

Why Suzie Wong Is (Possibly) a Lesbian: Reading the Queer Possibility of the Unseen in
Filmic Representations of Asian Women's Sexuality

Allyce Ondricka
School of Cinema
San Francisco State University

Hollywood images can only exist as part of dominant cultural imaginary. However, there are often ways in which the dominant ways of seeing fail and allow for alternate forms of unrepresentable meaning to emerge; the fact that this is unrepresentable does not mean that it does not exist, but rather that it falls outside of the forms of legibility that make something classifiable and thus controllable by society, as ways of being that are unthinkable cannot be co-opted. This is a queer way of existence, where there is not explicit representation of non-normative sexual and gender identities (as inextricably tied to race), but rather the possibility or potential to read alternate forms of race and sexuality into ostensibly heterosexual texts at the point where these representations fail. This paper looks at the ways in which stereotypes of Asian women in Hollywood film both overlap and contradict each other in two films – Josef von Sternberg's 1932 *Shanghai Express*, in which Anna May Wong plays the Dragon Lady, and Richard Quine's 1960 *The World of Suzie Wong*, in which Nancy Kwan plays the Lotus Blossom -- and the ways in which these contradictions, failures, and excesses of the racialized heterosexual imaginary can create places where queer potentials can exist within the unseen.

Looking at the queer gaps in any filmic text, especially historical filmic texts, necessitates a reading method that treats films as a living text, where meanings are constantly in flux along with the contexts in which films are viewed and interpreted. Building from Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question," this reading strategy looks at the "processes of signification" as they occur

over time and in varying contexts, and the ambivalence of these significations (67). In this way, the text is not closed, as proposed by film critic Peter X. Feng in "Recuperating Suzie Wong," where the inherent meaning of a film is waiting to be deciphered by varying audiences (Feng, 46), but open, where multiple meanings can coexist and contradict each other within its own representational economy, and it is the job of the critic to find where the contradictions, excesses, and gaps exist within these multiple meanings. This is not to ignore or forget that a film plays into negative stereotypes or can easily uphold dominant ideologies, but rather to acknowledge that fact while also taking stock of the ways in which these ideologies can short-circuit themselves through their own failures, similar to the "refiguring representations" method of reading and creating film proposed by Cynthia Liu in her essay "When Dragon Ladies Die, Do They Come Back as Butterflies?". Liu sets "dismantling stereotypes," the essentializing move of looking at whether a representation is 'positive' or 'negative' (23), against "refiguring representations," which looks at the ways images play into a "network of significations" (28) that looks at how these images circulate as one signifier in a larger cultural landscape, and how this network can be intervened in by spectators and fans who actively seek to rework these images. Celine Parreñas Shimizu's work in "The Sexual Bonds of Racial Stardom" is a major structuring force in this argument, as she argues for ways of accounting for pleasure and politics in viewing representations that are "both enslaving and empowering" (61). She further argues that "racialized sexuality on screen must then be sites where the bondage of representation is itself reimagined, recast, and criticized at the very moment of performance" (61); in this intervention, this recasting of meaning comes from both the moment of

performance and the moment of interpretation, and criticisms that stem from the performance itself may allow for queer meanings that are unthinkable within the narrative proper.

Films can only be read from the current moment; the critic cannot travel back in time in order to interpret a film from the time it was released, and can only reconstruct the interpretations of the day through what was written at the time. There is a danger in ascribing concepts from a time and place that are not within the text of the film to that film, since this can foreclose other forms of meaning, and can lose some of the meaning that the text had in cultural context. However, if the text is left open as a living text with multiple, contested sites of meaning, this danger is reduced, and allows for varying forms of interpretation and pleasure, and may allow for meanings that are unseeable in one framework to become visible, or at least possible, within another.

