

Michiko Nishiura Weglyn

(1926–)

Costume designer, writer, activist

Michi Weglyn's first career, which she began at the age of twenty-one, catapulted her to fame as the first nationally prominent Japanese American costume designer in the United States. By the 1950s, Weglyn was a regular fixture behind-the-television-scenes, best known for her flattering, successful creations for "The Perry Como Show," a weekly musical variety hour for which she designed costumes from 1956 to 1965. As a designer, she was lauded for her ability to hide the figure flaws of some of Hollywood's most famous celebrities at the time, including Ginger Rogers, Dinah Shore, Betty Grable, Anne Bancroft, and Jane Powell. Weglyn's designing career, which lasted nearly two decades, took her onto the sets of many of the most popular television musical variety series of the late 1950s and 1960s, including "The Jackie Gleason Show," "The Patti Page Show," "The Tony Bennett Show," and "The Dinah Shore Show." She eventually established her own manufacturing and design studio.

In 1967 after the "The Perry Como Show" commitment ended, Weglyn's life changed dramatically. In a 1976 article in *Pacific Citizen*, a childhood friend referred to the change as "the radicalization of Michi Weglyn." From glamorous designer, Weglyn metamorphosed into an acclaimed historical writer. It was the height of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. Then-U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark appeared on a television show and stated that there had never been, and never would be, concentration camps in America. Having spent more than two years of her life at the camp in Gila (pronounced heel-ah) River, Arizona, Weglyn justly referred to Clark's words as "an outright lie." She recalled to *Rafu Shimpo* in 1993, "I decided they were not going to get away with that. That was the catalyst for my book." That landmark work, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*, exposed the horror and suffering of some 110,000 Japanese Americans imprisoned in U.S. concentration camps during World War II. Writer and activist Frank Chin called *Years of Infamy* "the only Asian American book to change Asian American history," referring to its unparalleled contribution to the success of the Japanese American redress campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Farm Life

Born in Stockton, California, on November 29, 1926, Michiko Nishiura was one of the two daughters of Tomojiro and Misao (Yuasa) Nishiura. The family lived in a large, run-down house on a 500-acre farm in Brentwood, a small village in Contra Costa County, California,



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approximately fifty miles east of San Francisco. Growing up, Weglyn worked on the farm for a few hours before she went to school, feeding the chickens and horses. She wanted to prove to her father that she was just as valuable as the son he never had. "In Japanese culture," Weglyn explained in a 1976 interview with Harriet Shapiro, "it's disastrous if a family doesn't have an heir, a male offspring to carry on the family name and help in the fields."

At grade school, Weglyn found friends among the Mexican American and Filipino children. "Even when I was a little child my parents instilled in me *enryo*, a backing away, a shyness, especially with white people. I knew my place. Later, in high school, I was very self-conscious and terribly concerned about what people would think of me. My parents had taught me that I must not offend. They used to talk often about *haiseki*, or discrimination," she told Shapiro.

The day after Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Weglyn felt very anxious about going to school. When she arrived, she recalled the teacher telling the other students, "It's not the fault of the Japanese Americans. You are not to mistreat them." Unfortunately, the general public was not as fair-minded. "I recall my parents going out in the middle of the night and burning books and burying things—anything that might show their attachment to Japan, such as photographs of relatives, letters, even some of their beloved art treasures," Weglyn told Shapiro.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which called for the evacuation of all persons of Japanese descent (two-thirds of whom were American citizens) on the West Coast to ten "relocation camps" where the internees couldn't pose a threat to the U.S. military efforts against Japan. Families were given six to ten days to dispose of their property and businesses. Weglyn told Shapiro with great insight: "The Japanese Americans very obediently turned themselves in. Although they thought it dreadfully unfair to have to leave their homes, they felt powerless. The Issei [first generation], as enemy aliens, had no political voice, and neither did the Nisei [second generation] since most were not yet of voting age." When the evacuation order reached the Nishiuras, they were in the midst of packing. Weglyn recalled to Shapiro: "People wanted to buy our bicycles and automobiles for next to nothing, and the chickens for a quarter apiece. At that price Mom decided it would be better to eat as many chickens as we could before we left. To this day, when my sister and I talk about that period, the hurried killing and eating of our pet chickens was one of the most traumatic aspects of the evacuation. Our father and mother were losing everything they had worked for, but my sister and I had little realization of that. For us it was parting with our animals: our cats, dogs, chickens, our possum, and our parrot. Most were left abandoned. I guess that's what war is like. But these are the things that are not written up in history books."

