

Women in Hong Kong Fiction Written in English: the Mixed Liaison

By Mimi Chan

Introduction

I shall begin with an attempt to answer the question "What is Hong Kong fiction?" Can we talk of *the* Hong Kong novel or *the* Hong Kong short story as a genre apart? Within the past twenty years or so there has emerged in fiction written in English about Hong Kong a sense of the unusual dynamics of this rather unique place. Certain themes have become major preoccupations, for example, the fears and doubts of some inhabitants regarding the inevitable changes that 1997—when sovereignty of Hong Kong reverts to China—will bring. Another "Hong Kong" theme which is constantly brought out in fiction is the relationship between Chinese and Westerners, and we can identify changing perspectives: from Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, in which the Chinese characters appear merely as houseboys or other stereotypes providing the colonial backdrop for events involving English people who could just as well be in Singapore, Malaya or "Tching-yen" (the name of an imaginary colony adopted by Maugham in the face of libel suits), to much more complex studies of the racial make-up and power structure of Hong Kong in works like Robert Elegant's *Dynasty* and James Clavell's *Noble House*. Another favourite motif is the aimlessness of expatriate life in general, with its endless rounds of cocktail parties, bar-hopping and passionless pursuit of sex, described usually from a male viewpoint. Leaving aside the question of subject matter there is the question of authorship. Generally speaking, published Western writers who have written *about* Hong Kong as opposed to merely mentioning the place in passing, tend to be Anglo-Americans. Most do know the place, though their knowledge ranges from very superficial to profound. My choice of a corpus for discussion is not based on literary merit. Indeed the selection ranges from works that have received international acclaim to those that have little literary merit and little interest beyond the topical.

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The Importance of Social Context

RACIAL stereotypes will always exist, for better or for worse, and it will be a long time before people from the West, the potential readers of fiction, can see Chinese women as anything other than exotic sex sirens or sinister dragon ladies, images which have been perpetuated by works like *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Taipan*. In the Hong Kong context, political and social conditions up to very recent times have fostered among the expatriate community an image of subservience, not just of Chinese women but of the whole Chinese race. This can best be understood if one compares it to the situation depicted in *A Passage to India*. The idea of privilege by virtue of race persists in some writers up to very recent times. Even the "liberal" writer, in his very disclaimers of complicity with the social order, is admitting his belief in his privilege.

An interesting study of caste and class among the expatriate English community is made by H.J. Lethbridge in *Hong Kong: Stability and Change* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978). He quotes from Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright, authors of a compendium on Hong Kong and the treaty ports of China.

Among Englishmen who have never visited the outlying portions of the Empire the idea prevails that social distinctions are forgotten in the presence of the stern realities of life in the colonies, and that "all sorts and conditions of men" are united in the bonds of brotherhood by a common feeling of expatriation. But, though this idea may not be without justification in the backwoods of Canada, the bush of Australia and the veldt of South Africa, it is certainly a travesty of the conditions obtaining in our Crown Colonies. Nowhere, perhaps, is it more completely repudiated than in Hong Kong where society is cast into innumerable divisions and subdivisions. (p. 163 ff)¹

¹A. Wright and H.A. Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Other Treaty Ports of China*, London, 1908, p. 341.

The Painted Veil focuses on the British community in Hong Kong and the social divisions operative before World War II: depictions of officials, merchants, members of the professional classes and Europeans in supervisory or low-status occupations generate at least part of the interest in the novel. But I shall not attempt a detailed sociological exploration of the social origins of these expatriates and their improved standard of living and self-esteem consequent upon their expatriation. This Lethbridge does very lucidly and interestingly. In the novels I am concerned with, there is distinct stratification in the expatriate European community, based on external recognition, on wealth and position in the adopted community, rather than on class antecedents or educational background. Many social changes have taken place since the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), and unemployment in Britain, among other factors, has changed the type and classes of people seeking employment in Hong Kong. But, while pretensions to the practices and life style of the upper classes in England may have been curtailed, works of fiction published as late as the 1980s still depict an expatriate entity, a European community separate from the Chinese and, by and large, enjoying a life style far more privileged than the majority of the local population.

The expatriate community, however, is aware, and growingly so, of the very wealthy Chinese Taipans with glamorous daughters, bejewelled wives, antique collections and fleets of limousines. And these *glitteratti* appear as cameo sketches, for the most part, in Hong Kong fiction. But, except through the media and business or professional contacts, the average expatriate man would have little opportunity to really get to know such people personally. On the other hand, the surging masses living in cramped conditions in resettlement estates who mill about Mong Kok or Causeway Bay lend credence to expatriates' visions of themselves as privileged people. Most Anglo-Americans, until very recently, worked for the trading companies, for the established "hongs" like Jardine, Matheson & Co., or for the civil service, taught at the universities or in the English-language secondary schools, or were journalists. The majority are provided with housing in large (by Hong Kong standards) flats, passage allow-

ances and home leave: privileges partially accorded to some local people in comparable positions only a few years ago. Since the 1980s the situation has changed rapidly. Localization (the placing of local, i.e., Chinese, people in positions of responsibility) and decolonization as a lead-up to 1997 has accelerated in all fields. But the works under discussion reflect, for the most part, Hong Kong from the 1950s to the early 1980s, before Margaret Thatcher's visit to Peking, which set the stage for the territory's return to China. With a few notable exceptions the Chinese women the average expatriate male is likely to encounter are his professional and/or social inferiors—secretaries, airline hostesses, bar-girls, salesgirls, waitresses and amahs. Added to this is the popular image of Chinese women in the minds of the English-speaking world outside Hong Kong. If a writer is trying to cater for a mass market, his fictional Chinese women must fit one of these stereotypes, or the attempt at realistic portraiture may paradoxically have the reverse effect.

It must be admitted that the failure of racial integration in Hong Kong is as much due to Chinese prejudice as to that of the expatriate community. In spite of travel, education and residence abroad, in spite of all the trappings of Westernization, even relatively young members of the Hong Kong middle class frown upon marriage to a "gwailo" or "gwaipor".² Inter-marriage has become much more common due to the growing popularity of sending children overseas to be educated. But it is still a standing joke among middle-class families that the risk of such an education is the possibility of acquiring a "gwai" son-in-law or daughter-in-law.

With the rapid changes taking place in Hong Kong, there should be fewer reasons for expatriate Western males to feel more privileged than the average educated local professional. But a new prop for his sense of superiority has emerged: his foreign passport. While some Hong Kong women may desire a foreign (preferably American) husband and the right of abode overseas, the facts have been grossly exaggerated. In any case this ego-boosting myth of superiority colours the

presentation of Chinese women vis-à-vis their Western lovers, and strengthens the expatriate male's self-image as the superior partner. In *The Years of The Hungry Tiger*, the wedding reception of a bar-girl and an American consular official is described: "It was big news in Wanchai, 'Local Girl Makes Good'." Mi-mi, the bride, is clearly considered by all, narrator included, to have made the catch of the century, although his satirical attitude towards the patronizing paternalism of the American Consul is evident:

He [the Consul] gave the blushing Mi-mi a big kiss. "Welcome to the Yoo Ess Ay!"

"Thank you, sir," Mi-mi blushed happily.

