***1.1.3 - Actress Anna May Wong***

**The Asian American Education Project**

| ***Grade Level*** | K-4 |
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| ***Lesson Overview*** | According to California History/Social Studies Standards, students in the second grade study “the lives of actual people who make a difference in their everyday lives and learn the stories of extraordinary people from history whose achievements have touched them, directly or indirectly.” In practice, the people studied tend to be from the dominant classes. People of color and/or people from marginalized communities are often overlooked. As such, the narrative of Asian Americans are excluded. Asian Americans have made significant contributions and lasting impacts. Anna May Wong, for example, was a trailblazer in the entertainment industry, and continues to inspire Asian Americans today. Her story, as well as those of many others, deserve to be heard. |
| ***Lesson Objectives*** | Students will be able to:   * Identify the contributions of Anna May Wong * Explain how Anna May Wong impacted the entertainment industry |

***Lesson Implementation:***

This lesson can be completed in one instructional session or over a period of 1-2 weeks. Here are options for lesson implementation:

* One instructional session: Complete Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions.
* Two instructional sessions: Complete Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions and One option from Activity 4.
* One week: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, One option from Activity 3, One option from Activity 4, and One extension activity.

***Actress Anna May Wong Essay:***

Anna May Wong was born in 1905. She was born in Chinatown in Los Angeles. Her family owned a laundry business. She and her siblings worked there. They attended school with mostly white students. Wong and her siblings were bullied because of their **race**. Their parents later switched them to a Chinese school.

Wong found joy in movies. Since the age of nine she wanted to be a movie star. She even skipped school to visit movie sets and to watch films. In 1919 Wong turned fourteen years old. She got her first movie role. She was an **extra** in the film “The Red Lantern.”

Wong continued to pursue her Hollywood dreams, taking whatever roles she could get. She **auditioned** for many parts. At the age of seventeen, she played a lead character in “The Toll of the Sea.” This role brought her more public attention but she still had a difficult time getting leading roles. She instead often played supporting roles. These roles tended to **stereotype** Asians as tragic or evil characters.

Wong said, “I was so tired of the parts I had to play.” And so, in 1928 she left Hollywood. She went to find work in Europe. Europeans were more open to an Asian American movie star.

In the 1930s, Hollywood asked her to return. She performed in over 50 movies, television shows, and plays.

Wong even started her own film **production** company. The company was called Anna May Wong Productions. She made films about her Chinese culture. She protested against **discrimination**. She fought for better **representation**. She wanted to see more Asian Americans actors in movies. She wanted for them to get better roles.

Wong passed away in 1961 when she was fifty-six years old. She was the first Asian American movie star in Hollywood. She paved the way for future Asian American **entertainers**.

In 2022, the United States **Mint** honored Anna May Wong’s **legacy**. She was featured on the American quarter, to celebrate the accomplishments and contributions of women who have shaped history.

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***Vocabulary:1***

* **Audition:** a short performance to test the talent or skills of someone, like a musician, actor, or dancer
* **Discrimination:** treating some people worse than others without any fair or proper reason
* **Entertainer:** someone who provides amusement or performs for others
* **Extra:** a background actor who appears in non-speaking roles
* **Legacy:** long-lasting impact
* **Mint:** a place where the coins and paper money of a country are made
* **Production:** the making or creating of something
* **Race:** any one of the groups that humans are often divided into based on physical traits regarded as common among people of shared ancestry
* **Representation:** the inclusion of diversity in media
* **Stereotype:** a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing

1 Definitions adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

***Discussion Questions:***

1. Who is Anna May Wong? Why is she famous?
2. What are some of the challenges Anna May Wong faced? How did she overcome them?
3. How did Anna May Wong make a difference in the entertainment industry?
4. How does Anna May Wong inspire others? How does she inspire you?
5. Why is it important to learn about Anna May Wong? Why is her work and legacy important?
6. Why is representation important?

