



# Shape shifters: Racialized and gendered crossings in *Piccadilly* (1929) and *Shanghai Express* (1932)

by Li Yumin

## Orienting Paradise: Western Projections of the East

### Shanghai Express (1932)

Director:  
Josef von Sternberg

Runtime:  
82min

Country:  
United States

Language:  
English

#### AWARDS

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY  
Academy Awards 1932

The issues of cross-dressing, appropriation, and miscegenation take centre stage in *Shanghai Express* (1932), another film directed by an expat German-speaking (Austrian) director, Josef von Sternberg. In this film, the crossing of sexual and racial borders is not connected to the cultural history of exotic dance, but rather to the crossing of spatial boundaries: the film takes place in a train. Sitting in the first class carriage of the train from Peiping (Beijing) to Shanghai, are a motley crew of characters that can be read as a spread of representative western modern types: a British doctor Captain Donald 'Doc' Harvey, a French army major, an American businessman (actually the high-ranking rebel agent Chinese American Henry Chang), a British priest and the elderly Mrs Haggarty who runs a boarding house in Shanghai.

The only two occupants of the train carriage who fall out of this typology are the female figures played by Marlene Dietrich and Anna May Wong. Dietrich's Magdalen is a courtesan who selectively doles out favors for men between Shanghai and Beijing. Wong plays Hui Fei, a Chinese courtesan. In the narrative, in order to survive in China, Dietrich's character has taken on the role of Shanghai Lily, an exoticized cold-hearted femme fatale version of herself, lending an 'orientalness' to her sexuality and in her role as a courtesan. Wong's character Hui Fei, on the other hand, is a Chinese courtesan played by a Chinese American, who differentiates herself from the other Chinese portrayed in the film by virtue of the fact that Wong's character takes up western manners and converses confidently in both English and Chinese.

Wong here does not appear as the star, as in *Piccadilly*. Her role, however, is pivotal to the narrative. Gina Marchetti has described Hui Fei as 'Lily's Asian foil' who 'positions herself as a rival to Doc, as the "dark" intimate of the sexually ambivalent Lily'. Marchetti's analysis focuses on the threat of captivity that emanates from Chang and to a certain degree from Hui Fei, a threat she links to 'yellow peril'. It is in the role of Shanghai Lily, which crosses geographic as well as sexual boundaries, that Dietrich appears as exotic. And



Become an AFA member. Enjoy a host of benefits including complimentary tickets and merchandise as well as exclusive discounts with AFA partners. Sign up now at: [bit.ly/FriendsofAFA](http://bit.ly/FriendsofAFA)

it is Magdalen's racial crossdressing that enables her to transgress western sexual norms. This racial crossdressing, I suggest, is also staged through her encounter with Wong's character Hui Fei.

When Doc Harvey boards the train, his fellow travellers introduce Shanghai Lily as a 'notorious coaster'. As Harvey asks his comrades what a coaster is, they reply: 'It's a woman who lives by her wits along the China coast.' After the missionary Carmichael refuses to share a compartment with the Chinese courtesan Hui Fei, Shanghai Lily moves in with her. The two women smoke, listen to music on the gramophone and don't trouble themselves with the morals of the other passengers, from whom they maintain a certain haughty distance. As Mrs Haggarty tells them about her guesthouse in Shanghai that allows only the most respectable guests, both show no interest. Hui Fei says to her: 'I must confess I don't quite know the standard of respectability that you demand in your boarding house, Mrs Haggarty.' Shanghai Lily as well as Hui Fei are, because of their seemingly deviant sexuality, marginalized in the travel group.