On May 12, 1942, the Nishiuras were loaded on buses that carried them to a so-called assembly center where they found guard towers, guns, and barbed wire awaiting them. Young Weglyn was not yet sixteen years old. After several months, the family boarded another train which shuttled hundreds of families to the relocation camp in Gila River, Arizona. After two days and nights of traveling, the evacuees arrived in a barren desert, the site of their new home for several years.

Camp Life

In spite of the often inhumane conditions of camp life—the 130-degree heat, the unrelenting sand storms, the inedible food, the overcrowded housing, the communal bathrooms without even partitions for the toilets—the teenaged Weglyn thrived. Ironically, she told Shapiro that she felt a sense of relief and liberation in her new home. "Suddenly I was with my peers. I didn't have to feel inferior. I didn't have to feel small. Or to face the humiliation I had begun to feel more intensely in school. I was liked for what I was, not because of what my parents did or didn't do. I had finally gained a feeling of respect, and I was managing to do the kinds of things that had been denied me, back at home, as a person who was of Asian descent." Weglyn emerged as a true leader and achiever among her peers. She became president of the Girl Scout troop that she organized. She held a day-long Girls League Convention which brought in some 500 high school girls from various Arizona cities to the camp where

they participated in a talent show, were given a tour of the camp, ate together in the mess halls, and discussed timely issues. "They took back to their homes the news that we were as American as anybody else. It helped turn the feelings of distrust," Weglyn told Shapiro.

In 1944, Weglyn went to Phoenix to take entrance examinations for Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Just before her exam, she stopped at a nearby drug store for a soda, but was asked to leave. The storekeeper would not serve her, because she looked Japanese. For the previous two years, Weglyn had been shielded from such racism and abuse, living among only Japanese Americans at camp. In spite of the racist reception outside of camp, Weglyn eventually traveled to the East Coast and entered college. Although she does not remember the details of her arrival at Gila, she clearly remembered leaving: "I was full of the spirit of forgiveness and love and very grateful to the many dedicated fellow Americans who had made it possible for me to attend Mount Holyoke College on a full scholarship," she said to Shapiro.

Weglyn discovered her design aptitude in college, although her interest went back to her childhood. She recalled that at a young age, she had made sweaters for some genetically mutant pet chickens that were born without feathers. At Mount Holyoke, she won a campuswide design contest—for costumes, sets, and scenery for a college production. Unfortunately, her college career did not last long. In 1945, Weglyn was forced to leave Mount Holyoke and was placed in a sanatorium for tuberculosis which she had contracted at Gila. In 1947, she returned to school, this time to Barnard College in New York City, but again was forced to leave for health reasons. Weglyn later studied costume design at New York's Fashion Academy between 1948 and 1949. One year later, on March 5, 1950, she married Walter Matthys Weglyn, a perfume chemist, who came to the United States in 1947 after having survived the Holocaust. "Walter is my most exacting critic and mentor," Weglyn said of her husband in a brochure from California State Polytechnic University.