Reading queerness as existing within gaps and the unknowable or illegible is deeply indebted to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as laid out in "Insubordination and Gender Imitation." Here, she argues that gender is an imitation without an original that only gives illusion to its own coherence through repetition, but because gendered acts can never be performed in the exact same way, this creates slight changes to that performance that can destabilize the whole (18, 23-24). This paper takes Butler's framework to explain heterosexuality as both a societal structure and an individual identity and applies it specifically to the ways in which society attempts to construct filmic characters which are born out of dominant ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality. This panicked repetition of the image creates the illusion that Asian women enact forms of femininity that are always heterosexually available (using JeeYeun Lee's framework), but the endless copying of these images creates

gaps where the image fails to fit the stereotype and excesses where the repetition becomes too much, more than the stereotype allows. This is in conversation with Homi Bhabha's essay "the Other Question," which deals with the ways in which stereotypes are arrested representations that trade in ambivalence within systems of power (66); stereotypes do not need to be said, but rather the body itself is 'proof' of the stereotype, and needs to be anxiously repeated in order to reinscribe it (75-76, 78). This is similar to Butler's theory of performativity of gender, only looking at colonialist and racist stereotypes, in that both see the inherent contradictions in any societally legible performance or image to potentially be politically subversive; Bhabha argues that "such a reading reveals...the boundaries of colonial discourse" and "enables a transgression of those limits" (67). Images of Asian women as hyper heterosexual are an anxious repetition of racialized gender, which attempts to naturalize these images, however, these repetitions can never be exact or complete, leaving excesses and gaps in the forms of identity they construct, allowing for the image to undo itself, destabilizing the heterosexual matrix these images belong to. This method still allows for the text to have racist and sexist implications, but looks at the ways in which racist and sexist ideologies can leave room for their own undoing; it is a project of saying that a film both is racist and that it is doing more than being racist, without wholly rejecting the text's raced and sexed power relations.

Josef von Sternberg's 1932 film *Shanghai Express* mobilizes the 'Dragon Lady' stereotype of Asian women through the figure of Chinese prostitute Hui Fei (Anna May Wong), though it is the ways in which Hui Fei both exceeds her role as a supporting character and fails to fully embody this stereotype that allows for her fall in the gaps of the heterosexual representational economy. The film largely follows the romance between Shanghai Lily

(Marlene Dietrich), an infamous white prostitute, and Captain 'Doc' Harvey (Clive Brook), a former lover of Shanghai Lily who is morally repulsed by who she has become. Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily, due to their shared career and the refusal of other passengers to stay with them, end up staying in the same shared sleeping compartment on board the titular train headed for Shanghai. In the midst of civil war, the train is intercepted by rebels led by fellow passenger Henry Chang (Warner Oland), who, after being rebuffed by Shanghai Lily, takes Hui Fei and rapes her. Shanghai Lily then pledges herself to Chang in order to save Captain Harvey's eyesight, but before she is able to leave with him, Hui Fei murders her rapist, both getting revenge and saving Shanghai Lily. Shanghai Lily and Captain Harvey become coupled at the end of the film, while Hui Fei walks off into a crowd after refusing to answer questions posed by reporters interested in the story of intrigue and murder.

Where Hui Fei fails to embody the Dragon Lady type is in what we are not allowed to see and in what she does not speak; where she exceeds this role is in Anna May Wong's commanding performance. One way that she falls into gaps in the stereotype is by failing to be heterosexually available. She rebuffs an advance from Chang, preferring to stay in her compartment with Shanghai Lily and pulling down the blinds, and throughout the film, is not shown to be interested in heterosexual relations. The film also insinuates the potential for lesbian relations between Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily, through their shared compartment and the framing of the space, where curtains, smoke, and other visual blockages prevent us from seeing into the compartment; in this case, the literal unseeability of their relationship can lead to a queering of their sexuality, as the visual blockages have connotations of illicit activities taking place (illicit because of the same-sex and interracial desire). In her essay "Why Suzie Wong Is

Not a Lesbian,” JeeYeun Lee looks at the ways in which queerness is coded as butch and white, so that Asian femmes are doubly invisible as queer; the racialized construction of Asian women as always feminine and heterosexual and the gendered construction of the feminine as always heterosexual cannot be separated, which erases queer femme Asian identities from the American cultural imaginary (122). We are never given access to Hui Fei’s desire, which would be impossible in the American context, as her sexuality is not in relation to how she can give pleasure to men, but rather in relation to something else that cannot be defined. Her desire can be insinuated as a same-sex and interracial desire, but even the same-sex desire is queered by the fact that it is something that cannot be spoken of or represented, and is thus uncontrollable through its representation.

