HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

# Shanghai Express 1932

## Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)




*Motion Picture Herald*, Quigley Publishing, 1931. Courtesy http://mediahistoryproject.org/ Media History Digital Library.

OVERVIEW

> Poised, so composed, so still, so hushed.
> Like a bomb on the edge of going off.
> —David Thomson, *Have You Seen?*

A motley of passengers travel in hostile territory; tension heightens following a hostage crisis, in which a disreputable woman may play a key role. The premise of Guy de Maupassant's 1880 story "Boule de Suif" has inspired many films—Joseph von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) transposed it to Civil War-era China. The screenplay by Jules Furthman was adapted from Harry Hervey's story "Sky Over China"—which was inspired by a real-life event, the Lincheng Incident (1923) that took place when a Chinese warlord seized a train and held its passengers hostage.

**Setting and Authenticity.** China is the setting (the train journey from Peking to Shanghai was shot entirely at Santa Fe (Bogdanovich, 1997:236) of the fourth of seven films von Sternberg made with Marlene Dietrich; the film cycle geographically covers Germany (*The Blue Angel*), Mogador (*Morocco*), Vienna (*Dishonored*), Spain (*Devil is a Woman*), USA (*Blonde Venus*), and Russia (*The Scarlet Empress*). H.G. Wells observed that the director was "uninterested in a realistic China" (Harrington, 1949:13)—"I knew nothing about China" (Brownlow, 1970: 231), von Sternberg remarked in retrospect. He thought authenticity was overrated. His disregard for the concept in *Shanghai Express* is consistent with his approach to the aforementioned films' settings. Von Sternberg had never been to Germany before he directed *The Blue Angel*, and showed little interest in learning about the local culture; the

German town was a figment of his imagination. Same is obviously true for *The Scarlet Empress*' Imperial Russia and other countries featured in his films.

**Lineage.** Guy de Maupassant's story took place in the Franco-Prussian War (1880-1881). Notable film adaptations (some of them loosely inspired) are *Pyshka* (1934, Mikhail Romm), *Stagecoach* (1939, John Ford), *Angel and Sinner* (1945, Christian-Jacque), *Mademoiselle Fifi* (1944, Robert Wise), and *The Journey* (1959, Anatole Litvak). Among other films set in China's Republican era and its Kuomintang rule are *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933, Frank Capra) and *The General Died at Dawn* (1936, Lewis Milestone). *Shanghai Express* was remade as *Night Plane from Chunking* (1943) and *Peking Express* (1951).

**Reception.** Released at the height of the Great Depression, *Shanghai Express* was an "extended metaphor for the disorientation felt by the American audiences following the economic crisis that had befallen them" (Baxter, 1993: 5). The film was received with great enthusiasm and proved to be commercially extremely successful—it earned three million Dollars (100). *Shanghai Express* and von Sternberg were nominated for the 1932 Academy Awards in the Best Picture and Best Director categories (the winner of the Best Picture Oscar was *Grand Hotel*, which shared some characteristics with *Shanghai Express*); Director of Photography Lee Garmes won the Best Cinematography Oscar (Assistant Cinematographer was James Wong Howe [Hangmen Also Die]). This is von Sternberg's fourth and final collaboration with Lee Garmes; also, the first of a series of four films in three years, which Peter Baxter considers "the richest and most controversial" phase of his career (Baxter, 1970: 90). *Shanghai Express* is the "first of von Sternberg's sound films in which décor, photography, sound, and acting were at his fingertips." (99). According to David Thomson, the dreamy train journey is "one of the few great surrealist experiments ever paid for by a studio" and "a monument of erotic art" (Thomson, 2008: 780).

**Postscript.** In February 1932, as *Shanghai Express* was greeted with "rave reviews and crowded theatres" (Baxter, 1993: 32), the director was busy working on having his house designed by Modernist architect Richard Neutra in San Fernando Valley, where the film was shot. For a while, there circulated a rumor that von Sternberg would be arrested if he ever set foot in China (von Sternberg, 1965: 265)—which turned out to be false, as he was welcomed when he visited the country a few years later. In 1941, when "the world was engaged in a danse macabre," (278) von Sternberg would reimagine China once again with *The Shanghai Gesture*; the last Hollywood film he completed. Later in life, he would study and collect Chinese stamps (*Variety*, 1969). On a final, related note, his autobiography would be published in 1965 as *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*.

