racialized people in makeup? The whole thing doesn't really make sense. If you have a ban on it, you think would just ban it completely. But no, they still wanted to show these stories, but they just use it as a pretext to exclude actors of colors from getting those parts, which is very true in Anna May Wong's experience. She plays her first leading role in *The Toll of the Sea* in 1922, which is a bit of a fluke because that film was made by the scientists at Technicolor. So they weren't concerned with box office names. They wanted to make a movie that would demonstrate the color technology they'd created. So after that film, she doesn't play another leading role in Hollywood for another nine years. And part of that time, she goes to Europe. She's in Europe for almost three years where all of her roles there are leading roles. The films are essentially written for her specifically, and they're really her best films. She comes back to Hollywood after that. And at that point, Hollywood's like, "Oh, okay, well, maybe we messed up. Maybe we made a mistake because you went to Europe and they seem to really like you and you made all these incredible films. So, okay, we'll give you another chance." So Paramount gives her a two-picture deal. But the first film that they, the starring vehicle they come up with for her is *Daughter of the Dragon*, which is essentially a Fu Manchu film where she's playing the daughter of Fu Manchu, where she's on this vengeance tour to avenge her father and get the blood of this one family. And the whole thing is really lurid and fantastical and ridiculous. It's almost a film for kids because the script is so terrible. But that's what their imagination could come up with for someone like Anna May Wong. They just can't imagine her playing a human role, right? It's a fantasy. And so back to your question, yes, it is striking that all of her critics about, "why did you represent us this way? Why are you playing these menial roles?" They're not thinking about, who are the producers who are making all the decisions about these films? Because ultimately it comes down to them because as we see when, even when they're willing to give her a leading role, it's still in this very stereotypical context. And the truth is, especially for her early career is that the choice was between

either being in the film and playing the part that you have no choice in or not being in it at all. And so what is the better choice in that situation? I don't know. Clearly, she chose to be a part of Hollywood. And I think the thing that sometimes gets lost in her story is the fact that she does take all of the criticism to heart, despite, she knows it's not fair, 'cause she's gone through all of this with Hollywood. But she comes back from her trip to China, really a changed person. And she says publicly that she's not going to play unsympathetic roles anymore, roles that make her people look bad. And she goes to Paramount and is actually able to flip it into a new series of films that she does there and granted, they're B movies. So they're lower budgets, only one hour, they're not as spectacular as a Marlene Dietrich film, for example. But because they're B movies, she's able to really exert her influence over them and create some groundbreaking films that have not been watched nearly enough, like *Daughter of Shanghai* with Philip Ahn, her Korean-American childhood friend, they together play the leading heroes of this film. And she flips the script and has all of the villains played by white actors. And unlike the earlier films that she did, she doesn't have to die. She gets her happy ending and she and Philip Ahn end up happily ever after. So she does eventually kind of evolve her thinking and find creative ways to get Hollywood to change slightly. But yeah, I think that the criticism lobbed at her and at people like Hattie McDaniel, they were in such a tight space. And when you talk about Hattie McDaniel, having to play maids, I think also about Anna May Wong and at the end of her career, she had to play maids because she was old and she was no longer the young, beautiful, exotic girl. She was older. So they relegated her to these maid roles. And again, despite how on some level that's a bit demeaning, to have to be cast suddenly in those roles in your older age, but she still took them. And I think that speaks to the fact that she really felt it was important to do her work and also to be seen and that nothing was really beneath her in that sense. So, I have a lot of sympathy for the position that actors of color were in, especially in those like early decades of Hollywood.

AT: I do want to come back to where we're at now, because I do think that like it's gotten better, but obviously that was a really low bar given how bad it used to be. So I do want to come back later to how far have we really come, but you mentioned her traveling and working in Europe. You mentioned her trip to China. And I feel like both of these experiences that she had, which I believe she went to Europe multiple times. So it does seem like these experiences were transformative in both instances. Not least of all, because as a Chinese-American, you do talk about how she wasn't American enough for the Americans, but she wasn't Chinese enough for the Chinese. So she's just getting crap from both sides. So could you tell us how that first trip to Europe where she was living and working there, but then also her subsequent international travel really shaped her perspective and her career?

