HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Shanghai Gesture 1941

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

A half-remembered dream.
Poppy Charteris, *The Shanghai Gesture*

OVERVIEW

Shanghai Gesture is one of the names for cocking a snoot, an obscene and old-fashioned hand gesture that dates to Rabelais and Brueghel; it is made with the thumb touching the tip of the nose, with rest of the fingers wiggling. *The Shanghai Gesture* is the last Hollywood film Josef von Sternberg ever completed, also his "last classic."[1] There could be multiple interpretations of the title; one thing the film has in common with its namesake hand gesture is the way in 1941, this unusual film handled material deemed explosive by the standards of the Motion Pictures Production Code (the industry's guidelines for self-censorship) and was somehow able to circumvent the Code.

Sinful and Dangerous. A visual tour-de-force and an "immersion in decadence,"[2] *The Shanghai Gesture* was adapted from a 1926 theater play by John Colton. The text's indulgence in debauchery had posed an obstacle for previous attempts to adapt. "Our story has nothing to do with the present," a title card declares, point blank, indicating von Sternberg's intention to frame it as an ahistorical fantasy. This disclaimer of sorts didn't exactly please the Chinese consulate, but that country's diplomats' objections fortunately didn't end up harming the distribution of the film, as was the case with Spain and von Sternberg's *The Devil is a Woman* (1935).

The proprietress of a Shanghai casino, the ferocious dragon lady Gin Sling, recalls the Gorgon Medusa and the titular princess of the Puccini opera Turandot. The story of the wrathful and vindictive mobsteress has the intensity of revenge films such as 1928's *West of Zanzibar* (that was based on the 1926 play *Kongo,* and in return inspired *Kongo*, the 1931 film). What degradations the young Poppy is exactly subjected to at the hands of Gin Sling is left to the imagination of the viewer, but the decadent setting of *The Shanghai Gesture* anticipates Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975).

Hotbed of émigrés. Cast is crowned by the rising star Gene Tierney as Poppy. While von Sternberg, the master of lighting, spotlights her exceptional beauty, he also tracks her character's dark descent, foreshadowing Tierney's films noir such as *Laura* and particularly *Leave her to Heaven*. Two other leading parts are the Arab gigolo Omar and the Chinese proprietress "Mother" Gin Sling; these are played by American actors Victor Mature and Ona Munson—a casting choice made in part to refrain from representing miscegenation.

The Shanghai Gesture features a top notch supporting cast including many Russian and German émigrés; unfortunately in small roles. Examples are Albert Bassermann as the city commissioner, Maria Ouspenskaya as the confidant of the dragon-lady, and Marcel Dalio as a croupier. Von Sternberg cast Soviet actor Mikhail Rasumny as the appraiser, a petty figure whose sole function is to precisely assess the value of objects—a somewhat irksome character based on one of the director's previous employers.[3] A title card warmly and prominently hails the contribution of nameless "Hollywood extras," in the spirit of von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (1928).

Chinoiserie and Design. *The Shanghai Gesture* features spectacular examples of Chinoiserie; with its décor and costumes, the film imagines and reinvents China. The mural painted by Key Luke is the centerpiece of set décor; the notorious casino is decorated with grand carvings and sculptures of funerary camels. Art director is Boris Leven (*Rope* [1948], *West Side Story* [1961]) and set decorator is Howard Bristol (another Hitchcock collaborator, behind the hauntingly beautiful rooms of *Rebecca* [1940], and *Rope* again). Oleg Cassini's costume design would be the inspiration for Yves Saint Laurent's "Chinese and Opium" 1977 collection.[4] The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition "China: Through the

Looking Glass" (curated by director Wong Kar Wai) explored Chinese influence on Western designers; it showcased costumes from *The Shanghai Gesture* and other films which imagined the "exotic" China.[5]

Influence. *The Shanghai Gesture's* cosmopolitan and diverse International Settlement prefigures the Asian-dominated hectic metropolises of *Bladerunner* (1982) and *Strange Days* (1995). Scenes from *The Shanghai Gesture* were featured in radical philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord's 1973 film *The Society of the Spectacle* (based on his own treatise with the same title), a key text of critical theory and a critique of the commodification of (and alienation in) everyday life. No wonder Debord was interested in *The Shanghai Gesture*, which mocks and casually subverts racism and colonialism; among its other themes are gentrification and authenticity.

