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The Shanghai Gesture

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This essay concerns an Orientalist trope that I call “the Shanghai gesture.” This cinematic trope involves a movement whereby seemingly marginal Asian set dressing in Hollywood film ends up functioning as a load-bearing narrative element. A large number of *films noirs* visually and acoustically reference the East in this manner, featuring Asian stylistic touches large and small, from *Laura* (Preminger, 1944), with the porcelain bric-a-brac that graces its opening scenes, to the neo-noir *Jade* (Friedkin, 1995), with its bizarre décor and mysterious engraved Chinese box.¹ In such films, Chinese costumes and figurines appear at random, for what at first glance seem to be purely stylistic purposes. The East’s presence seems gratuitous — an afterthought tacked on for no other reason than visual atmosphere, aesthetic pleasure, or to conjure a vaguely paranoid mood for a Western film market. However, in some of these films, décor becomes entangled with the film’s larger meanings. Elements of *mise-en-scène* become overdetermined, and ultimately bear the burden of explanation for a multitude of cryptic enigmas that the narrative cannot resolve.

In my analysis, the Shanghai gesture involves a double abduction: an appropriation of superficial, even kitsch elements of Oriental aesthetic by Hollywood, and a trope in which that aesthetic comes to invade and take over the logic of the film. In choosing this phrase to describe the trope, I intend that my reader hear an echo of the verb “to shanghai.” The term originated in 1871 as colloquialism meaning “to drug or otherwise render insensible, and ship on board a vessel wanting hands,” and more generally, “to transfer forcibly or abduct, to constrain or compel.” The notion of being “rendered insensible” speaks to fears about a loss of cognitive

faculties and the capacity for rational thought in the face of a confrontation with the East. The loss of deductive reasoning power is precisely what threatens the *film noir* protagonist when he happens upon one of these overdetermined Orientalist objects. “To shanghai” indicates a sense of movement away or transfer, implying a kind of topographical extension, change of coordinates, or disorientation.

I have prepared this version of this essay for a special issue of *Forum*, regarding questions of desire. At first glance, the topic of Orientalist mise-en-scène may seem to have little to do with desire as we understand it, for example, as a condition of lack that structures human subjectivity, or a motor force of consumer capitalism. However, I do think that this essay engages questions of desire at another level, that of the desire to *know*. What makes the Orientalist objects I will be speaking about in this essay so intriguing and frustrating is their whiff of unintelligibility, which is captured in the word “curio.” Our desire to possess these objects is bound up with a desire to understand or even outwit them, and vice versa. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have suggested that the desire to know may underwrite desire in general: “However peculiar it may seem to speak of desire as an epistemological category, we propose that desire as lack is constituted, originally, as the exciting pain of a certain ignorance: the failure to penetrate the *sense* of the other’s soliciting” (Bersani and Dutoit, 40). Jean Laplanche has given a name to this epistemological formation of desire, the enigmatic signifier. I discuss that concept at greater length in the forthcoming book project to which this essay belongs, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Projection, and the Enigmatic Signifier*. In the meantime, I thank the editors of *Forum* for the opportunity to share this work in progress.

The Empty Camera: *The Big Sleep*

In his essay “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” Eric Lott describes a scene from *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944), in which a client attempts to give detective Philip Marlowe a jade necklace that he has recovered for her. Marlowe remarks, “No thanks, it’s wrong for my complexion.” Lott observes:

We are given to understand “complexion” first and foremost in the moral sense; Marlowe has bested the forces of greed and graft that threaten to swamp him...In another and equally pressing sense, though, Marlowe has remained true to a racial physiognomy, that of whiteness, which indexes his pristine soul. (Lott, 542)

The jade necklace in *Murder, My Sweet* — like the black bird in *The Maltese Falcon* — is a dangerous object, something that must be rejected or even destroyed if whiteness and Western rationalism are to be reaffirmed. Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo also comment on the significance of the jade necklace in this film, and suggest that it represents a threat not only against whiteness but against patriarchy: “While the rulers of the East know the proper value...of jade, which they revere, this indeterminate jewel is a threat to the West. Within this Orientalist paradigm, the East represents a maternal/natural figure in relation to the West’s paternal civilizing influence” (Oliver and Trigo, 46). The style of critical race reading that Lott here makes use of is equally revelatory when extended to other films in this cycle; similarly revealing are the observations that Oliver and Trigo offer regarding the gendering of ambiguous Eastern objects and the threats they pose to Western models of kinship.

Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* (1946), another *noir* adaptation of a Raymond Chandler hardboiled detective novel, relies heavily upon Orientalist elements of *mise-en-scène*. In this film, Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) has been hired by General Guy Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to investigate a blackmail case involving his daughter Carmen (Martha Vickers). While on a

stakeout outside the house of Arthur Gwynn Geiger on Laverne Terrace, Marlowe hears gunshots and a scream, and enters the house. The sequence is filmed largely from Marlowe's point of view, with a mobile camera, and edited in a loose shot-reverse shot pattern. Marlowe enters through a window to find Geiger dead on the floor, and Carmen Sternwood "high as a kite," posed in a carved Chinese armchair, wearing a silk Chinese dress decorated with metallic dragons.



The room contains a beaded curtain, a silk tapestry embroidered with Chinese calligraphy, and an Oriental rug. Incense wafts from a bronze bowl mounted on a wall. One object dominates several shots: a chipped, wooden Buddha head that looks to be of Thai origin. Marlowe flips it open to reveal a camera inside, and finds that the film is missing. Marlowe then

searches Geiger's desk, where he finds a little black book filled with names, including the Sternwood name, along with notes written in code. In the 1946 theatrical release version of the film, a dissolve connects the previous footage directly to Marlowe's discovery of the codebook. In the pre-release 1945 version, though, a lengthier investigation sequence precedes this discovery.

Aside from a few key details, both cuts of the film faithfully render the descriptions of Geiger's house in Chandler's 1939 novel. In first-person narration, Marlowe describes "brown plaster walls decked out with Chinese strips of embroidery," "Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames," lamps with "jade-green shades and long tassels," and "a thick pinkish Chinese rug in which a gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap" — a trademark Chandlerian metaphor that also happens to associate Chineseness with hiding and deception (Chandler, 31). However, there are also differences from the film. Unlike Hawks' Carmen, Chandler's is nude, except for "a pair of long jade earrings" (Chandler, 32). Another difference concerns the Thai statue. Chandler's original description describes it as "a thing that looked like a totem pole. It had a profile like an eagle and its wide round eye was a camera lens" (Chandler, 32). Whereas Chandler's totem pole calls to mind a Native American past and primitivist aesthetic, Hawks' Thai sculpture evokes an inscrutability that is a key element in *film noir* and that is associated in many examples of this genre with things Asian. The two details that have been altered from the novel — Carmen's attire, and the prop that houses the camera — are both Orientalized in the film. Like one who has reached a spiritual nirvana, the wooden Buddha's head is empty, posing the riddle of a camera without pictures, eyes closed and smiling at something secret, and it differs in this sense from Chandler's totem pole with its wide-open eye.



Editing and framing associate Carmen with the filmless camera; she is likewise cloaked in an Oriental exterior that contains nothing. Taciturn and grinning, she is intoxicated to the point that she is unable to say what happened or who killed Geiger. When Marlowe aggressively questions her, she only slurs, “You talk too much, yuk yuk yuk.” She has been Shanghaied: drugged, rendered insensible, and made foreign. She is also an enigmatic signifier, decadently clothed, but offering up no meaning. Later in the film, Marlowe shoots the statuette, blasting it open. He does so ostensibly in a ruse to trick Eddie Mars’ henchmen, who are waiting outside, but this act of destruction also symbolizes the triumph of Marlowe’s hard-boiled cunning over the irrational enigmas of the East.

This scene from *The Big Sleep* links the Orient to both the feminine and the erotic. It also links it to the unknown: to the limits of deductive reasoning and rational inquiry. This association is further sedimented when Marlowe discovers Geiger's codebook, which is related to the ciphers of the empty camera and Carmen. Chandler's novel also connects the codebook to the feminine, the erotic, and the unknown, as is apparent in a passage in which Marlowe describes Geiger's bedroom.

