



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 3, Issue 1

Summer 2020

Feeling Like an Outsider: Harold Acton, Anna May Wong, and Decadent
Cosmopolitanism in China

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2020

Date of Publication: 21 June 2020

Citation: Kristin Mahoney, 'Feeling Like an Outsider: Harold Acton, Anna May Wong, and Decadent Cosmopolitanism in China', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.1 (2020), 119–23.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i1.1407.g1521

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Feeling Like an Outsider:
Harold Acton, Anna May Wong, and Decadent Cosmopolitanism in China

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Fig. 1: Harold Acton in Beijing with Anna May Wong in the carved moon-gate of the drawing room of his residence at 2 Kung Hsien Hutung, or Gong Xian Hutong, c. 1936.
© New York University, Acton Collection, Villa La Pietra, Florence.

In his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948), the decadent modernist Harold Acton (1904-1994) chose to include a photograph of himself in his home in Beijing with the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) [fig. 1]. Wong, known for her roles in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and *Shanghai Express* (1932), was at the time on a year-long tour of China, during which she hoped to study Chinese theatre and acquire a deeper understanding of her heritage. She went with the hope of locating roots and a cultural home, but she also carried with her a deep ambivalence about these aspirations. ‘Perhaps upon my arrival’, she said, ‘I shall feel like an outsider. Perhaps instead, I shall find my past life assuming a dreamlike quality of unreality.’¹ Acton resided in Beijing from 1932 to 1939, and in his life-writing and fiction related to this period, he represents himself as perpetually working to come into communion with the culture of China and

perpetually frustrated in these attempts. In the image Acton chose to include in his memoirs, the two sit beside one another in the moon gate of Acton's home. In the words of Kun Xi, Acton has 'modelled himself after a Manchurian nobleman'.² Wong wears a patterned gown and holds a fan. These cosmopolites, raised in Florence and Los Angeles, who lived hybrid and peripatetic existences, longed similarly for connection with China, and they appear here staged in a manner that allows them to perform a sense of embeddedness within a culture from which they often felt disconnected.



Fig. 2: Anna May Wong in Harold Acton's residence in Beijing at 2 Kung Hsien Hutong, or Gong Xian Hutong.
© New York University, Acton Collection, Villa La Pietra, Florence.

Acton does not discuss the nature of his relationship with the famous Hollywood star in the memoirs, but the archive of visual materials related to Acton's time in China at his home, Villa La Pietra, includes numerous images of Wong [fig. 2] in his garden in front of the lotus pond, outside his study, posing in a larger group and alone wearing a fur coat. While Wong's visit to China was brief, she seems to have deeply interested and appealed to Acton. As I write a chapter on Acton's time in China for my larger project on transnational decadence and queer kinship, I am drawn to these photographs about which I want to know so much more. Because of an ongoing legal dispute concerning Acton's estate, I am unable to consult the paper archive at Villa La Pietra,

so I am uncertain whether Acton's correspondence might reveal more about how well Acton and Wong knew one another, what drew them together, or what they may have discussed during her visit to Acton's home in Beijing. However, as I work to understand Acton's relationship to China, which he represents in his writing as at once crucial and vexed, marked by a fundamental ambivalence that mirrors Wong's sense of both intimacy with and alienation from the country, I continue to return to these photographs with questions about what these two might have said to and learned from one another during this encounter.

In his memoirs, Acton foregrounds his practice of a Paterian openness to the beauty that surrounded him in China. His decadence, he seems to argue, endows him with the capacity to perceive the culture of Beijing keenly, lucidly, and with the greatest acuity. However, he also indicates that his deep veneration of Chinese culture rendered him suspicious to the expatriate community in the city, and he reflects at length in his novel *Peonies and Ponies* (1941) on the loneliness that resulted from his passion for China. Philip Flower, a character in the novel modelled on Acton, notes that his Britishness 'separates [him] from the Chinese', yet he is 'too Chinese for the foreign community'.³ Philip longs for connection and intimacy: 'He wanted to meet the Chinese on their own ground and be accepted as one of them. He would have liked nothing better than to be adopted by a Chinese family.'⁴ Philip seeks to solve the problem of his isolation by adopting a younger Chinese actor, a project that does not yield the integration with Chinese culture for which he so yearns. The young man, who longs only for New York, favours Western clothes, decorates his room with photographs of the Empire State Building, and does not provide Philip access to the union with China he seeks. Acton's novel foregrounds the sense of dislocation that accompanies the practice of decadent cosmopolitanism. The curiosity and desire for intimacy with other cultures that underwrite transnational aestheticist encounters can, in Acton's formulation, produce a sense of cultural exile, as one relinquishes a sense of rootedness in one's native culture to find that communion with the newly-desired home is impossible.

