Rose Quong Becomes Chinese An Australian in London and New York

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The story of Rose Quong (1879–1972) reveals how an Australian learned to use the pervasive Orientalism of the early twentieth century to her own ends. Quong claimed an essential ability to interpret Chinese culture, forging a career out of lecturing and writing on Chinese literature and traditions, and performing her own Chineseess. She juggled her mixed Australian, British and Chinese heritage in both London and New York, showing the plasticity and transporability of ethnic identities. Quong's story points to the role of London as imperial metropolis in the staging of an Australian's transnational career, even for an Australian whose imaginary homeland was China. The fact that Quong was embraced by the Australian community in London adds a new perspective on White Australia, even though that community was instrumental in steering her towards Chineseess and Orientalism.

ROSE QUONG, an Australian actor, lecturer and writer, was born and brought up in Melbourne but left in 1924, at the age of forty-four, with an ambition to make it on the London stage. Quong's career, which would span Britain, the United States and even China itself, was the result of her marketing of her mixed cultural heritage. She became a skilled purveyor of cultural mixing and cultural difference, casting herself as an essentially qualified interpreter of Chinese culture and the Western world. Yet Quong's measurable success creating a theatrical and lecturing career as a professional Chinese woman must be seen as a compromise. When Quong arrived in London, she brought with her a successful reputation from repertory theatre in Melbourne, as an actress well versed in Shakespeare and the theatrical canon of the day. Shakespeare was her lifelong first love as a poet and playwright, but her desire to perform on the metropolitan stage as a Shakespearean actress was frustrated by racial stereotyping. Partly from her own choice and interest, and partly through the repeated suggestions and encouragement of Australian and English friends, Quong carved out instead a niche for herself as a lecturer on Chinese culture and philosophy, an 'Oriental' actress and a reciter of Chinese poetry. Her successes—such as acting alongside Laurence Olivier, reciting on BBC radio, appearing on a BBC television program as early as 1935, publishing two books with a major American publisher and being cast as herself in a 1971 film—testify to her talent, hard work, energy and determination. But they need to be juxtaposed with Quong's separation from her home and family, the marginality of her material standard of living and the cultural stereotyping that precluded a career in Shakespeare and pushed her instead

towards her own careful appropriation of Orientalism. Quong's story leads us to consider how Orientalism—that edifice of Western representations of the East as exotic, mysterious, barbaric and sensuous, among other characteristics—could be appropriated by 'Orientals' to their own ends. It also compels us to think about how Quong juggled her mixed Australian, British and Chinese identities—stress-ing each in particular ways and at different times.

A generation ago Edward Said drew attention to the discursive structures of 'Orientalism', which he saw fundamentally as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'. Further, Said contended that Orientalism was the mechanism by which European culture 'manage[d]' and 'produce[d]' 'the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'.¹ Although Said focused mostly on the Middle East, an ensuing generation of scholarship has applied his insights further afield, including to the relationship between 'the West' and East Asia. Orientalism continues to engage scholarly attention despite critiques of Said's original thesis, and challenges such as David Cannadine's controversial counter-proposition of 'ornamentalism' as a better descriptor of dominant British imperial attitudes.² Yet we still do not fully understand the historical evolution of Orientalism as a constellation of assumptions and attitudes, its efflorescence globally, its intersections with European colonialism in different sites, or its twists and turns in the twentieth century. As Ann Curthoys has noted, the history of attitudes towards the Chinese in Australia must be linked to the evolution of British and other European Orientalisms, notably the shift from an eighteenth-century 'Orientalist' wonderment and fascination with Chinese art and learning to a mid to late nineteenth-century rising belief in European superiority and perception of noble Chinese labourers as a threat.³ As practices of discrimination were undegraded by purportedly scientific theories of social Darwinism, and the global modernist proclivity for racial stereotypes reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western Oriental-The constellation of racist immigration and labour policies in multiple Western countries, articulated and ubiquitous racial stereotypes and continuing Orientalist cultural fascination and condemnation, were virtually impossible to escape for those marked as 'Chinese', 'Asian', 'Hindu' or 'Moslem'.⁴

It is important historical context for Rose Quong's story that Chinese immigration to Australia was restricted temporarily from 1855 to 1867, then 'permanently' from 1880 to 1887, prior to being banned under the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, the first substantive piece of legislation passed by the new

1 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.
2 For a critique of Said see, for example, Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
3 Ann Curthoys, "'Chineseness' and Australian Identity", in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions*, eds Henry Chan, Ann Curthoys and Nora Ching (Rajap: Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies, National Taiwan University, Canberra: Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 2001), 25.

Commonwealth of Australia.⁴ This act, of course, codified what was informally known as the White Australia Policy, which would operate as Australia's overly racist immigration policy until 1966. Henry Chan has argued that we need to see Chinese people not just as victims of the White Australia Policy but as historical actors in their own right, with individual lives and family and community ties. He contends that we need to identify continuing links between families and villages in China and Chinese migrants in Australia, and to see this history as integral to a broader transnational, trans-Pacific history of the Chinese diaspora.⁵ Chan's emphasis on the transnational dimensions to the history of the Chinese in Australia makes very good sense.

