

Hong Kong as City/Imaginary in *The World of Suzie Wong*, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, and *Chinese Box*

Thomas Y. T. Luk

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Hong Kong as the 'Pearl of the Orient' has sparked the exotic imagination of the west over the years, being the object of 'the other'. This role will continue to be played by Hong Kong, in spite of itself, even in the new millennium. This essay attempts to examine western representations of Hong Kong with reference to *The World of Suzie Wong*, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* and *Chinese Box* related to this particular place. By analyzing and interpreting these works in their literary and cinematic texts, it tries to arrive at some understanding of the historical and cultural relationships between Hong Kong and the West, and explain why Hong Kong as city/space is so represented, and what are some of the factors, aesthetic, racial, economic and ideological, that may have underpinned its imaginary construction by the West. Through uncovering these layers, it is hoped that Hong Kong as a geographical or imaginary construction in its multifaceted manifestations may either be revealed or created. In the following, I shall discuss interchangeably these three texts, literary and cinematic, with reference to the theme of Hong Kong as city/imaginary. I shall divide my discussion in three separate sections, Mapping *The World of Suzie Wong*, The Melting Pot Myth of *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, and A Wistful Journey of the Return of the Native: Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box*, in relation to the three texts in question.

Mapping *The World of Suzie Wong*

On the whole, Hong Kong used to serve as a archetype of the exotic, mysterious Orient, thanks to its remote distance and inaccessibility to western audiences before World War Two. As city, it served more as an imaginary landscape than an actual topography, and has continued to do so even when it has become more accessible in physical and geographical terms after the jet age.

How Hong Kong as a city has been represented touches on methodologies of representation and these methodologies can point either to a construction of an actual city and the lived experience of individuals who inhabit there, or to metaphor/allegory intimating and conceptualizing certain experiences and perceptions. On the one hand, the 'city', then, may become a way of interpreting identity and living practices within that city. On the other, the city may be used as a backdrop for orientalising and othering as the case may be in Richard Mason's own apologetic coloration of his loco-description of Hong Kong. In my opinion, these three films have used images of space, place and the city more as structuring metaphors for perception and conceptualization of ideologies and experiences than concerned themselves with 'the clear text of the planned and readable city.'¹

Mason had been aware of what Said has now made famous as 'Orientalism'. He was very honest and consistent about how he filtered his views with self-conscious qualification. However, this eclecticism is least the concern of the film. Hence, the more blatant, chauvinistic Hollywood representation of Hong Kong in the usual western, patriarchal treatment of the other, as Gina Marchetti points out.²

The world in *The World of Suzie Wong* is treated as a location or a site of the *fin de siecle* Puccini's fantasy of Madame Butterfly and the story an update of this fantasy, that is, the male fantasy of a beautiful, available and submissive Asian woman. The cityscape is topography for the projection of racism, sexism, media stereotyping, all ready made vocabulary reserved for the Asian other, and Asian woman in particular.

In the novel as well as in the film, social portrayal, plot, characterization all conspire to create a setting for paternalism and condescension, not to mention distortion. Hong Kong and Suzie Wong become the other, to be exploited by the western gaze, and objects of western, Anglo-American inscription, as illustrated by the topographical/demographical focus of the city. There is a deliberate, if not ignorant, structural absence of its real denizens other than the bar-girls in Wanchai. Understandably, Hong Kong, the real thing, undergoes various kinds of mediations, such as the colonial gaze, western projections, Said's orientalist perspective, political positioning, etc., only to emerge into its Hollywood style construction/representation, that is, Richard Mason's novel, or Richard Quine's film.

As mentioned, Hong Kong as city in the 1950's and its accessibility to western audiences and readers in physical, geographical and literary terms, remains still the far and distant mysterious orient, though it is much better than the Hong Kong in the films of the 30's onwards. So geographical realism plays second fiddle to subjective perception of the city. Richard Mason's apologia for his literary cartography of Hong Kong as a city/space is well taken when he states:

'A moment can never be complete in itself since it belonged to a context, movement and mood, and only in this context had meaning: and moreover part of this context was the observer himself, interpreting the moment in the light of his own mind, his own personality and knowledge...³

Mason's topography of Hong Kong: Wanchai bars, rickshaw, harbor and ferry, sampans, floating restaurant, huts, hillside shantytowns, joss-sticks burning ritual become structural elements of the oriental other. "The scenery is extremely captivating, as Hong Kong surely would not look this way again, so the moment in time is a treasure in itself" — This seemingly innocuous statement from an Amazon viewer does nothing to get rid of a covert paradigmatic perspective, which renders the city with the absence of a presence by a 'tendentiously flawed mimesis,'⁴ or selected representation.