While the story of the film builds up to the heterosexual coupling of Shanghai Lily and Captain Harvey, this storyline seems contrived and extraneous to the visuals, Hui Fei’s character, and the political intrigue, as if the romance plot was included only to fulfill the Hollywood necessity for heterosexual romance. Shanghai Lily is entirely visibility and spectacle in contrast to Hui Fei’s largely hidden depths, and while an affair between her and Hui Fei is implied, it is Shanghai Lily’s heterosexual romance that the narrative of the film is centered around, as white heterosexuality is the only racialized sexuality imaginable in American society. Dietrich’s performance is somewhat stiff, especially in contrast to Wong’s very expressive performance, which leads to Wong commanding screen presence beyond her both narrative and visual pushing towards the sides of the frame. However, since Hui Fei’s character is not fully developed in the script, Wong’s performance gives her depth beyond what the film explicitly explores, leading the audience to both desire more and begin to fill in the gaps in her

character, and see how she moves beyond her simple Dragon Lady typing. This is not the essentializing project of what Cynthia Liu calls “dismantling stereotypes” (23) or looking at the ways in which stereotypes images go against some sort of assumed ‘truth’ about Asian women in disregard of viewer pleasure, but rather looking at and finding pleasure in the inherent incompleteness of stereotyped images.

Hui Fei’s lack of development, and specially her refusal to participate in the power positions that the other characters in the film attempt to place her in, can be seen as a refusal to take part in the dominant representational economy. This ties in with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which states that compulsory performance of acceptable forms of identity allow for the individual to be legible in society, and that a productive form of confusion can occur when one does not fit into societal norms (19-21). Throughout the film, Hui Fei is expected to bear the meaning of her race and gender, as she is stereotyped by the other passengers and forced to translate between the Chinese-speaking rebels and the English-speaking passengers, though her responses and translations are always as brief and curt as possible while still conveying the information. After her rape, she enigmatically takes out a knife from her compartment, with Shanghai Lily attempting to stop her from suicide; while it is unknown whether Hui Fei ever intended suicide, Wong was known for playing characters who would have to kill themselves at the end of the film, and Hui Fei never attempting suicide and instead killing her rapist shows her refusal to play into this stereotype. Further, her rape is an attempt to re-marginalize her as raced and sexed and show her lack of power. Notably, the white passengers of the train wait idly at the station while she is raped, with no one attempting to intervene, showing their expectations of the heterosexual availability of Chinese women,

even if that availability is by force. However, Hui Fei violently takes this power back from her rapist through her revenge, adding to the portrayal of her rape as a violent and violating act, rather than as implying that she was at fault for the assault due to her position of lower power.

At the end of the film, once the train arrives in Shanghai, reporters attempt to interview Hui Fei for all the salacious details of her revenge (“did you kill him with a knife?”), to which she glances to the left side of the screen, replies a few words in Chinese, put up her hand, and walks off the right side of the screen. This can be seen as a refusal to be the bearer of meaning, in that she refuses to engage with (English-speaking) media who only seem to have interest in the illicit portions of her story, and not in her subjectivity or desire, and in that she prefers to keep this subjectivity private rather than coming to stand in for her entire race and gender in an Orientalist environment. In “The Sexual Bonds of Racial Stardom,” Celine Parreñas Shimizu similarly reads Hui Fei’s refusal to speak as an “unfinished product” which “opens up possibilities for how she is understood” (75). Here, Hui Fei “[cannot] be understood in the existing terms” of sex and race, so her meaning is left ambiguous (Shimizu 76); however, this lack does not foreclose her meaning, but rather opens up queer possibilities of meaning and desire, as she cannot be understood within dominant ideology and normative relations. In this scene, Hui Fei is not only dealing with the trauma of her rape, but is also possibly mourning the loss of Shanghai Lily as her lover. The trauma of her queer desire itself is left unspeakable. The scene immediately preceding the reporter scene is between Shanghai Lily (on the left) and Captain Harvey (on the right), with Harvey looking left when looking at Shanghai Lily and then walking off screen to the right. Hui Fei’s actions mirror these screen directions, giving the

impression that when she glances left, she may be looking at Shanghai Lily, and her surface of impassivity can be seen as masking her grief.

