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LOVE WITH A PROPER *GWEILO*¹

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One might reasonably suppose that an urbanist's perceptions of cities should be formed primarily through the putatively objective lenses of the social science—through data, theories, and rigorous analysis. But it must be admitted that we social scientists are able to squeeze into our rather limited, qualified and cautious, forms of analysis often produce a “reality” that is rather lifeless and desiccated. Just as it is difficult to understand the personality of a person, even someone we might know quite well, from their blood type, or even their genetic profile, so also is it difficult to appreciate the essence of Paris, Beijing, New York, or Tokyo, by way of their densities, their gross domestic products, or their municipal bond ratings, crime rates, or pollution indices.

Therefore, in this presentation I intend to take a more subjective and impressionistic approach that I feel is encouraged by the interpretive spirit of this symposium and its theme. Like most people, I suspect, expectations about particular cities are often most influenced not by facts, but by novels and films which are set in them. I first saw *The World of Suzie Wong* as a

¹ “Gweילו” is a Cantonese term of some derision for Western people, meaning “white ghost.” This paper was originally delivered at the Symposium on “Hong Kong in Western Film & Fiction,” Department of Modern Languages & Intercultural Studies, The Chinese University, Hong Kong, and The Hong Kong-America Center, Sir Run Run Shaw Hall, May 4,-5, 2000. This revision combines some remarks from a presentation on the subject that was made at a public lecture at City University, Hong Kong, November 9, 2000, sponsored by the Syracuse University Hong Kong Center. At that time the author was the Fulbright Visiting Professor at City University's School of Creative Media. The title borrows from the 1963 film, *Love With a Proper Stranger*, which starred Steve McQueen as an itinerant trumpet player in New York City and his one-night stand love affair with a local Italian-American girl played by Natalie Wood.

teenager in a movie theater in New York, and was instantly smitten with Hong Kong, and with Suzie

People do fall in love with cities, sometimes for reasons similar to why they fall in love with people. For a young man with dreams of travel to exotic cities I was surely not the first to fall in love Hong Kong and with Suzie. The city, and perhaps its most famous fictional woman, became fused together. I, as did I am certain many other young men, identified with Robert Lomax, the American structural architect and hopeful painter, played by William Holden. I doubt that I am the first to stop aboard a Star Ferry and feel my heart race at the glimpse of a swaying, silky black pony-tail. So I imagined myself in Holden's place, enjoying the charms of Suzie and a happily-ever-after movie ending with her in Hong Kong.

With his handsome features, unadulterated "American" character, self-assurance, and taint of cynicism, William Holden was the ideal casting for the "proper gweilo." As a journalist (*Love Is . . .*), soldier (*Bridge on the River Kwai*), or an architect seeking a more artistic muse (*The World of Suzie Wong*), Holden is always his own man, unwilling to be confined to the accepted norms and social conventions, and usually afflicted with some recondite psychic angst. Holden played men sufficiently, cynical, emotionally-wounded, and estranged from their own culture to be both in quest of some new or revised identity, and who, if they were not openly seeking exotic romantic attachments, were susceptible to them. They possessed the roguish, independent personalities that allowed them to lift a veil, challenge a taboo, or push through a beaded curtain into another culture. Ian Buruma write that, "It is the mark of the romantic that he or she seeks the unreal. The point of going East is not to find oneself, as so many hippie seekers thought, but to get rid of oneself—or at least those aspects of oneself one does not like."²

But as my reading and film viewing brought me into contact with other East-West romances of "proper gweilos" it seemed to me that the prospects for happy endings were not particularly good—at least as indicated in the imaginations (*or could it be the actual experiences*) of writers of novels and films that involved love affairs between Western men and Asian women. The fictional theme is a familiar one in which adventurous and romantic Western male meets exotic, somewhat mysterious, but beguiling Eastern female, both defy the conventions of their respective cultures by falling in love, perhaps marrying, and suffer some tragic ending. It seemed that a syndrome was at work that Western men

² *The Missionary and the Libertine*, (New York: Random House, 1966), p xix

with the characteristics of William Holden's characters were in some way cursed, that the "proper gweilo" was someone doomed to an Icarian fate by getting too close to the exotic East. I choose to call this "William Holden Syndrome" on behalf of its most renowned fictional sufferer.

