

Interracial Romance Revisited: Chinese Box and Tomorrow Never Dies

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Introduction

The celluloid white-Chinese romance has often exemplified the converging discourses of race, gender and culture against the contemporary geopolitical context. In the tradition of Gustave Flaubert's travel account of Egypt in 1849 and Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904), the Hollywood classic *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960, henceforth *Suzie Wong*) features a white man's privileged freedom and sensual adventures set in Hong Kong, the "free world" outpost geo-culturally affiliated to Mainland China in the post-war Western imagination. With a passing reference to China's political uncertainty, the narrative depicts Robert Lomax's romantic conquest of Suzie Wong and ends with the couple living "happily ever after" in the West. The cinematic tale has so much shaped and been reproduced in the collective Western cultural psyche that several years after its release, Ian Fleming, creator of the super-spy James Bond, was amazed at the staying power of "the Suzie Wong myth" (Fleming, 1964: 22). Played by the previously unknown Eurasian actor Nancy Kwan, Suzie has provided an enduring stereotype of Chinese womanhood and accommodated the Western patriarchal fantasy for domination over the submissive Chinese woman. As a discursive construct interwoven with multifarious social discourses, cinema contributes to the production of subject positions and the construction of cultural, racial and gendered identities for its audiences in the very process of viewing. The hierarchical and gendered relationship in the romance narrative has become an allegory of the civilized masculine Western self versus the primitive, feminine Chinese Other in the public imagination. Such a chauvinistic stance is re-appropriated three decades later in both the independent movie *Chinese Box* (1997) and the eighteenth James Bond film, *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997, henceforth *Tomorrow*), revealing that a new age of Chinese ascendancy has altered the familiar interracial romance script.

Produced in the politically sensitive time when Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony and became a Special Administration Region of China, *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* give Chinese women new roles and new significance by reconfiguring their romantic involvement with white men. Seen as "an allegorical grandchild" of *Suzie Wong* (Luk and Rice, 2002: 7), *Chinese Box* transforms the American artist Robert Lomax into British journalist John Spencer, while the refugee-prostitute Suzie Wong splits

into Mainland Chinese adventuress Vivian and disfigured street hustler Jean. Played by bankable Chinese and Hong Kong stars Gong Li (Vivian) and Maggie Cheung (Jean), the two female characters occupy a significant amount of screen time despite the central narratorial position of John. By finishing with Vivian's "rescue" of the devastated John and Jean's awakening from her infatuation with a young Briton, *Chinese Box* puts a twist ending to the classic narrative and turns the audiences' sympathy towards the white man, instead of the Chinese woman. In a similar vein, Asia's best-known female *kung fu* star Michelle Yeoh vows not to be "a Suzie Wong stereotype" upon taking the role of the Bond girl in the action thriller *Tomorrow* (Gilbey, 2009). Set against a terrorist conspiracy to provoke a Sino-British war over the handover of Hong Kong, the narrative includes a romance between the British agent and Chinese Colonel Wai Lin during their confrontation with a totalitarian media mogul. Through varied descriptions of interracial romance set in or related to Hong Kong, *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* re-negotiate with the conventional Western patriarchal fantasy of subjugating the Chinese woman. With an understanding of the limits of comparison as a retrospective critical effort to focus on the prototypical narrative pattern, I examine these three films' continuation and reconfiguration of interracial romance.

I argue that the re-writing of interracial romance in *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* signifies the re-appropriation of Western patriarchal fantasy in a postcolonial setting. As contested sites in which history, culture and ideology converge to reproduce and shape popular, complex views of western life, the two films alter the classic romance narrative of *Suzie Wong* in terms of race, gender and cultural hierarchy. While recognizing that the three films cover a variety of genres—commercial, arthouse, independent, action franchise—and each film is circumscribed by different historical, generic and production contexts, I take them as comparable in constituting a unique historical trajectory of white-Chinese interaction in popular imagination. In contrast to the submissive Suzie Wong, who is defined mainly as the white man's love object, the Chinese women in the two 1997 films demonstrate multivalent characteristics from cosmopolitan sophistication to economic shrewdness to professional expertise. Their acquisition of such "progressive" qualities, previously accorded exclusively to the white protagonist as the distinctive marker of the "advanced" West, challenges the social distinctions of conventional Western imagery. As manifested by the juxtaposition of satire and nostalgia in *Chinese Box* and the ambivalence of respecting and containing the empowered Chinese woman in *Tomorrow*, the effort to adapt the romance narrative to the postcolonial setting is often burdened with tensions. With their ambivalent moral positions, incoherent ideological stands and unexplained oddities, the two 1997 films embody a cultural document of Western imagination at the critical moment of postcolonial transition. Following the theoretical paradigm of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and adopting the analytical approaches of Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

(1975) and Gina Marchetti in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"* (1993), I explore how *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* embody the reconfiguration of Western self-perception in altered socio-historical and cultural landscapes.

***Suzie Wong* as the Classic Narrative of Interracial Romance**

The dialogic interaction between race, gender and the pursuit of selfhood in cinematic narratives of white-Chinese romance is socially constructed and historically circumscribed. The screen punishment of interracial liaisons in early Hollywood films such as *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932) exploited public fear and fascination with the transgressive desires of miscegenation (Wong, 1978). As the Chinese partner often ended up dying for his or her sexual trespass, the narratives restored the white community after the eradication of such racial "contamination." The popular aversion to interracial liaisons was rooted in European racism, which assigned colored people and women to "inferior groups" below white men in the evolutionary chain of being (Bederman, 1995: 107). The ascription of particular psychological, physical and intellectual characteristics to different peoples formulated the "scientific" foundation to legitimize real positions of social domination, as the patriarchal, heterosexual ideology created a subordinate role for women, who were subject to constant surveillance and control. Dr. Samuel George Morton's craniological discoveries and Darwin's hypothesis of biological determinism were soon appropriated to bolster white supremacist claims in justification of overseas imperial expansion (Salyer, 1995; Rothenberg, 2005), as Rudyard Kipling celebrated the British mission to civilize "those lesser breeds" and urged the U.S. to take up "the white man's burden" as a sort of noble commitment (1897, 1899). Drawing on biological, economic, linguistic, psychoanalytic and sociological approaches and institutional discourse, racial and gender distinction were fundamentally relational. White was often defined in terms of the non-white, and masculinity in terms of its apparent opposite, femininity (Gilbert, 2005: 15). The construction of exotic women from other cultures, therefore, provided an ideal site to project the fantasy of omnipotent white patriarchal power, as illustrated by the proliferation of interracial romance on Hollywood screens when the U.S. muscled its way into the international stage as a hegemonic power after World War II. In *China Gate* (1955), *Love Is A Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), *Sayonara* (1957), *The Quiet American* (1958), *China Doll* (1958) and *Suzie Wong*, the narratives described white heroes' venturing into the exotic frontiers and romantically conquering Asian women. Among them, the box-office hit *Suzie Wong* stood out as a key text providing "an enduring stereotype of Asian womanhood that persists to this day" (Kehr, 2004).

