

Portrayals of Gender and Generation, East and West: Suzie Wong in the Noble House

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Introduction

How do western films about women in Hong Kong speak to issues of gender, difference, history, and cross-cultural relationships? Have messages about gender and race in Hollywood films about Hong Kong changed over time? In this paper we focus on the “cultural work” — to borrow a term from cultural studies — being done in these films. We ask not if the films are good art, but rather what are they good for? What messages do they convey as they entertain? We bring to this discussion of gender and generation in Hollywood’s Hong Kong a shared interest in women’s history, women’s studies, American Studies, and issues in transnational feminism. We share an interest in the relationship between gender and space in women’s narratives, and in the various histories that are written of national identity and relations between groups in Hong Kong.

We will be looking at several films: *Soldier of Fortune* (1955), *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing (LMST)* (1955), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), *Tai-Pan* (1986) and the TV mini-series, *Noble House* (1993). Our rationale for casting our net broadly and for including a six-hour TV series will, we believe, allow us to look at two groupings of texts — one circulating before and one after the second-wave Women’s

Movement in the United States. We will briefly explore three general themes:

1. How location and geography are used to mark gender, race, class, and physical space;
2. How historical events/historical narratives are utilised in the films; and
3. How anxieties about gender, culture, and interracial relationships circulating in Western, particularly American, society find their way into the films.

Geographies

Noble House and *The World of Suzie Wong* are deliberately situated in Hong Kong for many reasons, including its ‘exotic’ location. In her pioneering work *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”* Gina Marchetti notes that cities like Saigon, Casablanca and Hong Kong promise romance, adventure and an escape from the mundane reality of everyday life¹ But Hong Kong was the ‘exotic’ East long before *Suzie Wong*. It was the base for ‘China-watchers’ trying to fathom the goings-on behind the bamboo curtain, as well as the base for foreign correspondents — journalists like Mark Elliot in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* — covering the rest of South East Asia. But Hong Kong’s main attraction in the body of work under consideration is its duality or “two-ness.”

Hong Kong is seen as home for both the ‘oriental’ and the ‘occidental,’ the place where Ian Dunross, the 12th Tai Pan and a descendent of the Scottish clan of Struans, can unabashedly and proudly claim that he is Chinese. In these films Hong Kong itself is portrayed as a gendered space. The TV mini series *Noble House* (1993) following from the earlier *Soldier of Fortune* (1955) opens with a wide panoramic view of HK. The camera pans sensually across the magnificent harbour lingering over the phallic, skyscrapers lining central district. This cinematographic gaze prepares the viewer for a specific vision of Hong Kong as a male space of adventure and competition. In contrast *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) provides a

more human scale focusing narrowly on a cluster of boats amicably bobbing in the water. The camera then shifts the focus on ordinary people — Western and Chinese heading towards the Star Ferry, which is both a common mode of transportation as well as a symbol of Hong Kong.

The striking contrast in the two opening shots follow their separate and logical trajectories in gendering Hong Kong differently. Race, class and gender are interlinked and an integral part of how Hong Kong is portrayed on the Hollywood screen. The very title 'The World of Suzie Wong' demarcates the contours of this particular world through the limited perspective of a single, poor, Chinese bargirl. Her world encompasses the poorer Chinese areas of Wanchai and Aberdeen and the shanty squatter huts where she lives with her baby son. The people she knows are the common folk — street and boat people and the other 'ladies of pleasure' as they were called. From the first decision he makes in choosing a cheap hotel in Wanchai Lomax has declared himself. The immediate association and hierarchisation of whiteness with wealth is disturbed. Lomax, with Suzie's help gradually learns to negotiate her world. In the final scene at the temple, initially Lomax is not visible and the camera focuses on Suzie and her grieving friends. But the camera's vision widens to include him in this community. Lomax has become a part of Suzie's world crossing borders of race and gender. Racially he has rejected Kaye and the colonial world of wealth, secure 9 to 5 jobs and men who may deplore relationships with the Chinese and yet have Chinese mistresses whom they never marry.