CHARACTERS

While its "principal protagonist is a railroad train," (Weinberg, 66) *Shanghai Express* features an ensemble cast, portraying distinct characters, who, in a way, represent several countries. When the train is stopped for inspection by the government troops, the Westerners each react differently: the British reverend Carmichael makes a feeble effort to appear undisturbed and continue eating, the German dealer Baum says he would complain to his consulate, the French officer Lenard is clueless, and finally, of the two Americans, Mrs. Haggerty is fearful and Sam Salt is speculative. These minor characters are morally problematic, evoking "disgrace, drug dealing, fanaticism, obsessive gambling, and pettiness" (Chan, 2007: 229).

**Shanghai Lily (Madeline).** Captain Harvey's old flame has a reputation as a notorious coaster (defined by a passenger as "a woman who lives by her own wits"—implied to be a woman that travels on the coast of China as a mistress or high-class prostitute.)

**Captain Donald "Doc" Harvey.** British officer in the medical corps is on his way to perform an important surgery in Shanghai. Five years ago, he left Madeline (before she became Shanghai Lily) as a result of jealousy over an alleged affair. The actor Clive Brooks had played a rehabilitated alcoholic lawyer (and mobster's sidekick) in von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927).

**Hui Fei.** The USA educated Chinese courtesan gets along well with Shanghai Lily. Chang targets Hui Fei and sexually assaults her; she takes her revenge by stabbing him to death. Hui Fei is an important character; she "matches Shanghai Lily's cool demeanor with her own subtle hipness" (235).

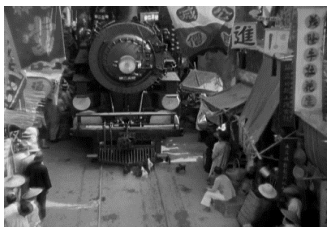
**Other Characters**

**Henry Chang.** Mysterious Eurasian turns out to be the "Number One" of the rebel forces who seize the train. Swedish-American actor Werner Oland is best known for portraying Dr. Fu Manchu and the detective Charlie Chan.
**Mr. Carmichael.** The fanatical missionary is racist and misogynist. He plays a key role in the denouement by facilitating the reconciliation of Harvey and Shanghai Lily.
**Sam Salt.** Garrulous and crass gambler/businessman contrasts with the mostly laconic passengers of the Shanghai Express. He is the only one who thanks Harvey for helping them safely arrive to Shanghai—by being a good hostage.
**Major Lenard.** The French officer does not speak English. Although he is always seen in full dress uniform, it is revealed that the Major simply wanted to prevent his beloved sister learning about his—possibly dishonorable—discharge from the military. Lenard is grateful to Lily for helping him communicate with Chang as a translator. The French officer is played by the director Émile Chautard, for whom von Sternberg had worked for as assistant director in *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (1919).
**Mrs. Haggerty.** Prim old American woman runs a boardinghouse in Shanghai and is trying to keep her dog away from the eyes of the train's personnel.
**Eric Baum.** German passenger is gruff and unfriendly; under Chang's torture, he confesses to being an opium dealer. Gustave von Seyferttitz (the chief of the Secret Police in *Dishonored* and 'Hymn-Book' Harry in *The Docks of New York* with von Sternberg; Professor Moriarty in 1922's *Sherlock Holmes*).

SYNOPSIS

A train departs from Peking for Shanghai, protected by well-armed Chinese soldiers and carrying a diverse and international group of individuals. Some of the passengers are bothered by the notorious courtesan Shanghai Lily, who has an emotionally charged encounter with Captain Harvey, her inamorato from years ago. Not before long, the train is ambushed and seized by rebel forces; one of the passengers, the mysterious Eurasian Henry Chang turns out to be their leader. Chang proceeds to torture and interrogate the passengers; he propositions Shanghai Lily and sexually assaults the Chinese courtesan Hui Fei. Eventually, Chang offers to swap Captain Harvey with his top lieutenant, who was previously arrested by the soldiers. Although the Chinese government agrees, Chang prepares to maim Harvey's eyes. To stop him, Lily succumbs to his demands—fortunately, she is saved from the ordeal when Hui Fei fatally stabs the warlord. Tension subsides and the train proceeds to its destination. However, Harvey is still suspicious about Lily's motivation for capitulating to Chang. He finally realizes the true nature of her selfless action and they passionately reconcile.

