

# Affair Caught between Two Worlds: A Transcultural Exploration of the “Asian Lover” in Western Literature and Film

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**Abstract.** Based on *L'amant*, this paper offers a critical discussion of the representations of the “Asian lover” in contemporary Western film and television works. By focusing on a transcultural exploration of the “Asian lover” that combines close-reading of literary and filmic texts with original archival research in contemporary news reports and government files, this paper examines the ongoing debates surrounding the underlying Western cultural stereotype with the East from a global standpoint.

**Keywords:** *L'amant*; Asian Lover; Western Literature and Film.

## 1. Introduction

Romantic stories between Asian men and white women have long been the subject of literature and film. Since 1919, the film *Broken Blossoms* directed by D.W. Griffith has already dealt with this theme, provoking nationwide disputes over the cinematic representation of interracial romance. With the increasing popularity of Duras's *L'amant* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century world, “Asian lover” began to swim into focus as a mass cultural symbol. The exotic images represented by Asian lover in such literary works are full of mysterious and complex charm, and Duras uses imagination and alienation techniques to present the unique characteristics of this lover. By combining the characteristics of the “Asian lover” in her work, such as cultural identity, personality and social behavior, and exploring the imagination and alienation hidden behind, it can be found that the alienated characteristics of the Asian lover are not originated from the subjective factors projected by the author only, but also takes root in the social reality at that time. At the same time, analyses of the image of “Asian lover” in mass cultural works including *L'amant*, as I will later argue, also reveal Western's countries' misunderstanding of Asian culture.

Taking *L'amant* as my point of departure, this paper offers a critical discussion of the representations of the “Asian lover” in contemporary Western film and television works. By focusing on a transcultural exploration of the “Asian lover” that combines close-reading of literary and filmic texts with original archival research in contemporary news reports and government files, this paper examines the ongoing debates surrounding the underlying Western cultural stereotype with the East from a global standpoint.

From a broader perspective, the paper is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the novel *L'amant* with the core narrative elements behind it. The second part is about two other contemporary Western film and television works with similar narrative conventions and thematic tropes---cross-cultural love between Asian men and white women. Although these works seemingly give Asian men a dominant position, which is typically characterized by graceful bearing, high intelligence quotient, great wealth, superior social status etc., in essence, all above epitomize the very same stereotype of the Eastern culture in the Western subconscious psychology that is initially presented in *L'amant*. Through this article, I hope that this contradictory cultural-artistic impulse can be transformed into an emergent form of affective identification, so as to explore the diversified possibility of the image of “Asian lover” in Western literature or film and television works.

## 2. Encountering the Other: L'amant as a Narrative Paradigm

In this section, I will discuss how, in *L'amant*, the white girl encounters the Chinese man for the very first time. To facilitate a more productive analysis of how such an important moment of romantic entanglement is depicted in this literary work, I will describe it as an “encounter.” As shown in *L'Amant*, when the white girl meets a Chinese man for the first time, race is an inevitable topic. The author's interested in dwelling upon the depiction of their first encounter, from a broader perspective, reflects that such a colonial society at Vietnam is built upon racial hierarchy.

To be sure, there are three race-related depictions about the encounter of first meeting in the novel. When the Chinese man meets the white girl for the first time, the author describes him as timid, self-abased and afeard. According to the passage:

His hand is trembling. There's the difference of race, he's not white, he has to get the better of it, that's why he's trembling. She says she doesn't smoke, no thanks. She doesn't say anything else, doesn't say Leave me alone. So he's less afraid.

The secular pecking order of race is so ingrained that an adult Chinese man feels intimidated when confronted with a girl of a supposedly higher race than himself. This feeling of intimidation reveals the unequal racial status as well as the fact that the Chinese man has developed a romantic preference to the white girl. Similar to the above passage the following sentence reads: “He says again how strange it is to see her on this ferry. So early in the morning, a pretty girl like that, you don't realize, it's very surprising, a white girl on a native bus.” The appearance of a white girl on an indigenous bus was a strange thing, showing from the side the subconscious recognition of the dignity of white identity and inferiority of other races, as well as the backward economy in colonial Vietnam. Moreover, this depiction suggests that the white girl finds herself comfortable alongside indigenous people, planting the seed for the later relationship between her and the Chinese man.