The white-Chinese romance in *Suzie Wong* demonstrates the complicated dynamics among race, gender and the reinvention of American selfhood in the post-war world. The film was produced amid nationwide

complacency about American superiority and the growing mass appeal of racial and gender equality, which initiated the "great transformation" of the American political universe in creating new collective identities (Omi and Winant, 1994: 95). Adapted from British novelist Richard Mason's 1957 bestseller, the film adjusts the story to suit American production. For instance, the righteous Lomax is no longer British but American, while a hypocritical American in the novel, Rodney Tessler, is transformed into an alcoholic British businessman, Ben, who sexually exploits Suzie. Reversing the book's favorable accounts of the British presence in Hong Kong, the film applauds American superiority over British colonial rulers by featuring Robert's chivalrous redemption of Suzie Wong, an orphaned Chinese refugee surviving through prostitution, who is brutalized regularly by her white sailor-clients. The narrative ambivalence of condemning colonial racism and reaffirming white patriarchal authority makes the film an interesting site to examine the formulation of the American self in relation to the Chinese Other.

The American hero's fascination with Chinese life and indignation against British exploitation underwrite the romance plotline. Bored by the routines of quotidian life in the U.S., Robert comes to Hong Kong in search of exotic aestheticism. In a famous three-minute-long travelogue sequence, point-of-view shots capture people eating with chopsticks in the open market and a snake curling around a man's neck, convincing the audiences about the "primitiveness" of Chinese life. Thanks to the U.S. policy of using the port of Hong Kong as a rest-and-recreation oasis during the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (approximately 1959-1975), the red-light districts frequented by white sailors look like "a wildly liberated Las Vegas" (Draft Contingency, 1967: 6). The spectacle of sexual promiscuity and racial mixture in seedy bars is presented as a diversion from "civilized" Western tedium and rejuvenates the world-weary Robert. The liberal-minded artist also notices the British rulers' "illegitimate" usurpation of economic and social privileges in Hong Kong (Memmi, 1967: 9), as the subhuman existence of Chinese refugees penned into shanty squatter huts or teen prostitutes plying their trade at the pier contrasts with the luxurious white-only banquet held by the British banker, O'Neill. Invited by potential love interest Kaye O'Neill, Robert is impressed by the host's tale about a non-existent Chinese brother-in-law, a story that embarrasses the guests in their haughty dismissal of the Chinese. Robert compliments O'Neill for his gallant disruption of European racism, ignores the Briton's advice to avoid mixing with the Chinese so as to be accepted by his "own people," and befriends the Chinese prostitutes by escorting Gwenny into the bar, changing money for Minni Ho and battling a brutal sailor in revenge for Suzie. Compared to the British rulers' indulgence in their expatriate enclaves, Robert crosses racial and cultural boundaries to reach the local community with the guidance of Suzie.

Robert's romantic involvement with Suzie exemplifies his denunciation of colonial racism. Victimized by circumstances, Suzie is a Chinese version of the Hollywood "whore with a heart of gold." Her uncorrupted innocence and helplessness arouses Robert's chivalrous desire. For instance, when the illiterate Suzie points randomly at a menu and orders cherry flip and vinaigrette in a fancy restaurant where Robert brings her for a treat, Robert gallantly joins in and orders the same to the disgust of a British waiter, and Suzie's insistence upon drinking the salad dressing so as not to waste money leads to Robert's hearty laughter. As a loving paternal figure pampering his spoiled child, Robert intervenes to rescue Suzie from social embarrassment. In another scene, Ben, the British businessman who "rents" Suzie as a mistress, asks for Robert's help to relieve himself of the Chinese burden. Robert responds in sarcastic indignation, "We know she isn't *really* a human being so she couldn't *possibly* have any feelings" (my italics). Struck by such cruel exploitation of Suzie, Robert gallantly offers to take care of the downtrodden Chinese woman. To solve their financial problems, Robert is even ready to give up his artistic pursuit for a "safer" job in the bank. When the hypocritical O'Neill reminds Robert that his bank would not employ a westerner who marries a Chinese, Robert realizes that the British are too racially obsessed to understand his committed love towards Suzie. Walking away from the "hermetic and homogenous space" of the O'Neill mansion to the distress of the lovelorn Kaye, Robert declares his distaste for British racism and identifies with "the chaos and poverty of Hong Kong and Suzie" (Gan, 2008: 14). Since the film implies Suzie's departure for the U.S. and concludes with Robert's marriage proposal, the last shot of the couple holding hands and walking off towards the horizon suggests the staple Hollywood romantic "happily ever after" ending. Revising previous cinematic punishment of interracial liaison, *Suzie Wong* offers a rather affirmative portrayal of white-Chinese romance in accordance with America's contemporary trend of racial tolerance. The film's depiction of interracial mixing set outside American territory not only serves as Hollywood's attempt to approach the social taboo of black-white romance with a distancing narrative strategy (Marchetti, 1993: 6), but also justifies the U.S. global aspirations in a "positive" way as being more flexible and humane in its treatment of the Chinese woman.