"Now now," the Consul wagged his finger; 'none of this sir crap, you're an American now, you call me Al!' (p. 130)

This is of course an extreme case but the association of expatriates with the good life—spacious luxury flats with harbour views, cars, boats, travel abroad—as contrasted with the squalor and the cramped unhygienic living conditions of the local populace persists. The Peak vs. Wanchai. Mid-levels vs. Causeway Bay. Plus the foreign passport. The most outrageous presentation of this contrast appears in Anthony Cooper's *The Sanctuary*, which was published as recently as 1984. What is surprising here is that the author is clearly aware of 1997. In the preface, he overtly pledges his personal commitment to Hong Kong, and yet the work itself makes no concessions to the shifting realities of power, or to economic and social structures. His American heroine insists that the commitment of his civil servant protagonist is only to Hong Kong as it is, a Hong Kong that will soon be no more. The whole "philosophy" of marriage to a Chinese girl is startlingly anachronistic, reminiscent of the attitude prevalent in Maugham's short stories about the East. Indeed, Cooper specifically mentions Young Guy, the character in Maugham's "Force of Circumstances", who marries an English woman while on home leave and then returns to Malaya to discover numerous complications in his personal life. He finally has to return to his "kampong whore" (Cooper's term).

Cooper's "philosophy" is put into the mouth of his protagonist, James Waltham, a colonial

²Foreign devil.

civil servant like Cooper himself.³ The arguments against such a marriage include the undesirability of Eurasian children and the essential anglophobia of the Chinese race (when a person marries a Chinese girl he "might get some of the heart but never, never the soul"). The most telling passage, in terms of revealing the author's attitudes, is this one:

"But I've seen it happen! A mixed couple seem very happy, then, a Chinese New Year or some other festival, the man's in-laws and Chinese family come round by the bus full to his nice home. They make the most god-awful din, drop rubbish all over the balcony. And while they do it they look askance at their daughter and wonder whether living so close with a round-eye long-nosed foreign-devil barbarian is worth life's meal ticket she got on her wedding day . . ." (p. 70)

In *Running Dog*, the only novel under discussion written by a Chinese woman, one of the focal points of the plot is a triangular love affair: Audrey, a beautiful Chinese girl with a degree from Smith, and her two suitors—Yau Man, a Chinese refugee with little formal education who has become a multi-millionaire industrialist, and Charles Felton, journalist, graduate of Harvard and Columbia. The author, Lee Ding Fai, who comes from the middle class and has received a Western-style education, presents a realistic picture of the living conditions, habits and mores of upwardly-mobile Chinese families. The Chens, Audrey's family, move from modest comfort to the splendours of a professionally decorated flat. The novel shows an awareness of the complexities of the stratification of Chinese society in Hong Kong.

The Chinese world of Yau Man in the latter part of the novel contrasts with the expatriate world of Charles Felton, but the contrast is the reverse of the stereotype. Yau Man seems to represent a world of unimaginable luxury—

³Here I am committing the critical error of equating character with creator, but the intensity and unnecessary length of his exposition of his whole "philosophy" suggest a degree of total commitment on the part of the author.

banquets with over 1,000 guests, fully-furnished luxury flats handed over to a discarded mistress to assuage guilt, lavish round-the-world trips taken without benefit of leave passage allowances. In a world of cream-coloured Jaguars, Charles Felton commands a second-hand Toyota! It is a pity that Lee Ding Fai, obviously a keen observer of the Hong Kong milieu as it exists for the vast majority of the population, is unable to write with greater force and sensitivity and with a more flexible style in order to reach a wider audience. This novel presents a ludicrous caricature of an outmoded colonial type. An English executive working for Jardine Matheson is seen through the eyes of a perceptive, well-educated, intelligent young woman, whose ironical remarks are lost on him. The patronizing tone is maddening, yet it has a terrifyingly familiar ring:

"You went to school in America, didn't you?" he commented blandly. "A lot of Chinese students want to go there, I understand. It's easier, I suppose. Of course, their college is really a school to us."

She sipped her drink, and returned a shrug and a slight smile.

"I wouldn't mind going there to have a look myself, though there are other places that one would rather go first . . . So where exactly were you when you were there?"

"In a school called Smith somewhere in the wilds of Massachusetts," she replied.

"Really, how interesting."

His obnoxiousness fascinated rather than offended her. He was like a kid turning up his nose at another boy's possessions.

And he talked about his work and his company as if without it Hong Kong's trade and commercial interest would come tumbling down to the ground.

Han Suyin's powers as a novelist are of course far superior and her self-portrait of a Eurasian woman doctor in love in *A Many-Splendoured Thing* is far more sensitive than Lee Ding Fai's portrayal of her heroine's vision, but Han Suyin's consciousness is that of a Eurasian born in northern China, educated in China and Europe, and stranded in Hong Kong by political accident, and not that of a Hong Kong Chinese.

In discussing the social context of these novels I have for the most part concentrated on the racial aspect—of expatriate versus local life. What of the position of women in Hong Kong? European women in the territory run the gamut from top Taipans' wives through the wives of middle management to army wives to deserted wives who drift about making a precarious living, some by dubious means. There are also single professional women working as teachers, nurses, physiotherapists. And many stereotyped portraits of these women appear in the pages of Hong Kong fiction. Even a superficial survey of fictionalized images of European women in Hong Kong reveals that Chinese women are portrayed much more positively than their Western sisters. This is certainly the case of the women in *The Years of the Hungry Tiger*, Miller and of some fleetingly glimpsed in Harry Rickett's collection of sketches. But my concern is not with all Hong Kong women, but rather with Chinese women in Hong Kong and with Hong Kong Chinese women romantically involved with European men. Eurasian women do appear in Hong Kong literature, (Han Suyin is the best-known example) but they tend not to be central characters.

As for the status of Chinese women in Hong Kong society today, it would appear that, for the professionally trained person, discrimination is no worse than anywhere else in the Western world; it could even be argued that the situation is slightly better. Traditional Chinese discrimination against female offspring has resulted in there being more male university graduates and other professionals than female. But in Hong Kong women do not lag behind those in the West in making strides towards equality. True, tokenism still colours the appointment of women to top posts in the civil service and the advisory councils. One stereotype among Hong Kong Chinese is the "strong woman", based on a few real-life models in the trades and professions. I began this section by referring to stereotypes. Indeed a night's viewing of locally-produced situation comedies and skits will show how many female stereotypes exist. Needless to say a great novelist has to go beyond the stereotype, and to make full use of the literary devices at his disposal to create realistic characters.

The Hong Kong Chinese Heroine in East-West Relationships: Techniques of Portraiture

A good number of Hong Kong novels include a liaison between a Western man and a Chinese woman. If the love interest is not central to the novel, it is still included almost as an obligatory bit of local colour. In Christopher New's *The Chinese Box*, the liaison between the English academic and the Chinese ballet teacher-cum-spy is pivotal to the narrative. In his second novel, *Goodbye, Chairman Mao*, the personal tragedy is incidental to the narrative of international intrigue. The Chinese origins of the wife provide the pretext for the exotic Hong Kong setting so familiar to the author. *Taipan*, set in historical Hong Kong, features the liaison between the Taipan Struan and May-May, all part of the excitement and adventure of carving out a trading empire in the exotic East. The half-caste offspring of this liaison add colour and intrigue to Clavell's later novel, *Noble House*. Harry Rickett's *People Like Us* presents a brief (and quite frankly, meaningless) vignette of the collapse of the relationship between a shiftless English youth and a rich Chinese girl, who initiates the following exchange:

"Well, are you happy I'm going?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. My friends told me Europeans had no feelings."