In the 1950s, under the name Michi, Weglyn began designing theatrical costumes for ice shows, night clubs, Broadway and television, including the Roxy Theatre (1952-53), "The Jackie Gleason Show" (1953), "Kraft Television Theater" (1954), *Hit the Trail* (a Broadway musical, 1954), "The Patti Page Show" (1958), "The Tony Bennett Show" (1959), "The Dinah Shore Show" (1961), "The Jimmy Dean Show" (1964), and, of course, "The Perry Como Show" from 1956 to 1965. From 1964 to 1967, Weglyn was also the founder and head of costume manufacturing and the design studio for Michi Associates Limited.

War

By the time Weglyn retired from designing in the late 1960s, war was a very controversial topic in the United States and beyond. The Vietnam War was raging abroad

while the civil rights movement gained momentum at home. Weglyn explained in 1993 during her commencement address at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, "As I look back, I would first have to credit both the Vietnam War (when the use of technological savagery on the lives, habitats, and ecosystem of a small Asian nation was shocking the entire civilized world), and the civil rights movement (when each day was filled with rage and racial violence) for the transition that took place within me. From an apolitical innocent I became a traumatized citizen. I was enraged by a democracy's flagrant disregard for elemental human rights, especially as they related to ethnicity and skin color, and by America's shocking disregard for a reverence for life which we had been taught to hold sacred.

"What startled me into disbelief during the heat of the antiwar and civil rights agitation was the preposterous lie spewed forth by the then-attorney general Ramsey Clark when asked on television if the protesters would be put in concentration camps. His astonished reply, that 'we have never had, do not now have, and will not ever have concentration camps here' was the catalyst. His blatant untruth convinced me that uncovering the probable lies of our long-revered wartime president Franklin Delano Roosevelt would surely lead me to the truth as to why we innocents had been consigned to prison camps.

"Indeed in the FDR Library, later at the National Archives and other repositories, a treasure trove was there for the digging. For an untrained researcher it was agonizing to decide how to proceed, when certain of my suspicions proved true: that textbooks, for example, were perpetuating a myth in scapegoating the fear hysteria of the West Coast, when the hysteria was actually in the White House."

Weglyn spent eight years in search of the truth. In 1976, the result of her passionate labors, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*, was published by William Morrow and Company. For the first time in history, Weglyn was able to break the paralyzing guilt that had bound Japanese Americans in silence. With careful research and documentation, Weglyn shed light on the abuses of power in the highest reaches of the U.S. government that failed to protect the basic rights of Americans of Japanese descent. Her work helped release a new social activism among Japanese Americans, to become more involved in promoting civil and human rights, which eventually led to the redress movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Both the book and Weglyn have been lauded for changing the face of Asian American history. Weglyn has been given much of the credit for the success of the Japanese American redress campaign. Bert Nakano, national spokesperson for the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRP), was quoted by *Rafu Shimpo* in 1993,

referring to *Years of Infamy* as the significant element in the redress campaign, adding "Her book was the primer that people referred to in order to get familiar with the [Japanese American internment] issue."

The Fighting Spirit Continues

Since 1976, Weglyn has remained actively involved in the Asian American community and beyond. She has been an adviser and consultant on countless projects, including the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles (1988-90), The Japanese American Library in San Francisco (1987-present), Loni Ding's award-winning film, *Color of Honor* (1987), the Congressional Study on the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (1981-82), and the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, "A More Perfect Union: The Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution" (1975-76).

The honors and awards Weglyn has received also seem limitless. They include the "Justice in Action" Award from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (1987); the Anisfield-Wolf Award in Race Relations for *Years of Infamy* (1977), and the Japanese American of the Biennium Award "in recognition of outstanding service by a Japanese American in making America a better place for all people" from the Japanese American Citizens League (1976). In addition, Weglyn has been bestowed honorary doctorates from Hunter College in 1992 and from California State Polytechnic University in 1993. Also in 1993, California State Polytechnic University established the Michi Nishiura and Walter Weglyn Endowed Chair for Multicultural Studies. And in June 1994, almost five decades after she was forced to leave due to health problems, Weglyn received an honorary doctor of letters from Mount Holyoke College.