The Shanghai Gesture was "made while the world was engaged in a danse macabre"[6] and released couple of weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The World War II forms the backdrop; an opening title card introduces the setting—Shanghai, a "speck … torn away from the mystery of China … neither Chinese, European, British, nor American; maintained itself in the ever increasing whirlpool of war." War would become the focus of von Sternberg's next project, a short, gracious, and insightful propaganda film titled *The Town* (1943).

The Town was von Sternberg's last film in the 1940s. In the following decade, he was fired twice by Howard Hawks, from directing *Macao* and *Jet Pilot*. To quote Poppy Charteris, the last Hollywood film he completed "smells so incredibly evil."

CHARACTERS

Victoria "Poppy" Charteris. Sir Charteris' spoilt and worldly daughter falls in love with "Doctor" Omar.
"Mother" Gin Sling. Proprietor of a high-end casino is treated with obeisance by the top officials of Shanghai. She is dispossessed of the location by Sir Charteris and has until the Chinese New Year to move out.
"**Doctor" Omar.** Damascus-born Omar is a shady operative and serves Gin Sling.
Sir Guy Charteris. Wealthy entrepreneur is Poppy's father. He purchases a large chunk of land in Shanghai and prepares to gentry it, dispossessing Gin Sling of her business in the process.
Dixie Pomeroy. "Chorus Girl" Dixie is introduced to Gin Sling by Omar. The American showgirl is familiar with Guy Charteris and informs her new employer about the businessman.

Supporting characters

The Shanghai Gesture showcases a top-notch supporting cast, including many Russian and German émigrés; mostly minor parts are played by some of the best actors of the time.

Van Elst. The city commissioner who is in charge of licensing the urban renewal projects is subservient to Charteris and cordial to Gin Sling (Albert Bassermann).
The Amah. Gin Sling's close (and silent) confidant is seen only briefly. The Amah is played by Russian stage actress Maria Ouspenskaya.
Montgomery Howe. Comprador Montgomery Howe is one of Gin Sling's lieutenants. He is among the few Chinese who are in senior positions of administration. The urban renewal project's directors consider appointing him as the police chief of the city following the eviction.
Marcel. Eminent French actor Marcel Dalio plays the croupier at Gin Sling's casino.
The Coolie. Gin Sling's enforcer and bodyguard; Mike Mazurki was a regular in films noir in which he played tough guys.

SYNOPSIS

The notorious proprietor of a high-end casino in Shanghai, Gin Sling, is summoned to evict the location by the Chinese New Year. A wealthy American entrepreneur has purchased a chunk of land (including the plot that houses Gin Sling's lucrative business) and the city has given him the green light to develop an ambitious development project.

Searching for a way out of her predicament, Gin Sling finds out that the businessman's spoilt daughter Poppy frequents the casino and is cozy with the shady "Doctor" Omar. Gin Sling schemes to manipulate Poppy and use her as leverage against her father; ultimately, to force him to abort his plans to dispossess her of her business. The denouement takes place during the New Year celebrations; Gin Sling hosts a lavish dinner party; she demonstrates that Charteris is just as blemished as she is. Charteris responds in kind; shocking secrets that emerge culminate in murder.

SCENES



Shanghai. A title card introduces the setting as "speck torn away from the mystery of China" and "a refuge for people who wished to live between the lines of laws and customs." One of these people is "Doctor" Omar, a Damascus-born charmer and fixer of sorts, who is a self-described errand boy for "Mother" Gin Sling, an infamous casino owner. Omar bumps into an incident where policemen are about to arrest an American showgirl named Dixie Pomeroy. He and a Chinese associate named Montgomery Howe intervene; by way of bribes, they get to make the officials release the young woman. Omar offers to take her to Gin Sling's popular casino, which lies in a bustling part of the city. The pit shaped grandiose casino is a descent into maelstrom—the excess and attention to detail recall Erich von Stroheim.