"What else did they say?"

"That you get what you want and then you don't want it any more."

"Nice friends you have."

"You don't know them."

"Whose fault is that?"

"I really loved you."

"Would you like some tea?"

He ordered more tea and coffee.

"It's someone else, isn't it?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Is it what I said about going with other people?"

"You give me no freedom." (p. 10)

Here it is perhaps worth referring to the totally non-stereotypical East-West liaison in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*. *Sour Sweet* depicts Chinese

immigrants from Hong Kong adjusting to life in Britain. It is comic, original and poignant, reflecting the author's combined gifts of humour and sympathy. Mui, formerly a Hong Kong domestic servant, has migrated to Britain to join her younger sister and her family. Mui is presented as comically plump and short; totally unprepossessing physically. The last thing the reader would associate with this unexpectedly resourceful Chinese woman is sexual desire. The family runs a Chinese take-away. Deep into the night Mui delivers trays of food to loud and usually burly truck-drivers. Her absences become longer and longer, she grows fatter and fatter and it turns out that she is pregnant. Who the father is remains a mystery, and indeed the reader is made to feel that this knowledge is incidental; in the same way that race is also incidental in this case. An anonymous Western man and a Chinese anti-heroine and anti-siren.

From the few examples I have cited it is clear that the norm of fictional East-West relationships is Western *man* plus Chinese *woman*; rarely do we find the opposite. This does not necessarily reflect the norms of contemporary Hong Kong society. But most of the writers are Anglo-American men and the stereotypical norm suits their vanity and satisfies the expectations of an international readership.

Han Suyin writes movingly of the love between an American woman and a Chinese intellectual, Dr Jen Yong. The two are swept apart by the events of 1949. *Son of the Revolution*, an autobiographical account of a Chinese student (Liang Heng) and his English teacher, an American woman (Judith Shapiro), describing their love in the midst of political turmoil, was a best-seller. But these are, as I have mentioned, exceptions to the fictional norm.

Let us consider three novels in which the central concern is the working out of a love relationship. A great proportion of narration, comment, description and dialogue in these books goes towards creating background and in localizing the story, but the plot on which other interests hang essentially centres on an affair between an Englishman and a Chinese woman. The three novels are Richard Mason's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957), John Gordon Davis's *The Years*

of the Hungry Tiger (1976) and Geoffrey Thursby's *Miller* (1983).

Each writer has lived and worked in Hong Kong and knows the place; Geoffrey Thursby, who died in Hong Kong in 1985, was a journalist and the publisher of the magazine *Hong Kong Business*. Richard Mason worked for the British Council and is familiar with other parts of the East as well. John Gordon Davis was a Crown Counsel in Hong Kong when his best-seller about Rhodesia, *Hold My Hand, I'm Dying*, was published. Each man writes of Hong Kong and its people with deep sympathy. All three novels centre on the motif of "renewal through the love of a Chinese woman". In each case an expatriate woman is used as a foil—a symbol of betrayal, materialism and neurotic self-interest in *Miller*; to a lesser extent in *The Years of the Hungry Tiger*; and as a symbol of joyless routine, convention and artifice in *The World of Suzie Wong*. But true to his self-image of Western (and possibly masculine) superiority, each protagonist sees himself (at least potentially) as the protector, patron and saviour of his Chinese lover. Of the three heroines—Suzie Wong (Wong Mee Ling), Tsang Ying Ling and Tina Lau—Suzie Wong is the best known, due to Nancy Kwan's successful portrayal in the film of the same name as well as to the sensational nature of her profession and the Wanchai milieu.

Difficult as the task may be, let us separate the film from the book and concentrate on Richard Mason's depiction of his Chinese heroine in the novel. Richard Mason uses a first person narrator, Robert Lomax, a self-taught aspiring painter who has come to Hong Kong in search of inspiration and fame after resigning from his job on a Malayan plantation. Because of limited finances he sets up in the cheapest place he can find, the Nam Kok Hotel, a popular haunt of prostitutes catering to the hordes of foreign sailors on shore leave. This is the heyday of the girlie bars and brothels in Wanchai. He befriends the "girls". Some, like Wednesday Lulu, Big Alice and Minnie Ho, are individualized to varying degrees, but it is Suzie who is portrayed with the greatest care.

Legend has it that the model for the Nam Kok Hotel was the now-demolished Luk Kwok Hotel in Wanchai. More than one habitué of the place has claimed to be the real Suzie Wong. But whether

Suzie is indeed drawn from life is irrelevant. Mason has created a character who is at once a perfect stereotype and yet an endearing individual.

A great deal of work has been done on images of women in literature, especially as they appear in books written by men. Analyses have uncovered such stereotypes as the virgin and the whore; the mother (angel or devil?); the submissive wife; the domineering wife; the bitch; the seductress; man's prey, the sex object; the old maid; the bluestocking; the castrating woman.⁴ Suzie incorporates the images of virgin and whore (an apparent contradiction that Mason painstakingly tries to reconcile in a number of passages), the mother, the largely submissive but at times domineering (but well-intentioned) wife, as well as another pair of apparently contradictory images—the seductress who is also man's prey, the sex object.

A close look at the opening chapter shows how Mason uses narration, comment, dialogue and description to illuminate character. The perspective, however, is that of a foreign male observing Suzie from the outside and trying to understand her, but without much success, which can perhaps be explained by the fact that he has only been in Hong Kong "a couple of months".

The novel opens with narration and description. The Chinese girl is introduced against a backdrop rich in local colour; details selected to evoke "Chineseness", with many—perhaps too many even for the late-1950s—ethnic stereotypes—"women in cotton pyjama suits . . . men with felt slippers and gold teeth . . . an old man in a high-necked Chinese gown . . . stroking his white, wispy, foot-long ribbon of a beard, a baby slung on a woman's back, coolies in blue tattered trousers and the remnants of shirts, Cantonese fisher-women in comical straw hats and shiny pink suits." One detail brings out the contradictions of this meeting point of East and West. A youth is also among the crowd waiting for the ferry. He wears horn-rimmed glasses and is studying a graph in a book called *Aerodynamics* he is holding

close to his nose. Against this highly-coloured background Suzie appears. "Her hair was tied behind her head in a pony-tail, and she wore jeans—green knee-length denim jeans."

Lomax's first comment anticipates his surprise at all the paradoxes and contradictions in her life and personality:

That's odd, I thought,
A Chinese girl in jeans.
How do you explain that?

This comment is particularly significant in that it draws our attention to how strongly perceptions may be affected by racial stereotypes. The narrator is also characterized—a naïve, recently-arrived expatriate steeped in the myth of inscrutable Chinese womanhood.

Suzie's first act is to buy a newspaper cone of melon seeds from a street vendor. Then she absently picks open the seeds "with red-painted nails", which elicits the following comment:

Probably some wealthy Taipan's daughter,
I thought.

Or a student. Or shopgirl—you never
could tell with the Chinese.