In an allegorical narrative of hegemonic succession to replace the old colonial power, the American hero rescues the Chinese woman from British colonialism and assumes the role of protector. Robert claims authority over Suzie due to his privileged historical, economic and cultural position. Legitimized in the hierarchical relationship of artist and model, Robert regulates Suzie's sensual image as a bride in antique finery, while Suzie is deprived of autonomy and reduced to an exotic object pandering to the patronizing male gaze. Her objection to the canvas portrait is brushed aside by Robert: "[I]t's what *I think* you look like" (my italics). When Suzie attempts to appear "civilized" by dressing up as a western

lady, the infuriated Robert literally strips her and yells that she has turned herself into "a cheap European streetwalker" with no idea about "real beauty." The sudden outburst of rage unveils Robert's psychological anxiety to enforce patriarchal authority over the Chinese woman, and he punishes the "transgressive" Suzie with a sense of entitlement to shelter the native woman from corrupting Western influences. Since Robert alone is granted the power to determine the "truth" for the Chinese woman who is "unable" to understand her situation, the narrative fastens Suzie in her "truly oriental" position awaiting Western redemption (Kabbani, 1986: 11). To foreground Robert's paternalistic chivalry, Suzie is allowed to display only her primitiveness and pathos, as demonstrated by her proud claim of being a rich "virgin," a hair-pulling scuffle with other prostitutes and clumsy imitation of western etiquette.

The construction of the submissive Chinese woman further sustains Western masculinity in response to the burgeoning feminist movement in the U.S. The film portrays Suzie as the incarnation of "ideal femininity," something the modern Western women "supposedly lost by their grumblings about emancipation" (Marchetti, 1993: 135). In the love triangle linking Kaye, Suzie and Robert, the Chinese woman triumphs and leaves the relatively independent white woman fuming with jealousy and frustration. As daughter and secretary of the British banker, Kaye participates in public life, feels free to enjoy her prerogatives and takes the initiative to approach Robert. Nonetheless, her sexual assertiveness and economic autonomy challenges the conventional patriarchal ideology. Since massive transformation of social structures in the 1950s, especially women's progress toward greater equality, created a crisis in both the meaning and the practice of manhood in the U.S. (Kimmel, 1995; Gilbert, 2005), the screen image of Suzie accommodates the patriarchal fantasy of female passivity and submission to male domination. Willing to sacrifice herself to fund Robert's artistic pursuit, Suzie resembles a childlike innocent imbued with an innate understanding of servitude. That Robert prefers Suzie to be his marital partner functions to diffuse the threat posed by the surging women's movement in the U. S.

The promotion of racial harmony and female submission in *Suzie Wong* feeds into efforts to create a distinct post-war American cultural identity. The slight hint of boredom with the uneventful American life at the beginning of the film is soon dissolved in Robert's uncontested authority and moral superiority to influence events in Hong Kong. Since the Chinese are understood as "available for and in need of" the "benign and beautifying intervention" from the U.S. (Pratt, 1992: 205), Robert assumes the heroic role of a "white knight" whose romantic conquest of Suzie simultaneously condemns British colonialism and reaffirms Western dominance over Hong Kong. The classic romance narrative of *Suzie Wong*, echoing Henry Kissinger's characterization of U.S. involvement in the Indochina wars as "testing our manhood in Asia" (Ong, 1999: 190),

manifests a youthful optimism in America's post-war encounter with the eastern land. Three decades later, the iconic figure of Suzie Wong came into the limelight again as she was repeatedly mentioned in the commemorative issues produced by *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Far Eastern Economic Review* about Hong Kong's change of sovereignty. As an historic manifestation of China's burgeoning power in the global arena, China's reclaiming of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 tends to evoke "a secret longing for disaster" as "a dramatic news sequel to the Tiananmen Square episodes" in the West (Yau, 2001: 16-17).

Between Subversion and Nostalgia: Interracial Romance in *Chinese Box*

Overshadowed by a number of fundamental ideological clashes such as "colonialism vs. nationalism, capitalism vs. communism and East vs. West" (Pan et al., 1999: 99), the transformation of Hong Kong elicited widespread suspicion in the West. In contrast to Chinese pride as the ceding of Hong Kong marked China's "Century of Humiliation" after the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1858), the Western media often saw Hong Kong as "an accidental or intentional victim of Big Brother next door" in the years leading up to 1997 (Leung and Cheng, 1997: 19). The pervasive Western anxiety about Hong Kong's post-1997 future was deepened after the Chinese government's suppression of demonstrators at the Tian'anmen Square in 1989, and the particular concern with freedom at Hong Kong's decolonization exemplified the collective yearning to reaffirm Western moral supremacy at China's rise. The growing sense of unease over the receding of the Western powers underpinned the multifarious Western discourses about the implications of the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong. In pulp fiction such as *Black Wind Blowing* (1990), *1997: A Conspiracy to Destroy Hong Kong* (1992) and *Nightmare Syndrome* (1997), the reiterated narrative of Hong Kong's gloomy future seemed to romanticize its "good old days" under British rule. Popular Western assumptions held that most Hong Kong people must have been morally improved and edified through their participation in the colony's politics (Spurr, 1993: 32-33). Equating their acceptance of the colonial system to a moral identification with the basic values of the West, these assumptions surmised that Hong Kong people would not tolerate China's rule. The projection seemed consolidated by the media coverage of the mass exodus of middle-class Hong Kong people to overseas regions. The exaggerated anticipation of violent revolt prompted Western reporters to pick on "the smallest details in a militant goading-on of so-called democracy" despite the rather peaceful handover (Chow 1998: 4). When the Hong Kong-born American director Wayne Wang came to his homeland to film *Chinese Box* in January 1997, he observed that "there [we]ren't any police cracking heads of protesters" (Faison 1997).