The Players. The architecturally impressive and pit shaped casino is managed by layers of operatives like Doctor Omar. The cyborg-like appeaser was inspired by one of von Sternberg's previous employers, in his early years when he worked menial jobs.



Literally towering above them all, from her office at the top of the huge pit, is the watchful and omniscient Gin Sling, who evokes both respect and fear. With her medusa style hair, dragon lady Gin Sling's (American actor Ona Munson) mask-like face displays few emotions.



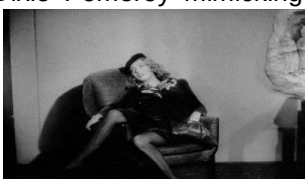
The city commissioner is among the guests; he delivers the message that Gin Sling needs to relocate her business and evict the precious downtown spot at the heart of the Shanghai International Settlement by the Chinese New Year. Eminent German actor Albert Bassermann plays the city commissioner.



The casino rests on a large chunk of land that was recently purchased by an American entrepreneur, who is preparing to go ahead with his urban renewal projects. The situation looks hopeless for Gin Sling and she tries to find out about the businessman who is about to dispossess her of power and wealth. Guy Charteris self-assuredly continues to plan his gentrification projects, with full support of city officials.

The Americans. The "choir girl" Dixie, who was rescued from the constables, proves to be a helpful source of information about the American tycoon; she reveals that his name is Sir Guy Charteris. She also provides some background information about the man and his habits; Gin Sling gets her goon Coolie to tail Charteris. It turns out that an attractive young woman that has been frequenting the casino happens to be Charteris' daughter. The Switzerland-educated and sophisticated Victoria "Poppy" Charteris is totally unlike the cheeky Dixie; Omar takes a keen interest in her all the same—and so does

Gin Sling. Von Sternberg visually quotes *The Blue Angel* in a scene with Dixie Pomeroy mimicking Marlene Dietrich's famous shot.



Gambling. Not before long, Poppy is infatuated with Omar and has fits of jealousy over him flirting with Dixie. She also begins to spend more and more time at the roulette table. Initially, Poppy is self-controlled and plays moderately; with Omar's encouragement, she loses her restraint and gambling takes hold of her. Consequently, her formidable bank account quickly dries up and she resorts to playing with borrowed funds, personally approved—seemingly as a courtesy—by Gin Sling, who is gratified to ensnare her prey. Key Luke's mural painting adorns the casino wall behind comprador Howe.



Father Knows Best. Poppy also sells her jewelry to fuel her gambling addiction; the necklace gifted by Charteris ends up being purchased back by him (thanks to the opportunistic Omar). Consequently, the businessman learns about his beloved daughter's downward spiral; he induces Poppy to leave Shanghai and is content to see her departure. Signature von Sternberg shots show cluttered foreground and interesting background—Omar watching the women quarrel.



Omar and Poppy are framed by the curtains as if they are performing on stage.



The Scheme. Gin Sling plots to deal a decisive blow to Charteris. She meticulously prepares for a dinner party to be held on the Chinese New Year. Guests from elite circles are picked carefully and invitations are sent. Charteris initially ignores and dismisses this as a desperate attempt to negotiate with him. Employing her enforcer Coolie, Gin Sling manages to intrigue and coax Charteris to attend the party. Gin Sling meticulously plans the dinner party using clay figures of her guests—and victims.



The Chinese New Year. Finally, celebrations for the Chinese New Year begin and a lavish party at Gin Sling's place commences. All the guests are revealed to be individuals, who, in spite of their high standing in society, are at the mercy of their hostess due to her knowledge of certain secrets from their past. Charteris is at first amused; as tension mounts, he gets annoyed and attempts to leave. Then, Gin Sling slyly mentions that he too has some dirty laundry and calls his daughter. The lavish dinner party of Gin Sling. The excess and attention to detail recall Erich von Stroheim.