KSG: Yes, so she leaves for Germany in the spring of 1928, because she's been offered a deal to do several films at UFA, which is the premier film studio in Germany at the time, home to all these German Expressionist directors. And they've written a script specifically for her. And in fact, they actually renamed the film to *Song* in honor of her Chinese name, Wong Liu Tsong. And it becomes a huge hit in Germany. I think for her going to Europe is really a revelation. And you can see that she must have looked to other entertainers of color, people like Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker, who had already left the US for France and England, and were having a lot of success there. But look to them to see what was possible beyond the US, very prescribed segregation. As an Asian-American, it wasn't the same as being a Black American, certainly. But there were still a lot of tensions and certainly things must have happened on set and in her personal life. She recounts some of these, even from a young age, her and her older sister had been going to an American school with other American kids until one day they're walking home and the kids are taunting them with racial epithets and pulling their hair and throwing things at them. And that's when they get pulled out of school and put into a Chinese school. So she's already experienced a lot of racism up close and personal in addition to the kind of passive-aggressive racism of Hollywood. Like, "oh, sorry, we have all these excuses for why we can't put you in these roles that you want to play." But she understands what's going on. And so she goes to Europe and it's interesting because a lot of people today will ask me, "why was it so much better for her in Europe?" And the

short answer is really that they were just not as racist. Of course, things are different in Europe now. They hadn't experienced a lot of immigration at that point. So being a Chinese-American woman, being either of those things would have been exotic, but being both is out of this world, right? Most people had never met anyone Chinese, let alone a Chinese-American woman who speaks fluent English. So it's the other side of racism, essentially. It's like the exoticizing of her. She is so fascinating, a novelty. We want to know more about her. It's not the kind of hatred and denigration, but it's also still treating her in a way that is not totally human. But for her purposes, for her career, it's a huge boon, right? Because of this novelty that she exudes to them, they want to put her in all these films and they're giving her these opportunities where she doesn't have to share the screen with anyone else. And so I think one of the things that's so incredible about them, I'm talking about films like *Song* or *Pavement Butterfly*, *Piccadilly*, which she makes in England. You just see her full acting powers at work on screen, which is not really what you get in most of her early films and even a lot of her later films in Hollywood. So the time that she spends there, it allows her to do all these things. It also is kind of turning her into this cosmopolitan young woman. You can imagine having grown up in LA, of course, it's a city and it was becoming a bigger and bigger city while she was growing up, but it's not the same thing as going to Europe, which is in a way like a finishing school. She's learning all of these languages. She learns German and French. She's schmoozing with all the elites of Europe. For example, Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher, meets her at a private party and becomes obsessed with her. He writes about his meeting with her in the newspaper. So you can just see how much people are enthralled by her. And she's able to make her debut in theater on the West End in London. So she's doing all of these incredible things. So it's really a radical revolutionary moment in her career that allows her to go back to the US in this very triumphant way. And of course, as we talked about, Hollywood is still stuck in their one way of seeing things. So over the years, she finds that she has to continue going back to Europe to get more opportunities. Every time she's shut out by Hollywood, she finds a way to go someplace else and find new opportunities. So whether that's going to Europe or going to China, she was the kind of person who wouldn't take no for an answer. She really believed in herself.

AT: When it comes to the China trip, you juxtapose it with these parallels going on with *The Good Earth*. So if you could take us through why those were interspersed, not just from a timing standpoint, obviously they were coinciding, but it is very fascinating because, I haven't seen *The Good Earth*. I hadn't really been aware of what a monumental film it was. But it is fascinating how it sort of seems like this encapsulation of all of these racism issues that we've been talking about. And then at the same time, you've got her experiences in China. So could you take us through those?