In the novel, the imaginary construction of the landscape of the writer's mind extends the absence of an authentic presence even to the

characterization of Suzie, who is apotheosized in all her child-like simplicity, naturalness and unbridled sex appeal; she is the incarnation of something that the west has perhaps lost and can only find in the figure of a noble savage, and her peculiar brand of sexual orientations: losing face if not sexually desired by Robert, and begging to be beaten so as to show off her wound. If the novel or film is to mirror, construct, represent the lived experiences and identity of its characters, it is done under the western eye and for certain segments of the western spectatorship; there is no attempt at genuinely grappling with the cultural and social geography of the place or its people. Thus, the city of Hong Kong is created rather than revealed. Suzie, in a strange way, is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's native woman in *Heart of Darkness*, an embodiment of the spirit of the wilderness, fecundity and mystery. That is Lomax's response to Suzie, who represents the binary contrast to his western debility and is the object of his desire in his willful quest of the elusive Grail. Suzie, the Orient, is vitality just as Lomax, the west, is lie and hypocrisy, a bipolar paradigm, again, analogous to Africa and Europe in Conrad.

The Melting Pot Myth of *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*

While Suzie is the fetishistic object or mirror for the West to see and retrieve what is pre-lapsarian, a mirror double for the debilitating west, Suyin in *Love is Many Splendored Thing* becomes a human double for Hong Kong where east meets West, as the clichés have it. Han Suyin states her objective of her book as synthesizing the two by understanding and harmony. Her preface demonstrates a genuine attempt at understanding and harmony between East and West. Her steadfast adherence to Chinese values and resistance to western values in the novel, however, give way in the film, which does not do her justice.

Hong Kong in Henry King's *Love is A Many Splendored Thing* becomes a site for the American melting pot myth. The city at first seems a place/setting for the East/West union between Suyin and Mark

Elliott. The appeal to melt is not about melting the northern mainlanders and the southern Cantonese locals in *The World of Suzie Wong*, but a call to melt Suzie into Lomax or Suyin into Mark Elliott. The mythical pot works, however, only to exercise dominance/superiority over the Asian other half — Hong Kong in this case becomes a setting for the dumping of the wish fulfillment of the west. Its geographical, architectural and human landscape is rendered fragmentary, partial and incomplete. In both films, it becomes a site for American bleeding heart liberalism, an occasion for the bugle-hooting cavalry to rescue and convert the Asian lover into a willing Jessica for Belmont.

Thus, Henry King's film depicts Hong Kong an ideal setting to accommodate different flows of western fantasies, a space especially for the projection of desires and anxiety: Hong Kong is the last, staggering bastion/border beyond which lurks the fear/desire of the alien, in this case, communism and exoticism all rolled into one. North of its border lurks the threat to western democracy. Here, Hong Kong becomes more a cultural signifier of an imaginary construction of the geography by the western mentality during the cold war era, than a straightforward physical/geographical city. It is an imaginary city that is created rather than revealed as some of its chosen locations suggest it to be the case, i.e., the Mid-level, Repulse Bay, the Central and Aberdeen, etc. The idyllic visuality of the birds-eye panorama of the Crown Colony at the beginning of the film is quickly interrupted by the siren of the ambulance and the subsequent concern of the refugee influx in the hospital, suggesting the imminence of change in a city under siege.