Capitalizing on worldwide excitement about the handover of Hong Kong, *Chinese Box* strives to construct a new narrative of interracial romance. With hand-held camerawork and an improvised script to incorporate events during the last days of British rule, the film describes John's desperate pursuit of Vivian and Jean's disillusionment about her "white knight." Showing the conventional narrative to be a Western patriarchal construct, the film rewrites the hierarchies of gender, race and colonial domination. According to Wayne Wang, *Chinese Box* attempts to make a "contemporary" and "realistic version" of interracial romance to differentiate from the "outdated" and "unbelievable" portrayal in *Suzie Wong* (Cheng, 1997). On the other hand, the film's "gendered and orientalized representations of Hong Kong" is considered to be "highly ideological" and "problematic" (Luk and Rice, 2002: 85-86). Following the Hollywood convention in structuring the narrative from the perspective of a white man, the film grants John a central narratorial position despite his waning power in commanding the situation. This predefined ideological positioning is symptomatic of the film's vacillation in reconfiguring the romance narrative, as Wayne Wang admits his "great sense of loss" for the departure of the British in this cinematic "love-hate letter" addressed to his homeland (Sherman, 1998). The complicated sentiments of nostalgia, uncertainty, sarcasm and admiration converge into the romance narrative of *Chinese Box*.

Chinese Box largely subverts the fantasy of white patriarchal hegemony in a different Hong Kong. No longer simply an exotic locale offering romantic relaxation to white men, Hong Kong becomes a modern, robust metropolis. The camera shots of the city's landmark high-rise buildings and multinational inhabitants as well as its ghettos and down-market brothels are accentuated by the soundtrack of a Tibetan-style song, Screaming Jay Hawkins' pop hit and the recurrent systolic-diastolic noise of the pile driver. The unyielding urban heartbeat and the stylish audio-visual complexity create a hypnotic atmosphere of Hong Kong as crowded, noisy and restless. According to John, the financial journalist residing in Hong Kong for fifteen years, the city is "an honest whore" whose perpetual pursuit of wealth would not be thwarted by the handover, but be manipulated by "a new pimp" upon the handover. Indeed, the film's multinational businessmen are more obsessed with commercial prospects in affiliation with the vibrant Chinese economy than with resisting Chinese communism. Fed up with the money-hungry Westerners and their convenient political indignations, John nonetheless describes Hong Kong's last colonial days as "Pompeii before Vesuvius" in anticipation of some sort of violence before the Chinese takeover. John's cynical ambivalence is underpinned by mixed sentiments of nostalgia and impotence. Despite his assigned vantage position in command of the narrative, John is constantly ineffectual in his romantic pursuit of Vivian and journalistic inquiry of Jean.

The John-Vivian romance illustrates the white man's frustration at his receding dominance. At the beginning of the film, John's tender touch of Vivian's picture is paralleled by CNN news clips of boatloads of Britons leaving Hong Kong after the termination of their special privileges. Having written a book, *How to Make Money in Asia*, admired by his fellow expatriates, John nonetheless feels alienated from the local reality as an outsider. Haunted by self-pity upon learning of his impending death, John quits his job and sees Vivian as his last hope of redemption. Vivian, on the other hand, does not respond to the lovelorn John despite their previous romantic involvement in Beijing. Probably an exiled Tian'anmen dissident with the hope of marrying Chang, a prestigious local businessman, Vivian works as a bar hostess under his patronage and socializes with people of power and wealth. Set amid the excitement of developing the China connection, John's unrequited love towards Vivian is marginalized by the political and economic vicissitudes. When he asks Vivian to marry him out of an instant urge to cling to something "real" and "concrete," she turns down his proposal with a friendly hug, reminding him that nothing is stable in a place like Hong Kong. Compared with Suzie's subservient gratitude for Robert's marriage proposal, the world-weary Vivian does not see John as a powerful Western savior who can exempt her of troubles. Her preference for Chang as an appropriate marital partner signifies a pragmatic concern to assimilate into local society rather than to count on a westerner. Given his allegorical role as a dying man afflicted with leukemia in a Hong Kong where British rule is fading, John is marginalized in his own story of romance as a chronicler of past imperial glory.

Western patriarchal power is further undermined in John's futile intervention to condemn Chang's sexual exploitation of Vivian. Upon learning of her shady past in prostitution to make "useful contacts" for Chang's business expansion, John brandishes the pictorial evidence, calls Chang a "pimp" and provokes him into a fight in Vivian's gilded club. John's gallant impulse leads to Vivian's public humiliation and his own expulsion from the bar. Reminiscent of a jealous loser rather than a chivalrous protector, John's defense of Vivian loses much of its impact as she is an accomplice at the high end of the commercial sex trade in exchange for financial security. If Suzie is largely a victim subordinated by the circumstances of her time, Vivian has access to decision-making capacity and chooses to incorporate herself into the sex industry. When John comes to Vivian for forgiveness, the cinematography reduces him to the margin of the frame, obscured in an implication of his downgraded power to command the situation. Saying "I don't want a friend like you" without turning around to look at John, Vivian remains engrossed in her own world of smoking, drinking and pantomiming the classic western courtesan played by Marlene Dietrich. Projecting herself onto the American icon of glamorous sophistication and languid sensuality, Vivian seeks to transform her victimization into a source of power.

Vivian's rejection subverts the conventional fantasy of rescuing the Chinese woman. Since his intervention to help Vivian is unappreciated, John's presence in Hong Kong is rendered almost superfluous. If Robert's patriarchal authority is enhanced through his cross-cultural ventures in 1960, John is deprived of such heroic aura at the moment of cultural transition. John's endeavor to engage with the social and political concerns of Hong Kong people is confronted with constant refusals. From a group of elderly people playing *mahjong* to an underground workshop pirating famous brands to the off-duty prostitutes enjoying their leisure time, the local community is absorbed in its own world with little interest in his quests. As all the parties involved take their share of the allotted benefits in the economic transaction of global capitalism, John's moral indignation is marginalized as an inconvenient nuisance. In the diegetic world consisting of local entrepreneurs, suave Chinese dignitaries, international business opportunists, multiethnic prostitutes and their pimp-managers, the circulation of money, power and sexuality leaves little space for John's romantic pursuit. Even when Vivian breaks up with the unworthy Chang, her first choice is to return to prostitution rather than to seek salvation from John. Compared to the redeeming power of romance in *Suzie Wong*, which provides a neat resolution of individual and social crises, the romantic quest in *Chinese Box* is rather vulnerable in the filmic world dominated by trade and commerce. John's romantic dream is barely sustainable but for Vivian's friendship, sympathy and perhaps love.