Noble House in contrast, demarcates a very different Hong Kong from the one Suzie inhabits. The name evokes and reiterates the 150-year-old lineage of the business house with its status, traditions and power. The China connection of its origins seen in *Tai Pan* (1986) is important to legitimise its position in Hong Kong. In *Tai Pan* the two rival clans fight to establish themselves on the highest point (at Victoria Peak) as a symbol of their pre-eminent status. Those associated with the Noble House, including Chinese compradors like Philip Chen, live in isolated, luxurious homes surrounded by gardens and ponds. Their

Hong Kong is located largely between the wealthy Peak and Central districts. Foreign women like Casey are able to enter this masculine, business world of cutthroat competition. But whether they can stay in as independent business tycoons is unclear. Local women like Orlanda on the other hand are accessories or sideshows serving an entirely different purpose.

Hong Kong, as Marchetti notes, is an ideal site where all kinds of binaries can be played out East–West, capitalism–communism, rich–poor etc. Geographically too, Hong Kong as portrayed in these two films, reifies the stereotypical binaries of the East as feminine, poor and cramped in contrast to the West as masculine, rich and spacious. The obvious orientalist perspective notwithstanding, *The World of Suzie Wong* even though it is produced a decade before *Noble House* portrays a more human view of Hong Kong.

Histosterone

Although none of the films (with the exception of *LMST*) claim to be historical in nature or “historically accurate,” all invoke selected aspects of Hong Kong History. Historical context is, in fact, a very important part of the settings and stories in all of these films — from *Soldier of Fortune* and *Tai-Pan* which focus on early to mid-19th century Canton, Macao, and Hong Kong to *Noble House* which explores corporate intrigue in the era just prior to Hong Kong’s 1997 reversion to Chinese sovereignty. In this particular type of history, men’s activities such as swashbuckling, opium dealing, and heterosexual encounters — usually between white males and Asian/Eurasian females — take centre stage. There is little or no analysis of domestic relationships or cross-cultural encounters involving anything other than business deals or sex. Women were part of Hong Kong history throughout the periods these films narrate. But with important exceptions, such as Han Suyin’s struggle to maintain her professional status as a doctor despite the double discrimination of gender and race, there is scant consideration of women’s day to day lives and experiences.

Such male-centred historical storytelling is particularly pronounced in the post women's movement films/TV sagas based on novels by James Clavell. Clavell describes his books as novels rather than history, but history is indeed a key element of the saga. Reviewers describe the novel *Tai-Pan* as "A fabulous epic of the Far East that will disturb and excite you" ... (*Baltimore Sun*). One reviewer described *Tai-Pan* as "The most stirring historical novel I have ever read." (Robin Moore). By the time *Tai-Pan* came to the screen in 1986, Hollywood was reflecting the Reagan era fascination with China, as seen in excerpts from promotional materials for the film:

[*Tai-Pan*] is rich with historical significance and romantic illusion, painted against the colorful backdrop of today's China — the first American film allowed to shoot on location on the mainland... Warships converge on China. The English drink, dance and celebrate. Rival merchants hatch schemes to plunder the wealth of this exotic land. And Dirk Struan is the eye of the tempest — the center of the adventure — taking his slave for his lady, making China his glorious new world.²

Bruce Williamson of *Playboy* adds his endorsement:

Tai-Pan is pop entertainment ... I had a great time being bamboozled back to an era when men were men and women were waiting to reward the victor.³

Clavell and others who produce and promote books and films in the genre are winking playfully at "historical authenticity" constructed as male-centred history. More subtly, they pine for a pre-feminist past where men were allowed to tell particular stories about themselves and pass them off as "real" history.

Is this male-centred approach to Hong Kong History a part of the larger historiographical landscape? What place do these films occupy in studies of Hong Kong history and culture? Gary McDonogh and Cindy Wong argue that Hong Kong Chinese moviegoers who, for the most part, have never seen these films, may "know them" in other ways. They cite intertextual references to *WSW* and *LMST* in the 1996 Hong Kong film, *Tiim Mut Mut* (English title: *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*).⁴ By now, they assert, Suzie Wong and other Hollywood

portrayals of Hong Kong have been reappropriated by the very locale they claimed to represent to Western, particularly American, audiences. The authors write

Hybridity and confidence have now become hallmarks of Hong Kong identity which no longer demands an approving gaze from the West but incorporates, plays with and subverts that gaze. This is evident in the right to ignore Hollywood as well as to reread a movie, and above all in the right to appropriate as part of Hong Kong history what was created for and by white Western eyes.⁵

McDonogh, Wong and others have explored intertextuality, playfulness, and creative reappropriation in Hong Kong reactions to these films.⁶ What remains to be explored is the very real need to critique the male-centredness of the celluloid characterisations that project us backward, literally, to times and places that did not really exist.