The above analyses cannot but derive from interpretations related to the notion of East and West, which may sound clichés. But under this rubric, its objectives is not so much to rehash simply misconceptions and polarities, but to relocate these discourses in the postmodern and post-1997 context with an impulse towards deconstructing them. In the process of addressing or redressing these misconceptions, one may run the risk incidentally of putting these new discourses in the snare of

orientalisms or occidentalisms, but the latter term has yet to garner the attention of critical discourse, as the West has enjoyed the position of empowerment and hegemony even up to this day and age. What warrants more urgency and need deconstructing is not how the East views the West, but the other way round. The fact that the volume of books on the East far outweigh that on the West suggests this to be the case. The polarities are often cast in the modes of the colonized East as opposed to the colonizing West, the feminized East (women) as opposed the male West to the extent that the Asian male in Hollywood films is often reduced to a dysfunctional body, with the only exception of the Chinese pig-tailed coolie turned gunfighter in the 1960 Paramount film, *Walk Like a Dragon*. My case in point is Dr. Shen in Henry King's film, who looks not just pale but no match in comparison with Mark Elliott for Suyin's amorous attention. This kind of characterization and the cultural texts in which it appears are the result of colonial discourse and orientalist representation, which aims for easy domestication and objectification, through Homi Bhabha's 'process of ambivalence,' to make the other at once 'fixed,' 'knowable' and 'visible.'⁵

A Wistful Journey of the Return of the Native: Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box*

The Chinese Box, epitomizes a gaze at the 1997 Hong Kong as a city in imminent change-over, a gaze supposedly of no one but a native son having returned for some last minute reminiscences and prognostic appraisal, not of love, career, but a search for identity, here and now. By creating a story interweaving lives of Vivian, Jean, John and Chang, Wayne Wang is hoping to find a bearing for Hong Kong, upon his artistic journey through the four characters. There may be dispute as to how genuine and authentic Wayne Wang's view is, having lived in Hollywood for so long, but there is no denying that Wayne Wang had lived and gone to school here. His is just another case of hybridity, so characteristic of Hong Kong's culture.

Wayne Wang's trope of revelation is through his montages: the shots of strings of rosary, coins and letter reminiscent of the old Hong Kong, whereas the shots of box within boxes, the watch, the postcard, pearl shells tell on suggestively the enigma of Hong Kong's physiognomy. Wayne Wang's soul-searching journey begins with the three romances involving the four characters mentioned and a British youth, shot through a hand-carried camera in a seeming attempt at docu-drama.

Hong Kong is portrayed as a rent-free borrowed space on borrowed time, figuratively, a prostitute with a shady past, and a slave to her master, Britain then and China now, and changes places with the two sides of the coin, just as Vivian and Jean are the two sides of the same coin. A borrowed image from Macau (Greyhound race) is blatantly transplanted into Hong Kong, making a point of Hong Kong's slavish body, chasing after some object by remote control. Despite the fact that some find Wayne Wang smearing the new SAR, he does try to instill some optimism into Vivian's future, when she is finally free from both Chang and John. Hong Kong is like a whore, who will work hard for money, as John suggests in his writing, and the changeover is just like a change for the new master/client.

Vivian as a character allegorizes Hong Kong's future after the reversion of sovereignty, a point not so quickly comprehended by those local critics who consider Wayne Wang has smeared Hong Kong's name with a few inaccuracies. Hong Kong to China is like Vivian to Chang, a relationship at the expense of Vivian for her disreputable past, no less ambivalent than the relationship between Vivian and John, the analogue to Hong Kong and Britain. This relationship is continued with more poignancy in Jean's unrequited romance with the young Briton. Jean's character is analogous to Hong Kong with a scarred past. Her scar and her elusive identity parallel Hong Kong's uncertain future. Wayne Wang does not fully credit his old Hong Kong memories as truth, since he did not see them himself. The only path to truth is through the captured images, just like John tracing Jean's life with his hand-held camera, to find out the truth that lies probably under her scar,

with no certain answer to what the truth entails, a structural point of the plot matched by Wayne Wang's titular icon of the Chinese Box in the film, with no clear-cut solution to problems in the multinational matrix of Hong Kong, China, the United States and Britain.

The film has created a symbiotic relationship between form and content. Images and sound effects are coordinated to produce a hurly-burly metropolis with breathtaking realism. Hong Kong as a city/space is revealed by over-the-shoulder shots, with John as the narrative center, observing the city in transition. On the one hand, this city/space so shot reinforces both the subjective perspective and local realism, making the audience feel the director's perspective and his confusion and ambivalence. The *mise-en-scene* reveals Hong Kong as a city of east and west, with old and new buildings side by side, as illustrated by John's apartment at central, opening to an incessant flow of people as well as to the skyscrapers. The film, *The Chinese Box*, may be said to be the Chinese Box within the heart of a diasporic Hong Kong native, full of sentimental feelings and convictions, but as a representation of Hong Kong, it falls short of the Hong Kong its inhabitants have come to know.