Whatever factual basis there may be to support the notion of "William Holden Syndrome" is not the purpose here. But there appears to be abundant evidence to support the claim that this syndrome has a solid grounding in fiction, not doubt owing to its great dramatic prospects.

The syndrome's evidence in literature and film can be traced back into a misty past. It doubtless predates *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. But these classic are sufficient antecedents, especially since they have made their way into film as well. Indeed, Homer himself might have had a good case of W H S. His Trojan prince, Paris, was so taken with the beauty of Helen—she from a town further to the *East* of Mycenae--that he couldn't resist bringing her home without an exit visa (indeed, she may well have been abducted as much as seduced). That romance concluded badly, and took a substantial of Trojans and Greeks along with it.

Recognizing such misadventures as a hot box office theme Homer sequeled it, He put Odysseus's picaresque tendencies the test in assignations with Circe and Calypso, and forced the wily king of Ithaca to take extreme measures to avoid those irresistible Sirens, who were as alluring to a sailor with shore leave as the almost equally fabled Wanchai bar girls.

Like the unsavory Biblical relationship of David and Bathsheba, the beautiful foreign enchantress is most often portrayed as a threat, someone so captivating that the hero might risk anything, everything, even his soul, much less the approbation of his family and society, to posses and retain "her". This *femme fatale* is the polar opposite of the safe arms of "the girl next door."

Moving the theme to more proximate waters there is, of course, the *Travels of Marco Polo* and its numerous spin-offs, as source material for Western writers. The Italian merchant was "enchanted," "intoxicated," and "bewitched" by the ladies of Cathay, but, like his successors, he could dally with them, but seems to have been more interested in bringing home to mama China's wares than its women, which is why he may have lived to write about his adventures.

Some credit for the advancement of WHS must also go to Nordhoff and Hall. ***The Mutiny on the Bounty*** is mostly known as a revolt against tyrannical authority, but not insignificant in that revolt are the exotic females of Polynesia who were meant to be merely an entertaining diversion from the rigors of long sea passages and maritime discipline, not longterm

attachments. In the most renowned cinematic version of this story Fletcher Christian is really more concerned with his ruined career than with making his self-imposed exile a bit more comfortable with his island mistress. In any case no one would have expected a happy ending for a guy named Christian and beautiful and sexually-liberated heathen.³ Things ended badly for this “proper gweilo” as well.

The WHS virus was transmitted from Nordhoff and Hall to the likes of the Jameses Michener and Clavell. Through them it became pandemic in paperback bestsellers and movie spin-offs, with more than a little help from an archipelago of bars and brothels from Hawaii to Singapore during World War II. Small wonder that Asian women acquired the stereotype of pretty playthings.⁴

In so many of these narratives where Western men are not loving and leaving their Asian paramours for the great hereafter, than they seemed to just plain love'em and leave'em. Recall that sad little “Cho-Cho,” or *Madame Butterfly* (first played cinematically, incidentally, by Sylvia Sidney in the 1932 film) is the classic jilted Asian girl “in port”. A teenage former geisha she pines away and searches Nagasaki’s harbor for the American naval officer who loved and impregnated her only to find he has taken an American wife. In a rare turnabout the disgraced and discarded girl kills herself.⁵

If it seemed that western lovers of Asian women were always saying “goodbye” it was only a matter of time before an appropriately-titled film should appear. In *Sayonara* Marlon Brando plays an American Air Force Korean War “ace,” Major Lloyd Gruver, stationed in Japan after the war’s end. It is necessary to emphasize the “American” since a year earlier, in 1956, Brando had played a Japanese himself, the interpreter Sakini, in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, a film that is best forgotten for the way in which it portrayed both Americans and Japanese. It is somewhat ironic that

³ The events on which the *Bounty* Trilogy was based occurred in the late 18th Century when Cook, Bougainville and American whalers were first encountering the exotic cultures of the South Pacific. By the end of the next century Melville and Gauguin had brought the notion of “going native” into fashion. Gauguin, in particular, with his luscious paintings of naked Tahitian and Marquesian maidens helped set the stage for numerous South Seas fantasies.