"By reading the life histories of individuals who have excelled in bettering the human condition, you will find their tragedies and triumphs to be a constant source of empowerment," Weglyn advised *Notable Asian Americans*, writing from her own experiences. While she cites such luminaries as Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, and Maya Angelou as her role models, indeed, Weglyn herself has become a laudable example for all those who seek truth and justice with unwavering dedication and compassion.

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—Sketch by Terry Hong

Anna May Wong (1907-1961)

Actress

Anna May Wong became America's first Asian American movie star before films could even talk. She maintained her popularity for more than a quarter of a century, and remained one of the highest-salaried stars of her time. She built a career around being the mysterious evil villainess, repeatedly playing the roles created by Hollywood's stereotypical fantasies of the Oriental woman. She was the exotic slave girl, the powerful dragon lady, the mysterious siren of the Orient with deadly charms.

In spite of her international fame, Wong spoke out vehemently against the racist Hollywood regime. Disgusted with the American motion picture industry, Wong fled two times to Europe. In a 1933 interview entitled "I Protest" which appeared in a London magazine and was reprinted without specific source citations in a document at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library, Wong told interviewer Doris Mackie: "When I left Hollywood I vowed I would never act for the film again! . . . I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is always the villain of the piece? And so crude a villain—murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass! We are not like that. How should we be, with a civilization that is so many times older than that of the West? . . . We have our rigid codes of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show these on screen? Why should we always scheme, rob, kill? I got so weary of it all—all the scenarists' conception of the Chinese character. You remember *Fu Manchu*? *Daughter of the Dragon*? So wicked!"

Hollywood Beckons

Born on Flower Street in Los Angeles, California in 1907, Anna May Wong was named Wong Liu Tsong, which in Cantonese means "frosted yellow willow." Wong was third-generation Chinese American; her father was born in Sacramento and his father had emigrated to California during the Gold Rush.

Growing up, Wong and her six brothers and sisters lived in a flat over the family's ramshackle laundry. Her first memories were of constant steam and the pungent odor of hot-ironed linen. As a young child, Wong became fascinated with the the brand-new movie world. She began skipping Chinese school in the evenings to watch such movies as *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) at the local nickel-odeon. By the age of eleven, Wong decided she was going to be a movie actress. In spite of the enormous improbability of such a goal, she got her first part at age twelve. James Wang, an agent who cast Asian talent for movies, was hiring three hundred Chinese girls as extras in the 1919 film *The Red Lantern*. Hardly visible in the final release version of the film, the small part nevertheless led to a few minor roles, including one in *First Born*, with Sessue Hayakawa, the only Asian leading man in the 1920s.

For two years, Wong thanklessly worked after school as an extra. Knowing her parents would not approve, she kept her extracurricular career a secret. At age fourteen, her father found her a job as a secretary, but Wong was fired one week later for her poor shorthand. When she returned home, fearing her father's anger, she found a letter from a director's office offering her a role in the film *Bits of Life* (1921), which would bring Wong her first screen credit. Although Wong's father strongly objected to his daughter's chosen career, he eventually relented on the condition that an adult escort, often he himself, would chaperone the young Wong on the film sets at all times. When she was not in front of the cameras, her father locked her into her room on the set.

At age seventeen, Wong had one of the few romantic lead roles she would ever play in *Toll of the Sea* (1923), the first Technicolor feature ever made. As a young village girl who marries an American sailor, Wong captured the media's attention for the first time. Reporters began to appear at the laundry in the hopes of catching Wong for an interview or a photo.

International acclaim came in 1924 with *The Thief of Bagdad*, in which Wong played an exotic Mongol slave girl opposite Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. By then, she was five feet, seven inches—an inch taller than Fairbanks. Although the film was the greatest success of the year, it scandalized Wong's family. Although Wong would continue to support her family for many years, from the time of *Bagdad's* release, an irreparable rift developed. Wong would only remain close to her brother, Richard.