This reinforces our impression of the narrator's naïveté. If the reader judges by Chinese norms of behaviour, especially those of the 1950s, no wealthy Taipan's daughter (or self-respecting student for that matter) would buy melon seeds from a street vendor, and would be even less likely to eat them in public—much less offer some to a male stranger, a *gwailo* at that, on a ferry. Her actions and her revelation of her virginal status, her father's possessions and her arranged marriage, would strike knowledgeable readers as entirely out of keeping with the accepted stereotype of the "rich Chinese girl". Indeed her long discourse on her virginal state causes even the narrator to wonder whether she is typical. And if the girl were indeed unconventional, avant-garde and Westernized, one might question her meek acceptance of an arranged marriage and her pride in her virginity. There is also the question of her English. But such doubts would not arise in the minds of most international readers. Seen from the perspective of the naïve observer, as yet uninitiated into the mysteries of

⁴See Sharon Spencer, "Feminist Criticism and Literature", *American Writing Today*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed., (U.S. International Communication Agency, Washington, D.C., 1982), p. 159.

Chinese women, Suzie's actions appear disarmingly natural and child-like. Suzie herself, playing the role of a Taipan's daughter, betrays her own naïve image of the Chinese Taipan, the vision of an outsider, a stereotype which is a product of her own imagination and wishful thinking. There are a number of perspectives here: the narrator's, Suzie's, that of the uninitiated reader (which need not diverge from that of the narrator), and that of the knowledgeable reader (which may or may not converge with that of the author).

The description of Suzie's physical beauty reinforces the impression of her innocence the narrator writes of:

The mischievous-innocent look in her eyes Her face, was round and smooth, her eyes long black ellipses, and her eyebrows so perfectly arched that they looked drawn—but in fact they had only been helped out with pencil at their tips. Her cheek bones were broad, with hints of Mongolia.

Her physical attributes are frequently alluded to in the novel. She is willowy and sinuous rather than voluptuous and buxom. There are no universal norms of female pulchritude and Mason, to his credit, makes no attempt to Westernize Suzie's appearance in order to make her irresistible appeal plausible to his wider audience—as Davis and Thursby do with their Chinese heroines. Suzie's beauty essentially follows the Chinese ideal. The description of her perfectly arched eyebrows is particularly significant, for such eyebrows have been immortalized in descriptions of archetypal Chinese beauties: In the Tang poet Bai Juyi's "The Song of Eternal Sorrow", for example, Yang Guifei is described as having "moth brows"—or, more poetically rendered, "eyebrows as delicate as the moth's fine silken feelers".⁵ Suzie has long, smooth dark hair hanging straight down her back, such as one finds in the proto-typical Chinese beauty, as well as in Western caricatures of sultry Oriental sirens. The fact that Suzie is Shanghainese is also part

of a stereotype, both Chinese and Western: pre-revolutionary Shanghai had a reputation as "sin city", and Shanghainese women in Chinese society enjoy a reputation for being stylish and modern.

The descriptions of her appearance, nearly always accompanied by the rapturous commentary of the narrator, strengthen the impression of her charms. This is reinforced by the narration of events which show her in relation to other men in the role of both seductress and sexual prey.

Let us return to the opening chapter. Possibly the most significant element in the portrayal of Suzie is her speech. The author uses deviant orthography only in one notable instance when he exploits what might be termed a phonetic cliché of Hong Kong English—the substitution of /l/ for /r/. In fact, this is a Cantonese rather than a Shanghainese habit. But it is associated with the Chinese stereotype, regardless of dialectal origin.

" . . . What is your name?"

"Wong Mee-ling."

"Mee-ling—that's charming."

"And you?"

"Robert Lomax—or Lomax Robert, your way."

"Lobert."

"No, 'R'."

"Robert."

(p. 8)

This exchange confirms that her English pronunciation has the phonetic characteristics associated with the Western stereotype of pidgin English as spoken by Chinese. Her grammar gives the same impression, although devices suggesting its sub-standard nature are not used consistently. There are direct translations of Chinese structure, such as the classic "No talk." Articles are left out, as in "You sailor?" But "No, there is a car to meet me in Hennessy Road." Suzie virtually always uses the simple present tense, in conformity with the expected patterns of pidgin English: "Oh I forget how many cars"; "I get married soon." Her vocabulary is limited. Her failure to come up with the English term for "You have not made love—not with anybody" is significant in itself, in addition to revealing her limited competence in English. It is meant to bring out her candour, "the naïveté of a child". It also reinforces the

⁵ Chan and Gray's translation, *Renditions*, Autumn 1980, p. 81.

double image she has throughout the novel—that of virgin and whore; virgin, though whore. Although there are just enough markers in Suzie's speech to set it off as pidgin, they are not consistent. She can, for example, utter perfectly grammatical sentences:

"No, I'm too scared to drive. But I don't mind tramcars, you know—I like riding in tramcars."

And at the very close of the novel, she demonstrates control over all her verbal structures, using contracted forms as well (*italics added*).

"Who's that?"

"My husband . . . you've got the tickets?"

"You're sure? You haven't lost them?"

As is evident from the opening chapter, the narrator does not want Suzie's pidgin to grate on the reader's nerves, thus exaggerating the stereotype. Indeed in their first encounter the author assigns Suzie very short snatches of direct speech. She uses minor sentences—simple answers, repetition of what has been said, catalogues. When she intimates details of her future, presents her imagined picture of her arranged marriage, and speaks of the high moral standards of Chinese girls vis-à-vis their European counterparts, the narrator couches this in indirect speech, which, while attempting to reflect her idiom, is in perfectly correct English. Mason invests Suzie with some distinguishing markers in the area of word choice. The Cantonese sound "hah" which she uses to indicate that she has not heard something properly, is an implicit request for repetition. Mason may have noticed the propensity among Chinese—and Cantonese in particular—to give nicknames based on physical attributes. "Tall Man Leung", "Fat Man Chiu", "Pock-marked Lam"—these are often used in direct address with connotations of intimacy and affection rather than malice or ridicule. Suzie persistently calls Betty Lau, the rival she stabs with a pair of scissors, "Canton girl", with the typical Shanghainese contempt for the "provincial" Cantonese. She calls the neurotic American frantically pursuing her "the butterfly man" because her intuition warns her of his fickleness.

In a passage of description-cum-commentary, Lomax muses upon the sleeping Suzie:

I wondered if she was dreaming, and what Chinese dreams were like. I hoped they were like Chinese poetry, full of wicket-gates and rock-pools and chirruping cicadas, and warm rice-wine and love.

A tame Western concept of the images found in Chinese poetry. Mason possibly has in mind the simple repetitious language of some Chinese love poems, when he has Suzie, in her broken English, use similar language:

"Go to bed with sailor—nothing happens inside, Nothing happens to heart. Go to bed with you—everything happens. I love. I feel beautiful. I think, 'My man,' you think, 'My girl.' We belong". (p. 36)

Banal, embarrassing—perhaps. But I suspect the author intends it to be poignant; even poetic.