SCENES



**Peking Station.** In the bustling Peking station, the Shanghai train is prepared for departure. A civil war is waging between the government troops and rebel forces; the perilous journey is expected to take three days. Consequently, the train is escorted by a large detachment of soldiers aboard armored railroad cars featuring artillery turrets. As the train moves through the bustling Peking marketplace, the locomotive driver negotiates obstacles such as animals on the tracks.



**Passengers.** In the comfortable dining car, the passengers present themselves; their identities will soon prove to be deceptive. Nine passengers are singled out: the prim Mrs. Haggerty, Christian missionary Carmichael, the elderly French officer Major Lenard, a gruff German named Eric Baum, and American gambler Sam Salt. Two high-class courtesans immediately attract attention: the USA educated and bilingual Chinese Hui Fei comes on a palanquin, the Caucasian "Shanghai Lily" arrives with a chauffeured limousine. There is also a British officer, Captain "Doc" Harvey; last but not least is a curt and inscrutable Eurasian merchant named Henry Chang, who remarks—not proudly—that he is half white.

**On Board.** The train very slowly moves through a hectic marketplace, with the locomotive driver negotiating animals on the tracks. In the meantime, the motley of passengers settle down and attempt to socialize half-heartedly—which proves to be difficult as prejudices prevail. The conformist and querulous Mrs. Haggerty and the fanatical British missionary Carmichael are both irked by the presence of Hui Fei and Shanghai Lily. As independent women and sisters-in-sin, the latter are comfortable with the company of each other.



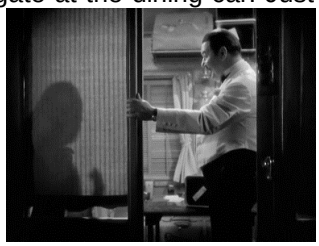


Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei are both flappers – Harvey kept the watch with Madeline's photo, from five years ago; before she got the bob haircut and became Shanghai Lily.

**Secrets.** The French officer Lenard does not understand English, the German merchant Baum is unwilling to communicate, and the American gambler likes to show off his valuables and invite others for bets. The quick introduction suggests that most of the passengers are hiding some sort of secrets. That of Mrs. Haggerty is innocuous and is revealed right away—she tries to keep her dog Waffles in the compartment. The stowaway is soon discovered and she can do nothing but protest as the dog is taken to the cargo car.

**Halt.** The train is now moving at regular speed and the passengers congregate at the dining car. Just then, the locomotive driver is ordered to halt at a blockade set up by the government troops. Soldiers swarm the cars and inspect passports. A young Chinese man is apprehended— he turns out to be a rebel operative. Just before the train is allowed to proceed, no one notices Henry Chang surreptitiously going to the telegraph office to send cryptic messages—informing the recipients of the arrest the young rebel and instructing them to make a move on the train. After the journey resumes, Chang menacingly enters Hui Fei's compartment; she is able to thwart—this to be the first—sexual assault and he sneaks away.





**Ambush.** As the train slows down at a refueling post, it runs into an ambush. A large group of well-equipped guerrillas stealthily overpower the sentinels and seize the train; the remaining soldiers are disarmed, rounded up, and mowed down by a machine gun. Henry Chang is revealed to be the leader of the rebels. He assumes command of the train and begins to interrogate the passengers—now at his mercy, as he steals and tortures. Eric Baum is branded; the German was in fact an opium dealer.



Modern technologies play key roles: rebels use electrical telegraph to coordinate the ambush; they use a Maxim machine gun to attack and overwhelm the train's well-armed military escorts.



**Hostage Crisis.** Chang is particularly interested to find out which passengers have wealthy and influential connections. The Chinese man previously arrested by the soldiers is one of his top lieutenants and he intends to find someone important enough to swap with him. As a decorated officer and a well-connected surgeon, Captain Harvey emerges as the prime candidate for a hostage barter. Word is sent out to British diplomats.

**Proposition and Rape.** While a response is awaited, Chang propositions Shanghai Lily, who tries to hold him at bay with verbal sparring. Harvey overhears their interaction and is troubled about her reaction, which he suspects to be encouraging. He punches Chang and is locked up. Chang then orders Hui Fei to be fetched and rapes her. Shanghai Lily is restless—the rest of the passengers remain passive.