The fulfillment of the John-Vivian romance is fabricated as the last souvenir of colonial memory. With the knowledge of John's impending death from a mutual friend, Vivian takes the initiative to mend her relationship with John. Accentuated by music about a traveler's broken dream in "the borderland," John sits alone near a busy street and looks stranded in the throng of people. At a touch upon his shoulder, the incapacitated John turns around to look and reclines back upon someone with a relieved sigh, and the camera tilts up to reveal Vivian. The "magical" touch from Vivian brightens up his remaining days after she comes to cohabit with him. The two lost souls manage to find love and companionship as they make love in the rented apartment or chase each other in the street. Nonetheless, the romantic episodes emerge rather late in the narrative and are overshadowed by John's imminent death. Towards the end of his life, John identifies his gratitude towards Vivian in a handwritten note saying "out of your life *you give me a moment*, make sure that [...] this tick of our lifetime's one moment *you love me*" (italics mine). In this farewell letter of love, the linguistic positioning of John as the passive object suggests his consciousness of himself as a fading passerby in the woman's life. His humble recognition that Vivian's love is only "a moment" illustrates a rather desperate psychological need to seek recognition to justify his value of existence. Simultaneous to John's melancholy gaze at the lowering of the Union Jack, he clings to Vivian's offer of tenderness to postpone the panic of decay. With the loss of his

privileged historical and moral position in Hong Kong, John attempts to embrace the particular moment of romance as the last memorable piece at the sunset of the British Empire. As John lies down against the ebbing tides with the video camera positioned to capture his last moments as "the closing chapter of his autobiography and of Hong Kong's pre-postcolonial history" (Wang, 2000), the film ends with Vivian wandering in the market. While she stares at the still-beating heart of a disemboweled fish, her voiceover narration says in Chinese, "Like the city, I have to start over again." The parallel stories between Vivian's subsequent life without John and Hong Kong's postcolonial future are concluded in the city's unyielding urban heartbeat of the pile driver. According to Iska Alter, the conflation of the city and the woman suggests "an open-ended gesture of renewal [...] now ostensibly free of one imperial presence, in any case, as another ordinary day begins" (2002: 109).

The rewriting of the classic romance narrative is marked by nostalgia at Hong Kong's decolonization. The subversion of the white patriarchal domination blends with the mourning of the passage of the colonial era. Peeling off the heroic masculinity accorded to Robert in the 1960s, John is a wanderer lost in an alien land with no real "home" to which to attach himself. His waning influence on the colonial situation is demonstrated by the lack of meaningful interaction with local communities as well as the loss of control over his life and emotions. On the other hand, the narrative is burdened by its often-slippery identificatory positions. Starting with John's voice-over narration and ending with Vivian's statement in Chinese, the film vacillates between ridiculing white patriarchal fantasy and acknowledging the humanistic concerns of the white man. By arranging Vivian's cohabitation with John, the art film pays homage to the Hollywood classic and engages viewers' expectations of the white-Chinese romance by rearticulating the ideological message of the benign nature of the Western presence in Hong Kong.

A more direct subversion of the romance myth is unveiled by the resilient Jean, whose scarred face functions as a signifier of the devastating colonial romance. The Jean-John interaction is prescribed by the interwoven discourses of capitalist transaction and the demise of white patriarchal supervision. In her naked monetary pursuit, whether by hawking fake Rolexes or offering to pimp for Western tourists, Jean represents the grand local narrative of material progress. Populated by successive generations of immigrants from China or from other places seeking shelter and fortunes, Hong Kong often turns away from politics and reinvents itself economically with acrobatic grace. Depicted as one of the local urbanites with little enthusiasm in politics, Jean responds to John's inquiry of "freedom": "What's free? My coffee would be free if you paid for it." John's persistent quest for freedom shows his eagerness to seek some local identification with the "superior" Western logic partly out of frustration with their rather "passive" acceptance of the Chinese

takeover. Jean, on the other hand, confronts the Western bourgeois fantasy of liberal humanism and turns down the interview offer, saying: "I *don't want* to tell you" and "I have no time for *that*" (italics mine). Having lured John into paying for the coffee and striding away from his haunting camera gaze, Jean refuses to play the role of a native informant at this stage.

The initial resistance soon yields to the paramount financial pursuit as Jean approaches John to sell her story. Under the particular condition that she will take the video camera and determine what to say, Jean denies her assigned role as merely an interesting object. According to Yiman Wang, Jean's "usurpation" of the white man's camera is underpinned by "several layers of tensions concerning ethnic, gender and colonial politics" (2000). Assuming exclusive domination over her story in defiance of Western supervision, Jean becomes at once its object and agent. In this colonial male-female encounter, power momentarily shifts ground and strays into the hands of the Chinese woman. Yet the power to speak for herself does not necessarily lead to self-emancipation, nor does it subvert cultural stereotypes. In the finished videotapes, Jean appropriates the camera to photograph herself from the unscarred side and tells her "autobiographical" accounts with increasing excitement. The lurid tales, from her childhood rape by a drunken father to the scam prostitution to her castration of a sadistic policeman, sound like a tabloid thriller story and dumbfound John. Understanding perfectly his voyeuristic interest in her scar, Jean finishes her monologue abruptly, "here is what I have to say about that [scar]: *nothing*" (italic mine). As her blown-up face stares at the camera in a blunt refusal of the white man's quest, John has to confess his limited knowledge about the native woman. At this allegorical postcolonial moment of turning "the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (Bhabha, 1994: 112), John's cross-cultural endeavor is frustrated by the darkness and mystery of the eastern land. In the tactful dissipation of her pains through layers of deceptions, Jean both imitates and deviates from her Hollywood predecessor Suzie. If Suzie maintains self-respect by pretending to be a rich virgin, Jean seizes upon her victimized status to fabricate sensational tales for Western consumption. Compared to Suzie's revelation of her pains to the trustworthy Robert, Jean is reluctant to unveil the true source of her trauma and sees John as just one of the curious Western dupes to be manipulated. Only at John's collapse does the streetwise Jean drop her capitalistic logic momentarily and recount the story about her English boyfriend William.