⁴ In Richard Mason’s novel, *The World of Suzie Wong*, Robert Lomax is even able to overcome his knowledge that more than 2000 sailors have enjoyed the charms of young Suzie before he met up with her. In the film, in contrast, Suzie comes off as almost believably “virginal”.

⁵ Pinkerton, the American naval officer was played by Cary Grant in this production. Some sources attribute the story to a relationship between a Dutch trader and a Nagasaki girl in the 1800s, although the story by John Luther Long (published in 1903) is set years later and the cad is an American. The opening of Japan in 1854 by American Matthew Perry generated an interest in all things Japanese. The event received undistinguished cinematic attention much later in *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958), starring John Wayne.

perhaps the best known Japanese woman of the World War II era was a despised American turncoat named “Tokyo Rose.” Rose inserted herself into Allied air waves with persistent exhortations to surrender, and to spread lies and Japanese propaganda often with more than a tinge of libidinous teasing. But of course, most of the impressions that Westerners had of Japan and the Japanese had been shaped in the heat and propaganda of the Pacific war.⁶ and only a few years later Korea had become the focus of military attention.⁷

There is sufficient reason to take a momentary detour into the matter of casting. In American film representations of Asians everything seems to have been notched down by one degree. For example in *The World of Suzie Wong* there is Nancy Kwan as Suzie, a real Eurasian playing a full-blooded Chinese; then Jennifer Jones, a westerner, playing an Eurasian in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*. Asian parts seem to have been cast as though the Asian personality was regarded as so stereotypically “inscrutable” that Western audiences would be unable to apprehend the subtleties of a performance by a *real* Chinese in the role of a Chinese. Hence the series of over forty *Charlie Chan* films (from 1926 to 1949) in which the titular lead was played by either a Scandanavian-born or American actor. Only the role of Charlie’s “Number One Son,” was played by Canton-born Keye Luke, although he is thoroughly “americanized”. Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1937) featured Westerners Paul Muni and Luise Rainer as Chinese in the lead roles. Then, of course there was the ultimate absurdity of John Wayne squinting his way through the *The Conquerer* (1956) failing to convince anyone that he was a credible Ghengis Khan while striding around Mongolia (actually Utah) in his unmistakable gait as though he were on his way to a cattle round-up in a John Ford classic.

Sayonara is layered with the matters of fraternization with the (former) enemy and with the subject of interracial romantic relations.⁸ Despite his working-class sounding name Gruver’s pedigree is a Southern aristocrat, West Point grad, and all that, and Brando plays him almost fey, nearly one-hundred and eighty degrees from Stanley Kowalski. That

⁶ See also, on war propaganda, Ralph R. Donald, “Savages, Swine, & Buffoons: Hollywood’s Selected Stereotypical Characterizations of the Japanese, Germans, and Italians in Films Produced During World War II,” *Images: A Journal of Film and Popular Culture*, April 2000

⁷ William Holden had already starred as a fighter pilot in *The Bridges of Toko-Ri* (1954)

⁸ It is noteworthy to contrast French director’s Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), which takes the aftermath of the war from a quite different point of view. This film deals head on with the effects of the atomic bomb, and reverses the more typical East West relationship with a French actress in a doomed love affair with a Japanese architect. It is the rarer form of relationship between the genders in East West romantic films.

portrayal helps suspend disbelief at the notion that a beautiful high-priestess of classical Japanese dance—Gruver’s love interest—would find an American warrior compatible rather than contemptible.

So smitten with Hana-ogi’s classical beauty is Gruver that he pursues her as would a junior high student with his first overdose of testosterone. In the film he fumbles with misunderstandings of Japanese culture and courting rituals, but for her he turned out to be a “proper *gai jin*”. Gruver is all but impervious to references from his friends that it is acceptable to have a little dalliance with a Japanese girl, but there is no more certain way to ruin a promising military career than to marry one, especially when you are already promised to your superior officer’s daughter.