What I want to suggest is that Rose Quong reveals *another* transnational dimension to the history of Chinese-Australians, a dimension so far overlooked in this area of scholarship, and that is the role of London and Britain as imperial metropole. Quong presents us with the perhaps startling realisation that the Australian colonial connection to London could and did provide a venue in which she articulated her identity as part of another diaspora and tied to another homeland, that of China. Quong's story forces us to recognise that British imperial identity, Australian colonial and national identity and Chinese cultural identity were not mutually exclusive but in fact could work to reinforce each other. This recognition negates the explicit assumption by some scholars of Chinese history in Australia that Britishness and Chinese cultural identities were antagonistic formations. The one scholar who has already pointed towards this possibility is Ann Curthoys, who has contended that the history of immigration in Australia must be seen within the framework of the history of colonisation, and that Anglo-Celtic and Chinese-Australian identities were both formed through dispersed populations moving back and forth between Australia and an imagined homeland.⁶ Rose Quong's life story pushes Curthoys' point one step further by demonstrating that British-Australian and Chinese-Australian identities were not just parallel or comparable but could in fact be intersecting, overlapping constructions of self.

The story of Rose Quong becoming Chinese in interwar London thus presents a new dimension to the formation of Chinese-Australian identities, and raises interesting questions about Australian anti-Chinese sentiments—such as why the imperial metropolis was a context in which Quong could pursue both a professional theatrical career and her self-constructed Chinese-ness better than in Melbourne. While the White Australia Policy was in full swing, the Australian community in London embraced Quong as one of their own—taking pride in her accomplishments, including her in their communal social life, nurturing her career but, like numerous English people, encouraging the trajectory of that career towards a professional enactment of being Chinese. The story of Rose

⁴ Andrew Markus, 'Government Control of Chinese Immigration to Australia, 1855–1975', in Chan, Curthoys and Chiang, 70–2.
⁵ Henry Chan, 'The Identity of the Chinese in Australian History', in *Queensland Review* 6, no. 2 (November 1999): 1–9; H. D. Min-hsi Chan, 'Becoming Australian but Remaining Chinese: The Future of the Down Under Chinese Past', in Chan, Curthoys and Chiang, 1–15.
⁶ Curthoys, 'Chinese-ness' and Australian Identity, 21–2.

Quong in London, like the later part of her life in New York from 1939 until her death in 1972, provides us with insight into the contingent historical evolution of 'Orientalism' and their twentieth-century possibilities for those marked as 'Chinese' or 'Asian'. From the 1920s to the 1970s British and American Orientalist fascination with 'the East' provided Quong with audiences and a market, even as racist assumptions and barriers steered her career away from the iconic English idiom of Shakespeare and towards Chinese-ness.

Quong was not the only Chinese-Australian woman in early twentieth-century London: her sister Florence lived with her for an extended period in the 1930s, and we also have some record of Justine Kong Sing, a miniature painter from Sydney who was in London at least from 1912 to 1922, whose successes included showing at the Royal Academy in 1915.⁷ The early twentieth-century decline in the Chinese population in Australia occurred partly because of the departure of younger people; it is possible that more than just these three headed for London. Rather than claiming significance based on numbers, however, we ought to consider Quong's story as a micronarrative. Advocates of the micronarrative as historical method have argued that a close reading of the exceptional can alert us to new meanings in larger structures.⁸ If Quong was unusual as a Chinese-identified Australian who left for London, and unusual in London in her juggling of British, Australian and Chinese identities, her deployment especially of her Chinese persona illuminates the plasticity, availability and circulation of ethnic identities in this period.

Although Quong's papers are, very fortunately, preserved at the National Library of Australia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the majority date from 1924 onwards, following her voyage to London. Therefore at this point we do not know a great deal about her early life in Australia. Rose Maude Quong or Rose Lanu Quong (as she variously gave her full name) was born in East Melbourne in August 1879, the first of four children born to Chun Quong and Annie Moy Quong. Chun Quong was a merchant born in Canton, China. Annie, born at Beetham in Victoria, was much younger than Chun, just eighteen at the time of Rose's birth. Coincidentally, Annie's father's name was John Quong (also a merchant) and her mother Mary's maiden name was Hayphie.⁹ Because most Chinese immigrants were male, there was a big sex ratio imbalance; for example, in Victoria between 1901 and 1921, the number of women ranged from 8 to 18 per cent of the total Chinese population.¹⁰ Rose was born around the time of the nineteenth-century height of the Chinese population in Australia, when

⁷ *The British Australian*, 4 April 1912, 21; 29 April 1915, 19; 30 September 1915, 18; 30 September 1920, 16; 13 July 1922, 20; 20 July 1922, 20–1.
⁸ A useful article on this is Matt Peltonen, 'Chines, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research', *History and Theory* 40 (October 2001): 347–59.
⁹ Death registration for Annie Quong, who died 12 October 1931, in St Kilda, Victoria, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne.
¹⁰ Sophie Goughman, 'From Mrs Lup Min, Chinese Herballist, to Yee Joon, Respectable Scholar: A Social History of Melbourne's Chinatown, 1900–1920', in Chan, Curthoys and Chiang, 132.

it was near 38 000, a level it would not reach again until the last decades of the twentieth century. In Melbourne, however, the Chinese population would keep increasing for a few decades after Rose's birth.¹¹ The Chinese community in Melbourne revolved around Chinatown, centred on Little Bourke Street. By the time of Rose's birth, Chinatown had become a residential, commercial and communal centre, but as Sophie Coucman has observed, it did not advertise itself with the overt markers of Chinese culture that it had assumed by the latter twentieth century.¹²