Presented in a series of interludes between the tortured John-Vivian romance, Jean's tragic story reads like a variation of the Madame Butterfly story. As William's father is required to sign a contract forbidding their relationship with the Chinese upon taking a high-ranking job in Hong Kong, the son's romance with the 16-year-old Chinese girl becomes a scandal for the white family. In line with what the hypocritical O'Neill

would do in *Suzie Wong*, the father forges a letter to break up the romance and sends his son away. Jean is shattered by William's "betrayal," attempts suicide and gets defaced. Living on the edge of the city's wealth, Jean clings to the dream of someday marrying William to achieve class mobility and financial success in the colonized society. Sympathetic to her situation, John manages to arrange a meeting between the couple, yet Jean finds out that William does not even remember her. Slapping the unworthy "white knight," Jean runs away in tears in a rare manifestation of fragility. Jean's painful awakening from her infatuation with the Western lover-rescuer is often deemed allegorical to the love-hate relationship between Hong Kong and the British colonial rule, as illustrated by the thwarted hope that Britain would grant the right of abode in the United Kingdom to the people of Hong Kong (O'Sullivan, 1998). Struggling to overcome the colonial trauma for a postcolonial future, a revitalized Jean is seen hustling the street to sell cans of "last colonial air" on the eve of the handover, while John stands aloof and watches the crowd with a sense of alienation. Despite his sympathetic intervention in the Jean-William relationship, John is ultimately rendered as out of touch and out of date. Jean, on the other hand, is depicted as a survivor bearing the indelible scar of colonial damage.

Chinese Box is thus charged with the aura of colonial nostalgia and postcolonial subversion of the white patriarchal fantasy. The white man's emotional crisis and physical decline intermingle with the Chinese women's quest for economic and spiritual independence. Not to be defined solely through the patriarchal lens, the adventurous Vivian and Jean seek their fortunes in the commodity chain of global capitalism. Compared to Suzie's eventual redemption in the West, the two Chinese women survive the traumatic interracial romances and take control over their destinies beyond Western desires and knowledge. The romance narrative of *Chinese Box*, often deflected by a palpable sense of loss, exhibits a certain inadequacy to contain the individual autonomy of Chinese women. The cinematic construction of these female characters is evidence of the West's changing perception of China, whose rise both challenges and offers new opportunities for the West.

The combined sentiments of guarding against and cooperating with China recur in the depiction of a more promising interracial relationship in the Bond franchise. Compared to the overarching framework of interracial romance in the art-independent film *Chinese Box*, the romance plotline of *Tomorrow* is just a subtext prescribed by formulaic narratives and familiar characters of Bond series. Yet for their intriguing presentation of the white-Chinese interaction at Hong Kong's cultural transition, I consider them comparable in terms of rewriting the classic romance narrative. In the film, set amid the international tensions of the Hong Kong handover when a British warship is mysteriously destroyed in Chinese waters, James Bond teams up with the Chinese Colonel Wai Lin to maintain world

peace. The film's engagement of interracial romance is subject to the ambivalent Western perception of China's ascendancy.

Romance with a Comrade

Created at the height of U.S.-Soviet tensions, the popular espionage series of James Bond was often set against the backdrop of Cold War conflicts. The narratives portray the gentleman warrior, backed up by a powerful British-American alliance and equipped with magical weaponry, venturing into exotic lands to save the world from the grip of evil masterminds (Lindner, 2003). Applauded as "a truly Anglo-American hero" and "an overly confident, elite white playboy" (Ginneken, 2007: 158), Bond's exceptional valor in triumphing over the villains is matched only by his prowess as a lover. As illustrated by the cosmopolitan Bond incarnations on screens from the 1960s to the 1990s, his entanglements with exotic women are both accepted and expected. As a romantic appendix attached to his noble missions, Bond often has sex with various local women and dismisses them afterwards as passing love interests. As illustrated by the distinctive title sequences in which silhouettes of naked girls perform acrobatics and the formulaic ending of Bond's conquest of a beauty, the films often depict women as erotic prey captured by the hyper-masculine hero. On the other hand, the much-disputed misogynist tradition and the Cold War framework of the Bond films are subject to qualification in accordance with contemporary political and gender ideologies. After the comparative box-office failure of *Licence to Kill* (1989), the producers sought to reinvent Bond for the audiences by casting Pierce Brosnan in *GoldenEye* (1995). The filmmakers further brought in Dame Judi Dench to play Bond's supervisor as the brand-new female M. Her blunt statement of Bond as a "sexist, misogynist dinosaur, a relic of the Cold War" both acknowledges the genre's "guilty appeal" in an era of "political correctness" and suggests the reconfiguration of its gender politics (Comentaleet al., 2005: xvii). Such narrative shifts in response to the criticism of male chauvinism and the passing of the Cold War is fully exemplified in *Tomorrow*, whose pre-credit sequence implies UK-Russian cooperation in destroying a terrorist arms bazaar on the border of Afghanistan under M's supervision.

The film situates its action romance amid increasing Sino-British tensions on the eve of the Hong Kong handover. The anticipation of turbulence in Hong Kong is echoed by the undercurrent sour-bitterness in *Chinese Box*, in which John and his reporter friend grumble about the lack of newsworthy tragic events at the fairly peaceful changeover. The implicit Western expectation for some sort of violence during China's claim of domination over Hong Kong also constitutes the dramatic background for another Hollywood thriller, *Hong Kong 97* (1994), in which a white corporate assassin murders a Chinese diplomat who would take charge of Hong Kong the next day. A similar mindset informs the first draft of