When Hui Fei returns to her compartment, she clutches a dagger; Shanghai Lily prevents her from committing suicide.

**Sacrifice.** British diplomats intercede and the Kuomintang government agrees to the hostage swap; Chang's lieutenant is handed over to the jubilant guerrillas. The Studebaker Touring car was also featured in *Hot Saturday* (1932) and interestingly used a parade car during the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics.



Shanghai Lily is mortified when Chang lets her know that instead of honoring the agreement right away, he intends to blind Captain Harvey before releasing him. She makes an attempt to kill him, but is subdued by his men. Shanghai Lily realizes that there is only one way she can save Harvey, so she tells Chang that she is succumbing to his proposition in exchange for not harming the Captain. As soon as he is freed, Harvey confronts Chang to free Shanghai Lily, but she tells him that it was her decision to stay. The train prepares to depart without her—also, Hui Fei isn't on board.

**Murder on the Express.** Before Chang can have his way with Shanghai Lily, Hui Fei furtively sneaks into his quarter and fatally stabs him with a dagger. She casually informs the others that she has "just killed Chang." Rebels lose control of the train and the hostage crisis is over.

**Normalcy.** The train approaches Shanghai; the passengers appear to be relaxed and there is slightly less bickering on board. Harvey is still not aware that Shanghai Lily wanted to save him. Mr. Carmichael, the reverend who had been a stern critique of the courtesan, goes out of his way to persuade the Captain about her noble intentions. Thanks to his efforts, Harvey finally realizes what actually happened. A key moment shows Shanghai Lily praying—Lee Garmes was awarded the Best Cinematography Oscar in 1932.



**Shanghai Station.** Passengers disembark; with many secrets unearthed, some uneasily exchange curt farewells, while most appear to be relieved that they would never see each other again. Hui Fei is the center of attention for the news media—she is expected to collect a large reward from the government for killing a top bandit. Harvey's pocket watch—which featured Shanghai Lily's photo—was lost during the scuffles; she buys a new one for him and they passionately reconcile.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**SHANGHAI LILY**

**Character** The moment she arrives at the Peking station, Lily causes a stir on board the train. Someone mentions that she is a "coaster"—and explains that the word means a "woman who lives by her wits." She has lived in China for the last eight years.

The adventuress on board the oneiric Chinese train has made significant contribution to the persona of Marlene Dietrich and the character has had an enduring legacy on popular culture—designer Tom Ford's luxury fashion house has paid homage to the notorious courtesan with a fragrance, its *Shanghai Lily eau de parfum*—dubbed "tantalizing, opulent, elegant" (*China Rhyming*).

*Illustrative moments*

**Languorous.** With *Shanghai Express*, "Dietrich's screen persona of disillusioned world weariness was clinched." (Baxter, 1993: 32) The characters, particularly Shanghai Lily (and Harvey), languorously mimic the pace of the train (Brownlow, 222). It is not so much her words that matter, but movement and mannerism, engulfed in chiaroscuro. Von Sternberg demonstrates his "ability to suggest the inner emotional experience, merely with a control of light and shadow" (Harrington, 13).

**Sophisticated.** Major Lenard can only speak French—which is initially not so important on board the international train. However, when rebels seize it, passengers find that they can easily be targets of random violence. Lily is fluent in French and acts as an interpreter between Chang and Lenard; the short interrogation reveals that the Major was actually not an active duty officer. The confession is shameful for Lenard, but at least Chang leaves him alone; he safely makes it to Shanghai, thanks to Lily's tactful eloquence. When the train reaches Shanghai, Lenard gratefully thanks her.

**Praying.** A turning point in the plot is Chang's rape of Hui Fei. Shanghai Lily urges other passengers to react, but they all choose to remain passive. She desperately turns to the man of religion, but Reverend Carmichael curtly—and somewhat hypocritically—tells her to get on her knees and pray. Subsequently, she helplessly retreats to an empty compartment. When Carmichael takes a glimpse inside the dark compartment, he sees that Lily is praying. It is a transformative moment for Carmichael—Lily is untouched by his persistent and aggressive attempts to reform her, but it seems that ultimately she reforms him.