In contrast with the above two passages, the following text concerns the differences between their socioeconomic backgrounds. To be sure, the third passage reads:

She asks him what he is. He says he's Chinese, that his family's from North China, from Fushun...Chinese. He belongs to the small group of financiers of Chinese origin who owe all the working-class housing in the colony.

The Chinese identity of the man is pointed out, and the social status and wealth of the man is much higher than that of the white girl, creating the contradiction of identity dislocation. Historically speaking, Chinese always asserted an important influence on the French-colonized Vietnam. In the 1930's, there were nearly 270,000 Chinese in Vietnam and many of them were successful businessman (Victor Purcel, 1980). As early as before the occupation and colonization of Vietnam by French invaders, the overseas Chinese in Vietnam had accumulated considerable economic strength after a long period of diligent management, and had occupied a large advantage in the fields of commerce, mining, some handicrafts and import and export industries, and had maintained this advantage until the early days of French occupation of Vietnam. In general, the economic activities of overseas Chinese in Vietnam are mainly business, about 60% of overseas Chinese are engaged in business activities, they work hard, and there are many rich people (Xu and Lin 2011, 213). The rich overseas Chinese invested a lot of money in large-scale commercial operations, and thus established a strong economic position. In addition, since the overseas Chinese were a major group of taxpayers and income-earners, although the French colonial authorities' policies were adjusted from time to time, they generally gave preferential treatment and encouragement to the overseas Chinese to meet their interests.

However, despite the fact that Chinese people in French colonial territories had accumulated significant wealth, enjoyed high social status, and received support from the government at the time, they were still positioned relatively low due to deeply ingrained racism. The Western world has long regarded China and its people as inferior, a perception that is reflected in the emotional relationship

between the Chinese lover and the French white girl. As a result, in the novel, it is the white girl who becomes the driving force behind the transformation of their relationship.

To sum up, the description of their first encounter in the novel sets the tone of the whole text. It conveys that racial differences can have a decisive impact on the romantic relationship. In this relationship, the Asian man has been feminized, and it is the girl who determines the changes between the two: The “lover” is attracted to the girl, because the girl takes the initiative to walk to his car, and continues to release the motivational cues; At the same time, the sexual process between them in the following story is also guided and promoted by the girl, so the development of the whole story is under the absolute leadership of the white girl. The character of the Asian lover reflects the author’s description of the reality of China, and represents the imagination and cognition of China in the French society at that time. After the outbreak of Opium War, Western world viewed the Chinese as dirty, backward and inferior. The author habitually uses some derogatory terms such as “scum” and “slavish” to describe the Chinese lover. Compared with white men, the image of the “Asian lover” can be summarized as rich, weak, grovelling in front of the white man, and a vassal who cannot face his own family. Although he loves the white girl, he is forced by the family and race and has to give up the feelings. He is numb, and has no rebellious soul. Although he wishes to be able to marry with the white girl and decorate himself according to Western looks, the native skin determines that the yellow race would never be recognized by the white.

### 3. Reimagining the Asian Lover on Screen: From L'amant to Selfie

With reference to the 1912 George Bernard Shaw play *Pygmalion* and its later, 1956 cinematic adaptation *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgs’ first impression of Eliza Dooley, in *Selfie*, is conceived on the basis of others’ words. In the very first scene of the show, Higgs was informed that Eliza has been one of the firm’s top sales. In response, Higgs said “She’s our best sales rep? That can’t be true!”, showing his resentment toward Eliza. Despite the seemingly higher status of Asian men than white women and the possibility of cross-cultural communication presented by Asian men in the process of getting along with white women and other Westerners, this TV series actually shares the same limitations and cultural barriers as the narrative of *L'amant*, that is, Chinese and even Asian culture are inferior and unacceptable in the collective consciousness of Westerners. In what follows, I will focus on one particular narrative trope that is seen across *Selfie*, namely the first encounter between the Asian man and the white woman. I argue that similar to the expression of *L'amant*, even though Asian men are given a higher social status and intellectual level than white women on the surface, they are always in a psychological and emotional weakness in gender relations.