Asian Women: Of Teachers and Mirrors

In exploring the portrayal of Asian women in these four films — *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), *Tai-Pan* (1986), and *Noble House* (1993), we asked several questions:

1. Who are the women and what do they do?
2. Do they form a continuum of each other or of some idea of Asian womanhood or are they strictly 'Other'?
3. What is the attraction of the 'Oriental Woman'?

Quantitatively it is noteworthy that two of the four important female characters are Chinese — Mei Mei (*Tai-Pan*) and Suzie (*The World of Suzie Wong*) — and two are Eurasian — Suyin (*Love is a Many Splendored Thing*) and Orlanda (*Noble House*). In the Hong Kong context, the 'Chineseness' of the Oriental woman is crucial. In *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, at an expatriate party reminiscent of the colonial clubs of E.M. Forster and George Orwell, Suyin vehemently distances herself from her Caucasian half as well as other Caucasians present. She notes that her studying medicine as well as her

work caring for Chinese refugees fleeing into Hong Kong is “to help my people” and she very clearly means Chinese people. In the politically volatile Hong Kong of the 1950’s, Suyin clear-sightedly notes that even in their relationship the difference between her situation and Mark Elliot’s is that “your pride and dignity are not at stake.” He is an outsider whereas she, though Eurasian, identifies herself as Chinese, racially, culturally and in terms of nationalist sentiment.

Even as she emphasises her Chineseness, Suyin is not ashamed of being Eurasian. She counsels her convent school friend Suzanne to be proud of her dual heritage. But Suzanne, who is a foil to Suyin, is convinced that “you can’t be two things at once.” She has chosen to be Western. Her dyed hair and Western dress signal that choice. She advises Suyin that it would be wiser for her to be Western than Chinese in the Hong Kong of the 1950s. Suyin acknowledges sadly that to some people the very word “Eurasian” connotes “a moral laxity.” She, on the other hand, sees mixed identity as an “answer to race snobbery.”

The contrast between Suyin and Suzanne, however, point to a critique of the Western aspects of a Eurasian identity. Suyin’s moral integrity shines through in her work and service ethic, her moral rectitude and in her respect for and obedience to her Chinese family in the mother country. In proper Chinese fashion, Suyin even asks permission of Third Uncle in China to marry Elliot. She could be seen as the embodiment of Confucian or “Asian Values.” Suzanne on the other hand is portrayed as a pathetic impostor who has gone astray. It is unclear whether her “moral laxity” stems from her Eurasianness or her rejection of her Chinese identity. Is Suyin unconsciously invoking Suzanne when she fears that her relationship with Mark will make her appear like a “cheap Hong Kong Eurasian?”

Nearly 40 years later Orlanda echoes the same fears, saying, “In Asia a girl especially a Eurasian girl finds out quickly that men want to pillow and that’s all they really want.” Being Eurasian is clearly seen as an additional burden to the primary one of being female. The Eurasian woman is rendered more vulnerable because there is no homogeneous solid community that she can seek refuge in or call her own. Without a

sense of community and belonging, she is forever in search of a home and security. Neither fully Asian nor fully Western, she must perpetually negotiate a third space.

This leads us directly into at least a partial answer to what is the attraction of the ‘Oriental Woman?’ Hollywood constructs the attraction as her very Orientalness, expressed through her clothing, language and attitudes. The Asian women in these films are culture and gender translators who teach men how to fit in and survive without appearing to do so.