KGS: Yes. So some people probably are going to wonder, why do you spend so much time writing about a film, *The Good Earth*, that Anna May Wong's not even in. And of course it is a little bit of a personal obsession, but one of the reasons I wanted to do that is partly because, when you just look at a condensed version of Anna May Wong story, like go and read her Wikipedia page or some internet articles, they're always going to mention *The Good Earth* because *The Good Earth* is this film that is like this big what-if - what if Anna May Wong had been cast in the lead? And just to give you some background, *The Good Earth* is meant to be this sympathetic portrait of two peasant farmers and the epic travails that they go through. And so it was meant to be a very sympathetic portrait and everyone in Hollywood saw it as an opportunity for Anna May Wong, because of course who else would play it, right? She's the only Chinese-American actress of note. But as we know, it doesn't end up that way. MGM doesn't cast her in the lead. They cast Luise Rainer, who is a German actress who's just arrived in the US for about a year. She's still practicing her English. So the standards are so out of sync depending on who you are when it comes to casting. But so that's what happens. They ask her to audition for some secondary roles and she ultimately says, "you know what, I'm not going to be in this film." And instead she takes this trip to China. So in many ways, her trip to China is her building a counter-narrative to what MGM is doing. MGM is creating this fake version of China, right there. They buy 500 acres in Chatsworth, hire all

these Chinatown extras to not only be extras, but to actually work the land. They're becoming farmers. And it's so rich with irony and hypocrisy because MGM, their goal was to have the most like authentic depiction of life in China. And they spent a lot of money doing that. They sent scouts to China. They brought back all of these props. They bought Chinese farms wholesale and then shipped them back to Los Angeles and recreated them. They're farming the land. They have all these experts, the dress, the hair, the costumes, everything is done to a T. But they can't bring themselves to cast Chinese or any Asian actors in the principal roles. So, it's the deep hypocrisy there, they want it to be authentic, but they can't do the thing that would actually make it authentic. And it's also Hollywood, right? They're always making up versions of reality that are completely different. And so I just felt like it was such a great opportunity to not only lean into the fact that Anna May is trying to subvert and take control of the narrative by saying why don't you come with me when I come to China? But to also reveal the ways in which Hollywood made films about the Chinese, it was still with this deep lack of understanding. And so, Anna May Wong goes to China. She writes five essays for the New York Herald-Tribune, which are syndicated across the country. So she's sharing her first impressions of going to China as a Chinese-American, which I think is really, really, really interesting. She's also hired a cameraman who's filming a lot of her travels and they later make that into a documentary, which she narrates and they air it on ABC in the 1950s. So she's doing all of these things to, show people what China is really like. And it's not like the version that MGM is creating, right? Of course there are farmers, but there are also people who live in cities like Shanghai, right? And so that's part of what she's trying to do, is really enrich people's understanding. And while she's also herself exploring it and learning about it. So I just couldn't miss the opportunity to have a split screen between the two versions of China: Hollywood's and the one that Anna May Wong actually goes and sees for herself.

AT: I will say as a white person, it actually got me thinking about who is best placed to tell stories, because the original author of the book version of *The Good Earth* is Pearl S. Buck. She won a Pulitzer for it. And she is a white, I believe daughter of missionaries, who grew up in China. And so obviously she's better placed than most white people to have written about life in China. But it made me contemplate, is it more accurate for a white person who grew up in China as opposed to someone like Anna May Wong who had never been there? Like if she were also a writer, 'cause you've talked about, she wrote these columns and I believe there's a bit in the book where you talk about, she was interested in writing, but didn't get to a point where she was actually writing her own films or anything. And so, there is no right answer obviously, but it did make me curious because you talk in the book about how, she's never been to China up until well into her life. So just that juxtaposition of a white woman who was raised there versus a Chinese-American woman who had never been there and who gets to tell these stories.

KGS: Right. Yeah. You've hit on something that I have also been fascinated by and thought about because I do think Pearl Buck and Anna May Wong are kind of on opposite sides of the mirror in a sense. Because Pearl Buck grew up in China, she was kind of divorced from American culture until she came to the US as an adult. And as a foreigner living in China, although she thought she was Chinese, of course, as a child, you would think you're like everyone who's around you. So she thought she was Chinese, but often would be taunted for being this foreign devil, which resonated with me. I was like, wow, that's kind of what Anna May Wong experienced as a little girl, being Chinese American. But the difference is that, on the one hand, I do think *The Good Earth* as a book is a great book and only someone like Pearl Buck could have written it, at that time. Because she was the daughter of American missionaries because she grew up in China. She was fluent in the language, really fluent in the culture, had a deep appreciation and understanding for what rural life was like in China, not city life. So she is really just showing one aspect of what China was like at that time or in decades prior to when she wrote the book. But the problem is that when she comes to the US, she becomes this celebrity author. And I think the American media has a habit of doing this where we prefer to have the authority who is white, who is American, who is like us rather to have someone from that country be the authority or from