In the first episode, for example, there’s one scene about the conversation between Henry and the manager of the company. In this scene, in order to show his appreciation and gratitude for Henry's contribution in regaining the product trust, the company manager kissed Henry on the mouth without his consent, and the exchange was as follows (see figures 1 and 2):



Figure 1. Scene screenshot



**Figure 2.** Scene screenshot

The manager said: “You know I read an article that said Asian man are more comfortable kissing on the mouth as a sign of friendship.” Higgs frowned and denied, saying: “They are not. No.” But the manager didn’t seem to mind his resistance: “All right, well, I’ll forward it to you.” Henry sighed and nervously tightened his lower lip and puckered his mouth, obviously feeling offensiveness. But when the manager said “I love and trust you” and stroked his arm, Henry quickly adjusted his smile and replied, “I love and trust you too, sir.” On the one hand, this shows that the real Asian way of life is not accepted by Westerners, who prefer to stick to their imaginary or hearsay information about Asians, constantly reinforce this stereotype, and even tend to reverse export this image to a real Asian. On the other hand, the dominance of Westerners in social relationships and the passivity, discomfort, and surprising persistence of Asian men, represented by Higgs, problematizes the TV play’s standpoint on cultural equality.

In the same scene, When Eliza heard Higgs took a product whose reputation had been badly tarnished and rebranded it as a product that consumers could once again in love and trust, Eliza was determined to get Higgs to remarket her. After the meeting, the scene cuts to Higgs’ office, and Eliza, wearing a short pantyhose skirt, sits casually on the back of the sofa in his office waiting for him. When Higgs came to the office, she told him frankly about her problems and her need for repackaging: “I’m not leaving until you say you’ll help me.” And after Higgs said no, she said “I know, I know you don’t like me, but if you don’t like me, then just change me.” In this conversation, Higgs’ attitude clearly indicates his lack of interest in helping Eliza. Higgs expresses his refusal in a subtle and restrained manner. However, it is evident that this approach does not affect Eliza. As revealed by Eliza’s lines, she not only openly acknowledges that Higgs doesn’t like her, but it doesn’t hinder her in handling their relationship. Eliza’s goal-oriented nature allows her to assert dominance more freely in this dynamic. In other words, the dialogue between the two echoes the scene in *L’amant*.

During their first sexual encounter in *L’amant*, the white girl was in the midst of her youthful naivety, bravely expressing her desire for sex and appreciating the male body, displaying the most primitive and instinctive sexual impulses. Even though the Chinese lover appeared weak, melancholic, hesitant, and even wept, the white girl remained composed, demanding that he treat her as he would any other woman.

In this scene, the girl says, “I’d rather you didn’t love me. But if you do, I’d like you to do as you usually do with women.” He looks at her in horror and asks, “Is that what you want?” She confirms it. In this room, he begins to suffer, no longer pretending. He realizes she will never truly love him. The novel examines men through the eyes of the young girl and even exchanges the power between men and women. “She tells him to keep still, let me do it. She says she wants to do it. And she does.” This description subverts the traditionally assigned role of women as passive and vulnerable. The white girl takes on the roles of initiator and giver in the act of lovemaking, transforming the experience from one of pain to pleasure. Through explicit depiction, it reveals the white girl’s absolute dominance over her body and the relationship between them, reducing the Chinese lover to an object dependent on her.

In addition, other scenes from *Selfie*, in a similar manner, also shows a looming imbalance in the interaction between the two. To be sure, it is evident that Higgs was a gentleman, friendly to the people around him, well versed in social etiquette, and taught Eliza social skills in every detail, but in fact Higgs repeatedly felt at a loss for Eliza's directness and irregularity. Their relationship reached a freezing point when Eliza made a noise while attending a wedding with Higgs, causing the two to find themselves in an awkward situation. An argument broke out and they exchanged nasty words. In the empty auditorium, Eliza first stood up, leaned down and pointed her finger at Higgs, commenting on him as an unfun man, then turned and ran for the exit, hurling insults and disparaging words at Higgs. Higgs, who was obviously not good at quarrelling, was defeated and simply said dryly that Eliza was a lost cause. Eliza quickly retaliated, saying "super mean," and then turned and ran out of the auditorium, leaving Higgs standing there, frustrated and confused. Through Eliza's words, the audience is preconceived to reinforce the specific image of Henry: holier-than-thou, antisocial, judgmental, hypercritical, workaholic...which is consistent with the stereotype of Asians in the West, and is proved in Higgs' every move.