In *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Tai-Pan*, clothes, and especially the cheongsam, become significant markers of Chineseness. In the *Suzie Wong* book, Lomax notices Suzie because “she wore jeans — green knee-length denim jeans. That’s odd, I thought. A Chinese girl in jeans. How do you explain that?” (p.5)

In the movie version the jeans are there but not evident, covered by a longish coat. What one does see clearly is Suzie’s high Chinese collar. Lomax paints Suzie mainly in Chinese “costumes” — an Empress dress and the traditional black pants with Haka hat, which were probably more ‘foreign’ to her than Western clothes.

On one occasion Suzie enters wearing a Western dress and hat. Lomax is almost apoplectic with rage. He rips the clothes off her and throws them out of the window, saying, “take that terrible dress off. You look like a cheap European streetwalker.” It is unclear whether he is accusing her of looking like a whore, which she is, or of looking like a Western whore.

Less violent but equally telling are moments in both *Tai-Pan* and *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*. In the first, Struan is shocked at seeing Mei Mei in a ball gown and tells her that it does not suit her. Similarly in the latter film, Elliot protests when Suyin appears in a western dress the first time he takes her out. However, she does not change, saying that it is her Western self that is going out with him.

Chinese women wearing Western clothes signal a cultural transgression that Western men seem unable or unwilling to tolerate. The ‘authenticity’ signalled by the cheongsam becomes an external

manifestation of that other thing that makes Oriental women attractive to Western men — local knowledge. This access to local lore does not necessarily make Western men more Eastern; that kind of slippage is not even hinted at. However, it gives them an extra edge or insight that allows them to become an ‘insider’ or an ‘expert’ in a foreign society.

Suzie, Mei Mei and Orlanda pass on knowledge of local mores to foreigners in various ways, easing them into the local culture. Colonial English literature is replete with stories of colonisation accomplished by the gradual process of “taming by naming.” The bits of ‘chinoiserie’ that Suyin, Orlanda and Suzie provide in terms of stories, superstitions, festival celebrations, foods and general know-how are not merely exotic backdrops, but essential means whereby Western men can familiarise themselves with and dominate an alien landscape. In *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, however, the same dynamic of cultural translation seen in the other films is not at play. Despite Elliot’s attachment to Suyin in a cheongsam and his desire to show her off as “the most beautiful Chinese girl,” he does not gain ‘expert’ status through her.

In *Tai-Pan*, Struan’s “China Lady” Mei Mei instructs the wifeless Struan how to nurture and build links with his estranged son. She teaches him how to be both mother and father to the son. Callum’s acknowledgement and acceptance of his half-brother Gordon at Struan’s death — “Gordon will take over the funeral arrangements for *our* father and his mother” (my emphasis) — is testimony to Mei Mei’s success.

Suzie and Orlanda are more cultural than gender translators for Lomax and Link Bartlett respectively. Suzie functions as a cultural guide, introducing Lomax to her world of a poorer and more Chinese Hong Kong. His access to Western/colonial Hong Kong comes through his race and the privilege conferred by ‘letters of introduction.’ Lomax does try to bring Suzie into that world of “stuck up” Kayes and supercilious waiters. The experiment is an unmitigated failure and is never repeated.

Orlanda never needs to wear a cheongsam in order to play the culture card. By 1993, when the series was made, Western dress had

become an unremarkable norm. She is an unpaid cultural “informant.” As a Hong Konger and someone who has been close to Gort, the aspiring local tai-pan, she helps Bartlett in his business deals by filling him in on the histories and legends of the two rival houses. She explains and contextualises the major characters and unravels the “mysterious East” for him, teaching him “the Hong Kong way” of doing things. A good student, Bartlett uses and repeats what Orlanda tells him to show off his ‘knowledge.’

Oriental women are not just informants. Their greatest appeal, as Hollywood presents it, is as non-threatening, male-glorifying ‘essential’ women who fulfil desires and pacify male anxieties.

David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, which nicely subverts the Orientalist metanarrative *Madame Butterfly*, provides a perspective from which one can see Suyin, Suzie, Mei Mei and Orlanda conforming to and reiterating particular aspects of the stereotype of Oriental womanhood. The duped French diplomat Gallimard from *M. Butterfly* believed he had found and been loved by the “perfect woman,” who as we know was actually a man:

Gallimard: There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life....I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth. (p. 91–92. *M. Butterfly*)⁷

The “perfect women” we see on the Hollywood screen conform to Gallimard’s vision. They wear kimonos or cheongsams, love passionately and unconditionally, willingly accept any punishment meted out to them, and are ever ready to sacrifice themselves for love.