**Trembling.** Another visually powerful scene spotlights Shanghai Lily's hands after she has conversed with Harvey. He is still accusatory and skeptical about her actions; "you appear to be nervous," he observes, noticing that her hands are trembling. She responds that it is because he has touched her as he lighted her cigarette. Not much comes out of the dialogue and she returns to her compartment; in the dark, while she smokes, her hands are visibly shaking.

**CAPTAIN DONALD "DOC" HARVEY**

**Character** Harvey wears two hats, military man and scientist; it appears that medicine is more important for him. He is observant and rational, however, not as intuitive and determined. As an officer, he seems to be chivalrous and graceful; but that may not always be the case.

*Illustrative moments*

**Laconic and Dull.** The passengers speak somewhat monotonously; when von Sternberg was asked about this, he explained that it was intentional that their speech and conversations were slow, in order to mimic the rhythm of train (Brownlow, 222). This is particularly true of Harvey, who is laconic and stiff. As the leading man, he may be less than charming, but he helps to direct the spotlight on Marlene Dietrich.

**Impressionable and Uncertain.** The British officer demonstrates his main flaw right away: he is quite impressionable. Listening to Carmichael's conservative diatribe leaves him confused. Just then, Lily and Hui Fei stop by his compartment and invite him to join them at the dining car. The superficially graceful Harvey makes a surprising move—he rudely declines to shake Hui Fei's outstretched hand. Lily is baffled and remarks about the "cruelty" of his action. Harvey then makes a sarcastic observation about her professional camaraderie—with the implication being both women are courtesans. That's what a quick chat with Carmichael does to Harvey. Towards the end, he once again gets nasty, when he informs Lily that her "friend Chang is dead."

**Insecure and Faithless.** Harvey is still struggling with Madeline's "a woman's trick" from five years ago. Although she explains to him that she had simply wanted to make him a little jealous and test his love, Harvey had left her then and is still not sure whether she had cheated him. This is the event that led to her becoming Shanghai Lily. Before the rebel attack and Chang's harassment, Harvey appeared to be willing to trust her again; in spite of not really accepting her version of what took place five years ago. Lily

remarks that "when I needed your faith, you withheld it; and now, when I don't need it, and don't deserve it, you give it to me." Soon, he is going to withhold it again. Harvey continues to display insecurity; he suspects that Lily might have willingly consented when Chang propositioned her. Even when the fundamentalist Carmichael realizes that her motive was to save Harvey from torture, he keeps grumbling about the incident (an insubstantial allegation, as Hui Fei got rid of Chang before anything could even happen). In that respect, Harvey sounds a lot like the prim Mrs. Haggerty. Towards the end, he goes even further and stupidly commends Carmichael for his earlier misogyny and contempt of Madeline—his "amazingly correct diagnosis of Shanghai Lily." Interestingly, the previously self-righteous reverend has moved on; now, he insists that there is a solid reason to change that perspective, but Harvey is adamant and says that defending her action amounts to "rubbish." Carmichael observes that Harvey's problem is his lack of faith—"love without faith, like religion without faith, doesn't amount to much."

**HUI FEI**

**Character** The bride-to-be Hui Fei is planning to settle down in Shanghai. She is an independent woman, who is further empowered through her killing of Chang. She may be the only real winner of the train journey—the government is expected to pay her the $20,000 bounty. At Shanghai, she is greeted as a celebrity by a horde of journalists, whom she casually walks away from. The role is "a regurgitation of previous" (Chan, 226) ones played by Anna May Wong—who had most recently appeared as the daughter of Fu Manchu.

*Illustrative moments*

**Serene and Stolid.** When Carmichael makes a scene about sharing the compartment with Hui Fei, she silently continues playing solitaire, only occasionally taking amused glances in the racist and misogynistic reverend's direction. Subsequently, Carmichael is reseated somewhere else and replaced by Shanghai Lily**.** When Mrs. Haggerty visits their compartment, Hui Fei disinterestedly keeps herself busy with a deck of cards. She initially ignores the haughty old woman's charade about respectability; subsequently defies it. During the film's climax, she stabs the rebel warlord and casually informs Harvey that "I've just killed Chang."

**Bilingual and Sophisticated.** Hui Fei is eloquent in English. When Mrs. Haggerty self-righteously talks about respectability, Hui Fei mocks (and infuriates) her by using language that is more complex compared to that of the pretentious woman—"I must confess I do not quite know the standard of respectability that you demand in your boarding house." Later, Hui Fei calmly translates the orders of the government troops to her fellow passengers, who are clueless and panic stricken.