Except for these hints, this imbalance is especially manifest in the last scene of the first episode. While they were talking under a rainy roof, Lisa suddenly pushed Henry out into the rain when he wasn't looking. She thought "I think I should tell you how to get it." Henry stood in the rain, the light shining on his face. He was startled but more surprised. Eliza stood not far behind him, looking at him with relief. "Something told me it had been a while since anyone give Henry a push. And sometimes, we all need a push." Henry said excitedly, "See, I get it. I get it." Then he accidentally fell in the mud, wet to the skin. Eliza began to laugh, then, at Henry's urging, went to help him up, and the two of them happily returned to the house. The background music is light and uplifting, implying their relationship is easing and progressing. While the theme is the dashing Asian man transforming the Western woman, it's really about the two rescuing each other, which set up a controversial contrast between the emotions and psychology of Higgs and Eliza, and between the Asian man and the white woman.

Does Eliza, a white girl with a promiscuous personal life, vulgar behavior, and no merit in the world's judgment, really have the charisma to bring the workaholic Henry to life and become romantically attracted to such an excellent Asian man? Is this logic self-consistent? In fact, this secretly conveys that even though Asian men are outstanding in their careers, they are emotionally lacking, unsociable, eccentric and boring, and Eliza's change to Henry is a cinematographic presentation of Westerners' benevolent discrimination against Asians. To be sure, this approach to the representation of interracial romance finds deeper roots in the meta-text of *L'amant*.

#### **4. The Politicization of Interracial Romance: A Power Struggle**

As mentioned earlier, the imbalance in romantic relationships due to racial and cultural differences also emerges in the actual interaction between Eliza and Higgs. Their relationship becomes a tumultuous battleground for power, as both silently vie for control over the course of their connection. The escalating emotions between them are not solely fueled by shared affection, but rather, they are marked by a constant clash of contradictions and an ongoing struggle to understand each other's perspectives. These nuanced portrayals underscore the profound impact of racial and cultural disparities on Eliza and Higgs' evolving romance, often leading to friction and misunderstandings. The clash of their contrasting backgrounds serves as a persistent reminder of the challenges they face, as societal prejudices and stereotypes cast a shadow over their relationship.

Through their turbulent love journey, characterized by moments of tension and frustration, Eliza and Higgs gradually navigate the complexities imposed by their racial and cultural differences. It is through these conflicts and subsequent efforts to overcome them that their emotional connection deepens, albeit with lingering doubts and uncertainties. Their love story exposes the harsh reality of navigating interracial romance, where the weight of social expectations and deeply ingrained biases can strain even the strongest bond.

“Old habits die hard,” Eliza mumbled to herself. As she sat down to eat, she absentmindedly reached for her phone to tweet about it, while Higgs, with a troubled expression, attempted to stop her. “Don’t tweet it, eat it,” he advised. “It is not an outfit of the day. It is just an outfit,” Higgs commented as Eliza posed for a photo to showcase her OOTD (outfit of the day). “My followers want to know what I am wearing,” Eliza responded.

In the opening scene of the fourth episode, Eliza and Higgs stepped into an elevator (see figures 3 and 4). Higgs asked Eliza about her plans for the weekend, to which she replied, “I’m gonna try to bump into some celebrities. Maybe hit a gifting suite, kick it with Karrueche, Yacht-hop, Pitbull, binge-drink till I’m white-girl wasted... Pop by the pop-up party, get my grind on swing by in-n-out, kiss a hamburger, full makeup, no filter, David Guetta.” Eliza’s rapid speech and determined tone showcased her exhaustion and dissatisfaction with adhering to rules and social etiquette for a whole week. After finishing her statement, she looked directly at Higgs. As she confessed, “Higgs was trying to help me become a better person. And even though I appreciate his help... I also kind of wanted him to die. By the time the weekend rolled round, I just wanted to order a latte and not say thanks.” Higgs hardly said a word, only responding with “That sounds...” until Eliza finished speaking, leaving him astonished and puzzled. He slowly asked, “W-what? W-why? Why would you do any of those things?” Eliza then provided a string of nonsensical and absurd reasons. Higgs proposed, “I also convinced [you] to try something more meaningful, something more constructive, like, dare I say, to help others?” But Eliza promptly declined, using the excuse that weekends should be for resting. Higgs then suggested, “Weekends are supposed to be productive,” and supported his point with the song “Working for the Weekend.” This also subtly hinted at the stereotypical perception in the Western world that Asians seem to work relentlessly without any breaks, even on weekends. However, when someone pointed out, “It is not about working for the weekend. It’s about working in anticipation of the weekend,” Higgs responded, “Well, that was certainly not my interpretation. As you can imagine, I will now be removing that jam from my playlist.” At this point, Higgs displayed an uncompromising attitude, while Eliza proposed a trade-off. She offered, “Ok, how about this? I promise to work for the weekend if you promise not to... I will accept Higgs's assignment and do something to help others. If, in return, he will spend his weekend doing anything but working. He needs to let loose and have some fun.” As she spoke, she looked around, making eye contact with everyone, and finally pointed aggressively at Higgs, leaving no room for disagreement. Higgs audibly gasped and hesitated momentarily but eventually agreed.