An almost seamless merging of the Orient and Oriental women appears on the Hollywood screen. East-West romance is based on the idea of the selfless and self-sacrificing love of the Oriental woman for

the Western man, who is portrayed and seen by the women as a saviour or what Marchetti terms a “white knight.” The Western man actually falls in love with this image of himself that he sees reflected in the eyes of the Oriental woman. His love is above all a narcissistic self-love. Lomax’s overwhelming need to be needed draws him to Suzie. Ultimately her need of him seduces Lomax. It is not until her other lover drops her that Lomax says “let me take care of you” and confesses his need of her. He also finally proposes marriage when her son has died and she is most vulnerable and alone.

Orlanda (*Noble House*) tells Bartlett that “tears are a way of life for a girl” but reassures him that he has wiped away all her tears. Few men or women could resist the seductive self-image of being able to wipe away sadness. The power of the white knight’s love transforms Suzie Wong. Instead of a prostitute, she becomes not Mei Ling, virgin, as Lomax originally sketched her, but Suzie Wong, virgin. The same kind of love redeems Orlanda from being Gort’s *Mui Jai* to becoming Link Bartlett’s de facto *tai-tai* — “supreme of supremes.” The Hollywood screen implies that it is only a Western man’s love that confers such redemption. As Marchetti says, “when set in Asia, the romantic hero functions as a white knight who rescues the nonwhite heroine from the excesses of her own culture while “finding” himself through this exotic sexual liaison.” (P.109)

In *Tai Pan*, *Noble House* and *The World of Suzie Wong*, it is a woman’s “duty” and desire to please men, and not merely at a sexual level. These works ignore the fact that pleasing men, in some cases, is a necessary strategy to keep the men. Poverty, social status, Eurasianness and the fact of being female limit the women’s choices. But the myth of transformation through love hides and confuses the master/slave narrative of these stories.

Orlanda, however, is not merely a sexual being who offers herself to Bartlett. She is also “the angel in the house” whose “real” place, and indeed choice of place, is at home. She is the nurturer who buys, cooks and beautifully serves his food, assuring him that she knows and likes her place (at home) and will never be threat or competition to him.

Western Women: Of Ghosts and Guardians

If these films portray local/‘native’ women as the conduits of knowledge for Western men, without in turn gaining an entrée into Western society, where do Western women fit? Their two-ness is seen in their roles as ghost and guardian. In many of these films white women literally seem to haunt certain areas of Hong Kong, especially the Peak — where they constantly attend lunch and dinner parties — and the Star Ferry. Some wives are not present at all. They represent the historical reality of the expatriate spouse who stays in the home country to tend to children or other family concerns. Western prostitutes are never seen in these films even though they constituted a significant portion of the expatriate population in Hong Kong in the late 19th and early 20th Century.⁸

But more often, white Western women are guardians. They are concerned with keeping their men from “going native” and setting boundaries of “appropriate” moral behaviour. Different valences of guardianship range from the busybody to the manipulator. Watching white womanhood in these films answers the question, “Who/What is the flipside of the beautiful, feminine, sexually-available ‘Oriental’ woman?” Or specifically, what would be the attraction of a Mrs. Palmer-Jones (the white, fat, bossy, asexual, gossip-mongering, racist wife of Dr. Palmer Jones, head of the hospital in *LMST*) if Han Suyin or Suzie Wong were available? Even Kaye, the British daughter and secretary, who is softer, single, and ostensibly less racist than Mrs. Palmer-Jones, fears that she can’t win Lomax on her own; she needs her father’s influence to triumph over Suzie. Western women, like Asian/Eurasian women, are also in pursuit of white knights. However, they are pitted against these ‘essential’ women in the chase.

Guardians also are in need of white knights, albeit in different ways from the Asian women discussed earlier. In *Soldier of Fortune* and *Noble House*, American women (who manifest appropriate “rugged female individualism” in their neediness) are more masculine in their speech and demeanour than Asian/Eurasian women. Despite their independent natures, they too must rely on white men. In *Soldier of*

Fortune, the Susan Hayward character insists on independent action as does Casey Cholok (*Noble House*) but in both cases the women need rescuing by their respective white knights.