While Hui Fei's refusal to bear meaning can be read as her falling into the 'inscrutable Oriental' stereotype, her explicit taking back of power through her refusal can also be seen as a way to work within dominant forms of ideology and 'knowledge' about race and sexuality in order to question them. Because she can only be placed into the types of characters allowed by the American cultural imaginary, Hui Fei's resistance also has to come about by mobilizing these types and failing to fully embody them, pointing to the ways in which she can move outside of dominant forms of racialized sexuality by refusing to participate in the representable forms that Asian women's sexuality takes in the American context.

In contrast to *Shanghai Express*, Richard Quine's 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong*, is able to move its Chinese prostitute character outside of a heterosexual matrix through her excesses of racialized heterosexuality. While both films work within the same representational economy in representing the hyper heterosexual availability of Asian women, Suzie Wong embodies the other side of the dichotomy, the so-called Lotus Blossom type, where she is submissive and seemingly wants nothing more than the love of a white man; both her excess of gendered and raced performance and the inverse stereotype of Asian women seemingly paint her in stark contrast to Hui Fei's unknowable Dragon Lady, though the effect of the two films in using stereotypes of Asian sex workers in a way that causes these stereotypes to ultimately fail in heterosexual representation is very similar. The film centers on Robert Lomax (William Holden), an American draftsman who has taken a year off to become a painter, using a move to Hong Kong as inspiration. There, he stays at a hotel/de facto brothel, where he meets a

beautiful young prostitute, Suzie Wong (Nancy Kwan), who serves as his artistic inspiration until he falls in love with her. Meanwhile, he is pursued by a white woman, Kay O'Neill, the daughter of a banker who is assisting Robert with his finances during his travel, but rejects her. After some strife between Robert and Suzie over Robert's inability to financially support Suzie and her infant son, and his refusal to take financial help from Suzie, the two reconcile after unsuccessfully attempting to rescue Suzie's child from a flood. The film ends with Suzie promising to follow Robert wherever he goes, with the implication that the two will move to America and be supported by Robert's burgeoning painting career.

As argued by Lee, within the American cultural imaginary, Asian femmes are doubly invisible as queer because both their race and their gender performance are read as heterosexual, regardless of their own sexual desires; Lee argues that "gender is always racialized" and that "any analysis...of gender identities must be complicated by a consideration of racial specificities" (121-122). While in the dominant ideology Asian femmes are not seen as and cannot be lesbians, queerness is there, but not seen by the culture at large. In *The World of Suzie Wong*, any potential queerness on Suzie's part is thus unthinkable by the white heterosexual viewpoint of the film, whether Suzie is 'actually' queer or not. Throughout the film, the identificatory viewpoint is that of Robert, a white, Western, heterosexual man, and the audience is presumed to be sutured to this Western subjectivity, not to Suzie's, due to how the film is structured. Further, the film itself is a Hollywood production, so it generally works within the same representational economy as the dominant ideology, even as this ideology is always internally contradictory in the sense of Butler's theory of performativity. Due to these

viewpoints of the film, we can only be shown what Robert sees of Suzie, which follows what the hegemonic position in society can see: Suzie as heterosexually available.

One example of the queer possibility of the unseen is found in a space we are never able to see within the film, the upstairs of the bar. In the center of the bar that serves as the location for Chinese sex workers to meet their clients, there is a spiral staircase with a sign that reads “Ladies Only – Powder Room.” This staircase is first shown early in the film, on Robert’s first visit to the bar, and the camera lingers on the sign. In earlier shots of the bar and in the background of this shot, laughing and smiling Chinese women are shown to dance closely together (presumably to pass the time and show themselves off while waiting for men to become their clients), and when the staircase is shown, two women are seen to hurriedly walk up the stairs together. While this can be seen as lesbian desire as a prelude to or substitute for heterosexual desire, lesbianism pervades the scene; since the upstairs powder room is never shown in the film, it is unknown what erotics may take place within that female-only space. Further, friendships between women seem more important to Suzie and her colleagues than their labor of heterosexuality; Suzie’s close friend, Gwennie Lee, often proclaims how much “sex appeal” Suzie has, making this slippage between homosocial bonds and homosexual bonds apparent.