**Vengeful Nationalist.** Chang has a bounty on his head and Hui Fei maintains that "it would be a great day for China when that price is paid." Considering that Chang is presumably the leader of communist guerillas, Hui Fei is likely to support the nationalist Kuomintang party. Hui Fei wears ornate dresses and carries an ornamented dagger—with which she murders Chang. "Death cancelled his debt to me," she tells Shanghai Lily, with quiet intensity.

**HENRY CHANG**

**Character** Before it is revealed that Chang is the rebel leader, the international passengers regard him as a local elite. Mixed-race Eurasian is played by Warner Oland, best known for his yellowface portrayals of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. "The rebel is the result of miscegenation, a Western taboo that inevitably ends in his demise" (230).

*Illustrative moments*

**Vindictive and Lascivious.** Even early on, Chang acts as a bellicose bully, jostling and shoving others. The irascible German dealer Eric Baum mildly reacts to Chang's rudeness—the latter doesn't forget this trivial incident; when the train is under his control, he has Baum branded. Chang makes no pretense that the torture had to do with the German's illegal undertakings; he says that it was punishment

for his previous "insolence." Later, when he propositions Shanghai Lily and gets punched by Harvey, his reaction is similarly horrific. He doesn't retaliate against his valuable hostage and leaves Shanghai Lily alone for the time being—but the indirect consequence of the humiliation is his rape of Hui Fei. His previous sexual attack had taken place before the rebels had seized the train and it was thwarted by her.

**Untrustworthy.** Even after the Chinese government accepts Chang's terms of the hostage exchange, he attempts to take his revenge from Harvey by maiming his eyes. Lily tries to stop him by bribing; Chang dismisses her offer, saying that "all the money in the world cannot wipe out his insult to me." Her protests for not honoring the hostage agreement (at that stage, the government of China has fulfilled its part of the deal and delivered his lieutenant safely to him) is also futile—"I am not concerned about your ideas about justice," Chang mutters, "I live by my own code."

**MR. CARMICHAEL AND MRS. HAGGERTY**

**Characters**

These are the two conservatives: the self-described "doctor of divinity, in the service of mankind," is apparently a British scholar of theology (the character is listed as Mr. Carmichael in the credits and only rarely referred to as doctor by the other characters), the American Mrs. Haggerty owns a boardinghouse, "only for respectable people."

*Illustrative moments*

**Self-righteous and Judgemental.** The two characters have little in common except the fact that they are both rigid and judgmental conformists. They both make a fuss about their fellow passengers Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei. Anthony B. Chan argues persuasively that the prudish Haggerty is a "stand-in for Harvey," (234) who is confused about his own moral standards and considerably insecure.

**Transformation.** Only Carmichael is transformed; he recognizes and respects the nobility of Shanghai Lily's action and acts as a mediator between her and Harvey. On the other hand, Mrs. Haggerty remains a female misogynistic. It appears that her view of Hui Fei has improved after her killing of Chang, but she still thinks Shanghai Lily is "terrible." At this point, Haggerty serves a reference point to highlight the change in Carmichael and the stupidity of Harvey.

**Faithful Mediator.** Carmichael says that Harvey and others may perceive him to be a "meddlesome fanatic," but says that he regards faith to be essential not only for religion, but also love. He has faith in Shanghai Lily's sincerity—and so should Harvey.

**SAM SALT**

**Character** Sam Salt is the second American on board (the other is Mrs. Haggerty). He bets "on everything and anything going right or wrong." He is relieved enough at the journey's end to thank Harvey for helping them stay alive by being a good hostage.

*Illustrative moments*

**Pragmatic Speculator.** Salt is a raconteur and is an oddball among the passengers who talk like a train (see "Shanghai Lily" and "Captain Harvey"). He is careful to distance himself from directly antagonizing anyone. Sometimes, he states the obvious, without any moral commitment; an example is his observation that Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei "are not going to have an easy time"—with no implication that he condones Carmichael for inciting hatred about the two women. Salt is essentially a conservative, but isn't vocal about it. When Carmichael makes a u-turn and begins to defend Shanghai Lily, Salt says that "I am a liberal, but I wouldn't defend that dame for all the rice in China."