The films do, however, capture certain historical realities. There were/are women like Mrs. Palmer Jones (*LMST*) who gossiped and lunched but then gossip and lunching, are not solely female diversions. And occasionally we see a glimmer of that well-documented ennui that certain women of privilege articulate. Hong Kong expatriate women's letters and journals from the 19th and 20th centuries are replete with musings about their place in the community. Many did and do struggle to answer the question, "What am I doing here?" Or as Kay whines to Lomax (*WSW*), "I envy you. I'd give more than a year of my life away if I knew what to give it for. But I don't know." The same insecurity about place in Hong Kong is absent from men's narratives.

And of course the tensions between the two groups of women — Asian/Eurasian and Chinese, something that feminist and postcolonial history has theorized are evident in several places in the film. Western women who are both marginalized and empowered in the colonial context don't like losing "their" men to Asian women. However, these feminine showdowns never really go beyond the exchange of hostile glances, or as they do in current episodes of *Ally McBeal*, sounds of snarling cats/dogs in the background.

The closest we get to a textured portrayal of white womanhood is *Tai-Pan*'s Mary Sinclair. She uses her intelligence and sexuality to secure Struan's future as *Tai-Pan* of *Noble House*. In so doing, she proudly announces to Struan that she "likes to go to bed with Chinese men." Struan is floored by this flaunting of gender and racial conventions despite the fact that his lover Mei Mei is Chinese. He actually has to sit down to process this information. "This is not the Mary Sinclair I know," he laments. Mary responds, "Yes it is. Mary Sinclair the innocent who loves church and singing and knitting is also me. We are all that way, *Tai-Pan*. Look at you. Devil, Smuggler, Prince, Murderer Husband, Father, Fornicator, Saint.... Which is you?" While she doesn't cross over in the same way that Struan, Lomax, or other

men do, she points to the ironies and ruptures in the tightly regulated world of the colony, to contradictions each of us, and to the double standard that ultimately forces her back to white men and her role as guardian of racial purity.

Anxiety about Cross-Racial Relationships

All of these films are anxiety-laden cautionary tales about people who try to transgress gender boundaries or cross over from one racial, cultural, or class context to another. There is no indication in any of the films of the changes in US society wrought by historical events such as the Vietnam War, women's/feminist movements, and multiculturalism. Where are the more "progressive" portrayals of women and "people of color" evident in other Hollywood films produced since the late 1960s? Intermarriage — culturally and sexually — is still taboo when it comes to Asia. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the endings of these films.

The "Happily Ever After" that has been a staple of Hollywood movies is supplanted by endings marked by suffering, death and uncertainty for interracial couples. There are no weddings in any of these films (although Suzie Wong and Richard Lomax marry in the novel, they do not in the film). This is not surprising given the long history of anti-miscegenation laws not revoked in many states until the mid-late 20th century and socio-cultural prohibitions and/or resistance that continue to this day.

Yet, as multiculturalist views of US culture have documented, cross-racial, cross-cultural relationships have been present from the beginning of cultural contact between Native Americans, European colonisers and Africans in America. Despite this fact, such relationships have historically been subject to legal censure, suspicion and ridicule. Even today, members of mixed-race couples tell stories ranging from the mildly amusing to the horrific about the treatment they receive because they have decided to date/marry/love outside of proscribed societal expectations. (The most recent cinematic portrayal

of troubled aspects of these relationships is the new Jet Li film, *Romeo Must Die* which features tension between Asian Americans and Black Americans.)

In all of the films' endings, two-ness appears once more. "Progressive" statements and characterizations that seem to auger well for heterosexual (at least) vie with the "in your face" warning that such pairings are disastrous. Of course, *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* is a different film from the others. Based on Han Suyin's autobiography, the unhappy ending was, in all likelihood, not a fabrication but a tragic reality. Still, filmmakers and audiences are free to enjoy the "tragic romance" without having to confront anxieties they may have about the future of the relationship which was both interracial and unconventional in that Elliot was still married. In *The World of Suzie Wong*, Suzie and Richard stroll off contentedly toward Hong Kong Harbor, agreeing to stay together "for as long as he wants her around." But this ending is marked by the death of Suzie's son Winston who has been killed in the collapse of a Hong Kong shantytown during the rains/floods.