The heroine of John Gordon Davis's *The Years of the Hungry Tiger* is Tsang Ying Ling. The narrator is Jake McAdams, a successful young British officer in the Hong Kong police force. Davis has created a domestic canvas. While the novel focuses on the love story of McAdams and Tsang Ying Ling, who teaches in a communist school, it is also an adventure story set in Hong Kong and China in 1962 to 1967, the years between the Great Leap Forward (1957-1958) and the Cultural Revolution. Against a background of earth-shaking events, espionage and riots, the liaison between the British policeman and the Chinese communist school teacher unfolds to its tragic end. Ying Ling is presented through the perspective of a man who falls madly in love with her. His love for her overcomes all professional caution and common sense. There can be little doubt that Davis wishes to portray Ying Ling not only as a truly beautiful and desirable woman, but more, as a very special woman, for whom the ambitious, worldly-wise McAdam should be willing to give up his entire world, professional, social and emotional. Davis seems to want to invest his protagonist with something of the grandeur of a tragic hero—a man who loved not wisely but too well. The woman must be presented as a worthy object of that love. Unlike Suzie, whose main

characteristics are presented in the first chapter, Ying Ling's personality is revealed gradually. The portrait begins with a narration of action, an incident which gives an important clue to her character.

Davis quite clearly wants to depart from the existing stereotypes of Oriental women. The plot requires Ying Ling to be Chinese and communist. Her Chinese-ness adds a great deal of interest and local colour, but the devices which have gone into her portrayal seem to come as much from idealized Western images, transplanted to a squalid little room and roof-top. But I am anticipating.

The narrator first meets Ying Ling when he is in charge of an operation to stop the tide of illegal immigrants entering Hong Kong from China. Into the closed border area comes Tsang Ying Ling to survey the situation and to bring buns for illegals hiding from the police. This is the first reference to Ying Ling: "And there, coming along this cross-trail was a young Chinese woman, and a dog. She was carrying a big China Products shopping bag" (p. 73). The dog and the China Products shopping bag are essential elements in her characterization. This first episode establishes her independence, courage, humanity and her own brand of patriotism. Her physical appearance strikes the narrator—and the reader—in stages. We first see her as just "a young Chinese woman". Then after the initial confrontation, the narrator notes, "She was tall for a Chinese girl, with a squarish face and she had slanted deep brown eyes." More angry exchanges follow. Then Miss Tsang is taken away from the closed area in a police Land Rover, where the narrator looks at her, and we share his vision through a stream-of-consciousness technique. "Her jeans had paint on them, all the colours. She was very pretty in a somewhat severe sort of way. Twenty-three? Two short pigtails. Wide full mouth. Good nose. Tall for Chinese girl. Big breasts for a Chinese. Northerner, Shanghai way" (p. 76). The description is still fairly detached, though her sensual appeal is noted early. The conflicting images of sex object and bluestocking are conveyed.

"She had long full legs. She didn't look much like a communist school-mistress."

But this is a convention well established in Western popular culture: the schoolmarm whose pent-up sexual passion is released when she sheds her spectacles and loosens her hair from the confines of a bun (or in Miss Tsang's case, pigtails). As the narrator falls more and more deeply in love with Ying Ling, the reader is given more and more intense descriptions of her beauty.

The narrator encounters Ying Ling a second time when she, as a member of the R.S.P.C.A. reports a case of extreme cruelty to animals. The Heavenly Restaurant serves the brains of live monkeys. Ying Ling displays qualities which to some readers may suggest a self-righteous girl scout, a do-gooder. She is a picture of earnest determination. The following exchange reinforces the image of her as a Goody Two-Shoes.

"Are there any more animals in the kitchens, on the lower floors?"

"No, sir," the Inspector said.

"Yes!" Miss Tsang said vehemently.

"There are pigeons." I said, "I am afraid eating pigeons is not an offence in this Colony, Miss Tsang."

"The cages are too small," Miss Tsang said.

"All right," I said, "I'll look at them on the way out, perhaps there's a cruelty charge."

"Yes, cruelty," Miss Tsang said.

The author uses the two initial encounters to characterize Tsang Ying Ling as high-minded but rather naïve and to prepare us for her rather simple-minded and misguided idealism, of which we are given many examples, and which finally leads to the unhappy ending.

As I have stated, the picture of her physical attractions unfolds slowly. The author uses her account of the happenings at the Heavenly Restaurant, written up as a police report by the narrator, as a device to give the reader a summary of her life story. She is not Cantonese, but from Chongqing. This confirms my impression that Western male writers find women from Canton less fascinating than women from other parts of China. Perhaps this has to do with the unfair stereotype of the "Southern Barbarian", unsophisticated and raucous. Ying Ling is twenty-

six when they first meet and by the end of the novel she is thirty-two. Tina Lau, the heroine of *Miller*, is in her thirties, a divorcee and the mother of a young daughter. None of the writers are describing giggling nymphets. Let me now return to the more detailed description of Ying Ling combined with the narrator's commentary (italics added):

She stood up, straightened her skirt over her flat belly and thighs. She had ink on two fingertips and her plaits were a bit ragged and she looked tired now it was all over. Her lips were full and her face was squarish and purposeful and she smiled at me for the first time. *Her eyes were large and the eyelids had the double fold like a European's, which is unusual in a Chinese,* and they were softer now she was satisfied I had done the job properly, and when she smiled at me like that briefly I thought she was beautiful. (p. 176)

Abandoning the Western stereotype of Chinese women, the author makes every effort to Westernize her appearance. She has none of the features considered typical of Chinese beauties. He notes her un-Chinese characteristics: she is tall for a Chinese, has big breasts for a Chinese. He dwells on her big brown eyes often in the course of the novel. Her square face and large mouth would, according to traditional Chinese notions of feminine beauty, be regarded as liabilities.

My first reaction is that John Gordon Davis is in a sense cheating. He wants to appeal to an international readership. He wants features, physical and otherwise, which will strike a familiar chord in his Western readers. Ying Ling is just a Western woman in the guise of a Chinese communist school teacher. Both her race and her politics are essential to the plot of the novel. Anyone who has lived among Chinese people knows that not all Chinese women look the same: Tsang Ying Ling's appearance is well within the limits of possibility. Some Chinese girls are indeed tall, even by Western standards, are well-endowed, have big brown eyes, long legs, square faces, and generous mouths. This does not fit the traditional Chinese stereotype—much less the Western

concept of the dainty almond-eyed lady with a cherry-like mouth. But Chinese ideals of female beauty are changing, moving, for better or worse, towards the Western mode, although the conventional view dies hard, especially among the older generation and country folk. Timothy Mo's heroine, Lily, is portrayed as being attractive to the gwallows in London, but she is considered ugly and ungainly by her dour husband from the New Territories in Hong Kong.

On Lily there were two opposing views. Chen did not think she was pretty. She had a long, thin, rather horsy face and a mouth that was too big for the rest of her features, and also a tiny mole just under the rim of her lower lip on the left side, which fell into a dimple when she smiled, which was frequently, too frequently to be consonant with Chen's passive ideal of female pulchritude. She was also rather busty and her hands and feet were a fraction too big to be wholly pleasing to her husband. It was her face, though, which really let her down (Chen had decided), being over-full of expression, particularly her bright black eyes which she had a habit of widening and narrowing when listening to something she found interesting. Probably there was too much character in her face, which perhaps explained the lack of Cantonese male interest better than any particular wrongness of an individual feature or their relationship to each other. Westerners found her attractive, though. Lily was unaware of this but Chen had noticed it with great surprise. That was if the second glances and turned heads on the street were anything to go by.