Their sexual deviance is paralleled with a 'racial impurity': Hui Fei is not a 'normal' Chinese and Magdalen as Shanghai Lily is sexualized through her cross-cultural adoption of an 'oriental' alter ego, who professes a distinct lack of interest in traditional forms of marriage. Doc feels that the many men in Magdalen's past are an obstacle to their reunion and wishes that she did not have any other men but she answers: '[F]ive years in China is a long time.' The otherness of the country allows her to act in a manner that is sexually different. She exoticizes herself as 'the notorious white flower of China'. In *Shanghai Express*, Magdalen/ Shanghai Lily thereby generates sexual ambiguity through her deployment of masquerade. In the train, which like the movie is called the *Shanghai Express*, first-class people from colonial Europe meet one another: Brits, Germans, and French. Here, the rules of both the West and of China apply. Magdalen comments on her transformation to Shanghai Lily to Doc as follows: 'It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily.' Dressed up with a veil, a feather boa, silk gloves, and necklaces, Shanghai Lily uses sartorial codes of transvestite performances. The veil functions, on the one hand as a symbol for erotic play; on the other hand it symbolizes chastity, as the veil is used for nuns and brides. Indeterminate gender identity can also be read as a veil, as Marjorie Garber claims when discussing '*The Erotics of Cultural Appropriation*'. Dietrich's costuming thus functions as cross-dressing on different levels: She applies ambiguous female codes of dressing

and sexualizes herself by exoticizing her looks. Her masquerade draws not only from gendered imaginations, but racialized ones as well. As a femme fatale who does not belong to one man, her Chinese Alter Ego enables her to transgress patriarchal gender norms. Moreover, Shanghai Lily's lovers enjoy the pleasures of being with a sexually exotic woman while not risking the threat of miscegenation.

Like Dietrich, the 'real' exotic woman, Hui Fei, is also a liminal figure and appears in multiple respects as a loaded counterpart to Magdalen/Shanghai Lily. She is a self-assertive courtesan who mediates and literally translates between the Chinese and the white passengers of the train, yet she is also treated as an outcast. After being raped by the general Henry Chang, she wants to commit suicide, but Magdalen dissuades her. Instead, Hui Fei kills Chang, freeing Magdalen. As the only Chinese woman in the film, she is confined to a marginalized status among the Chinese and the white passengers; she finds acceptance only from the equally ambiguous Shanghai Lily/Magdalen. But unlike Magdalen, she cannot be saved by love.

In the artificial world of the train compartment, where strangers live together for a limited amount of time in a mobile space, Hui Fei and Magdalen follow their own rules. They are excluded from the rest of the group and establish a third space in which hybridity and translations are practiced. Hui Fei (who serves as a cultural broker between East and West) and Shanghai Lily (who masquerades as 'Oriental') are boundary crossers on many levels. Shanghai Lily's sexuality remains ambiguous for the passengers of the train. They do not know that she offered herself to the general in order to save Doc and it appears to them as if she voluntarily acquiesced to him. On the other hand, Mr Carmichael watches her as she prays for Doc's safety. And he is the only one who defends her against the other passengers, which leaves them stunned. As Doc and Magdalen rekindle their love, the latter begins to de-exoticize herself. She transforms from playing the exotic and sinning courtesan into the Christian (Mary) Magdalen(e). Cross-dressing must not only be thought of in terms of gender, but, I argue here, can be also imagined in terms of ethnic crossing; the act of appropriating the codes of the (alleged) 'other' presents itself as possibility for liminality and change, even as it may simultaneously make use of stereotypes.

As Anne Cheng points out in *The Melancholy of Race*, 'the realization of agency in drag (be it racial or gender) is borne out of a maneuver between opposites: that is, in drag, one is neither "just acting like" nor "really being" but some

complicated combination of the two'. Gina Marchetti notes in her analysis of *Shanghai Express*, 'Lily, the Caucasian blond always dressed in black, and Hui Fei, the brunette Asian always dressed in light colors, visually function as mirror images, pictorially complementing each other'. Hui Fei and Lily both appropriate the codes of the 'other', becoming an ethnic hybrid of sexual deviance, united in the space of their 'third' cabin. However, as a Chinese American actor, Wong performs a complex double play: She poses as Chinese without performing 'Chineseness', although for the film audience she passes as Chinese and her acting is not perceived as crossover.

---

First published in *Sexualities* Volume 23, Number 1-2 on 21 November 2018

**Yumin Li** is a research assistant at the Institute for Cultural History and Theory at Humboldt University Berlin. She is a member of the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies.

\*This version has been edited for length.