that community be the authority. And the criticisms in China of her book were the fact that, “well, we're not all farmers anymore. We're not a completely rural society. This only shows one picture part of the picture.” And that's true, but there weren't any other voices who were going to write novels about the Chinese in the American market. So therefore her book kind of becomes all-encompassing and that's everything that anyone knows about China. And so that's kind of the unfortunate downside of the success of that book.

AT: From her personal perspective, in terms of this trip to China, because you do talk about how this was transformative for her. And there's a section where she is talking about how if she goes out in Western dress, people say, “oh, why is that Chinese woman wearing Western dress?” But then if she goes out in a cheongsam, “why is that American wearing a cheongsam?” So I don't know if she expected to just be Chinese in China. But this goes back to that whole, she was too Chinese for Americans, but too American for the Chinese, not to say that she didn't experience welcome and have a really wonderful experience in a lot of ways. But that sense that she's been, say, removed from her cultural heritage, she can't just slide back into it.

KGS: Right. I think that this is a common feeling among a lot of hyphenated Americans, this idea. I have experienced it myself, growing up Chinese-American and thinking, on the one hand, wanting to honor that heritage, but also feeling divorced from it, because I don't really know that much about it, other than what I know about my family. And our own traditions, which may not be like the dominant thing. And I think a lot of people feel that way, especially if you feel otherized in American society. Because I'm mixed race, I can blend in. So it's not as much of an issue, but like someone like my mom, people are always going to look at her and say, “oh, she's Asian.” Or if you're Black, someone's always going to look at you and say you're Black. And so I've had these conversations with other friends when they've traveled to places like China or Africa. And on the one hand, it's nice because you feel like you do blend in and there's a sense of not being the different one anymore. But at the same time, you still are different. And people realize that when they try to talk to you or because of the way you're dressed or there's something different, the way that you carry yourself is different, which I think was definitely true for Anna May Wong. And so there's this sense that you just can't win. You don't belong anywhere. Which I think can be a very lonely feeling, but that's certainly, I think what Anna May Wong was trying to express is that she, and a lot of Chinese-Americans feel this way. We feel like illegitimate Chinese people. Actually, there's a great line, I don't know if you're familiar with the photographer Corky Lee, who passed a few years ago, but one of the things he would say is that he was a hundred percent authentic fake. And I just love that because it just captures it so well, like that is exactly what it's like to be a hyphenated American because you didn't grow up in that other place. You grew up in America, you're American, but you still have parts of your culture, but you don't always know what they mean. Just like Anna May Wong, when she first starts her movie career, she tells people what her Chinese name means, but it's actually not the correct meaning. Which is I think a totally Chinese American thing to do, to like have a Chinese name and not know what it means. Like, how would you know what it means? Someone would have to tell you. So it's a precarious state, but I think that a lot of people still relate to it today, unfortunately.

AT: And so the title, which as I mentioned, is *Not Your China Doll*, obviously refers to this metaphor of wanting her to be silent and compliant, which you get into in the book is how people really wanted her to just shut up and do her job. But there were things where she did set boundaries when she could and when it was really important to her. And I feel like this is a thing that we still see today where I'm assuming there's a racial component as well, but any woman is typically expected to just shut up and do the job and don't complain and don't push back and don't stand up for yourself. Because if you do, you get called difficult.