(p. 15)

On deeper reflection, then, Davis is not cheating. He is honestly *trying* to create a Chinese woman whose beauty and character totally win over the heart of his narrator. She explains why she is a communist, and the narrator adds commentary.

"I am Chinese." Then she sat back and was more serious and her face was equally beautiful. A beautiful Chinese-woman strong face, such eyes. (p. 214)

Her actions are full of contradictions, and readers may well regard her with exasperation rather than admiration. Many details about Ying Ling are meant to be endearing to Western readers, for example, her love of animals and plants. But she is not just a Walt Disney character. She drinks, smokes (Chinese Red Victory cigarettes), is fond of black coffee, and has a feminine fondness for frilly, sexy underwear. There is no dearth of detail, and yet one gets the impression not of a living woman, but of a self-conscious creation of an author attempting to fuse East and West in a single character. Perhaps this underlines the difficulty of successfully delineating a Chinese heroine. Paradoxically the drastic movement away from the stereotype has not brought Davis any nearer the verisimilitude we assume he is aiming for.

In the matter of Ying Ling's speech, Davis boldly sets aside all conventions associated with foreign speakers of English. Ying Ling was educated in Manila and attended a teachers' training college in Hong Kong. Her speech is not set off by any markers of deviance. Her first utterance shows some unidiomatic pomposity, but, generally speaking, the rare markers of foreignness occur only on the lexical level. Her lover, McAdam, also speaks Cantonese. When they converse in Cantonese, the reader is told that this is the case, but such occasions are rare. At their initial encounter, the author establishes his own set of speech conventions for Ying Ling:

I said, and as soon as I said it I felt foolish,

"I must congratulate you on your English."

She did not look at me. "Why not? You speak good Cantonese."

Go to hell, I thought. (p. 77)

Apart from establishing the conventions of Ying Ling's English, this is also a rightly contemptuous response of an educated Chinese woman to a European's patronizing attitude regarding her ability to speak English. Ying Ling makes jokes in English; she reads T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas in the original; she paints in both Western and Chinese styles. She deep-sea dives.

One memorable incident relates to the supposed earthiness of the Chinese. Ying Ling is no exception. Davis tries to suggest a natural attitude to bodily functions, which incidentally is also a feature of the *fabliau* characters of Chaucer.

I imagined her doing her graceful Chinese shadow-boxing in the dawn, slow motion, more like a ballet dance, watching for the sunrise, and the look in her eyes; and singing as she watered her flowerpots with a mixture of her urine and water from her red chamber-pot which she kept under her bed for this purpose. She was quite unabashed about telling me such things. She even considered collecting urine from other people in the house where she lived, but decided against it because she didn't have enough flowerpots or chamber-pots. She considered getting more of both, lying with me in the back of the station wagon, "It is a pity to waste all the urine."

"Oh, quite."

"It just goes into the sea. But it is so good for flowers."

"Indeed."

"In China everybody must save their urine and shit, you know, to put on the fields, it is the law."

It shook me when she said this in English, though not in Cantonese. The Chinese swear a great deal.

"And a very good law too."

"It is very important because we have not yet got factories for fertilizer. If we had always done this, under the previous governments, China would be a rich country today."

"Seven hundred million Chinese," I said, "that's a lot of urine."

"And shit," she said.

"And shit. The mind boggles; terrifying."

(pp. 232-3)

Opening with a description of her graceful shadow-boxing—a touch of the sublime—the narrator quickly descends to the ridiculous. The narrator shows gentle ridicule and tolerance in his share of the exchange, as if he were humouring an earnest but simple-minded, albeit lovable, child.

A Chinese reader—here I speak for myself—is apt to take deep offence at this passage on first reading, and to find insulting the depiction of Ying Ling's subsequent insistence on introducing the chamber-pot routine to the penthouse she shares with McAdam. "The Chinese swear a good deal" is made as a general statement. But only a certain social class of Chinese men "swear a good deal", usually only in the company of other men, and Chinese oaths do not usually involve the excretory processes. It would be quite surprising to hear a schoolmarm talking directly and with such relish about urine and shit. Is the author being deliberately insulting to the Chinese in general and his Chinese heroine in particular? *Probably* not. This episode can be regarded as part of his effort to sinicize his character, to suggest his insider knowledge of Chinese people as a bilingual who responds instinctively to equivalent terms in the two languages—though one may well draw the conclusion that the inclusion of this episode is ill-advised in the wider context of what appears to be his attitude to his heroine. An unsympathetic or neutral reader may view this episode as an endorsement of one of Anthony Cooper's objections to inter-racial marriage, his vision of the Chinese as uncouth and unhygienic, spitting over the balcony, stinking up the bathroom and so on.

And yet this same woman portrayed as so earthy in the matter of the chamber-pot is credited with some very sound and balanced views on mixed marriages. In Hong Kong novels, and *The Years of the Hungry Tiger* is no exception, marriage to a Western man is generally considered an unqualified boon for a Chinese woman. But the other side of the coin is presented through Tsang Ying Ling:

"What would your friends think? I am a curiosity. People in England stare at me in the street. When I go into a shop—"

"Chinese live all over this world."

"But what about *me*?" she insisted.

"Where is my culture? My people? My books? My songs? My jokes? My language? I am a yellow Englishwoman! And our children half and half . . . I disagree with you that most marriages between Chinese and

Europeans are successful. I do not think so. Because of culture. The Chinese girl is trying to be a white wife with all her husband's white friends. Conversation. Jokes. Interests." (p. 264)

Western authors writing on Chinese subjects seem to feel that the use of Chinese motifs strengthens portraiture. The motif of Hua Mulan, the woman warrior, is utilized in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. In his depiction of Ying Ling, Davis uses the poetic motif of trees with interlocking boughs to symbolize eternal love. Before a much-dreaded year-long separation Ying Ling plants two pine trees on an outlying island.

We had planted the pine-trees. Side by side all alone on the top of the ridge, so that when they grew up their branches would just touch each other. They are still there.

(p. 397)

Geoffrey Thursby's *Miller* is an altogether forgettable novel and his Chinese heroine, Tina Lau, a forgettable character. The love between the protagonist Robert Miller, a successful English businessman married to a horrendous caricature of an expatriate wife (an ex-shop-girl who once sold sausages in a chain store in London and now queens it in colonial splendour) and Tina Lau, deserted "wife" of a Chinese-American bigamist and the mother of a young daughter, is set against a background of high finance. Geoffrey Thursby was a journalist familiar with Hong Kong's business scene. His novel tries to capture the excitement of deals involving astronomical figures and dynamic Taipans, expatriate and local, male and female. To give focus to the frenetic goings-on in the world of take-over bids and white-collar treachery, Thursby centres his plot around Miller's love for Tina Lau. He commits fraud so that her daughter can have an expensive heart operation in America, but is found out and sentenced to prison. All for love. But in the clichéd ending, Chinese lover, young daughter and loyal Chinese amah are killed in a car crash on their way to visit Miller, thus making a mockery of his great sacrifice.

Tina falls far short of Suzie Wong and Tsang

Ying Ling in terms of depth of characterization, particularly as a *Chinese* character. Miller meets her at a barbecue given by an American couple, whose guests include many Americanized Chinese. He first becomes aware of her when he hears an American—and if one is thinking in terms of fictional stereotypes—a fairly “typical” American greeting her with:

“Oh, hi, Tina . . . Wow! You look something.”