Revelations. Poppy's intoxicated entrance causes a stir; she had been under Gin Sling's control all this time while her father thought that she was safely out of China. In her degradation, Gene Tierney as Poppy foreshadows her films noir, especially *Leave her to Heaven*. Gin Sling explains to her guests that she was once married to Poppy's father—when Charteris had another name and was a broke young man. He had abandoned her, taking her personal savings with him. In return, Charteris makes an even more shocking admission—that Poppy's mother is none other than Gin Sling. He then turns to leave together with Poppy, but she returns to the dinner hall for Omar. There, another verbal altercation leads to Gin Sling shooting her own daughter dead. Outside, a sarcastic Coolie asks Charteris if he likes the Chinese New Year.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gin Sling – Unconscientious (Regal Dragon-Lady, Masked, Imperious Puppeteer, Rational, Nefarious and Violent)
Poppy Charteris – Emotional (Smart and Sophisticated, Entitled and Petulant, Composed, Neurotic Slave
Doctor Omar – Disagreeable (Shady Errand Boy, Despoiler and Seducer, Pretentious
Guy Charteris – Closed (Secretive, Urbane)

GIN SLING (Unconscientious)

"Mother" Gin Sling is a self-made and very well-connected businesswoman who—to put it mildly—operates in the grey areas of the law. Her background is only partially revealed. There are very few known facts about her: the older woman that appears by her side as a silent confidant, "The Amah," is the mother figure in her life and Gin Sling was at one time briefly married to Charteris.

Illustrative moments

Regal Dragon-Lady. Powerful, intelligent, and deceitful, Gin Sling personifies the dragon lady, a stereotype reserved for Asian women. "Warlord of the Chinese underworld" is domineering and demands absolute loyalty from her underlings. Outside the casino, her notorious reputation generates a blend of respect and fear. Her power rests on her lucrative business, but it is her methods that guarantee that it remains unchallenged. It is revealed that "Mother" Gin Sling is adept at blackmail and extortion—elites of Shanghai are intimidated by her because of her knowledge of their secrets. Behind the façade of a legitimate business, the Dragon Lady is prone to instrumental violence and is somewhat of a mobster. Coolie (film noir actor with imposing physique, Mike Mazurki) is her enforcer. When Charteris ignores Gin Sling's approaches, Coolie coaxes him. Like the appraiser and the croupier in the casino, the tough guy is simply one of her agents.

Parallels. Sources of inspiration for the concept are characters played by actress Anna May Wong. The term may connote power, as well as deceitfulness and/or promiscuity. A key progenitor is the comic strip (and the 1940 film series) *Terry and the Pirates*. Contemporary examples are Michelle Yeoh in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and Lucy Liu in *Kill Bill* (2004).

Masked. "Who are you? What's behind this mask of yours?" cries Guy Charteris, feeling cornered as Gin Sling drops a hint of his secretive past. Actress Ona Munson not only impersonates an Asian, she seems to carry a mask that reveals little about her real emotions. Her mood shifts, voice, and mannerism indicate contempt, fear, and cunning; however, her facial features remain more or less the same.

Imperious Puppeteer. In his memoirs, von Sternberg points out that he essentially views actors as puppets. Gin Sling has a comparable approach to social relations; she uses individuals to control others. The obvious embodiment of the concept of puppetry is the scene with Gin Sling meticulously planning for her Chinese New Year party. The whole purpose of the evening is to use Poppy to deal a decisive blow to Charteris. She has at her disposal a set of painted clay figures crafted for her; these resemble her guests and serve to aid her develop her strategy.

Rational. "You are plotting your revenge like an engineer," comprador Howe observes, as Gin Sling is going over her plans for the New Year party using a specially made chess set with figures representing the guests. Feminist theory has underscored the traditional assumption that women are somehow closer to nature—more emotional and less rational compared to men. Cinematic representations of gender tend to adhere to this distinction, with unusual examples like Gin Sling in *The Shanghai Gesture*, who emerges as a cold and systematic thinker—while the main male character Omar is primarily a seducer.