It was neat, fussy, womanish. The bed had a flounced cover. There was perfume on the triple-mirrored dressing table, beside a handkerchief, some loose money, a man's brushes, a keyholder...I took the keyholder back to the living room and went through the desk. There was a locked steel box in the top drawer. I used one of the keys on it. There was a lot of writing in code, in the same slanting printing that had written to General Sternwood. (Chandler, 34)

Marlowe uses feminine adjectives to describe Geiger's bedroom: "fussy," "womanish," "flounced," and so forth. Like Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*, with his gardenia-scented handkerchief, there is something queer about Geiger. The scene in Geiger's bedroom was cut from the 1946 theatrical release cut of the film, but the 1945 pre-release version shows that the filmmakers retained these connotations from the novel, as Marlowe examines the contents of the dressing table, sniffs the perfumed handkerchief, and smiles knowingly.



The slanting writing that Marlowe finds in the code book when he opens this box with Geiger's key is an enigmatic signifier that points to skewed motives and twisted desires, evoking and fusing the stereotypes of the "bent" homosexual and the "slant-eyed" Asian (the bookshop clerk played by Dorothy Malone earlier describes Geiger as having "a Charlie Chan moustache"). The mirrored dressing table points both to a stereotypically narcissistic femininity and to a notion of glassy, deceptive signs. The next scenes in both the novel and film depict Marlowe at home, sleeplessly trying to crack the cipher in Geiger's book. But the key is already there, in the very slant of the handwriting, which itself becomes the mark of guilt, awryness, and perversion. The handwriting functions as an index: the clue is not to be found in the translated content, but is rather hiding in plain view, in the style of the print. Chandler's repetition of the

words “key” and “keyholder” in this passage provide a clue that the code is less intractable than it seems.



One could argue that these swinging tapestries, perfumed Chinese interiors, and slanted words are but marginal set-dressing in both the film and the novel of *The Big Sleep*, and if so, there would be little to say aside from a brief critique of the Orientalist impulse revealed therein. However, as I suggest above, these elements of mise-en-scène signify in excess of both the notion that they are arbitrary placeholders in the plot, and the notion that they are simply exotic theme-decorations and nothing more. We and Marlowe enter Geiger’s Orientalist house at a pivotal moment: it is here that Marlowe comes to realize that he is involved in a much more tangled web of intrigue than General Sternwood’s initial story about a gambling debt would

suggest. Geiger's house is a miniature Chinatown, an Oriental funhouse of riddles that, one by one, pop up to test Marlowe's interpretive skills. The Oriental and queer mise-en-scène is precisely what indicates the underlying presence of further secrets. It is as much through mise-en-scène as through plotting that we come to expect a more complex story than was originally made known both to Marlowe and the spectator.

What are these deeper enigmas, and why are Orientalist signifiers so often deployed to represent them — or even offered up as the explanation for them? *The Big Sleep*'s plot is notoriously convoluted, and many of the questions it poses are left unanswered. Chandler reportedly said that he himself was not sure who killed the Sternwood's chauffeur Owen in the end.ⁱⁱ The tale may be apocryphal, but it reveals that *The Big Sleep* is not simply an example of detective fiction, but an allegory of the very problem of unsolved mysteries: the kind that cannot be answered simply by pinning a doer to a deed. What do these mysteries look like, and where they come from? In most *films noir*, as scholars have detailed, they appear in the form of a grail-like quest object, or an inscrutable *femme fatale*. However, some of the most emblematic examples of the genre substitute for the briefcase an Asian figurine, or provide the *femme fatale* with a Chinese back-story. As in the example above, some *film noirs* pepper the scene of the crime with Oriental curios taunt both detective and viewer with the question of their own significance: whether or not they are clues, whether or not they mean something. Such films finally project the East as the site where informative communication and rational thought reach a limit. It is frequently in relation to the Asian signifier — be it slanted or accented, ornamented or calligraphic — that this limit crops up.