KGS: There is, I would say, a pervasiveness to the China doll stereotype, especially. Asian women are always objectified in that way. To be doll-like, to have skin like porcelain, to be sexually available to men. There's just a long history of it, specifically in the US, but anywhere in the Western world. And there are people who could

argue that Anna May Wong, to some extent, she didn't really create it, but that she maybe codified this stereotype through some of her roles. Because she was playing these China doll-type innocent, naive, exotic young girls who, a white savior comes in to rescue them. So you could argue that she has furthered that stereotype. And part of going just back to her own story, when you get the condensed version, there's also a sense of tragedy, of thinking of her as tragic. This China doll who couldn't pursue her dreams because of racism. What a sad story. So all of these things together, I wanted to reframe that narrative. I wanted to reject this idea that she's a victim and that she doesn't have agency and that she's like your China doll that you're going to worship like a goddess. She's a person, she was a woman, a human. Despite all of the challenges she faced, she was able to always pick herself up and find a new direction, a new strategy, a way to keep going, which to me is the true story of her life. Like, "wow, how did she do that?" A lesser person, most of us, would have just quit. We would have given up. And she never did that until her dying day. And so not your China doll, I wanted it to be a bit defiant. And it was also a reference to something that James Baldwin said that became the title of a documentary made about him by Raoul Peck called *I'm Not Your Negro*. And it's just the idea that this stereotype that you've boxed me into, that isn't me. Someone else created that and then you put me in it, but that isn't me. And that really is what I wanted the title to do. And I think the thing that's been really gratifying about that is that since the book has gone out in the world, I've heard from a lot of Asian-American women and they really embraced the title as if it were their own rallying cry, because I think they relate to the experience that she's had. Sadly, they still relate to the sexism and exoticism that she experienced. So, in a way, I think the title is tapping into a larger societal phenomenon, something that a lot of people are experiencing.

AT: To look at the intersection of that, but also this whole Chinese media and people blaming her for taking these roles is one of the ways that people are intimidated into staying silent is saying, "well, if you don't do it, I'll just get someone else in here." And particularly given that there were plenty of Chinese-Americans readily available in that area at that time, and I would assume still today, but when we're looking at *The Good Earth* as an example, when she declined the secondary role, it just ended up going to a white actress anyway. And so both from an intimidation standpoint and from a getting blamed for stuff that's outside your control, it's like, well, if she hadn't done these roles, if Hattie McDaniel hadn't done these roles, they would have probably just gotten another person of color or worse, actors in blackface or yellowface, like the role still would have been done. That portrayal still would have been put out there. So this idea that if you don't do it, someone else will, feels like both a threat and something that gets overlooked in that criticism.

KGS: Absolutely. That was the situation. Someone was going to play the role no matter what they were going to fill the role. They weren't going to cancel the film because one person said they wouldn't do it. So, that's a really great point because if it wasn't Anna May Wong, then it would be somebody else who would be getting the brunt of that criticism. And I think she understood that. Of course it was still painful to be treated that way. Thank God she had a great sense of humor, but one of the other things that happens when she's in China is that she catches up with another Hollywood friend, Warner Oland, who's a Swedish actor that she's done a lot of movies in because he's become famous for playing Asians in yellowface. And at the time that he's traveling to China, he's become famous for playing Charlie Chan, the Chinese detective. And so she gets to witness how he's received in China with open arms because he's playing a role model. He's playing a character who solves crimes. He's a good guy, unlike her, but he's not even Chinese. But they're like, "Oh, but you look Chinese. You could be a real Chinese." And so he's getting all of this flattery and attention and like, and poor Anna May Wong. She's like chopped liver. It's like, "well, what about me? I'm actually Chinese." And meanwhile there's Chinese op-eds saying, "we should deport her. She's not a real Chinese. And she did this and she did that." And so, of course, gracious as always, she treats her friend Warner to dim sum and she's basically realized, the wheels start to turn. So when she gets back to Hollywood, the way that she gets her deal with Paramount, she was really shrewd. So she's come up with this idea, like, "why can't I play a female version of Charlie Chan?" Which is what the next series of films she does are, she's not exactly a detective, but

she's playing a heroine who busts crimes, who solves all these crimes. So that's her concept, "I'm going to be a positive role model. I'm going to do a positive part, like Charlie Chan." And then she goes and has lunch with an executive at Paramount and says to him, "well, I have this idea, I'll play a female Charlie Chan. And what studio do you think I should pitch it to?" And they immediately say, "well, why aren't you pitching it to us?" And she's like, "well, I didn't think you would want it." And of course that's how she gets them to do the next series of films. But it's like things like that, like she's able to take this kind of very offensive experience of seeing the white guy embraced because he's playing Charlie Chan in yellowface. But she's able to take that and use it to her advantage and turn it into a win for herself. That's like wisdom you could put in a business book. That's literally making lemonade out of lemons.