The role of cupid in *Sayonara* is performed by the romance between Red Buttons and Mioshi Umeki, who set up house in a modest neighborhood and show Gruver that true love is possible across a great cultural gulf and historical enmity. Heaven for Buttons is a cute Japanese woman who will draw your bath and wash your back. That romance is, however, doomed, by racist pressures from both sides, and ends in mutual suicide. It must be admitted that Brando is at his best when he discovers them embraced in rigor mortis.

Far less plausible an outcome is that the dancer, Hana-ogi, forsakes the security of her career and comforts of her culture to accept Gruver’s marriage proposal. While the *denouement* of their love affair would seem to offer a “happy ending” that counters the thesis of failed East-West relationships, this story’s ending seems downright incredible. The prospect of a traditional Japanese dancer returning to immediate post war Tennessee to live out her years with a soldier with an aborted career is recipe for tragedy in my book. One might not trust such a romance to prevail even if Pearl Harbor had never been attacked.⁹

The Enduring Fantasy

Despite such odds the syndrome persists, seemingly undiminished. John, the nostalgic British journalist in Wayne Wang’s *Chinese Box* is a proper gweilo who not only pines for the good old colonial days of Hong Kong, but for the good old prostitutes. Unlike Lomax he didn’t marry his, Vivian (played by Going Li) and in the swirl of allegiances brought about by the 1997 handover, she seems to prefer the stability of a Hong Kong

⁹ In *Sayonara* there is also a counter romance in which Brando’s jilted fiancée (played by Patricia Owens) finds some solace in a kabuki performer played by Ricardo Montalban looking every bit like an Hispanic guy trying to look and sound Japanese

businessman with good connections up North. Being jilted by the woman he loves *and* the city he loves is as emotionally fatal for him as the leukemia he is about to die of.¹⁰

A partial explanation might be that the attractiveness (beyond the physical) of Asian women to Western men may have much to do with the male fantasies. As a somewhat generalized “other,” by virtue of being of a different race and culture, the Asian woman serves as convenient “canvas” upon which the Western male may paint his fantasies of an idealized lover. If Asian women are, correctly or not, likely to be perceived (or to fulfill the perception) of the compliant, self-subordinating, wishing-to-please, woman of many-a-man’s dreams, then all the better as far as the syndrome’s fantasies are concerned. Indeed, even if well-meaning in her attempts to step beyond those perceptions she herself risks spoiling the illusion. When Suzie Wong forsakes her *cheongsam* to outfit herself in a Western-style dress, hat and shoes, Lomax is outraged at her ignorance of the features of her beauty he most admires and throws the outfit into the street. If the relationship is going to work at all—and that must somehow deal with the fact that she is whore—then she has to be *his* idea of her.

That essential element of culture—language--also has its erotic as well as exotic functions. Since Western men typically lack fluency in Asian languages then she is required to converse in the male’s (English). This re-enforces his male-dominant position, while at the same time creating a context in which the nuances of a relationship are beyond the bounds of her communication ability. It might also lead men afflicted with WHS away from Americanized Asian women with the verbal capacity to delve into the subtleties of relationships or to call their illusions into question. Suzie Wong may be a bit saucy and sassy, but it is when she is her most vulnerable and unsophisticated that she captures Lomax’s heart. In *Many Splendored Thing*, written by a Chinese woman, although Dr. Han does possess a fluency with English, there is a concerted (and sometimes gratuitous) attempt in the screenplay to have her address relationship questions with Chinese proverbs in a way that seems she should first assume the lotus position. She seems anxious to continue to stress that she is “Eurasian” whenever Mark Eliot seems to treat her as too Westernized. Dr. Han might have had a more difficult problem than Ms Wong. She had to cope with her

¹⁰ Paul Theroux, one of the screenwriters for the film, also has a character in his novel set in the aftermath of the handover, *Kowloon Tong*, featuring another Brit undone in business as well as romance by the political and economic changes.

Eusasian-ness not only under the politics of 1950's Hong Kong, and with her family in the motherland, but also with Mark.