**Phony.** Salt may not be a liar like Eric Baum and Major Lenard, but he is similarly deceptive. The precious lapel pin he boasts about turns out to be fake; so is the one he keeps in his pocket as a substitute. Supposedly, the original is in a safe in Shanghai.

**MAJOR LENARD AND ERIC BAUM**

**Characters** Minor characters are interesting portrayals of French and German citizens in the inter-war period.

*Illustrative moment*

**Liars.** The Frenchman is polite and pleasant; the German is irritable and uncommunicative. They have a common trait: both are liars. Lenard pretends to be an active duty officer, whereas he has been—presumably not honorably—discharged from service. Baum claims that he owns a coal mine in China, but Chang doesn't buy that for a second. They are both impostors; Lenard wishes to continue making his sister proud and Baum is dealing opium. Lenard's lie saves him because Chang categorizes him as someone who has no worth as a hostage; Baum's lie—together with his previous "insolence"—gets him tortured.

THEMES

**Society –** Race and Racist Conformity, Gender and Conformism, Modernity and Technology, Exoticism
**Relationship –** Love and Faith
**Appearance –** Identity and Deception

**SOCIETY**

**Race and Racist Conformity.** Most of the characters in *Shanghai Express* are unlikeable and flawed. The worst of them is Chang, who is a torturer and rapist; the rebel warlord also orders the killing of unarmed soldiers. In spite of the presence of the deplorable Eurasian villain (he happens to be half white), *Shanghai Express* consistently underscores instances of racism as obnoxious behavior. Right away, Mr. Carmichael emerges as the racist who refuses to share the same compartment with Hui Fei. He keeps bickering about her—he is only distracted when his misogyny proves to be just as powerful; consequently, his hateful language targets the Caucasian courtesan Shanghai Lily. Just like the prim boardinghouse owner Mrs. Haggerty, Carmichael is—initially—presented as a fool and a nuisance. Towards the end, certain events cause him to question his prejudices and he is transformed.

Warner Oland plays the mixed-race Henry Chang in 'yellowface' (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 (noteworthy 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. Von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) would make heavy use of yellowface performances. Notwithstanding the use of yellowface, that film's approach to racism is subversive—prejudices are articulated and stereotypes underscored, ultimately to be mocked. Racist conformity of some characters in *Shanghai Express* fulfills a comparable function.

**Gender and Conformism.** Carmichael's racism is matched by his misogyny: After his outrage about the presence of a higher class Asian woman on board, he finds that there is another female who is just as dangerous—"one yellow, one white, just as rotten." A while later, he continues his diatribe somewhere else, talking about a "cargo of sin." He doesn't like the older Mrs. Haggerty either, even though she shares his sentiment about Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei. The self-righteous and gossipy Mrs. Haggerty makes an attempt to socialize with the flapper style women who listen to jazz and enjoy themselves in their compartment; she proudly introduces herself as the owner of a boarding house, where "only respectable people" stay. Right away, conformism emerges as an issue that divides them. Lily makes fun of her emphasis on respectability and Hui Fei openly rejects any pretense to fitting within her moral standards. As they defy and mock her self-righteousness, she leaves the compartment with contempt. The tension between the independent and outcast women versus the prim conformists is one of the themes of *Shanghai Express*.

Von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* spotlighted disreputable women looking for social acceptance and redemption—Mae thought marriage might redeem her tarnished past and make her 'decent'. In *Shanghai Express*, Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei are self-confident women, but they also seem to view marriage as a way to elevate their status. Madeline seems to be regretful of her transformation to Shanghai Lily. Hui Fei is on her way to Shanghai to get married—Chang's sexual attack in a way aims to spoil her transition to 'decency.'

**Modernity and Technology.** The express train features a variety of ethnic and gender identities; it also showcases technological advances of early twentieth century modernity. The most important technology is the train; by bridging the two distant cities of China, it ossifies the nation-state. On board, it makes improbable encounters possible and facilitates connection between different social identities.

Among other significant technologies is the gramophone. Lily and Hui Fei are more or less isolated in their compartment; they use a gramophone to turn their living space lively. Mrs. Haggerty is enticed by the music and stops by; she finds out that the two women are too modern for her taste. Telegraph also plays a key role in the plot; when the government troops arrest his right-hand man, Chang immediately sends a telegraph to the rebel forces, to order them to seize the train. Another technological convenience is the electrical fan which adds to the luxury and comfort of the dining car—yet it bothers the irascible German Eric Baum, who demands that the fans be turned off.