In fact, heavy rains, typhoons, flooding, and mudslides are key in many of these endings. In *Tai-Pan* Struan, soaking wet from the typhoon and newly empowered by his success at thwarting his business competitor, throws cultural mores to the wind and declares that Mei Mei is his supreme lady. The two are found the next morning in each other's arms, but dead, lying under layers of debris from the rages of the storm. However, we are to be comforted by the knowledge that the couple will be buried together. The film ends with more panoramic views of contemporary Hong Kong indicating that economic intermarriage, at least, is an acceptable reality. In *Noble House*, The all-American looking Link is swept to a muddy grave just after he asks Tai-Pan Ian Dunross how difficult it is to get married in Hong Kong. His beautiful Eurasian lover, Orlanda watches the building (and her betrothed) slide away.

The unions that survive in these films are the ones between white westerners. In *Soldier of Fortune*, Susan Hayward, who is "released" by

her husband from an unhappy marriage, allowing her to “live happily ever after” Clark Gable. Although we are not certain whether Superwoman Casey Cholok will end up with Tai-Pan Ian Dunross or not, she promises to try and juggle the demands of her new responsibilities as head of Par Com with her love for Dunross in order to get back to Hong Kong in six months time. (After all, why would he leave Hong Kong and move to California where Casey’s professional world is based?) No wedding here either, but considering the fate of interracial relationships in *Noble House* and in the other films, the union is sanctioned if for no other reason that the two lovers are still alive when the credits roll.

Conclusion

In the Hong Kong Arts Festival 2001 Suzie Wong has been resurrected as a ballet entitled “The Brave New World of Suzie Wong.” The evocation of Suzie Wong is curious, as the ballet does not seem even remotely connected to the book, film or even the characters. There is no East meets West love story. The one interesting feature though is that the narrator is a Chinese male who is an archaeologist and curator of a Suzie Wong museum. In a contemporary Hong Kong context then the racial aspect has changed but not the gender dimensions. Women are still packaging and moulding themselves to conform to a male defined “ideal vision” not of the Orient but of Womanhood. Hollywood’s portrayal of women, both Western and Eastern, has not changed significantly over time. But a local invocation of an Oriental stereotype has not added a new dimension either. The mutually shaping relationship between society and cultural products like films, ballets and the rest has kept certain stereotypes in circulation. The Asian mail-order bride’s phenomenon indicates the persistence of a Suzie Wong archetype that still holds the imagination of the Western male. The films discussed in this paper emphasised the competition between Eastern and Western women for the “white knight.” However contemporary Hollywoo

erasure of ethnic identity. In a film like *Charlie's Angels* Lucy Liu is indistinguishable from the other angels except that she looks Chinese. Even *Shanghai Noon* which playfully subverts many racial stereotypes is overtly about men rescuing damsels in distress albeit with help from a female Tonto.

Tracking these various elements — gendered geographies, histories and ideologies across various generations of films reveals that Hollywood's portrayal of women, both Western and Eastern, has not changed significantly over time. In fact, in some cases, the early films were much more nuanced and willing to engage questions of difference. Contemporary films seem to continue echoing the intransigent negative “No, not yet.... No, not there” of Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India* concerning the impossibility of egalitarian gender and racial relationships.

Notes

- 1 Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”*: Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction. University of California Press: Berkeley, London, 1993.
- 2 See promotional material on the video cover.
- 3 Both quotes appear on the cover of the video cassette promoting the 1986 version of *Tai-Pan*.
- 4 McDonogh, Gary W and Wong, Cindy Hing-Yuk “Orientalism Abroad: Hong Kong Readings of *The World of Suzie Wong*.” Unpublished paper.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Hwang, David Henry. *M. Butterfly*. Penguin Books, USA. 1989.
- 8 See Susanna Hoe, *The Private Life of Old Hong Kong: Western Women in the British Colony 1841–1941*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991.