Moreover, there may be elements to the exotic culture that fulfill fantasies that in Western society would be regarded as unsavory, but serve to re-enforce the exoticism of the East.. Two quite similar scenes, one in *Tai-Pan*, the other in *The World of Suzie Wong*, serve as illustration. In the former, Bryan Brown in the title lead, after supposedly being offended by his Chinese mistress's (Joan Chen) miscue with Western closes, is "required" to "beat her" so that she can "save face" in front of the other Chinese servants. A Western woman might well take offence a being told what she can or cannot wear, and desire to reverse the roles in the beating. Similarly, when Suzie is smacked by an irate sailor, she employs her bleeding nose to gain face with here sisters of the trade, by saying that "Lobert" hit her because she made him angry. "He must love you very much," one of them says in admiration for this expression of "tough love".

Guess Who's Coming to Dim Sum?

Race, particularly when mixed with romance, has long been an uneasy subject for Hollywood. Sometime the best way to deal with potential miscegenation in a story it is to just get rid of somebody.

The extremely successful stage musical and less successful film *South Pacific* (1958), for all of its sappy moments, did include a nice American boy meets nice Polynesian girl romance. Lt. Cable (John Kerr) and island girl Liat (France Nuyen) fall in love long enough to sing that racism is something that is "carefully taught," but their romance is not allowed to survive when the writers kill off Cable in favor of the more acceptable and racially-consonant, Franco-American romance between Rosano Brazzi and Mitzi Gaynor.¹¹

It will be recalled, too, that Phileas Fogg returns to London with an Indian Princess Aouda after getting *Around the World In 80 Days* (1956). But this princess looks more like *Irma La Douce* with a tan. One is forced to wonder whether the casting director was concerned that American and British audiences would not be able to accept David Niven's proposal of marriage to an Indian Princess that didn't look any less Western than Shirley Maclaine. Or, was this improbable liaison merely to cover any suspicions that might arise about a stuffy Brit and his cute little manservant?

¹¹ This *deus ex machina* to escape from the awkward interracial romance is not confined to always dispatching the heroine. In *Anna and the King of Siam* (and its remakes) the king's death conveniently settles the matter.

But the cultural realities behind failed East-West romances are usually much more complex than racial attitudes and relations alone.. In his excellent memoir, *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto*,¹² Pico Iyer refers to what might be described as an aesthetic of sweet sadness in Japanese romance, fictional or factual. This is based in the Eastern notion that a relationship with *tristesse* has a fuller appreciation of the range of romantic emotions, and is therefore, in its paradoxical way, more fulfilling and complete than a solely blissful one. Yin and yang, perhaps; how can we know what “true” happiness is without experiencing sadness.

Failed East-West romantic encounters might therefore also be the result of cultural difference about love and romance. It is difficult, of course, to extricate the dramatist’s (novelist, or screenwriter’s) natural attraction to such themes. If Western, or at least American, audiences are accustomed to, indeed demand, “happily ever after” conclusions to cinematic romances, their Eastern counterparts might have cultural tastes that are more bittersweet. This is perhaps the romantic equivalent of the theme “die young, forever young,” celebrated in both fiction and the lives of over-dosed rock stars. When it comes to love with a proper *gai-jin*, at least, a tragic ending at the peak of emotion may be preferable to long, drawn out years on a porch somewhere in Tennessee.¹³

One might have the same thoughts watching Holden and Kwan walking down towards Victoria Harbor in the last scene of *The World of Suzie Wong*. Is this a happy ending? Will Robert and Suzie find interracial, cross-cultural and trans-generational happiness in Hong Kong, or anywhere for that matter?¹⁴ There is the bloom of fresh love, but there are also stages in not only adjustment to each other, and the adjustment to one another’s cultures, that are unavoidable.¹⁵ Lomax received sufficient warnings during

¹² Vintage Departures, 1992

¹³ Worthy of mention are the romantic entanglements in James Clavell’s *Gai Jin*, his sequel to *Tai Pan*. Clavell allows his romantic lead, a beautiful young Frenchwoman, Angelique, to have a “romantic encounter” (actually a rape) with a Samurai warrior, but she has been drugged and, although it is clearly her most exotic and enjoyable experience, she recalls it only mistily. None of the Western male/Eastern female relationships work out, the most dramatic, that between a syphilitic Frenchman and his bought and paid-for girl from the *yoshiwara*, ends in mutual death and immolation

¹⁴ Although the film ends with them in Hong Kong, Mason’s novel has a sequence in which Robert takes Suzie to the UK, and in which she holds her own with, or bests, snide and prying English ladies, re-confirming just why Robert finds her so attractive for her non-Western-ness. It should also be noted that, at the end of the novel, the couple moves to Japan, supposedly to advance Robert’s painting career.