There are two automobiles: Shanghai Lily makes her entrance with a luxury car, an Austro-Daimler limousine—which signifies her social status (Hui Fei is also a high-class courtesan, but she arrives to the station on a palanquin). The Studebaker Touring car that is later seen was also featured in *Hot Saturday* (1932) and interestingly used a parade car during the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics (SHHUST, 2010).

Technologies of war are also prominently displayed. There are numerous carbines and infantry rifles in sight during the earlier scenes. The train is protected by (at least) one armored car that features a formidable artillery turret and a mounted cannon with a gun shield. Both soldiers and rebels possess Maxim machine guns; these are used twice; during the ambush on the train and subsequently, when the rebels execute a large number of troops by mowing them down.

Finally, modern medicine plays a part in the plot: one of the main characters, Captain Harvey is a British officer, but he is also a surgeon. The reason of his travel from Peking to Shanghai is to operate the governor.

**Exoticism.** Railroads have played an important role in compressing time; they facilitated the need for punctuality and standardized time zones. In *Shanghai Express*, clocks appear several times, but the setting is not entirely in harmony with the modern conception of time—for instance, Mrs. Haggerty complains that she was handed a newspaper from 1927. The train has to negotiate a hectic marketplace, with animals leisurely occupying the tracks at the Peking Station. China is also dangerously alien—Sam Salt proposes a bet about their likelihood to survive; Chang cautions him that "you are in China, sir, where time and life have no value."

**RELATIONSHIP**

**Love and Faith.** Doc Harvey is unsure whether he can trust Madeline. During the course of their conversations when they confront their past, it is revealed that five years ago, she had attempted to make him a little jealous by pretending to be interested in someone else. He had taken her act as infidelity and walked out. This is the fateful event that turned Madeline to Shanghai Lily, a high-class prostitute. Now, on board the train, Harvey is faced with the same problem; he is suspicious about her faithfulness and is hesitant to commit again. When he overhears Chang propositioning Shanghai Lily, he assumes that she is willing to have an affair with the warlord—when she was in fact desperately searching for a way to save Harvey from captivity and torture. It will not be easy for him to understand her real motivation and the selfless nature of her action. Thanks to Reverend Carmichael's efforts as an intermediary, Harvey is finally persuaded and they reconcile.

**APPEARANCE**

**Identity and Deception.** Identity in *Shanghai Express* "is not a state, but a process of continuing change and adaptation" (Baxter, 1993: 118). The passengers embark on the train and present themselves to one another—by the end of the journey, it would be revealed that most of these identities were deceptive or fallacious: The French major, who had never taken off his full dress uniform (which boasted his military decorations) was in fact discharged from the army and merely wanted to spare his sister the shame; the gruff and unpleasant German passenger, Eric Baum, was an opium dealer; Mr. Carmichael incessantly complains about the courtesans and later champions the reconciliation of Harvey and Lily; the Eurasian merchant Chang is in fact a warlord.

**Discussion questions**

Are there aspects of femme fatale characteristics in either one of the two main female characters?

How do the political forces (rebels and government troops) in the *Shanghai Express* and the key incidents relate to the history of 1930s China? How does the film represent the historical actors?

Hui Fei and Chang are natives of China (with the qualification that she is bilingual and he is mixed-race); Shanghai Lily is Caucasian (her country of origin is not specified). The other passengers are foreigners whose nationality is identified (German, Baum; French, Lenard; two British, Carmichael and Captain Harvey; two Americans, Salt and Haggerty). Taken as a cross-section of the major powers that had a stake in China, what observations can be made about their representation?

The reverend Mr. Carmichael is an interesting character. What seems to motivate his transformation? In 1932, the British priest Harold Davidson was defrocked following a scandal involving prostitutes. Could he (or others) be an inspiration for Carmichael? How would you compare *Shanghai Express*' reverend with the representation of men of religion in other films?

In two scenes that spotlight Shanghai Lily's hands, what is she praying for and why are her hands trembling?

According to Anthony B. Chan, "Hui Fei, as a proactive and reality based heroine, emerges from the Chinese tradition as Hua Mulan and She Saihua" (Chan, 230). How would you compare Hui Fei with the representation of strong Asian women in contemporary cinema?

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