A Show for the Tourists: *The Shanghai Gesture*

Josef von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) starts with a title screen that provides an immediate clue that the film will be in some way about signification, and what is lost in translation. The fantastical Shanghai in which it is set, the title card declares, is "a modern Tower of Babel...[with] people living between the lines of law and custom." On a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the film is most insistently concerned with the deceptiveness and instability not of verbal language, but of objects. Indeed, this theme is central not only to *The Shanghai Gesture*, but to Sternberg's oeuvre as a whole. In *Underworld* (1927), a feather clipped from a gangster moll's boa appears frequently in close-up. It initially serves as an erotic keepsake, but after making the rounds, it becomes proof of infidelity. Amy Jolly's bracelet in *Morocco* (1930) undergoes a similar transformation: when its beads scatter, it becomes a symbol for Amy's failure to follow her true love. In *Macao* (1952), Nick Cochrane carries a two-dollar bill inscribed with fellow soldiers' signatures all the way through the war. The *femme fatale* Julie steals this bill, and immediately uses it to tip a rickshaw driver. When the bill fortuitously falls back into Nick's hands, it will signify in yet another way: as evidence that Julie was indeed the one who stole his wallet. Similar objects populate the other films: the postcards bearing Lola Lola's image in *The Blue Angel*, a religious icon tossed in the snow in *Scarlet Empress* — all of which demonstrate Sternberg's preoccupation with the instability and mutability of the value and significance of material objects.

Toward the beginning of *The Shanghai Gesture*, there is an elaborate crane shot accompanied by a foreboding orchestral arrangement that moves down through a circular, tiered casino run by Mother Gin Sling (Ona Munson), the "warlord" of the Shanghai fringes of society.



We are introduced to a collection of stock characters — a Brooklyn chorus girl named Dixie, the polygamous Mr. Howe, the “Persian Poet” Omar, a Russian bartender, and Poppy (Gene Tierney), a young woman who has just arrived in Shanghai and whose true identity remains a mystery. Soon, a commissioner pays a visit to Mother Gin Sling to inform her that her establishment will be shut down before the Chinese New Year if she does not vacate the international sector of Shanghai and relocate to the China Cities. The Inter-China Trading Company has apparently bribed the government into passing an anti-gambling ordinance. Meanwhile, Poppy immerses herself in the casino culture, and with Omar’s encouragement, she gradually gambles away a sum of twenty thousand pounds.

Mother Gin Sling soon discovers that Poppy is the daughter of Sir Guy Charteris (Walter Huston), the wealthy owner of the Inter-China Trading Company (who also seduced her years ago and robbed her of her dowry). She hatches an elaborate plan to save her establishment and take revenge on Sir Guy by throwing a Chinese New Year's dinner party where "debts will be paid." Granting Poppy unlimited credit, she lets her sow the seeds of her own destruction at the roulette wheel; Omar in turn encourages her to sell a necklace that was a gift from her father. Sir Guy soon discovers that his daughter has overdrawn her bank account, and contrives to send her to Singapore. However, Poppy sneaks off the plane and shows up in time to make a drunken spectacle of herself at Mother Gin Sling's party. Sir Guy reluctantly attends this party, only to find his profligate daughter fully intoxicated and fully in debt to Mother Gin Sling. After assessing the situation he concedes to Gin Sling's demands, granting the casino permission to continue its operations in the international sector. But Sir Guy also has a surprise in store for Mother Gin Sling: Poppy is her own biological daughter, a daughter that she had presumed dead. The film's fantastical resolution to these rapid turns of events shows Mother Gin Sling attempting to discipline the unruly Poppy, finally shooting her dead amid the noise of firecrackers and screams from the New Year's parade outdoors.

In her book *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, Gaylyn Studlar suggests that Sternberg's oeuvre is characterized by an insistence on the iconic dimensions of the cinematic sign.ⁱⁱⁱ Contrary to notions of the cinema's fundamental indexicality — its claim to a material, motivated link with its pro-filmic objects — Sternberg's films emphasize their images' pictorial resemblance to objects in the world. Unlike in Eisenstein's account of the "pictogram," however, where the depiction of objects via "resemblance" implies a kind of materialism and link to the external world, Sternberg's iconic