While, as the child of second-generation Chinese-American parents, Wong certainly possessed greater access to a sense of connection with Chinese culture, she places similar emphasis on a sense of rootlessness and dislocation in her comments on her visit to the country. Before her departure, she stated, 'I am going to a strange country, yet, in a way, I am going home.'⁵ However, as recent accounts of her Chinese travels by Anthony B. Chan and Graham Russell Gao Hodges indicate, this sense of homecoming was complicated by the reception she received during her visit. Prior to her visit, 'numerous [Chinese] magazines openly questioned whether she would be welcomed at all' and charged her with '[disgracing] China' in her portrayal of Chinese women.⁶ At a party in Shanghai, she met 'one of the ladies [who] spoke my dialect and so I began to chatter

away merrily in Cantonese. After a few minutes, she said, “Miss Wong, do you mind going back to English? You speak Chinese charmingly, but you have such a marked American accent.”⁷ Oral histories of her visit to her ancestral village of Chang On ‘state that villagers threw rocks at her as she approached’.⁸ She had hoped to learn more of Chinese theatre during her trip. Yet on her return she concluded, ‘I am convinced that I could never play in the Chinese theater. I have no feeling for it. It’s a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I am too American.’⁹ However, as Shirley Lim has recently argued, Wong was haunted throughout her career by ‘Western fantasies of the oriental, and racial segregation’ that ‘[denied] her an opportunity to become an A-list Hollywood actress in major studio productions.’¹⁰ Her Asian identity separated her from Hollywood, but she was perceived as too American by the Chinese community once she made her way ‘home’.

Working with this incomplete and alluring archive at Villa La Pietra, I am left to wonder whether Acton and Wong discussed their sense of cultural exile with one another when these photographs were taken in Acton’s garden and in his home. With the decadent tendency to Orientalism in mind, it is easy to think that these photographs reflect Acton’s treatment of Wong as an exoticized object of fascination. But Acton and Wong’s careful reflection on their attempts at communion with China lead me to hope that something else happened when they came into contact with one another. Philip Flower’s lament concerning the alienation resulting from his cultural hybridity resonates with Wong’s expression of regret about her own transnational dislocation. Perhaps this shared feeling was the foundation of their engagement with one another. These photographs, then, become artifacts with a very different political inflection, that speak to thoughtful and painful consideration of cultural displacement and the stubbornness of national boundaries rather than simply appropriation and appetitive consumption of otherness. This is, for me, an archive of images that allows for a meditation on decadent cosmopolitanism and Orientalism, that pushes us to ask a slightly different set of questions about the manner in which the decadents engaged with difference and reflected on the politics of Paterian curiosity and desire. But it is at the same time an archive that speaks to the tremendous frustrations that beset our attempts to answer these questions about the cultural politics of decadence and to reconstruct history while relying on partial or incomplete archives. This is an archive that allows us to wonder rather than to know, but I have focused here on these photographs because I treasure the uncertainty they introduce both for my own project and for our larger conversation about the politics of decadent cosmopolitanism.

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- ¹ Carolyn Anspacher, 'Star Goes "Home"', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 January 1936, p. 17.
- ² Kun Xi, 'Picturing an Aesthetic and Homoerotic Space: Harold Acton's Travel Writing of China in the 1930s', *Interactions*, 28.1/2 (2019), n.p.
- ³ Harold Acton, *Peonies and Ponies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941), p. 78.
- ⁴ Acton, p. 79.
- ⁵ Anna May Wong, 'Anna May Wong Tells of Voyage on 1st Trip to China', *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 May 1936, p. 1.
- ⁶ Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 159.
- ⁷ Anna May Wong, 'Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception', *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 May 1936, p. 6.
- ⁸ Hodges, p. 168.
- ⁹ Quoted in Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905-1961)* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 119.
- ¹⁰ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), p. 3.