"Hong Kong is a very direct, very visceral, very physical city. In order to capture that feeling, I felt that I should use a hand-held camera rather than make pretty, still pictures."⁶ So it's the camera style that's most appropriate to the city itself. Images such as bloodied hands, a man beheading a chicken, the recurring close-up of a heart still beating on the complex soundtrack which contrasts voluminous traffic sounds with eerie silences, create an impressionistic mood purportedly representative of the fragmented society. However, Wang has mounted a fascinating essay-fashioning fiction around real event about colonialism, patriotism and the individual's relationship with the state, whether he's a citizen or not."⁷

In *Chinese Box*, Wayne Wang took a wistful journey home to Hong Kong with recourse to visual and aural details of the location — the neighborhoods, interiors, the city dialect and street sounds,

the market place where fish is cut and left with a palpitating throb, etc. John in the film becomes 'the man with the movie camera,' a *flâneur* in but not of the crowd, snatching the disappearing days in the life of a British Crown Colony. The city so captured provides a metaphor, a projection for the mixing of the public and personal spheres of experiences. It is his way of investing the place with meaning, memory and desire. The narrative pattern of a *flâneur* walking the streets of Hong Kong gives rise to a combination of topographical realism and fictional imagining. Wayne Wang uses techniques of on-location shooting, insertion of documentary sequences and the inclusion of crowds and PLA tanks into his fictional film of romance to tell his 'spatial story.'⁸

In the analyses above, I have attempted, as may be applicable, to refer to the connection between the discipline of geography and film studies, and demonstrate how the latter can use concepts of space, place and city as structuring metaphors to address certain issues of representation in the filmic texts. The interweaving of geography and film studies is becoming a popular field of enquiry, prompting a new awareness of space and the emergence of new cultural/physical geography in literary and filmic analyses.⁹ In addition, the three films and their novelistic versions reflect how socially determining factors such as gender, race, and class can be revealed, constructed and even contested in the way these three cultural texts construct space, place and the city. Judged by the impact as a whole, the attempt to relate the construction of the diegesis ('world') of these texts with the lived world of actual and social relations of Hong Kong is bound to meet with a mixture of success and failure, accuracy and distortion, positive images and negative stereotypes. All these, after all, boil down to what is referred to earlier as "tendentiously flawed mimesis," which we must recognize in our critique of its mode of representation and production of knowledge, with reference to the historical/temporal context.

Notes and References

- 1 de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.93.
- 2 Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.) p.123.
- 3 Mason, Richard. *The World of Suzie Wong*, (Pegasus Books, 1994), p.10.
- 4 Spence, Louise & Stam, Robert. "Colonialism, Racism and Representation," *Screen* 24, 2 (March–April, 1983), p.6.
- 5 Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question.... Homi Bhabha Reconsiders The Stereotype Colonial discourse," *Screen*, 24, 6, 1983, p. 16.
- 6 Worsdale, Andrew. "More Questions Than Answers," in *Film*, September 24, 1998.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Bruno, Julian. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1993), p.162.
- 9 Lury, Karen & Massey, Doreen. "Making Connections," editorial introduction to the special issue of Space/Place/City and Film in *Screen* 40: 3, Autumn 1999, p.229–237.

Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question.... Homi Bhabha Reconsiders The Stereotype and Colonial discourse," *Screen*, 24, 6, 1983.

Bruno, Julian. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

Lury, Karen & Massey, Doreen. "Making Connections," editorial introduction to the special issue of Space/Place/City and Film in *Screen* 40: 3 Autumn 1999.

Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.

Mason, Richard. *The World of Suzie Wong*, (Pegasus Books, 1994).

Spence, Louise & Stam, Robert. "Colonialism, Racism and Representation," *Screen* 24, 2 (March–April, 1983).

Worsdale, Andrew. "More Questions Than Answers," in *Film*, September 24, 1998.