When Rose first achieved success in London, *The Australian Woman's Mirror* claimed that she was 'the daughter of a leading Melbourne Chinese merchant'.¹³ Despite this claim, it is unclear whether the Quongs were respectable working class, or more middle class. It is clear, though, that the Quongs encouraged their children's education; Rose attended University High School, and at least when she finished school the family was living in Fitzroy. Rose's younger brother Norman went on to have a long career as a court reporter for the Supreme Court of New South Wales. Norman recalled in later life that all four children, including Florence and Eric, lived at home with their parents into adulthood and were educated together.¹⁴ In extreme old age, Rose herself told a journalist:

My perfect gentle little mother determined that as I grew up I should learn the best I could of the ways and culture of the west ... I also went to the library and dragged out all the books on Chinese thought I could, reading translations. My parents were proud of me because I was a scholar, someone who loves books. That's the Chinese ideal.¹⁵

At least in this account, Rose Quong's self-construction as Chinese began very early in life. In a brief autobiographical statement written a few months before she died in 1972, Quong claimed to have had several years of higher education from 1897 to 1900, that she planned to study medicine and that 'my college teachers thought I was a genius'. (No doubt occasional immodesty was a helpful trait in a career that depended largely on self-advertisement.) But, she continues, 'I decided it was my brothers who needed education, and the theatre got hold of me'. Records show that in late 1896 she passed the matriculation examination at the University of Melbourne in nine subjects, including Latin, algebra and physics.¹⁶ A 1930s magazine report described her as having been a university student, but there does not seem to be any record of her as a student at the University of Melbourne.¹⁷

- 11 Markus, 69, 71.
- 12 Coucman, 125.
- 13 'Women in the World', *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 9 June 1923, 18.
- 14 Deposition of Norman Quong, August 1960, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series 1, Correspondence, *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 9 June 1923, 18.
- 15 Kim Rossion, 'From Australia to the West Side: The 93-Year Journey of Actress Rose Quong', *Mandarin Tribune*, 13 May 1972, 7-9.
- 16 Matriculation examination registration form for Rose Quong, 23 October 1896, and matriculation examination results lists, November 1896, showing Quong's results as Candidate No. 507. Archives, University of Melbourne.
- 17 'Women in the World', *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 10 January 1933, 20.

We do know that Quong was a public servant, first appointed in June 1897, and that from 1901 she worked as a telephone switch operator for the Commonwealth Public Service. By 1919 she had become a clerk in the Auditor General's Office, naval and military branch.¹⁸ Yet her heart lay with the theatre. When questioned by a journalist late in life as to why she never married, she responded: 'I never met anyone I've been interested in. Perhaps I've been too much of an actress. Perhaps I've always acted life'.¹⁹ Certainly, when she left Australia at forty-four, by contemporary standards she would have been considered beyond marriageable age. Quong traced the origins of her theatrical career to the training she received from an Englishman called Mr Chisley who, in Melbourne in the 1890s, taught her to read Shakespeare and poetry. While her love of poetry predated Chisley's teaching, 'he enabled me to acquire a quality of expression and appreciation, which has marked my acting and lectures ever since' and because of which she considered he 'was probably the greatest influence and benefactor in my life'.²⁰ In Melbourne her theatrical work never went beyond the amateur, yet she made a name for herself on the local stage, firstly in elocution competitions. She helped to found a theatre company first called the Mermaid Play Society, later called the Melbourne Repertory Players, unofficially connected with the University of Melbourne. Quong served on the company's executive, and acted in works ranging from an ancient Greek drama to a John Masefield play. Although we do not have detailed evidence of her Melbourne life, the fact that she was a successful amateur actor in a traditional theatrical repertoire suggests that racial stereotyping did not impede her greatly at this stage. And, seemingly, her reputation in Melbourne led her towards consolidating her Britishness, both her aspiration to perform Shakespeare and her decision to go to London. Her performances were such that, according to the *British Australian and New Zealander*, the newspaper for London's Antipodean community, 'her many friends in Melbourne ... urged her to bring her talent over to Europe'.²¹

Her own explanation of her decision to leave for London might have been given by any number of ambitious Australians, and reveals an archetypal British colonial sensibility, and conception of London, its attractions and possibilities: 'I was crazy on Shakespeare and Dickens. I wanted to go to London. I wanted to meet Ellen Terry and Melba. I needed a new experience, change'.²² There is no hint in this capsule explanation for her major life decision to leave the country of her birth, to which she would never return, of any frustration with anti-Chinese discrimination in Australia, nor of her desire to develop her own Chinese-ness. Rather, this articulation suggests a desire to claim and develop her Britishness. Yet I think we need to note, as part of the context for her leaving Australia, that

- 18 Commonwealth Public Service Lists, Mitchell Library, Sydney, and her brother Norman's deposition of August 1960.
- 19 Rossion, 9.
- 20 Letter to Axel Harvey, 2 July 1972, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series 1, Correspondence, HSP.
- 21 W. G., 'Miss Rose Quong: A Charming Chinese Australian', *The British Australian and New Zealander*, 15 January 1925, 5.
- 22 Rossion, 9.