¹⁵ Mildred McCoy, “Culture-shocked Marriages in Hong Kong,” [Hong Kong Psychological Society Bulletin](#), January 1979, No. 2, Pp. 9–16. McCoy’s research deals with Western women who have married Hong Kong husbands in the US and returned to Hong Kong to live with them. However, the stages she

the course of the film. The banker's attractive daughter had fallen in love with him and his paintings (many of which were of Suzie), but when her father learns about Suzie, all this good fellowship and support drains out of him. Their attitudes are those of colonists. It may be acceptable, even accepted for the conquering Westerners to have a dalliance with the locals, but anything more serious than that threatens the racial and class barriers that are carefully erected. Before Lomax declares his love for Suzie fellow Brit Michael Wilding, suffering in a moribund marriage, secures Suzie's services in the hope she can jump start his desires for his wife, all discreet and in its place, of course. He never sees her as anything other than an instrument of his own needs, discardable as soon as they are satisfied.¹⁶

Ironically, the Asian woman, as often portrayed in many of the scenarios, is often hankering after a form of acceptance and respectability that they imagine comes with a relationship with a Western man. Suzie Wong thought she rose out of and above her station as a prostitute with her exclusive relationship with Ben, who led her to believe that he would forsake his wife for her when he never had any such intention. In *Tai Pan* Dirk Stuan's Chinese mistress wants nothing more than the position of *tai tai*, his *Mrs.*, that will give her a respectability above all others. Both Vivian and Jean (Maggie Cheung) in *Chinese Box*, sought and did not find the security and respectability of the British men they loved but who would not marry them. Vivian fared no better with her successful Chinese businessman, who confined her to being a comfortable *gui fei* because he would not risk his reputation in marriage to a former hooker.

How much these desires are largely the fantasies of male authors, or have some basis in social reality, is not easily obtainable. Some reference can be obtained from within the medium. Oliver Stone's *Heaven & Earth* (1993), is based on the story of a Vietnamese victim of rape and prostitution during the Vietnam War. She is "rescued" by an American serviceman,

sites in the 'culture shock model' would have application for either gender in either direction of cultural transition

¹⁶ There apparently was a good deal of real world precedent for this sort of thing. The realities of such dalliances such relationships might have more to do with social class. In Kate Whitehead and Nury Vittachi, *After Suzie, Sex in South China* (Hong Kong: Chameleon, 1977), p.31. the authors note that men from genteel society not only had their own brothels and arrangements, but also actual marriages between local women of easy virtue "... was not uncommon among the police and ship's captains."¹⁶ They might have added, and not a few sailors. In the relevant cinematic examples there is also the starcrossed marriage of Frenchy Burgoyne and Maily in *The Sand Pebbles*, she a sweet missionary-educated girl sold into prostitution, he a sensitive American sailor. But, somewhat keeping to form, he dies of an influenza in the wretched hovel they are forced to inhabit; her fate is not contemplated.

A more contemporary manifestation is cited in Simon Winchester's *Here Be Dragons*. The author cites that ex-pat Westerners have been known to refer uncharitably to the Filipina maids that work in Hong Kong by the thousands as "LBFMs," a reference to their sexual stamina.

intent on excising his guilt over the war and professing that he “. . . want(s) an ‘Oriental’ wife,” not a prostitute. Hayslip becomes that wife, and much of the story takes up where most proper *gweilo* movies leave off, in the not-so-happily-everafter. This is perhaps as close to “reality” as movies can get. But even at that it is still Oliver Stone’s politics layered on Hayslip’s hard memories.