Nefarious and Violent. Gin Sling is feared as an organized crime bigshot, but the ending shows that her capacity for violence extends beyond business dealings. As she is scheming about the Chinese New Year party—rehearsing with the chess set of miniatures representing the guests—she is so enraged by

the sight of Poppy's figure that she severs the head of it. Gin Sling's strategic attack on Charteris ends with her actual murder of Poppy, after being informed that the young woman is her own daughter.

POPPY CHARTERIS (Emotional)

The wealthy tycoon's daughter is prim, spoilt, and petulant. The story follows her demise from being glamorous and self-confident to a neurotic addict and wreck. The finale reveals that she is also Gin Sling's daughter.

Illustrative moments

Smart and Sophisticated. The cosmopolitan young woman is Switzerland-educated and worldly. She feels at home exchanging Omar Khayyam verses with Omar and is articulate enough to hold her own against the experienced Gin Sling. Her first scene in the film is a dialogue over cocktails with the (White Russian) bartender; she quickly earns the grumpy man's respect by showing that she knows what she is talking about. The sophisticated Poppy contrasts with Dixie Pomeroy, the smart-talking choir-girl from Brooklyn.

Entitled and Petulant. Poppy is initially a reserved observer. When Omar and Gin Sling take turns to approach her at the casino, she is languid and prim. Everything is fine as long as she is winning at the roulette table; even when she runs out of luck and her funds evaporate, she is careful to maintain her dignity and self-respect by tipping the croupier. Yet, as she keeps playing, her spoilt nature makes it difficult to digest the losses. Parallel to her addiction to gambling and alcohol, her infatuation with Omar grows and Poppy becomes obnoxious and nasty.

Composed. Gin Sling may be the harridan eager to boss and manipulate Poppy, yet the latter is initially calm and controlled; she stands her ground when the two women interact, even wittily teases her about choosing the particular liquor as her obviously made-up first name—the answer is one of the rare moments that Gin Sling ends up revealing a little about her secretive past: "there was a girl called Whisky Soda, too ... and another one called Miss Martini. One called Scotch Highball and another Bénédictine. In other places I might have been called Rose, or Violet, or Lily... or even Poppy!" This is as close to anyone gets in getting a glimpse of the domineering person behind the mask. Similarly, the manipulative Omar finds that Poppy has a high degree of self-confidence. When he tries to cajole her into spending more time at the roulette table, she mildly reproaches him for failing to appreciate the strength of her character—"there's something you don't know about me. I can stop whenever I want to." These dynamics change for the worse for Poppy as her addiction to gambling and alcohol grows stronger; she becomes subservient to both Omar and Gin Sling.

Neurotic Slave. Poppy starts out self-confident and controlled; gradually she becomes obsessed with Omar—at one point she even calls him "master". She makes a scene at his apartment's door and begs him to let her in. The sado-masochist relationship is reminiscent of von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (in reverse, with Poppy paralleling Professor Rath's demise and Omar facilitating the degradation, like that film's Lola Lola).

DOCTOR OMAR *(Disagreeable***)**

Omar the charming gigolo operates as a semi-autonomous contractor in the casino and is instrumental in Gin Sling's manipulation of individuals. Nothing is known about his past, except for his claim that he was born in Damascus and his father was an Armenian tobacco dealer.

Illustrative moments

Shady errand boy. Omar defines his role at the casino as being an errand boy for the omnipotent "Mother" Gin Sling. "A trifle shady," one character calls Omar, mainly because he "carries water on both shoulders without spilling any … a go-between," whose loyalty can be bought. When he seems to be passionately flirting with Poppy, Omar makes sure to make extra cash by reaching out to her father in order to sell the necklace she lost in a game of roulette.