financial affairs at the Commonwealth Bank and rapidly beginning a social life by attending affairs, for example, at the feminist-leaning Lyceum Club.²⁶

Not only were Quong's articulated reasons for going to London typical of the thousands of Australian women making the pilgrimage 'home' in this period, her life in London was also similar in many ways to those of her compatriots there.²⁷ In fact, compared to some other Australian women in London around the same time whose papers I have read, she was better integrated into the Australian community. In her first years there she lived in boarding houses in Earl's Court, mixed often with Australian friends (some of whom she had known in Australia but some not), attended Australian social and community functions and engaged in all the usual activities of the colonial courts. In August and September 1924, in typical fashion, she spent several weeks in Paris, absorbing all of the art and historic architecture, practising her French, browsing the bookstalls along the Seine and shopping in the department stores. In London she visited the National Gallery, the British Museum and Westminster Abbey, attended lectures on subjects ranging from art history to speech patterns to Shakespeare, explored Soho, went to concerts and the ballet, took French lessons, milled in the throng of people at Piccadilly Circus waiting for results on an election night, repeatedly visited the 1924–25 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley and went to the theatre as often as she could, recording her critical comments in her diary afterwards. Like other Australians in London, she wrote frequent, long letters home, eagerly awaited the Australian mail, visited Australia House and in the first two years dithered anxiously about whether and when to return, although in the end she never did.²⁸

Her busy social life revolved around her Australian friends, particularly close women friends with whom she spent much time, some of whom lived either in the same boarding house or in another close by. Besides her close friends Louise and Winifred, whose son Jack was at boarding school in England, she regularly socialised with several Australian musicians who were achieving success in London, such as Gertrude Johnson, Anne Williams and Wilma Berkeley. Evenings with her Australian friends included, for example, one when she and Winifred called first on their friend Edith Young, and then on their friend Ada MacLaren, where they met Percy (Inky) Stephensen, a Rhodes Scholar from Queensland—whom Winifred would later marry. Quong noted in her diary that they all 'had a good yarn'.²⁹ Some diary entries suggest the explicit sharing of an Australian identity. One entry refers to an evening with 'our own crowd', while another relates a dinner conversation among Australians who all appreciated a story about the 'Limless Soldiers' Association, the point of which was that Melba's generosity

she did so in the period (1901–33) that historian Andrew Markus has characterised as having the harshest policies against Chinese immigration and Chinese communities in Australia. In these decades the Chinese population of Australia declined through death and emigration from almost 30 000 to 8600, a decline surely indicative of a hostile environment, although the decline in Melbourne's ambitious woman to build a career in early twentieth-century Australia, there must have been particular obstacles for a Chinese-Australian woman.

Rose Quong embarked for London on 17 January 1924 on the SS *Ballarat*, travelling with Louise Maters, a friend from the theatrical world. In true Australian style, a sizeable group of friends and family came to see them off. While there are other sources for Quong's years in London and New York, such as newspaper articles, most of what we know comes from the diary that she began when she embarked in Melbourne. Her first entry dramatically announces 'My great adventure begins'. 'A day of glorious Australian sunshine', she continues, followed by a precise list of all those who came to the dock to bid her farewell.³⁰ Secondly, she intended her diary as a travelogue, and as an *aide memoire*. She wrote regular and apparently long letters home (which seem not to have survived), perhaps using the diary as a source for those. She also seems to have used it to help her remember the names and contact information of people whom she met. In the early years, she usually recorded at least a paragraph per day, sometimes much more. From early on, the diary performed multiple functions, including her budget accounting, notes on lectures she heard and her own critiques of the plays she so avidly saw. The multiple small notebooks that constitute her diary continue on into the 1940s, in their later years losing their earlier travelogue aspects, and becoming more a repository for her reading notes, as well as a brief record of outings. Interestingly, Quong is not introspective in her diary; it is a record of her

limited to the review. In that sense, it is not a particularly useful source for her emotional life (let alone any sexual life), and only of limited help for analysing her subjectivity.³¹ It is, however, a wonderfully informative record of her professional and social life and her travels.

The *Ballarat* took the South African route, and on their arrival at Tilbury on 7 March Rose and Louise were met by Quong's friend Winifred Lockyer. Lockyer was a ballet dancer who had spent a good deal of time touring North America in the 1910s. She made Quong and Maters' arrival in London easy and comfortable; she had already rented a very pleasant flat for the three of them in St John's Wood. Quong quickly established herself, checking in at Australia House, arranging her

²⁶ Markus, 70, 74; Couchman, 127.

²⁷ On historical sources and the construction of subjectivities, see Angela Woolliacott, 'The Frag-
mentary Subject: Feminist History, Official Records, and Self-Representation', *Women's Studies*

International Forum 21, no. 4 (1998): 329–39.