Through this introduction Thursby wants to establish the character’s ravishing physical appearance. A direct description follows, with brief commentary.

Miller turned to see a tallish Chinese woman, her black hair curling up from her forehead in front, sculptured into her neck at the back, he guessed in her early thirties, a little fleshy, perhaps, but shapely, in worn, but well-cut blue jeans, and soft red silk blouse. Her skin was pale, and she had a delicate, narrow nose for a Chinese, and a broad, intelligent-looking forehead. (p. 147)

The use of commas to link the different parts of the description suggests that this is going on in Miller’s mind and that he is taking in all these features together. Like John Gordon Davis, Thursby modifies Tina’s appearance, making her appeal more Western. She is “tallish” and “had a delicate, narrow nose for a Chinese”. Tina, we learn later, is an ex-fashion model and attended a convent school. Her hair is more Vidal Sassoon than Suzie Wong, and her clothes are the epitome of Western chic. In the subsequent narration, Tina’s stylish outfits are described in what may strike many readers as excessive detail. But then Tina is an ex-fashion model and Geoffrey Thursby’s wife Marguerite, a well-known dress designer. To return to Tina’s “narrow nose”, narrow “for a Chinese”, Thursby’s misinformation concerning physical features characteristic of different regions of China is surprising. His heroine claims:

“Mother was Chiu Chow.” She touched her nose. “I got my narrow nose from her.”
(p. 152)

Few Chinese would make such a mistaken attribution. Whatever the physical characteristics ascribed to Chiu Chow (Chaozhou) people, narrow noses are not among them. In assigning such an erroneous comment to Tina, the author makes the knowledgeable reader respond to her, and to him, as frauds. And indeed, any reader responding to the portrait of Tina as a whole may feel cheated.

We are *told* that Tina is Chinese but there is little in her speech or actions to support this contention. We seem to have to take her Chinese-ness on faith. She does not seem to have a Chinese name. Once it is established that she has been educated in a convent school (the best place to learn good English, as Tina herself asserts on p. 52), her speech seems to be based on the assumption that her English is comparable to Miller’s. At least no effort is made to suggest any form of deviance or inadequacy. She speaks not just correctly, but with native fluency. The author takes pains to remind us of her ethnic origins by having her assert her Chinese-ness by occasionally giving a Chinese point of view. In response to Miller’s question of whether she liked cheese, for example, she replies,

“I adore it . . . My father used to say Chinese who don’t eat cheese could never hope to understand Westerners.” (p. 211)

“I’d like a son . . . I suppose it’s the Chinese woman in me. A Chinese woman gives her husband sons.” (p. 280)

One gets the impression that Thursby thinks he has moved away from the stereotypical Chinese heroine with pidgin English and sylph-like shape. He has even introduced a weight problem! To be fair to Thursby, he has in many respects drawn from reality. But he has moved from the Anna May Wong media stereotype to a female stereotype in the Hong Kong mode. A hyper-Westernized Hong Kong girl educated in a convent school. Speaks excellent English. Ex-model turned travel agent (other fashion or travel-oriented jobs are possibilities), dressed entirely in Western clothes, known to all (presumably even poor old monolingual great-grandmothers who sadly mispronounce it) by an English name (often of her

own devising and highly ingenious, like Harpic or Anglie or Detergent). Children with English names, as innovative as possible; proud that she has "seen to" her children's English. To the chagrin of Chinese readers Miller has based his heroine on a Hong Kong stereotype, known to local Chinese as the 書院女 or convent school girl, a type most local Chinese hold in contempt, although the description is not altogether fair. This type thrived in Hong Kong during the late-1950s through the early-1970s, and though fast becoming an anachronism, still survives. I cannot see how Tina Lau can evoke positive responses from Hong Kong readers. As for Thursby's international readers, there are so few characteristics that genuinely set Tina apart from a Western woman that rightly or wrongly there is bound to be some foiling of expectations.

New Stereotypes for Old or Old Wine in New Bottles?

In the three novels under discussion the Chinese heroines are depicted with varying degrees of loving care by their creators. Each is presented as an object of supreme love and sacrifice. In two instances narrator is fused with lover, and in the third, narrative, comment and description are given in many parts of the novel through the consciousness of the lover. On the surface, Suzie Wong follows the old stereotype most closely and in turn reinforces that stereotype in the minds of Western readers. Tsang Ying Ling and Tina Lau seem to represent conscious efforts on the part of their creators to move away from the stereotypical Chinese heroine. And yet, in all three cases, for all the details meant to give verisimilitude and individuality, such as a love of animals or of cheese, the three women share one distinct characteristic—fierce loyalty to their Caucasian lovers. They are caring and considerate, and despite the always unequal relationships in terms of material advantages, the authors take great pains to make use of incident, comment, dialogue and description to show the absolute disinterestedness of the Chinese lover where material advantage is concerned. The Western hero is loved for himself alone. Could this—now a virtual cliché in novels

of this type—be because most (in the case of the three I have discussed, all) of the authors are Western males, consciously or unconsciously giving expression to their fantasies about subservient and worshipful Oriental women? This is coupled with the fantasy that they are great white gods who dispense largesse: material, emotional, sexual. And this is the picture one tends to end up with: Western man as patron and giver. Take the following examples:

After Tina had picked up the travellers' cheques, Miller said "It's going to be cold in New York, my love. We've got to get you . . . warm clothes."

"Robert, we'll be all right."

"No," he said, "You must have warm clothes. Let's go over to the Hilton. There're some nice shops there, places like Dynasty . . ."

(pp. 297-8)

Suzie Wong is depicted as the embarrassingly grateful recipient of gifts and favours—from a pink Japanese umbrella to gifts from London for all her former "colleagues" which she dispenses with great pride as her husband, benefactor, patron and lover stands at her side beaming indulgently as one might at a clever and generous child. Tsang Ying Ling protests at the idea of McAdam's setting up a flat for her, but after some hesitation, wallows in the decadence of a "big fat bed" and a "Western bathroom" with abandon. Again the reader is presented with the picture of the generous Western lover pressing upon his reluctant Oriental mistress all the material advantages that his resources can provide. In a particularly offensive scene, we are shown Jake McAdam and Tsang Ying Ling disputing the ethics of Tsang living "like a bourgeoisie" then going "to school to teach about communism, and outside people are sleeping in the street!" (p. 259) The narrator seems unoffended by her hypocrisy: quite the contrary. And there are no authorial comments to suggest John Gordon Davis's view. The author gives another picture of Ying Ling as a tasteless and ludicrous mixture of the stereotypical Oriental sex object and sophisticated woman of the world, with a bit of her own particular ideology thrown in for good measure, and of her lover—the white man as giver.

"God, you're beautiful. I'll buy you some dresses to go with them (high-heeled shoes he has bought her)."

"No dresses. It is a waste. You only make me take them off!"

"Go and buy some dresses. I'll pay for them."

"No dresses. Small sexy things for us, okay, but not big things like dresses."

"Think big!" I said. "Think petite bourgeoisie!"

I bought her a couple of pairs of fish-net stockings and a red suspender belt. I loved to see her in such things. She had a beautiful body. She enjoyed wearing them for me, being sexy. Another time I bought her half a dozen pairs of pretty scanty panties. Some of them were hardly there at all.