Despoiler and seducer. "Omar should avoid thinking. It doesn't suit his personality" remarks Gin Sling about his top lieutenant. While "Mother" is rational and methodical, Omar is associated with emotion and exotic charm. Omar also likes to brag about his defining quality, his good looks; he tells comprador Howe to supply himself with a new face, if he intends to compete with him in courting women. Gin Sling tasks Omar with the degradation of Poppy; as per her instructions, he sees to it that the young woman becomes addicted to gambling and alcohol.

Pretentious. "Are you the caliph of Baghdad today?" Gin Sling teases Omar as he flirts with Dixie Pomeroy. He likes to recite verses from his namesake Omar Khayyam. Undoubtedly, the name Omar is fake, just like the nickname doctor—"doctor of nothing" he answers Poppy's question about his specialty. Omar is a fake-doctor and a fake-poet; his identity is performative.

GUY CHARTERIS (Closed)

The entrepreneur is in Shanghai to launch a large scale development project. Thanks to the vast funds he controls, Charteris is able to buy a chunk of land in the downtown district. The background of Poppy's father is not known until the ending.

Illustrative moments

Secretive. Initially not much is known about Charteris and his past, except for his wealth and that he has a daughter who has just graduated from a Swiss school. One hint about this character comes from Dixie Pomeroy, who implies that he is a womanizer—mentioning his "orderly/flunkey," who takes care of his dirty work. The finale reveals that "Sir" Charteris' real name was Victor Dawson. He belongs to the same league of fake and shady characters, together with Gin Sling and Omar.

Urbane. Suave looking gentleman comes to Shanghai with the backing of a huge corporation and exceptional personal wealth. The "Sir" prefix also identifies him as an aristocrat, apt for someone who is not hiding his colonizing ambitions. However, it turns out that like Gin Sling, Charteris has a checkered past. Gin Sling reveals that he is just as blemished as she is. His claim to aristocracy and refined manners serve to mask his shadowy past.

THEMES

Society – Race and Racism, Gentrification and Urban Diversity, Colonialism and Corruption
Quest – Authenticity

SOCIETY

Race and Racism. For the casting of the major roles, *The Shanghai Surprise* almost entirely relies on "yellowface" actors—the name given to the practice of having white actors play Asian characters. Although this was a common method in the earlier part of the century (notable examples include characters played by Katharine Hepburn, Mickey Rooney, and John Wayne), the approach serves to regenerate stereotypes and would be viewed as offensive by contemporary standards. Notwithstanding the use of yellowface, *The Shanghai Gesture*'s approach to racism is subversive and well ahead of its time. Prejudices and stereotypes are articulated, ultimately to be mocked.

An example of race dynamics is references to language, particularly certain characters' derisive comments on the non-native English speakers' use of the language. Casino's bookkeeper, Ceaser Hawkins—another one of Gin Sling's paladins—keeps adding a "chop, chop" to each and every one of his utterances when he interacts with Chinese individuals. Language comes up as a barrier, and also provides occasions to condescendingly snub the locals. Casino's young Chinese maitre d' speaks English as good as the others, but Hawkins keeps teasing him with his annoying chop chops. Similarly, Charteris is amused by the mannerism of the burly coolie, whose laconism leads Charteris to make assumptions about his English proficiency and intellect. He uses simplified language to patronize the imposing figure, up until the end. Then the tables turn; the very last line of the film belongs to Coolie, who is now talking back sarcastically—"you like-ee Chinese New Year," he asks, mocking Charteris' way of addressing him.

Race is also an issue in the battle of wits between Gin Sling and Poppy. “You’ll bring discredit to your race … it’s not good for us to see you like this,” cautions Gin Sling when an intoxicated Poppy makes a scene. “Behave yourself Poppy. You’re in China, and you’re white,” she adds haughtily, revealing the real power dynamics behind the façade of appearances. Father and daughter Charterises find out that their privileged positions were in fact precarious. Stereotypes about Asians are articulated and caricatured in *The Shanghai Gesture*; in the end the supposedly powerful whites turn out to be clueless and overwhelmed.