²⁸ Diary 1924, Papers of Rose Quong, MS 9796, National Library of Australia.
²⁹ On this topic, and for details of Australian women's lives in London in this period, see Angela Woolliacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
³⁰ She didn't resign from her Australian public service job until she had been in London about six months, and for the first couple of years continued to think of going back.
³¹ Diary entry for 8 January 1925, Journal 1924–25, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 7, HSP.

meant that the Australian branch had considerably more money than the English branch, which was reportedly run by snobbish aristocrats.³⁰ Quong met Melba on more than one occasion, and her diaries show Melba's dominant and supportive presence in the Australian community in London. Quong was invited repeatedly to gatherings of Australian artists at the home of the very successful concert singer Ada Crossley. On at least one such occasion the men in the group sang, then Rose performed scenes from *Macbeth*. And she attended significant Australian community events such as an Australia Day church service, followed by a concert by Australian musicians and singers.³¹

Quong's social life in London thus testifies especially to her sense of herself as an Australian and her acceptance in the Australian community. But there are also some clues in the accounts of her social activities to her self-construction as Chinese: her frequenting, often with Australian friends, of Chinese restaurants and her marked proclivity to give Chinese objects, usually decorative household items, as Christmas and birthday presents. Beyond these clues, her articulation of a Chinese identity occurred mostly in her career.

Quong considered enrolling at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but instead won a scholarship to study drama at the academy of Rosina Filippi, a Shakespearean actress. The judge of scholarship competitors who picked Quong was Edith Craig, the feminist and lesbian theatre director and daughter of the legendary nineteenth-century actress Ellen Terry. This professional association with Craig would continue to benefit Quong, such as when she acted in a provincial production of Craig's in February 1925.³² Her classes began at the end of April 1924, and consisted of lessons in drama, movement, diction and theatre history.³³ Quong's voice—apparently deep and powerful—won her praise at this point as it would later, and she was considered so accomplished at diction that she gave private diction lessons to other aspiring performers. The fact that critics often commented on her 'flawless English diction' probably just indicates their surprise at such speech from a Chinese person, but Quong also admitted to friends that she sought to acquire a perfect English accent as opposed to an Australian accent.³⁴ Filippi acted as something of an agent, introducing Quong to theatre critics and producers with a view towards professional opportunities. In late 1924 Quong began a taxing round of auditions, preparing scenes and hiring costumes and props for arranged or advertised viewings of her work. During this period, Quong's signature acting for informal recitals or performances for her friends and acquaintances was Shakespeare, usually scenes from *Macbeth*. Occasionally she chose to do a scene from *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which is indicative of her own and others' sense that she was suited to the category of exotic roles. For two of her first professional auditions she performed excerpts from the character of Ulah in

³⁰ Diary entry for 15 October 1924, Journal 1924–25, HSP.
³¹ Diary entry for 26 January 1925, Journal 1924–25, HSP.
³² W. G., 'Miss Rose Quong'.
³³ Diary 1924, Papers of Rose Quong, MS 9796, National Library of Australia.
³⁴ Diary entry for 8 February 1926, Diary 1925–26, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Withings, Box 1, Folder 8, HSP.

a play Filippi wrote called *The Contract*. Ulah was an Oriental role, about which Quong had misgivings, especially after an evening spent with a couple who had lived in China, with whom she discussed her qualms. Nevertheless, she went ahead with the role, going to considerable trouble to arrange a 'Chinese' costume and props. For one audition, for example, she wore a hired purple robe and trousers, a Chinese crown and had her hair cut with a fringe.³⁵ If initially she felt ambivalent about presenting herself professionally as Chinese, the rapid evolution of her career in that direction was the product of several interconnected factors. Despite determined perseverance at contacting theatre directors, critics and agents, and some initial successes, it became clear that she was not going to make it as a Shakespearean or general actress. Her friends and advisors urged her towards a specialised niche career, that of exotic or Oriental roles, actresses and performer. And at the same time, her own genuine interest in Chinese culture and philosophy, and her desire to develop that dimension of her identity, led her towards professional Chinese-ness. In her first year in London she frequented the Kensington Public Library; in October 1924, for example, she recorded that she borrowed a book of 'Chinese Folk Tales', although she did not elaborate on her reasons. In December 1924 and January 1925 she received a sudden flurry of press interest, with interviews by *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Graphic*, *The Glasgow Morning Post*, *The Sketch* and *The British Australian and New Zealand*. In the midst of all this and her auditions, she had publicly photos taken by a professional photographer, for some of which she chose to wear a 'Chinese gown'. Her quest for the right Chinese outfit to perform in was protracted, partly because some she found did not seem appropriate and having one made was expensive. In her first years in London she often borrowed items of clothing and props that she thought would produce the right background; her descriptions of these clothes and props sometimes read like a pastiche of 'Oriental' objects. For her performance at the Writers' Club on 27 October 1925, for example, she wore 'blue & greenish sort of wide trousers Edith Craig had lent me', a coat borrowed from someone else, pearl and flower ear ornaments she had made for her role in *The Contract* and she carried a fan and fan-holder also lent by Craig.³⁶ Her own predilection to present herself as Chinese was reinforced negatively by her lack of success at other roles, and positively by the encouragement and success she found in this new persona. By September 1925 she had met Arthur Waley, the renowned translator of Chinese poetry, who advised and encouraged her. Her performance at the Writers' Club the following month consisted of her reading Waley's translations alongside Waley himself. By then she was also in demand at private recitations, called 'At Homes'. In late November 1925 when she recited and commented on Chinese poetry on BBC radio, her success was celebrated by *The British Australian and New Zealand*, which reported that 'there were many Australians interested' in the broadcast, and 'several who had not wireless

³⁵ Diary entries for 17 and 18 November 1924, Journal 1924–25, HSP.
³⁶ Diary entry for 27 October 1925, Journal 1924–25, HSP.
³⁷ Series II, Withings, Box 1, Folder 7, HSP.