Hard Realities

Perhaps more is known of the realities of women in less savory roles. The prostitute with a golden heart and fetching way about her is a plot staple that transcends but intersects the immediate subject matter. *Irma La Douce*, the sweet, good-hearted prostitute, no doubt goes back to the origins of the profession. But of course, such characterizations mask some gritty realities. Mason’s Suzie, in spite of a couple thousand “customers,” remained, as he wrote “a virgin at heart.” But more recently the author has admitted that not only would his book not be written in the same way today, but he also has stated recently that: “Some of the bar girls were romantics but others were as hard as nails. Prostitutes that were virgins at heart very soon lost that. Not many went on to lead very respectable lives.”¹⁷ Indeed, it is not appropriate for a proper *gweilo* to assuage his disorder with a hooker. In the film Lomax allowed himself to be convinced of Suzie’s “I’m a virgin at heart” fantasy; in Mason’s book he found it much more difficult to do so.

Asian women didn’t have to be a bar girls to earn a bad reputations for consorting with a *gewilo*, proper or not. In *Many Splendored Thing* the esteemed Han Suyin, respectable physician and widow, is all but disowned by her family, frowned upon in public, and reminded by her bleached former Chinese classmate who serves as a mistress to an Englishman, that in her culture’s eyes there are fewer than six degrees of separation between herself and Suzie Wong. In a sense the Asian woman is put in the most unreasonable position by racial intolerance and cultural stereotypes in both cultures. Since the days when the “Orient” was a place just at the east end of the Mediterranean, “the European idea of the Orient as female, voluptuous, decadent, amoral—in short dangerously seductive—long predate[d] the European empires in India and Southeast Asia.”¹⁸ Of course, in Han’s case she is saved by the insistent fate that seems to afflict such liaisons. Mark never makes it back to that tree on the hill up behind the hospital, and she,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 40

¹⁸ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p. xvi

like so many of her sisters is left with only her sweet sadness blowing in the breeze. But, it's the ending she wrote.

Whether demanded by culture-bound audiences or production codes the easiest solution to cinematic East-West romances was to kill one of parties off. Sometimes it is the woman (Cho-Cho in *Sayonara*), sometimes the man (Lt. Cable, in *South Pacific*; Tuan Jim, in *Lord Jim*; Mark, in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*; and Fletcher Christian in *Mutiny on the Bounty*, among others); sometimes couples (Dirk Struan and May-May in *Tai Pan*; Katsume and Joe Kelly in *Sayonara*), or to just break up the relationship with other of life's realities (Hatsue and Ishmael in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, and Steve Butler and Le Ly in *Heaven and Earth*). More recent films appear better inclined to be less violent in putting mixed romances asunder. In earlier American films not only was there a kissing prohibition between Asian and Caucasian actors, but death of the woman, self-inflicted or otherwise was almost a requisite. Anna May Wong, America's first Asian actress once claimed to have "died a thousand deaths" in her films because producers could not abide having her as a viable love interest in spite of her obvious beauty.¹⁹

If WHS in films and novels is indeed a minor genre, it is one that is confounded with another minor genre that I have written about: the romantic travel movie. If these fictional or factual romances between East and West have a higher mortality rate than others, it may well owe something to the fact that they have some of the elements of the so-called "shipboard" romance. There's a time limit on them that disallows the ideal of the oxymoronic "happily-ever-after" ending. Deep down inside himself the guy with this syndrome knows that, I think. He knows that "the proper gweilo" is a guy as much in love with his illusions as he is with his Suzie Wong. He knows that after Lobert and Suzie walk down that hill together, after the credits roll, after the fade to black, they're going to have to decide what they are going to have for dinner and then where they're going to live. Reality just isn't as much fun; fantasies are not unreal, just an alternate reality.

Perhaps this helps bring whatever "closure" can be brought to this subject. In the end, we are academics sitting here speculating on what was in the mind of Richard Mason, or James Michener, or Han Suyin, a half century ago in historical circumstances we most know about from books. And then, their stories, whatever their motivations, were re-interpreted by

¹⁹ See Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (N.Y.: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004)

screenwriters, nuanced by actors, and edited by directors. That's a process that manufactures its own reality. It is reality run through a food blender, and it ends up tasting a little different to each of us. Not just because of the difference in our own realities, but because, being academics, like Procrustes, we need to fit that reality to the analytical protocols by which we think we can make sense of the world. But that's the part where, as the moviegoer says, I came in. ■