Tomorrow's script, in which European terrorist Elliot Carver intends to destroy Hong Kong rather than hand it over to China. This plotline was dropped when the film consultant, veteran American statesman Henry Kissinger, warned that if something actually did occur during the handover in real life, the film (which was set to open a few months later) would look ridiculous (Anonymous, n.d.). The provocative impact of the quasi-nationalist confrontation was finally replaced with the story of Carver plotting to set up a media empire with "exclusive broadcasting rights in China for the next hundred years." The lament of the fading Western hegemony in Hong Kong at the end of colonial rule is further illustrated by Carver's sensational newspaper headline "The Empire Will Strike Back" after implementing the conspiracy plan to ignite Sino-British conflicts at the Hong Kong handover. In a sense the film both indulges in and contains the Western bitterness at the loss of power by transferring the imperial logic to a terrorist-magnate of German nationality. In a scene when Lin rushes forward to attack Carver but backs off at gunpoint, the evil mastermind parodies Bruce Lee's kicks and shrill scream, looks at the Chinese woman with contempt, and dismisses her as "pathetic." Bolstered by advanced weaponry and assuming a grandiose role as the shaper of history, Carver manifests an imperial racist stance and is punished for such political incorrectness in the subsequent narrative. A "demonic hybrid" of Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch (Pomerance, 2004: 175), Elliot Carver is constructed as the new sinister adversary to be warded off by the east-west union. Although Bond and the Chinese agent appear to be "strange bedfellows" (Marchetti, 2006: 1), they join hands to make the world safe for the peaceful transfer of Hong Kong.

Lin's role as the white man's worthy counterpart challenges the clichéd oriental submissiveness. Given a fair amount of screen time paired with the hero, the powerful role is specially designed for the *kung fu* star Michelle Yeoh, famous for performing her own stunts in Hong Kong martial arts films (Lii, 1997). Having increasing control of her screen persona in Hollywood, Yeoh takes proper precautions against the Suzie Wong stereotype in a new cultural milieu. During China's rise in the post-Cold War era, Yeoh's assigned role as a secret agent of the Chinese government is depicted in a mostly positive light. Different from the subservient Suzie or the materialistic Vivian and Jean, Lin is a cool-minded professional disguised as a cosmopolitan journalist. During their first encounter at the inauguration ceremony of Carver's Global Satellite Network, Lin diverts the tycoon's attention from social talk with Bond via her resourceful flirtation. Previously standing behind Bond as an out-of-focus figure, Lin steps forward to the foreground of the frame, and the camera shifts from Bond to concentrate on the gorgeous-looking woman. Just as Bond resorts to his masculine charm to seduce Carver's wife for information, Lin utilizes her sexuality to approach the media magnate for espionage purposes. When they bump into each other during their investigation at the villain's headquarters, Lin runs away by walking

vertically on the rooftop via a special gadget and waves a naughty goodbye, to the displeasure of Bond, who is left to combat the armed guards alone. As the apt match of Bond in her expertise of high-tech weaponry, quick intelligence and charismatic sexuality, Lin appears as more a rival than a love interest. Set against the escalating tensions between China and Britain plotted by the techno-terrorists, the initial reserve between Bond and Lin in their espionage missions demonstrates a mutual suspicion.

The Lin-Bond interaction is often underwritten by the fluctuating geopolitical relationship between China and the West. Making their death-defying escape from Carver's Vietnam bureau through a series of explosive chases, the accidental allies, attached by handcuffs, struggle over steering a motorbike. Their disagreement upon turning "left" or "right" implies some ideological differences between a Western agent and a Communist woman. Reluctant to follow Bond's lead, Lin refuses his flirtatious proposal of teamwork to confront the common enemy. The woman's reserve towards Bond corresponds to a certain degree to the real-life geopolitical situation, since the long-held western nagging of China's lack of transparency is echoed by China's suspicion about hostile western penetration. The constructive partnership is achieved only when they liberate themselves from the grip of ideological confines and national allegiances. During their sailing mission to destroy the villain's stealth ship, Lin jokes about her cooperation with "the decadent agent of a corrupt Western power" and apologizes for disappointing Bond without "a Little Red Book," while Bond laughs at the Western cliché that "Communists don't know how to have fun." The description of Lin as an open-minded woman with a sense of irony, contradictory to the message that "no Orientals are to be trusted" in the fifth Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1967), rewrites the stereotypes of the slogan-spouting Communist woman cadres. The friendly bantering not only neutralizes their ideological differences but also humanizes their interaction under the aegis of cross-cultural understanding. In their good-humored parody of the clichéd propaganda phrases, they formulate a certain camaraderie as China and the West strive for strategic collaboration against terrorism, which replaces Communism as the globe's scourge in the post-Cold War era. According to Sheldon Lu, the tale of an encounter between Bond and a Chinese agent "heals an old wound between China and the West and offers an imaginary solution to potential future conflicts" (2001: 22). The camaraderie-romance between Bond and Lin recollects the sophisticated Western perception of China's rise in the postcolonial and post-Cold War era.

Out of a shared interest in maintaining the existing world order, Bond manages to form an alliance with Lin by readjusting his stance. When Lin finally agrees to reciprocate military and intelligence sharing, she clicks a button and turns a ghetto house in Vietnam into a Chinese safe house

furnished with satellite networks, advanced weaponry and oriental-style gadgets, to Bond's amazement. At Bond's remark on China's piracy of a German-made Walther gun, Lin snaps coolly, "we've made some improvements." Eager to retain the upper hand, Bond assumes a commanding position in front of the control panel and asks Lin to do the errands, and she steps aside and chuckles at the dumbfounded Bond facing a computer keyboard of *red* Chinese characters. The revelation of Bond's limited power over Chinese language, contradictory to his claim of mastering several eastern languages in *You Only Live Twice*, demonstrates that the white hero is losing ground in terms of global governance and as an extension of his masculine autonomy. If the exaltation of Bond as a globetrotter with extraordinary talents and "a license to kill" embodies the British Empire's once-glorious power, the ridiculing of such chauvinism in *Tomorrow* suggests a critical stance towards the self-assumed righteousness at the postcolonial moment, since China's technological innovation disrupts Arnold Toynbee's binary demarcation between the mechanical "penchant" of Westerners and the aesthetic or religious penchant of other cultures (1987: 242). As the magical espionage equipment is deemed indispensable to Bond's triumph over the world, Lin's mastery of the high-tech weaponry undermines the very foundation of Western masculinity. The correlation between the Chinese woman and modern technology challenges the well-established Western patriarchal authority over the Chinese woman in *Suzie Wong*. If Robert is justified to punish Suzie for her "transgressive" adoption of a Western dress in the 1960s, Bond is restrained from such patriarchal hegemony and seeks to cooperate with Lin with mixed feelings of anxiety and admiration.