The paper noted that Quong, though Australian, is of Chinese parentage, [which] accounts for her perfect understanding of these poems that portray Chinese tradition and legends of the fifteenth century.³⁷ Such essentialism pervaded the comments of those who supported her. For example, when in September 1925 she read some of his translated poems to Waley, he told her that 'he had nothing whatsoever to suggest—he didn't hope to hear them read better. Said the rhythm was perfect—could only be instinct'.³⁸ Some commented on her mysteriousness and exotism. Her friend Gertrude Johnson told her that her 'voice sounded sexless—too deep for a woman's and too soft for a man's', and another supporter effusively commented, according to Rose, that 'Chinese poetry was so unique, & my personality, voice & everything about me were different'.³⁹ The theatre critic for *The Illustrated London News* wrote to her that a performance of hers 'had the real Oriental flavour', and another acquaintance told her that 'what gave [her] such power over people' was a kind of Eastern hypnotising power.⁴⁰ A woman associated with the Writers' Club was frank in her professional advice to Quong: 'the Orient always had a fascination for Western people, & [she] could represent Eastern characters as no one else here possibly could—Shakespeare lots of actresses could play more or less adequately—... but for success one must specialize'.⁴¹

The fact that Quong appreciated these essentialist compliments and herself subscribed to Orientalist attitudes is reflected in one of her habitual brief theatre criticisms in her diary. After seeing a performance of *Anthony and Cleopatra* at the Old Vic she commented that the actress Edith Evans had good technique 'but didn't seem to have the real eastern feeling'.⁴² While she worked at casting herself as specifically Chinese, this denigration of Evans' performance suggests she felt she had a claim to a range of Oriental roles, a broad definition encouraged by others, such as a woman she met who thought she might be suitable for either a Japanese or a Tibetan role. Yet by 1926 she had become systematic about studying Chinese literature and art, steeping herself in the culture she increasingly sought to represent.

Arguably Quong's greatest success came in March and April 1929 when she started with Laurence Olivier and the well-known Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong in *The Circle of Chalk*, a play by the German dramatist Klabund, based on Chinese legend, first translated into English in 1929 and later adapted by Bertolt Brecht. The 1929 production at the New Theatre, which consisted of forty-eight performances, was probably the pinnacle of her career. It certainly helped establish her name in London, and it was registered in Australia. The Sydney-based magazine *The Home* reported that her 'striking success' was 'acclaimed alike

³⁷ *The British Australian and New Zealander*, 3 December 1925, 14.
³⁸ Diary entry for 1 September 1925, Diary 1925–26, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 8, HSP.
³⁹ Diary entries for 30 November and 6 December 1925, Diary 1925–26, HSP.
⁴⁰ Diary entries for 19 October 1925, and 15 March 1926, Diary 1925–26, HSP.
⁴¹ Diary entry 31 March 1926, Diary 1925–26, HSP.
⁴² Diary entry 18 December 1925, Diary 1925–26, HSP.

by critics and public'. Moreover, the magazine asserted, Quong had outshone Anna May Wong; she had 'scooped' most of the praise from the critics' and indeed 'is credited with having popularized the Chinese literary cult in London'. The Melbourne Repertory Society, the review concluded, 'may well be proud of the [most?] famous member it has so far produced'.⁴³

By 1932 Quong had launched what she called her 'Circle', a regular event on alternate Sunday evenings at which she would lecture on Chinese themes and recite poetry, or to which she would invite a guest speaker, and would usually include a musician or singer on the program. She charged 2s 6d admission for these events, no doubt in part because her overall income was never robust. By this time she had her own flat on Chatsworth Road at Willesden Green, NW2, which served as the venue for her 'Circle'.⁴⁴ She was always willing to travel for an engagement (again at least in part to maximize her income), such as the lectures she gave to the Leeds Women's Luncheon Club and the Belfast Alpha Club in late 1932. A newspaper report of the latter address described her as 'attired in a Chinese costume consisting of bright green trousers embroidered in gold and a kimono-like top in soft yellow patterned with snakes'. Her lecture covered the contemporary position of women in China, the 'Bandit problem', Chinese language, poems and stories.⁴⁵ If her audiences were often female, in October 1933 at Lynton she lectured to 'highly placed retired army men and their relations'.⁴⁶

In February 1934 she embarked on an eleven-month visit to the United States and Canada, lecturing, being honoured at receptions and interviewed by the press. She travelled extensively for speaking engagements but was based in New York. In July 1934 she appeared at the Ritz in New York, again with Anna May Wong, in an event that one newspaper described as 'Occidentals feast[ing] on [the] Beauty of Two Stage Stars'.⁴⁷ So important was it to her to announce her Chinese-ness that she managed to get herself ejected from a train across the US that passed through Canada. At the Canadian border in Detroit, she was refused entry because she was considered Chinese and, like Australia, Canada had racially based immigration laws. She told her story to a policeman at the Detroit train station, where she was stranded overnight. The policeman, she later recounted, was 'bewildered as I had been. Canada was part of the British Empire; I was born in Australia and was therefore a British subject. "But," I added, "I happen to be Chinese." Puzzled, [the policeman] asked: "And how did they discover that?" "Why I told them so." "Holy Mike, born in Australia, speaking English as you do,

⁴³ 'Melbourne Musings', *The Home*, June 1929, 13.
⁴⁴ Printed invitation card for 'The Rose Quong Circle', Rose Quong Papers, MS 9796, National Library of Australia.
⁴⁵ *The British Australian and New Zealander*, 8 December 1932, 12; Clipping marked 'Belast', Oct. 21, 1932, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series III, Box 4, Loose Materials from Scrapbook, Printed Materials and ephemera, HSP.
⁴⁶ *The British Australian and New Zealander*, 19 October 1933, 10.
⁴⁷ Diary entry for 19 July 1934, Diary 1934–38, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 10, HSP.

why the devil did you drag in China?⁴⁸ The policeman's puzzlement reflects the ambiguity of her identity in everyday street dress, rather than her 'Oriental' outfits.