Gentrification and Urban Diversity. The main setting of von Sternberg’s *The Docks of New York* (1928) was the rowdy Sandbar. A title card introduced the wildly shabby and dreamy waterfront tavern—“vanished now, wiped out by reform and commerce.” “Mother” Gin Sling’s Casino, which “never closes,” as its street sign announces, is a similar urban heterotopia. Poppy murmurs that “I didn’t think such a place existed … except in my imagination … like a half-remembered dream … anything could happen here.” Various ethnicities somehow co-exist in the cosmopolitan venue, which is alluring and dangerous at the same time—a “witches Sabbath” and “a modern tower of Babel” as Poppy observes. Then, Charteris, as the frontman of the Inter-China Trading Company, steps in and attempts to wipe out all traces of the glorious casino with one fell swoop. Standing before a huge map of the downtown district, the top-tier International Settlement, he points out that “it’s only a question of making it nice and comfortable for others before they sell.” Essentially, the plan Charteris outlines is an instance of the urban development processes referred to as gentrification after the 1960s. The connection *The Shanghai Gesture* makes between colonization and gentrification would be particularly interesting for students of urban studies.

Colonialism and Corruption. The powerhouse behind Charteris is the Inter-China Trading Company. He is just one of many Europeans who come to Shanghai for easy profit—and exploitation. A tight network of individuals controls the nodes of power and Charteris partners with other Caucasian men (e.g. the city commissioner van Elst and the Counselor Jackson). Charteris, van Elst and the rest of the elites pretend to complain about what they regard as a substandard social organization and like to make jokes about it—Chinese jails can’t prevent escapes, bribery is a natural part of the system, and so on. Outwardly, they gripe about local matters and institutions, but continue to profit from them and make sure that they endure.

Local people essentially function as servants, with a few rare examples in administrative positions, such as the comprador Montgomery Howe (another yellowface character). Howe’s role at the casino seems to be some sort of a public relations executive; he functions as a liaison with top officials (the opening scene introduces him bribing petty officers). Right after the city commissioner delivers Gin Sling the unwelcome news of eviction, the officials tell Howe that they would like to employ him as the chief of police. From being a lieutenant of the underworld’s dragon lady, Howe is to smoothly transition into being the city’s top policeman. The Europeans are depicted to be perfectly content with the corruption of local politics; and they fuel it by making sure designated (and corrupt) intermediaries such as Howe efficiently take care of the dirty work.

QUEST

Authenticity. Many things are fake in *The Shanghai Gesture*: people, jewelry, and mise-en-scene are some of the examples. The appraiser of the casino authoritatively brushes off items that he deems to be cheap replicas, such as rhinestones that a player tries to convert to cash. Faces reveal little about genuine emotions—the obvious example is Gin Sling, then there is the fake-poet Omar. When Poppy asks him his field of specialization, he responds “doctor of nothing.” “Doctor” Omar’s irresistible charm is a façade for his manipulative ways. He mockingly advises comprador Howe to supply himself with a new face, if he intends to compete with him in courting women.

During the Chinese New Year party, the main attraction of the street celebrations is a surreal scene—young, semi-clad women are suspended in the air in straw baskets and auctioned off to a horde of lustful junkmen. Gin Sling quickly explains that the set-up is totally “fake”. She stresses that the men are acting and the women are “neither frightened, nor innocent.” The entire scene is supposedly a playful reenactment of Westerners’ stereotypes about Chinese customs and identity.

Discussion questions

Is there an enunciator in the story? Which character assumes this role? What are some of the relevant moments?

If the Shanghai gesture of the hand (as in cocking a snoot) can be taken to signify von Sternberg's evasion of the strict rules of the Motion Pictures Production Code, what are (if any) examples of scenes where *The Shanghai Gesture* more or less defies the Code?

How would you compare two young women, Poppy and Dixie with characters played by Marlene Dietrich in other von Sternberg films?

Why does Gin Sling kill Poppy?

What are specific examples of Chinoiserie in *The Shanghai Surprise*? How are they associated with the representation of Chinese art and culture in later films?

How is the concept the dragon lady (as exemplified by Gin Sling) similar to or different from the femme fatale in films noir?

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