***Activity 1:* Introducing Anna May Wong (Suggested Time: 10 minutes)**

Students will consider what makes a person inspirational and be introduced to Anna May Wong.

1. Have students write a list of people they know who have made a difference in their lives or the lives of others.
2. Have them select a partner.
3. Have each partner select one person on their list and share who that person is and how that person inspired them.
4. Have each pair compare the two people they shared and identify similarities between the two people.
5. Facilitate a discussion with the whole class by asking, “What qualities or characteristics make a person inspirational?
6. Have students identify Asian American entertainers and/or movies and shows featuring Asian Americans. Record student responses on chart paper. Tell students that there’s always a need for more representation in media.
7. Show students a picture of Anna May Wong.
8. Ask if any students know who she is.
9. Tell students that Anna May Wong was the first Asian American movie star and that she paved the way for all the Asian American entertainers listed on the chart paper.
10. Tell students that Anna May Wong inspired others just like they were inspired by the people they mentioned on their list.
11. Say the following to students: “Decades ago, there weren’t many Asian American entertainers and that in some cases, white actors and actresses played Asian/Asian American roles. When Asian/Asian American entertainers were casted in movies and shows, they were often denied the leading roles. They played supporting roles or even villain roles. Anna May Wong is a big reason for why we see movies where Asian Americans are the heroes. Let’s learn more about Anna May Wong and how she made a difference.”

***Activity 2:* The Life and Legacy of Anna May Wong (Suggested Time: 40 minutes)**

Students will learn about Anna May Wong’s life, including her struggles, achievements, and legacy.

1. Read the essay aloud to students. Choose one of these options:
2. OPTION 1: Create a slide deck with the essay content and add visuals. Read it aloud to the students.
3. OPTION 2: Write each section on large chart paper. As you read each section aloud, draw visuals in collaboration with the students.
4. Facilitate a discussion (see Discussion Questions) about the essay to ensure comprehension.
5. Read aloud to students, [*Shining Star: The Anna May Wong Story*](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/shining-star), by Paula Yoo. Ask students, “What more did you learn about Anna May Wong from this book?”
6. OPTION: Show students the video entitled, “[Anna May Wong: The first Asian American Movie Star](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/anna-may-wong-first-asian-american-movie-star-bfnigk/13978/).” Facilitate a discussion about the video by asking: “What more did you learn about Anna May Wong from the video?” (Note: The video contains footage of Wong wearing scanty clothing.)
7. Show students the video entitled, “Actress Anna May Wong honored on quarter.” Facilitate a discussion about the video by asking the following questions:
8. Why is Anna May Wong being recognized on the U.S. quarter?
9. Why is it an honor to be on the U.S. quarter?
10. What more did you learn about Anna May Wong from this video?
11. What are other ways we can honor Anna May Wong’s legacy?
12. Have students make a T-chart listing Anna May Wong’s struggles in the left column and how she overcame those struggles in the right column:

| Anna May Wong’s Struggles | How Anna May Wong Overcame Her Struggles |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

***Activity 3:* Anna May Wong’s Contributions to American History (Suggested Time per Option: 30-45 minutes)**

This activity offers two options for teachers to use and have students further build their knowledge of Anna May Wong’s enduring legacy by analyzing her contributions to American history.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Option 1: Have students work in small groups to create a visual timeline of Anna May Wong’s life using ten images from the internet.
   1. Have students place the pictures in chronological order and caption each picture.
   2. Have students highlight the contributions.
   3. Have each group present their timeline to the class.
   4. Have students give reasons as to why they chose those ten images.
   5. Facilitate a class discussion by asking the following questions: “What are similarities in all the timelines? What are the differences between the timelines?”
   6. Have students agree on Anna May Wong’s top three contributions based on their timelines.
2. Option 2: Have students do a “Four Corners” activity where they reflect on the legacy of Anna May Wong. In each corner, post a sign with the following:
   1. Corner 1: “Anna May Wong broke barriers for more positive Asian American roles in entertainment.”
   2. Corner 2: “Anna May Wong was a pioneer, becoming the first Asian American movie star.”
   3. Corner 3: “Anna May Wong starred in over 50 movies despite the stereotyping and discrimination she faced.”
   4. Corner 4: “Anna May Wong became the first Asian American woman on U.S. currency.”
   5. Ask the following questions and have students go to the corner that best reflects their responses; give each group about 3-5 minutes to discuss why they chose that corner and then discuss each question as a whole group:
      1. Which corner represents Anna May Wong’s greatest contribution?
      2. Which corner or contribution would be ranked last among Anna May Wong’s contributions?
      3. Which corner or contribution are you most inspired by?
   6. Have students write a paragraph using this sentence frame: “Anna May Wong contributed to American history by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The effects of her contribution are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