In London in July 1935 Quong appeared in an early television broadcast, a low definition form known as the Baird Process.⁴⁹ At the end of 1935 she returned to the United States for another extensive lecture tour, her last visit before moving permanently to New York in January 1939. On this second trip in 1935–36, again she was based in New York and again she travelled widely giving talks. But this time she went further—on 30 May 1936 she sailed from the United States to China itself, arriving in Shanghai. In China, she took lessons in Mandarin (she had taken Chinese language lessons in London from a Mrs Wang, starting in January 1935⁵⁰), was interviewed by the press, travelled to 'Tchiping' and went sightseeing, and enrolled for a few weeks at a college of Chinese studies. In late September she departed China and sailed back to America; it would be her only visit to her imagined homeland. She lectured to sizeable audiences across the United States both on the way to China and on the way back, mostly at women's clubs. In Detroit she had an audience of 1500 for her lecture at the town hall. The return trip talks consisted largely of her travel observations in China. One handwritten draft of these talks exudes her excitement at actually being there. By this time, her identification as Chinese was so complete that, in a talk in San Francisco on the way back, for example, she referred to 'one of our great poets, Po Chu',⁵¹

she had done in London. Yet she continued to cast her Oriental authority as exceeding Chinese culture. Her notebooks from the late 1930s show that she read widely on meditation, yoga, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita, clearly intent on absorbing South Asian culture too. She would continue this pan-Oriental stance in the late 1940s and 1950s, particularly in plays she wrote. Seemingly, she was never a published playwright, yet her papers contain typescripts of two plays in particular, plays that show her engagement with early Cold War politics. One play is set in post-war American-occupied Okinawa, and centres

⁴⁸ Rose Quong, 'Spiritual Forces and Race Equality', in *The Role of the Races in Our Future Civilization*, ed. Harry W. Laidler (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1942), 35–6.
⁴⁹ *The Times*, 22 July 1935, 7.
⁵⁰ Diary 1934–38, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 10, HSP; *The British Australian and New Zealand Mail*, 4 March 1937, 14.
⁵¹ My emphasis, 'China', handwritten in notebook, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Box 3, Folder 1, HSP.
⁵² Diary entries for 7 and 19 March 1938, Diary 1934–38, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series II, Writings, Box 1, Folder 10, HSP.

on the American Captain Fishby's attempts to institute democracy and stimulate industry in the village under his charge. The theme of the play is East meets West, but rather than the villagers simply absorbing the lessons of the American Occupation Force, Fishby learns to appreciate Okinawan culture and abandons his attempts to enforce the Occupation plan. For instance, he lets the villagers build a tea-house with the building materials intended for a school, and solves the village's economic crisis by selling their sweet-potato brandy to 'officers' messes all over the island. In a complicated piece of gender politics, Fishby's going native includes his learning to accept the Geisha woman whom the villagers give him. The denouement comes when his commanding officer arrives unannounced, only to find Fishby and his sidekick the army doctor both in kimonos and Japanese sandals, singing 'Deep in the Heart of Texas' to the enthralled villagers in the tea-house. While the play can be read as a critique of America's global politics and Westernisation, what intrigues me is Quong's assertion of herself as an expert on Japanese or Okinawan culture. The other play is set in British Malaya in the 1940s or 1950s. While it is essentially a murder mystery about the disappearance of the wife of a British settler, the background context includes British colonial attempts to suppress the Malayan Chinese guerrillas.⁵³ Again, Quong seems to be claiming a kind of pan-Oriental expertise. By the time the Cold War was evolving in the late 1940s and the 1950s, China had become a more complicated commodity to sell to American audiences, and she may have been strategically broadening her claimed cultural authority.

Despite later successes, such as appearing in a production of *The Circle of Chalk* in 1941 and in the Broadway production of *The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Flower Drum Song* in 1958–59, in New York as in London Quong worked hard and travelled frequently to give lectures. At times she mixed in glamorous social circles. But her modest standard of living is reflected in the fact that she spent the last seventeen years of her life living in one room in a residence hotel, worked for a while in her eighties as secretary to a Chinese businessman and could not pay her doctor's bills during her last illness.⁵⁴ It must have been gratifying to be cast as herself (Rose Quong, 'Chinese astutologist') in the 1971 Canadian film *Eliza's Telescope* starring Tommy Lee Jones, but the money would have been equally important. She died in New York on 14 December 1972, aged ninety-three.