Once Suzie’s economic position is taken into account, the excesses of her heterosexual availability become visible. Throughout the film, she explicitly states that her sex work is less a choice than a necessity, since it is the only type of work available for someone of her race, gender, and class. She also repeatedly asks Robert to hire her as his “permanent girlfriend,” tying (white) heterosexuality to economic upward mobility; when Robert does not have the

money to support her but does not allow her to continue sex work to support herself, she leaves him, and only returns once he has sold a painting and is thus able to financially support her. By choosing to go with Robert at the end of the film, she is able to take advantage of his race and class status by the heterosexual coupling. She tells Robert "I'll be with you until you say, 'Suzie, go away,'" which makes the pairing sound more like a service provider/client relationship that can be terminated at any time by one party than a romantic relationship that requires mutual support and trust. In this case, she is molding herself into the Lotus Blossom stereotype of a subservient woman in order to gain access to Robert's status.

The first time the film shows Suzie, she is on a ferry into Hong Kong, where she tells Robert that she is a wealthy virgin named Mee Ling, and once the infatuated Robert tracks her down does she reveal her name as Suzie Wong and her occupation. However, this later performance as 'Suzie Wong' cannot be seen as natural, since everything that comes after Suzie's masquerade on the ferry has to be seen in relation to that masquerade. It is impossible to know how much of Suzie's 'true' persona is also a masquerade, including her performance as Lotus Blossom. As argued by Judith Butler, identity only exists as an effect of actions, and these actions do not reveal an inherent subjectivity underneath (18); while Butler's theory looks at unconscious actions that provide societal legibility, Suzie's explicit masquerade makes her performance as the Lotus Blossom visible as performance and not as how she naturally or inherently is due to her race and gender. Since the film only sees from Robert's point of view, we can only see from his racial-sexual point of view, which can only see Asian women according to the racial-sexual types found in the American cultural imaginary. While this makes Suzie seem, on the surface, like the epitome of the subservient, heterosexually available Asian

woman, because the film structures her as performing a masquerade from the beginning of the film, and makes her economic investment in that masquerade clear, her excessively heterosexual performance can be seen as revealing an underlying lack of that very heterosexuality.

This theoretical work seeks to find the ways in which stereotype discourse can be further complicated, beyond looking at 'good' or 'bad' images, and beyond disavowing the negative portions of a text in order to avow the positive ones. The queerness of the intervention seeks to read the potentials for these images to become their own undoing, which keeps intact the specificity of the race and gender in question, but also destabilizes the ground for identity itself as a construction, and as a 'truth' to be represented. As a way of looking back on cultural artifacts, this isn't a method of placing characters into sexual categories that weren't there to begin with, or a method of re-'discovering' forms of identity; instead, this project seeks to disrupt the process of identity formation by looking at how that process is constantly in flux. Looking ahead, films need to include more diversity of identity positions than they have previously, and need to explicitly work against stereotyping and the dominant representational economy, but without then re-stereotyping characters into new categories. In this way, what is unthinkable in society, and what is being re-thought and re-imagined in this project, needs to become a project of queer futurity, where the unthinkable becomes thinkable, but never fully stabilizes or fixes itself in place. This is not simply a project of creating 'positive' representations of Asian queerness, but rather opening a space for these experiences to be imaginable within society. However, since the power of the queer is its inability to be fixed in place, this should not take the form of a stabilization and codification of a new set of normative identities, even if

those identities involve same-sex desire. What is needed is an expansion of imagination and possibilities for what certain bodies are allowed to do.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi Jehangir. "The Other Question." *Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1993. 66-84. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. 13-31.
- Feng, Peter X. "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-dary." *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000. 40-55
- Lee, JeeYeun. "Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities." *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Anthology*. Ed. Genny Beemyn and Michele J. Eliason. New York: New York UP, 1996. 115-32
- Liu, Cynthia W. "When Dragon Ladies Die, Do They Come Back As Butterflies? Reimagining Anna May Wong." *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000. 23-39.
- Shanghai Express*. Dir. Josef Von Sternberg. Prod. Adolph Zukor. By Jules Furthman and Lee Garmes. Perf. Marlene Dietrich, Clive Brook, Anna May Wong, and Warner Oland. MCA TV, 1932.
- Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. "The Sexual Bonds of Racial Stardom." *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian-American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 58-101. Print.
- The World of Suzie Wong*. Dir. Richard Quine. Screenplay by Paul Osborn. By Richard Mason. Perf. Nancy Kwan and William Holden. Paramount, 1960.