Therefore, the depiction of the escalating emotions between Eliza and Higgs in the drama diverges from the straightforward portrayal of budding affection found in mainstream Hollywood romance films. Instead, the narrative tension revolves around the characters' speculation and acceptance of each other's identities. This shift in focus stems from the racial and cultural differences between them, which transform the power dynamics within their romantic relationship into a struggle for power dominance. It is not to suggest that every interracial romance, in real life, is inherently a power struggle. Rather, as illustrated by the TV's show, when it comes to representing interracial romance on screen, writers tend to dwell on the dramatization of how the couple affirms each other’s romantic presence of mutual affection through a series of intense conflicts resulted from the couple’s cultural differences.



**Figure 3.** Scene screenshot



**Figure 4.** Scene screenshot

In this regard, *Selfie* also resonates with *L'amant*. Both works highlight the profound impact of contrasting racial and cultural identities on their love story. The narrative in these works goes beyond conventional portrayals of romance that focus primarily on chemistry between two individuals. Instead, it delves into the complexities and power dynamics associated with racial and cultural disparities. It explores how societal expectations and prejudices profoundly influence the development of relationship.

This exploration of power dynamics and identity acceptance sheds light on the intricacies of interracial relationships. It serves as a reminder of the complex interplay between love, power, and cultural context. It highlights the necessity of open communication and a genuine willingness to understand and embrace each other's unique experiences and perspectives. By navigating and reconciling the challenges posed by their racial and cultural differences, they have the opportunity to forge a deeper emotional connection. Furthermore, it provides an academic lens through which to examine the nuanced portrayal of race and culture in romantic narratives, underscoring the significance of addressing and understanding their impact.

## **5. Concluding Thoughts**

In his book *Orientalism* published in 1978, post-colonial scholar Edward Said argues that Western perceptions of the East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not based on factual evidence but rather on imaginative constructions. He emphasized the strong biases held by the Western world towards the peoples and cultures of the Arab-Islamic world, perpetuating misunderstandings and romanticized impressions of Asia and the Middle East. These distorted perspectives provided justifications for colonialism in Europe and America.

The aforementioned perspective offered by Said serves as a valuable reference or resonance for my research with respect to the romantic relationship between Asian men and white women. This paper critically analyzes the representation of romantic relationships between Asian men and white women in Western literature and film. By examining Duras's novel *L'amant* as a starting point, the paper explores the exotic and complex imagery associated with the "Asian lover" and highlights how these characteristics are not solely projected by the author but deeply rooted in the social reality of that time. This paper argues that Western countries have always had preconceived stereotypes about Asian culture. Expanding further, the analysis delves into contemporary Western film and television works, revealing the perpetuation of the Orientalist framework in the portrayal of Asian men. Despite granting them dominant positions with qualities like grace, intelligence, wealth, and social status, these works still reinforce stereotypes about the East. The paper suggests transforming this cultural-artistic impulse into affective identification to explore new possibilities for depicting the "Asian lover" in Western literature and film. By examining power dynamics, identity acceptance, and the complexities of interracial relationships, this research sheds light on the interplay between love, power, and cultural context. It emphasizes the importance of open communication, understanding, and embracing each other's unique experiences and perspectives. Navigating the challenges posed by racial and cultural differences can lead to deeper emotional connections.

Looking ahead, future research directions include investigating the portrayal of romantic narratives involving white men and Asian women in comparison to the discussed representations. Additionally, exploring specific aspects of intercultural research related to white male and Asian female love stories will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of interracial relationships and expand the discourse surrounding cultural representation in romantic narratives. By challenging and transcending the Orientalist framework, we can strive for more authentic and nuanced portrayals in literature and film, fostering greater empathy and appreciation for diverse cultures and experiences.

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