Quong's story amply illustrates the constructedness, plasticity and transportability of ethnic identities, through her own adoption and adaptation of her Chineseness, and her strategic deployment of broader categories of the 'Oriental'. One remarkable feature of Quong's career is her reshaping of identity as she moved from Australia to London and then to New York. While we don't know a great deal

⁵³ Scripts, Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series III, Printed Materials and ephemera, Box 4, Folder 6, HSP.
⁵⁴ Rose Quong Papers, MSS 132, Series I, Correspondence, HSP.

about her early life in Australia, her theatrical work in Melbourne was within the Western canon of the day—despite her childhood reading of Chinese literature. It is probably a reasonable guess that she did not much advertise or publicly celebrate her Chinese-ness in early twentieth-century Melbourne, even though Melbourne's Chinatown stood out for its size and resilience in the first decades of a white Australia. Her colleagues and audiences in Melbourne's amateur theatre world seemingly accepted and praised her, leading her to believe that a professional theatrical career in London was worth pursuing on the basis of her Australian and British identities. In interview London, Quong juggled Australian-ness, Britishness and Chinese-ness, managing an identity that included recognisable aspects of all three, while working to foreground the Chinese element. The transporability of constructed ethnicity is highlighted by the fact that she could move this identity to New York, and sell herself there as Chinese in a context of the emerging category of Asian American, which scholars have suggested was a mid to late twentieth-century artefact.⁵⁵ Quong exemplifies the transnational formation of Oriental and other race-based stereotypes, and their modern global circulation.

For the history of interwar Britain, Quong helps to complicate what we know of Orientalist representations of Chinese-ness. As we know from the work of Marek Kohn, in post-World War I Britain a panic about drugs was tied to Chinese men, gambling, opium and especially Chinese men's perceived sexual attraction to young white women. Chinese communities had sprung up around the turn of the century in port cities such as Liverpool and Cardiff, and in the docklands area of London. These 'Chinatowns' were initially populated by merchant seamen, so not surprisingly most of the Chinese population was male. The fact that some Chinese men married white women sparked eugenicist anxieties about interracial unions, fears that fed stories about young white women being drugged and raped by Chinese and black men. Racist fears underlay the 1919 riots in which returned soldiers played leading roles, such as the Cardiff riots in which Australian soldiers were involved.⁵⁶ Rose Quong's celebrity in interwar London shows that domestic British Orientalism was multi-faceted, incorporating fascination as well as fear, and involving fantasies related to high-cultural productions as well as supposed dens of vice. No doubt the gendered dimensions were crucial here. If lower-class Chinese men were thought to represent a violent moral threat, an educated and well-spoken Chinese woman may have been seen as an intellectually respectable embodiment of Oriental sensuality. Yet Quong presents a complicated instance of the gendered politics of Orientalism. Orientalist representations have typically feminised Asians; Asian women especially have been seen as exotic, sensual and submissive. Quong cast herself as exotic but not erotic, and in asserting her status as an intellectual cultural authority, claimed a masculinised position.

⁵⁵ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.
⁵⁶ Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of The British Drug Underworld* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992), esp. Introduction, Ch. 4 and 148.

Rose Quong's long career casts light too on the historical evolution of Orientalisms in the United States. Mari Yoshihara's book on white women and American Orientalism documents the ways in which American women appropriated and shaped Orientalism from the 1870s to the 1940s, as consumers, artists, performers and writers. Yoshihara argues that white American women 'embraced the East' for complex reasons, not least because intervening in the developing ideology of Orientalism empowered them within domestic American culture.⁵⁷ American Orientalism, particularly in material culture and the arts, created a nationwide market for Quong's lectures and performances. In contrast to Anna May Wong, whose career in the 1920s and 1930s was primarily in film and mostly contemporary roles, Quong presented herself as an interpreter of centuries-old Chinese literature. Therefore, while Wong was often cast as a sexual figure in romantic or tragic roles, Quong—who was much older—represented intellectual and cultural Chinese-ness. As Karen Leong argues in her study of Wong, the specific nuances of Orientalism in these decades shifted with political events and diplomatic relationships. In the 1930s and early 1940s China was an ally of Britain, the United States and Australia and therefore a subject of interest.⁵⁸ By the late 1940s, China was seen as more menacing. Both Wong and Quong's careers faded as the Cold War intensified. Quong's ability to maintain her career at all may have depended in part on her British and Australian identities.

The fact that she created a successful transnational career out of her Chinese-ness—in sites ranging from Britain, to the United States and China—demonstrates the transnational marketability of Orientalisms in the early to mid twentieth century, and their construction through a process in which Westerners and those who identified as Asian were complicit. At the same time, it is imperative that we identify the power imbalance between the parties in this process. Quong's story shows that marketing herself professionally as Chinese was a compromise at which she arrived, not just from her own predilections, but because a career as a Shakespearean actress seemed foreclosed, and her British and Australian advisors urged her towards specialising in the exotic and Oriental. As Ien Ang has argued, the capacity of racism and Orientalism 'as forces that perpetuate and reinforce essentialist notions of the Chinese other should not be underestimated'. With Anglo-Celtic Australian and British people resisting Chinese-Australians' claims to Englishness or Britishness, and insisting that they should instead enact a sense of belonging to the Chinese diaspora,⁵⁹ Rose Quong's story shows such dynamics concretely at work.

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⁵⁷ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
⁵⁸ Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, and the Transnational of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
⁵⁹ Ien Ang, 'Can One Say No to Chinese-ness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm', *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 236, 235, 238–9.

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