signifiers, Studlar suggests, do not posit or presume an ontological connection to their referents. Studlar also suggest that “Von Sternberg’s iconic style involves an ambiguous disavowal of cinematic representation’s indexical aspect” (Studlar, 92). One effect of this insistence on iconicity over indexicality is to undo the usual conflation of Orientalist fantasy with East Asian reality. In fact, Sternberg informs us outright in the prologue to *The Shanghai Gesture* that the Shanghai of his movie “has nothing to do with the present.” The film’s anti-illusionist aesthetic is consistent with such a reading; *The Shanghai Gesture* tends to emphasize the duplicity and falseness of the image. When Poppy decides to sell the diamond necklace given to her as a present from her father, Omar remarks, “This sparkle is artificial; you don’t need it.” Dixie in turn squanders a small fortune given to her by Sir Guy when she was his mistress by investing it in a ruby that turns out to be phony. Almost all of the main characters go by pseudonyms: Poppy’s real name is Victoria Charteris, Omar the “Persian Poet” is actually neither. At the dinner party, the guests’ places at table are accordingly marked not with name cards, but with small, Chinese porcelain figurines made in their images, and some confusion arises during the process of sorting them out. *The Shanghai Gesture* is concerned not only with the possibility of a false identification of an individual or object, but with the vast possibilities for deception that arise in a world saturated with iconic signs, signs based solely upon a relation of resemblance to their referents rather than upon a motivated or physical link.

Sternberg’s film is preoccupied not only with the possibility of deception, but also with economies involving the wayward inflation and deflation of values, which in this same text Studlar calls a “masochistic” free-play of meanings. The film associates these rapid value-shifts explicitly with the Far East. A note one version of the script indicates that “the currency used in Shanghai is a distorted mirror of the confusing, ever-changing monetary values with which the

earth counts its material wealth. Everything goes from buttons to lumps of metal, from copper cash to shoe silver” (Colton). The *mise-en-scène* of *The Shanghai Gesture* is filled with suspended objects that move up and down, which form visual metaphors for the wild fluctuation of values in this world. Several scenes feature a basket on a pulley system within the casino: a mechanism for the secure transfer of cash and pawned items up to the administrative offices on the top floor. The objects placed in this basket — diamond necklaces, pearls, guns — have been sold for a song by their owners in exchange for more chips, or to pay off debts. Later in the film, young women appear suspended in cages above the streets of Shanghai during a New Year’s pageant, and the cages resemble the basket and pulley system, an image that I will address shortly.

Many aspects of the story of *The Shanghai Gesture*’s long and arduous journey to the screen seem to mirror some of the chaotic fluctuations of value and meaning with which the film is concerned. All the Hollywood studios sought the property, originally a Broadway play by John Colton, who had also adapted W. Somerset Maugham’s short story “Rain” for the theater. Paramount made the first inquiries in 1926, followed United Artists in 1929, Carl Laemmle, Jr. for Universal in 1929, Columbia and Tiffany in 1930, and RKO, Mascot Productions and Warner Brothers in 1932. Records indicate that Will H. Hays and Colonel Jason S. Joy of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors America corresponded at length with Laemmle, beginning in October of 1929. Joy wrote to Hays to apprise him of the impending “delicate situation” with the play, which was sure to be in violation of the Production Code: “Junior said his company is pretty much in the ‘red’ and that they need a ‘red-hot smash’ to pull it out...However, I think he is about ready to be weaned away from the idea” (Joy, 22 October 1929). Two days later, Hays wrote to Junior Laemmle:

The play deals with a bawdy house which at times is unusually attractive and at other times wretchedly sordid. Into this background is woven miscegenation, illegitimacy, white slavery, murder and an opportunity to incur the ill-will of other countries. If the story were re-written so as to avoid all of these difficulties, as it would have to be, it is my honest opinion that it would be so emasculated as to thwart the purpose you have in mind. (Hays, 24 October 1929).

The negotiations pertained to the perceived box office value of the racy film being deflated by the restrictions of the Production Code, which would essentially castrate it at the box office. Junior, for his part, refused to take no for an answer: records indicate that he was willing to “change the bawdy house into a gambling joint,” but was bowing to the “personal and social influences” of playwright Colton (Joy, 31 October 1929). He then agreed to shelve the project, only renew his request. Numerous changes were made to the treatment, in addition to the change from bordello to casino. “Mother Goddam” became “Mother Satan” (eventually, she would be Mother Gin Sling). Poppy’s opium addiction survived only in the allusion of her name, and care was taken to avoid accusations of anti-Japanese propaganda, including changing the nationality of one character “who is described as Jap” (Joy, 5 February 1930).