AT: And so fast-forwarding to today, as mentioned, things have gotten better, but given everything we're talking about, better just means that we've moved on to whitewashing characters instead of putting them in yellowface. And so for anyone who's not familiar, whitewashing is when you have a character of color who is played by a white person. So we saw this with Tilda Swinton in *Doctor Strange*, we saw this with Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Machine*. Plus, you get nonsense like the *Iron Fist* series where it's basically rich white boy goes and learns martial arts. (laughter) How are we still getting these into the 2010s? And so this may be my perception, but it does feel like the roles where Asians are cast, whether that's Asian-Canadians, Asian-Americans, or Asian Asians, the roles that they do get cast in when they are the lead, it feels like these are projects that are typically **about** the experience of being Asian, which isn't a bad thing, but it's still a form of pigeonholing. And it seems like a film like *Hustlers*, where Constance Wu's race is incidental, it's not the central focus of the film. That seems really uncommon. And you might have them in secondary roles like Awkwafina in *Ocean's 8*, or if the actor is also the writer. So Mindy Kaling is probably the biggest example of this, where she's writing the parts that she wants to play. But it does seem like it's much more common that if you see an Asian or Asian-American, etc. actor in the lead, then the film is going to be about the ethnic experience, rather than just, "oh, yeah, no, we're just a person living our lives."

KGS: That's right. This is something I've also been thinking about recently, too, because on the one hand, we have seen an incredible amount of change in the last few years. Ever since *Crazy Rich Asians* came out, was successful as a rom-com, Hollywood Studios seemed to perk up and realize, "oh, we can actually make money with Asian actors and an Asian cast and an Asian story. Other people will go and see those movies." So that was a huge win, and it's opened up the floodgates. And now we have like a million, seemingly, projects that have come out in recent years or are still in the process of being made. But you're right. Most of those projects are usually all-Asian cast, which is great for the actors. But because of that, they're generally centered around an Asian-themed story, right? An Asian-American-themed story, an Asian story, which is not bad by any means. We want to have our stories represented, but it does belie the fact that while Hollywood still doesn't want to cast Asian actors in more what we might call race-blind roles, leading roles. We don't see them as action heroes, other than Shang-Chi. (AT: Which is all about being Chinese.) Yes, exactly. So being a Chinese action hero. Yeah, so that's what we're still missing, really.

So there was a project in maybe like 10 years ago when there was the Oscars So White campaign against the Oscars not nominating any people of color. And so this artist, I believe his name is William Yu, he started photoshopping John Cho's face into movie posters as the leading man. Just to like say, like the power of that image is undeniable. And so I kind of riffed on that by using AI art generators to put Anna May Wong in films that she never appeared in, but to put her as the leading role. So, they're up on my website, notyourchinadoll.com, but I put her in *The Birds*, I put her in *Casablanca*. Of course, I put her in *The Good Earth*. I made her into Wonder Woman, she's Barbie, she's in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. But the power of seeing an Asian face in a lead role. And it takes people a minute when they look at the photos, so they're not totally sure what's going on. Because the reference of this entire scene is familiar because they're from very famous films. But there's something off about it because her face is there. And you kind of have to take a second to figure

out what's going on. But I think it's really powerful to see her in that way because it's like saying like, "yes, we could play, we could be in these leading roles, but Hollywood still hasn't put us there." I think things will continue to change. Part of the reason they have changed is that we have more Asian and Asian-American writers, directors, producers. So they're in the rooms where decisions are being made. But that said, there's still not that many. And this goes back to that question we were talking about with Anna May Wong and Hattie McDaniel, like who's making the decisions, right? It's ultimately the people who are making the decisions. And I think until there's more diversity there, we're not going to see the types of race-blind casting that we really want to.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.