



Jadin Wong Chichester
1913 - 2010

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Most people consider themselves to be among the lucky ones if they find their calling in life; a single starring role that belongs to them alone. Jadin Wong was not most people. Jadin knew she wanted to be a dancer from the age of five. She performed in public parks and waited tables, saving her tips in secret to help pay for her dancing and singing lessons. Born in China's Guangdong province, Jadin's immigrant father Charles was a railroad worker whose marriage to her San Francisco-born mother, Pauline Fong, was arranged. One of six children, Jadin was born Anna Mae Wong in Marysville, California, north of Stockton, on May 24, 1913. Growing up in the heart of California's gold country prior to the depression, Jadin and her siblings were taught the values of hard work, respect, and self-confidence. Pauline, whose most precious gifts were her children, was a life-long role model for her.

As Jadin grew older, she could no longer ignore her desire to go into show business. Her youngest brother Wally fondly recalls, "One day she told me that she wouldn't see me for a while, climbed out her bedroom window with a suitcase, and joined the Marx Touring Company." At seventeen, she was performing with a young red-haired boy from Brooklyn named Danny Kaye, when a truant officer caught up to her and brought her back home. Jadin's parents vehemently opposed any mention of their daughter going into show business and it became the fuel for many an argument. "I would hear her crying in her bedroom," says Wally. "And then it happened again. She crawled out the bedroom window



(Above) Jadin Wong in her first film, *Mr. Moto Takes a Vacation*, produced by 20th Century Fox in 1939. Cover portrait by Boris Bakchy.

with her suitcase. This time our mother was waiting for her.” But Pauline wasn’t angry. She handed Jadin \$40 and told her she understood and to take care of herself.

Hollywood would shortly find Jadin Wong knocking at its doorstep. But with no contacts and very little money, she was soon hungry and tired, sleeping on park benches and dancing in the street. It just so happened that luck turned her way, and not for the first time. Producer Norman Foster of 20th Century Fox passed by Jadin one day and invited her to lunch at a nearby restaurant. She was soon taken home to meet his wife, the actress



Jadin Wong with Humphry Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Rudolf Friml, and others.

Claudette Colbert. Jadin's first among dozens of films was *Mr. Moto Takes a Vacation*, released in 1939. Other films include *Around the World* (1943), *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and, at age 92, *The Pink Panther* (2006).

In 1939, this showgirl at heart was also a headliner for the opening of San Francisco's legendary all-Asian nightclub, Forbidden City, and performed at other clubs in what was known as the "Chop Suey" circuit. By the 1950s, Jadin began touring with a performance act throughout America, Europe, and Asia to great acclaim, acquiring fans and friends wherever she went. She performed with Josephine Baker in Paris and became a friend of Noel Coward when he was a surprise hit in Las Vegas.

One of the greatest points of pride in Jadin's younger years was the amount of time she was able to spend entertaining U.S. troops.

“Lady Luck” would again intervene on Jadin’s behalf one night over the Black Forest in Germany. While flying on orders from General Westmoreland to U.S.O. shows, her aircraft developed mechanical problems and the pilot advised Jadin to put on a parachute. Jadin later recalled to her brother Wally that she was scared out of her mind as she floated through space, and so imagined her mother singing an old Chinese lullaby to her. She was soon spotted by a farmer dangling from a tree branch. He immediately contacted a nearby U.S. military post and she was rescued. The plane she’d been flying in crashed. After receiving medical treatment for injuries sustained, she joined Bob Hope that evening, performing for American troops without costumes or props to the tune of a standing ovation. The President of the United States and the California State Senate honored her for her volunteer services.

After a brief early marriage to her dance partner Li Sun, Jadin moved to New York in 1960, where she met and married Broadway powerhouse Edward Duryea Dowling, producer and director for the Shubert Organization. Dowling is remembered by his brother-in-law Wally as having been “a creative and sensitive gentleman, who understood his wife’s need to perform, however far it took her from him.” Their eight-year partnership was abruptly ended in 1968 when Eddie suffered a fatal heart attack. Jadin married a third and final time to baseball player Gil Chichester.

Her professional life thrived in New York, as Jadin appeared in several Broadway shows, including *The King and I* and *The World of Susie Wong*. By 1970, Jadin felt ready to assume her most important and influential role. All too familiar and dissatisfied with the



Jadin was the headline dancer in 1939 at Charlie Low's Forbidden City, the country's best-known Chinese-American nightclub. Here she performs "The Moon Goddess."

lack of Asian talent being cast in significant roles in theater, film, and television, she opened Jadin Wong Management. Jadin stepped out of the spotlight and enabled it to shine on a new generation of Asian performers whom she inspired and mentored, becoming the predominant talent agent for Asian Americans. She made very strong appeals to all who worked in the entertainment industry, stressing the value and importance of including Asian talent in all theatrical venues. As with everything she put her mind to, her agency was a great success, representing more than 400 Asian and Asian-

Americans.

In 1979, Jadin Wong Management teamed with casting director Joanna Merlin to host the first non-traditional casting symposium at the Shubert Theater. This event drew participants, theater owners, and union members from across the performing arts, with guest speakers Paul Robeson and Harry Belafonte, and featured Asian artists performing in non-traditional roles. The symposium was historically significant because it opened Broadway to Asian talent in a way that had not been previously thought possible.

Jadin Wong Management was involved in the casting for *The Song of Singapore*, *Flower Drum Song*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *M. Butterfly*. David Henry Hwang, the Tony-award-winning playwright, said, “The character of Mme. Liang in my 2002 re-write of *Flower Drum Song* was my tribute to Jadin; a brassy, brilliant, ex-actress turned agent for Asian talent.” On May 13, 1985, Congressman Norman Mineta of San Francisco presented Jadin’s story to the House of Representatives,

Jadin with her brother Wally Wong, and Gerald Shoenfeld.



which resulted in further nationwide recognition for all she had accomplished.

Jadin Wong's final performance on October 11, 1997 was at a gala benefit for a new national Chinese-American museum that saluted the pioneers of the 1930s and '40s nightclub era. The theme of the evening, "I'm Stepping Out with a Memory Tonight" honored Jadin. At age 84, she performed her signature dance, "The Moon Goddess," which she had created more than 50 years before.

An innovator and a pioneer, Jadin made her way in show business and blazed a trail for other Asian performers to follow, reflecting her singular determination to show the world what she could do, even when the world wasn't ready to listen. She was the quintessential Broadway dame, bursting with chutzpah, never less than glamorous, a showgirl through and through.

Her brother Wally continues: "Jadin wanted to be remembered not only as a professional performer and an artist, but as a woman who helped young Asian performers pursue careers in the arts." She established the Jadin Wong Educational Fund in The New York Community Trust to continue her dream and theirs: to support aspiring artists, musicians, and dancers of Asian descent.

The New York Community Trust

is a community foundation, helping New Yorkers achieve their charitable goals and making grants that respond to the needs of our City.

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