Still, the property continued to be hot commodity. Hays stated that there might have to be a lottery: “companies would draw for the privilege the same as they did in getting ‘Bad Girl’” (McKenzie, 6 May 1932). *The Shanghai Gesture* had become the prize in a Hollywood-wide game of roulette. A peevisish telegram from Harry Warner to Hays indicates that he had been ready to purchase the rights to the film, but declined because of Hays’ objections and assurances that the picture was unfilmable, only to find a United Artists advertisement in the Hollywood Reporter announcing it as one of their upcoming productions; Hays hastily wrote back

explaining that the ad had been a mistake and that no one would be making the picture (Hays, 17 July 1933). The project was tossed about like a hot potato, rich with the promise of box office, but gradually diminished by the ever-growing list of rejections from the Production Code Administration. Eventually, with Sternberg's collaboration, Arnold Pressburger secured permission to make *The Shanghai Gesture*. But its fraught pre-production history continued to have effects upon the film.

The hullabaloo with the Hays office may have had a role to play in shaping the film's anti-illusionist aesthetic. The story of one scene that almost failed to make the final cut is telling in this respect. Toward the end of the film, at the Chinese New Year's party where Poppy meets her demise, Mother Gin Sling opens the curtains of her dining room to reveal some "entertainment" staged outside in the streets: girls in wooden cages on ropes being hoisted above a vast crowd as they are auctioned off to the highest bidder. She informs her astonished guests that the spectacle is not a real auction, but rather a show "staged purely for the tourists...Shanghai has to live up to its reputation." "Are you sure? They look awfully real," says a concerned guest. "Nevertheless, they're fake," she insists, "They're neither frightened nor innocent." Sternberg's camera lends emphasis to her statement about the artifice of the spectacle by framing the scene with windowpanes, and including Mother Gin Sling's bodyguard as a spectator within the image.



The scene is a relic from the play, which features women in cages at the brothel. A response to an earlier version of the treatment submitted by Colton in 1932 in fact indicated that “there are no signs of the caged women” (Colton, 8 March 1932). However, this image does indeed appear in the final film. A letter to Arnold Pressburger from the PCA sternly reminds the producer that “the girl in the cage must, of course, not even be suggestively nude” (PCA, 21 June 1941). The image remains in the film, not as a representation of “actual” prostitution, but as simulacrum. It is merely “a show for the tourists,” an iconic sign inside the film’s diegesis. Strangely, this seems to open up the possibility that *any* act or image prohibited by the Code might be represented on screen, as long as it was clearly marked as spectacle.

The most eloquent objection to image of the caged girls came not from the Production Code offices, but from T. K. Chang of the Consulate of the Republic of China (Taiwan), who cautioned the producers to take “consideration of Chinese sentiment” in their depictions (Chang, 25 August 1941). As to the “auction of girls,” Chang stated, “there is no such practice” in Chinese culture. Chang also complained of the film’s ending: “to slaughter a child at the very hand of her own mother...is hardly conceivable in good morals, whether it is Shanghai Gesture or Hollywood Gesture. Certainly it is inconceivable in the moral concept of the Chinese people.” Naturally, Pressburger responded by reminding Chang of the film’s status as fiction, as iconic signifier rather than index: “Please do not forget that our film ‘Shanghai Gesture’ is not meant to portray reality, but to display a world of fantasy. This imaginary world has no connection with the realistic aspects of today” (Pressburger, 22 August 1941). Chang, for his part, replied with the following statement:

While it is true that a story of a picture is necessarily an imaginary fiction, such imaginations always prove to be constructed from the raw material of realities. In other words, in almost every story, there is always a certain local color, descriptive of certain definite people in a definite place...In actual Shanghai, gambling joints have never been operated by Chinese nationals much less by Chinese women — such as described in your picture. It is hoped that as a friend of China, you will be good enough to re-arrange your characters with this patent fact in mind...I have found that based on information obtained through their own sources, Chinese newspapers in San Francisco and the Chinese Screen Actors’ Guild here [in Los Angeles] have voiced their disapproval. (Chang, 25 August 1941)