"Gwailo pants!" she jiggled two pairs in front of her delighted face. "I always like barbarian pants!" Quick as a bunny she yanked up her skirt and yanked down her China Products jobs, tossed them over her shoulder and wriggled the Paris model up her lovely legs, wriggled her hips and let the elastic go with a snap. "Voila!" She tossed the skirt from side to side grinning, like a can-can girl . . ."

(pp. 272-3)

It seems that, whatever good intentions they may have, with regard to the creation of a "new" Chinese heroine, Western male writers have so far found it impossible to move away from the stereotypical Oriental siren whose only aim in life is to please Western men. *Taipan* deals with historical Hong Kong, starting from when the Chinese island became a British colony in 1841. The relationship between May May and Struan is not complicated by an ever-changing set of conditions relating to politics, economics, society, race and sex. May May is a compliant sex object who would offend any self-respecting woman, let alone a self-respecting Chinese woman. Her speech conventions alone reveal the author's attitudes and intentions. She speaks pidgin with a touch of Struan's Scottish idiom and pronunciation:

"I kowtow because you give me the hugest fantastical face on earth . . . How you

like birthday present, heya? Is that why you marry your poor old mother? . . . Yin-hsi is very accomplished. She is nice in bed?"

Struan's eyes crinkled with amusement.

"I did not make love . . ."

"What? . . . She's in your bed and you dinna make love?" (p. 683)

May May's sole purpose in life is to give Struan pleasure. In a novel about contemporary Hong Kong an author has some new premises forced upon him, and we have seen how concessions have been made, but the Western male's stereotypical concept of the Oriental mistress, I have noted, dies hard. In *The World of Suzie Wong*, set over a hundred years later, in a world where the relationships between the races and the sexes are less simplistic, the Western writer has to acknowledge the existence of educated Chinese women. But not all Western men accept such women. Richard Mason describes the following scene:

Ben (an English man of the old colonial school) rose without a word, left the house and drove down to the club. There he deliberately set about getting drunk. Soon he was joined by a ship's surveyor called Wildblood . . . who was married and had children but was reputed to sleep with his Chinese servant. Ben despised him . . . Ben noticed Wildblood's eyes follow someone across the room. He looked round. It was Moira Wong, a slim beautiful girl of twenty-six who was a qualified doctor. She had been brought in by Bill Harper, an up-and-coming young left wing politician.

"Not bad," Ben said approvingly.

Wildblood grunted, pretending to notice her for the first time. He was always at pains to conceal his interest in Chinese girls and to imply he would not touch them with a barge pole . . .

"I've never had a Chinese girl," Ben said.

"Well, keep off them. They're all gold diggers—hard as nails."

. . . Moira Wong and her companion were eating a Chinese dinner at a nearby table. Ben watched them . . . And now, as he

watched Moira Wang wiping Harper's chopsticks for him and then helping him to some choice morsel, a new truth burst upon him with a blinding flash: that oriental women had a femininity that western women had lost—that they were dedicated to building up masculinity, whereas western women were dedicated to its destruction.

(p. 94)

The author's disdain for the old colonial attitudes is made clear in the novel. The gold-digging Chinese stereotypes are indeed found throughout Hong Kong fiction in English, from bejewelled, be-Diored demanding *tai-tais* to rapacious mistresses in mink coats, and ultra-chic super-efficient lady tycoons. But these are only part of the background, the local colour. The heroine is inevitably loving and self-sacrificing, the average Western male fantasy of exotic and submissive Oriental beauty. If it is not the author's own fantasy it is a case of his pandering to those of his international male readership.

In one striking aspect there has been updating and liberalization of love relationships between Western man and Oriental woman in that the woman is no longer regarded as a poor substitute for a white woman due to the dearth of the latter in Eastern parts. Self-centred, demanding and emasculating European women, usually wives, who may be subtly or crudely depicted are often presented as foils to the self-sacrificing, lovable and lovely, submissive Chinese heroine. I have mentioned the motif of renewal through the love of a Chinese woman. The myth of the submissive Oriental woman as a desirable sex object has been updated. Today's Chinese heroines are well-educated and interesting, and make stimulating friends and companions. Generally speaking, Western male attitudes in contemporary Hong Kong fiction seem to reflect the actual situation. Dr Mildred M. McCoy's extensive research on expatriate women in Hong Kong shows that many suffer from feelings of inadequacy and insecurity

in the face of competition from the legions of dainty and attractive Chinese women.⁶

Conclusion

There is no doubt that novels with a Chinese flavour are proliferating. Hong Kong has long been a source of fascination for Westerners, and in recent years it has been much in the news. Western writers have capitalized on this potential, and novels like *Dynasty* and *Noble House* reach a vast readership. In many cases the readers have no knowledge of Hong Kong other than what is offered by the novels. Factual inaccuracies and insulting or simplistic characterization often embarrass Hong Kong Chinese readers, but more often enrage them. The better the novels sell, the more authors will rely on tried and true formulas. Certainly sex and violence are essential ingredients of the popular novel. And readers have been conditioned to expect exotic Chinese women, often involved in amorous relationships with Caucasian protagonists, to appear in novels about Hong Kong. We have seen that many authors have failed to escape from stereotypes in the presentation of these Chinese women. Often it is not for want of trying that an author fails in realistic portraiture. It has long been recognized that Chinese women characters are notoriously difficult to bring to life for Western readers. (Perhaps the same would apply to Chinese men, or indeed any "unfamiliar" or "exotic" ethnic group.) As one of his reviewers has pointed out, Anthony Cooper was probably wise in his decision to replace the more expected Chinese love interest with a voluptuous American journalist in *The Sanctuary*. Having created May May in *Taipan*, Clavell in *Noble House* eschews depiction of a major Chinese woman character.

Confronted with the barriers of both race and sex, Western male authors are *doubly* handicapped

⁶Her report has been published as a monograph, entitled *Attitudes of Expatriate Women Living in Hong Kong: Questionnaire Surveys, a Research Report* (1983), by the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong.

in their efforts to execute multi-dimensional portrayals of Chinese women. Even in Asian-American literature up to very recent times we find relatively few female characters. When one does appear she tends to lack the depth of the male characters.⁷ Ruthanne Lum McCunn's biographical portrait of Lalu Nathoy, a Chinese immigrant pioneer, in *A Thousand Pieces of Gold* (San Francisco, 1981), has been acclaimed for its sympathy and sensitivity. Here is a Chinese woman responding to another Chinese woman adapting herself to an alien world. Ruthanne McCunn is a Chinese-American with both the linguistic and literary skills to make the character come to life. It would be superfluous to labour

the point that Hong Kong Chinese women, indeed Chinese women, do not comprise a generic mass, but are individuals, though shaped by common factors and united by common concerns.

Knowledge, understanding, sympathy, artistic integrity coupled with creative skills and complete mastery of the English language would contribute towards an effective fictional presentation of Chinese women. With the possible exception of Han Suyin in *A Many Splendoured Thing*—delineating a Eurasian, not a Chinese woman—these qualifications have yet to be realized in the writers of Hong Kong fiction in English. Perhaps what we need are effective English translations of Chinese works.

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⁷Elaine H. Kim, "Asian American Writers: A Bibliographical Review", *American Studies International*, Oct. 1984, Vol. XXII No. 2, p. 63.