***Activity 4:* Significant Events in Anna May Wong’s Life (Suggested Time per Option: 45 minutes)**

This activity offers three options for assessing students’ comprehension of significant events in Anna May Wong’s life.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Have students create and present a creative biography (i.e., storybook, poster, flipbook, etc.) about Anna May Wong that includes the following:
   1. At least three facts about her life.
   2. At least two facts about her accomplishments or contributions.
   3. At least one way her work has affected our lives today.
2. Have students choose three important events or challenges in Anna May Wong’s life (i.e., her early life, being bullied at school, early Hollywood career, career in Europe, return to the United States, etc.). Have students write a diary entry from Anna May Wong’s perspective; each diary entry should include a description of what is going on and what Wong may be feeling or thinking.
3. Present the following scenario to students: “It is 1960 and you are a journalist for a local newspaper. You have the chance to interview Anna May Wong, but you only have ten minutes to talk to her.”
   1. Have students write a list of at least five questions they would ask Anna May Wong.
   2. Have students write a paragraph introducing themselves to Anna May Wong. (Tell them that a good journalist would research their subject ahead of time and mention some facts in their introduction.)
   3. Have students write a paragraph explaining why their readers should know about Anna May Wong.

***Extension Activities* (Suggested Time per Option: 30-60 minutes)**

1. Have students learn more about the U.S. Mint by reading the article, “[Anna May Wong is the First Asian American Woman on US Currency.](https://www.dogonews.com/2022/10/25/anna-may-wong-is-the-first-asian-american-woman-on-us-currency)” Have students write a paragraph about the process and the impact of having Anna May Wong’s image on U.S. quarters. Have students collect Anna May Wong quarters. Have them write a thank you note to the U.S. Mint explaining why Anna May Wong was a good choice for the U.S. quarter. (Option: Have students research other notable women and make recommendations for future quarters.)
2. Have students discuss why featuring Anna May Wong on the U.S. quarter is a good way to honor her legacy. Have students think of other ways to honor Wong (i.e., art, mural, museum exhibition, building dedication, award, etc.).
3. Have students imagine that Anna May Wong was still alive when she learned she’d be on the U.S. Quarter. Have students write a diary entry from her perspective describing her thoughts and feelings.
4. Have students research and/or watch one of Anna May Wong’s movies. Have students create a movie poster about the film including a short summary of Wong’s character in the film.
5. Tell students that Anna May Wong was also known for being a fashion icon and that she would be considered an “influencer” today. Have students do an online search of Anna May Wong and design an Instagram post with a caption and hashtags that she would use if she were alive today.
6. Have students define what it means to be a “trailblazer.” Have them make a list of female trailblazers in the entertainment industry. Have students research one of them and compare her to Anna May Wong in terms of their struggles and achievements.

***Further Information:***

*Note: These lessons will enhance the teacher’s knowledge. They are not designed for 2nd graders.*

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Chinese Exclusion Act and the Exclusion of Asians, Pacific Islanders and Women”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/chinese-exclusion-act-exclusion-of-asians.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “APIDAs on the Big Screen”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/apidas-big-screen.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Generation Rising, APIDAs Contribute”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/generation-rising.html>