Chang was invited to visit the set, which, as Pressburger described it, “along with our costumes and Chinese actors are designed to fully portray the finest aspects of Chinese dignity and art” (Pressburger, 22 August 1941). He met with members of the production team, including Sternberg, and continued to voice objections to major plot points and characters. However, Chang held less sway in Hollywood than the MPPDA/PCA, and it appears that none of the changes he requested were made — either due to lack of concern, or perhaps because production was already too far along.

In some ways, *The Shanghai Gesture* might be said to enact the biggest “Shanghai gesture” of all, one that seeps out of the diegesis into the circumstances of the film’s production. It is as if the property itself — from Colton’s play to the treatment, the script, and the eventual film — became the object of a series of projections, anxieties, over-valuations and deflations that were always consistently, if obliquely, associated with its Orientalness. Like the black bird in *The Maltese Falcon*, this object was overdetermined: a highly coveted property that was also taboo and potentially poisonous, and freighted with an enigmatic significance that demanded yet resisted interpretation. The key to deciphering the property was in fact to encode it: to cloak its forbidden erotics behind a shimmering wall of style. Each successful treatment of the material constituted an attempt to preserve all its alchemical box office goodness (the sex, the drugs, the exoticism, and so on) while sneaking it past the censors. Other controversial projects of this era were rejected, resubmitted, and eventually approved by the PCA. *The Shanghai Gesture*, though, was subject to an unusually long revision process. The language of Hays’ initial response to Carl Laemmle, Jr. is revealing: the story, as Hays put it, “deals with a bawdy house which at times is unusually attractive and at other times wretchedly sordid.” The problem is not just the bawdy

house, nor is it simply the film's exotic setting. Rather, the problem is that their meanings are ambiguous.

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ⁱ Other examples from the *film noir* genre that employ Orientalist décor or settings in this manner include *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944, based on Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*); *Impact* (Lubin, 1949), wherein, as in both *Chinatown* and *The Lady from Shanghai*, Asian servants are the bearers of secrets; *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), which also associates Asiatic, exotic décor with the mania of the *femme fatale*; *D.O.A.* (Maté, 1950); and *House of Bamboo* (Fuller, 1955). There are also neo-noir and noir-inspired films that evoke Asiatic themes or settings in more self-conscious and critical ways, such as *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (Cassavetes, 1976) and *Chan Is Missing* (Wang, 1982). James Naremore dedicates a few useful but brief pages of his book *More Than Night* to Orientalist themes and stereotypes in *film noir*, where he states that "the Asian theme can in fact be traced back to Dashiell Hammett's earliest hard-boiled stories for *Black Mask*, which are saturated with a low brow Orientalism reminiscent of the Yellow Peril years before and after World War I" (Naremore, 225). Two other valuable essays that need mentioning in this context are Karen Lynch's "Orientation via Orientalism: Chinatown in Detective Narratives" and Eric Lott's "The Whiteness of Film Noir." Although Lott's essay focuses primarily on racial blackness, it presents a persuasive catalogue of racially coded motifs in examples of the genre from the 1940s, with a focus on 1) the way that *noir* protagonists often become racially marked (Walter Neff's spreading stain in *Double Indemnity*), 2) the function of racially coded locations (the jazz club in *Dark Passage*), and 3) the way that marginal characters who are racially other often play overdetermined roles in the narrative (the domestics in *Mildred Pierce*). Finally, in their excellent *Noir Anxiety*, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo provide psychoanalytic readings of foreignness, particularly foreign language, in *film noir*, often routing their examples through Kristeva's writings on the maternal voice.

ⁱⁱ William Luhr references the "famous story about how neither Faulkner nor Hawks was able to figure out who killed the chauffeur, leading Hawks to wire Chandler, who replied that he did not know either" in his book *Raymond Chandler and Film*.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use the term "iconic" in the sense defined by Charles Peirce in his *Elements of Logic*, particularly pp. 156-161.