To reconcile the contradiction between the white patriarchal power and the threat posed by the racial and cultural other, the narrative relocates the Chinese woman within the romance framework. Since the Bond series often opens and ends with the hero's sexual conquest of beauties, the paradigmatic objectification of women constitutes a key segment in manufacturing Bond's masculinity. In the opening sequence of *You Only Live Twice*, set in Hong Kong, Bond kisses a half-naked woman in bed and concludes that Chinese girls "taste different" from all other girls like "Peking duck is different from Russian caviar." Such a sexist remark of savoring the Chinese woman as an exotic delicacy is transformed into a more sophisticated manifestation in *Tomorrow*. In a contrived streetside shower scene, the camera rotates around to capture Bond's muscles and Lin's shapely body contours. The sensual objectification of Lin's body is nonetheless disrupted by her cool reminding to Bond (and audiences) not to "get any ideas" in a semi-flirtatious denial of the lustful male gaze. The mismatch between visual and audio cues exemplifies the film's ambivalence in positioning the woman in the macho tradition of Bond films. To construct a Chinese woman of intellectual and technological prowess and to subject her to the charm of Western masculinity recalls

the film's ideological maneuvering to conform to the popular imagination. Based on a tacit agreement between filmmakers and audiences, the narrative conclusion contains Lin in the conventional male-centered, heterosexual spy genre.

In the last combat sequence, the Chinese woman is largely deprived of physical prowess and reduced to Bond's affiliate. As Carver wants to show off his power to launch a "new world order" in front of "an audience," Lin is captured, disarmed and restrained to witness his evil accomplishment. Her escape and single-handed destruction of the engine room is soon curtailed by her second seizure by a henchman as bait to trap Bond. When Lin is dropped into the sea in steel shackles, Bond dives underwater to provide the drowning woman a life-giving kiss. The camera rotates around the embracing couple in slow motion against the booming music in the soundtrack, adding a sensational moment of *Titanic*-style romance to the action thriller. With the final shot of Bond atop Lin in passionate lovemaking, the film pays tribute to the hyper-masculine tradition of Bond movies despite its modification of female typecasting. The intense rival-partner relationship constructed in the previous narrative ends hastily in Lin's subjugation to the white man's sexual prowess. Commenting on the emergence of "smarter, tougher, and more multicultural" Bond girls, Christopher John Farley states, "the world has changed since *Dr. No* and the status of women has shifted, but Bond is still on top. Bond, like Tarzan in the mid-20th century [...] exists to demonstrate to men of European heritage that they are still in control, that they are masters of any domain, no matter how tangled the jungles of Africa, the hip-hop world, or international politics" (2002: 1-2). The rather clichéd ending of Bond's romantic conquest of Lin in *Tomorrow* maintains the order of the familiar, comfortable world for Western audiences and appeases Western cultural anxieties over this "transgressive" Chinese woman. In an allegorical sense, the challenges brought by China's rise in the post-Cold War era eventually will be contained in the Western-dominated world.

Conclusion

In the close reading of *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* in comparison with *Suzie Wong* situated in their production discourses, I try to arrive at some understanding of how the transformation of the interracial-romance narrative manifests Western ambivalence at the postcolonial moment. Since China now possesses increasing capability in economic, technological and cultural realms, and its transformation "from a weakling to one of the strong" recontextualizes the global sway of the West (Kristof, 1993: 60), the construction of empowered Chinese women characters in the two 1997 films exhibits a changed perception of the racial and cultural Other. If the romance narrative in *Suzie Wong* depicts the eastern land as a feminine space for "the triumphs, profits and sexual gratifications of Westerners" (Mackerras, 1999: 268), such western

patriarchal fantasy is subverted to different degrees under contemporary historical, political and cultural circumstances. Along with China's constructive participation in global capitalism and the relative decline of Western hegemony, *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* assign Chinese women space to exercise power and agency in their interaction with white men. From Vivian's romantic "rescue" of the dying John and Jean's survival of the traumatic colonial romance in *Chinese Box*, to Lin's full-fledged cooperation with Bond in *Tomorrow*, the gendered and political repositioning of these women characters proposes an advance that moves beyond the conventional hierarchical paradigm of omnipotent white man and submissive Chinese woman.

In their attempt to reframe the classic interracial-romance narrative in the postcolonial and post-Cold War era, *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* operate in a middle terrain, neither in wholesale dismissal nor in uncritical adulation of western patriarchal hegemony. As an independent movie with greater artistic freedom, *Chinese Box* transforms the heroic white knight into the marginalized wanderer and shows respect to the self-reliant Chinese women, whereas the Bond vehicle *Tomorrow* tries to avoid treading on Sino-Western political differences and to maintain a balance between rejecting oriental submissiveness and sustaining white masculine prowess. If John's fading presence in Hong Kong and Bond's uneasy collaboration with Lin challenge the cultural hierarchy of the classic romance narrative, the insistence on Chinese women's emotional and physical attachment to white men in both films pays homage to colonial power arrangements. The repetition, revision and parody of the classic interracial romance narrative in *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* exemplify progressive approaches to construct the complex intersection of race, gender and cultural hierarchy in response to the contemporary geopolitical context. The empowerment of the Chinese woman, the critique of racist ideology and cultural stereotypes, and the ridicule of the omnipotent western patriarchal authority disrupt the previously hegemonic gender and power relationship and manifest the Western world's changing attitudes. The eruption of the conventional white patriarchal fantasy contributes to the formulation of a more heterogeneous, cross-cultural interaction beyond rigid social distinctions based on race and gender. In the diegetic world where colonialist agendas and postcolonial reactions encounter one another, *Chinese Box* and *Tomorrow* create an abstract and open space into which contemporary audiences can insert themselves.

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