

大玉王

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TAI-PAN (USA 1986) 127 min. De Laurentis Entertainment Group. Starring Australian actor Bryan Brown as Scottish Opium trader Dirk Struan, Joan Chen (Chen2 Chong1) as his slave-girl/lover, May-May and John Stanton as Dirk Straun's competitor Brock, this film is based on a best-selling novel of the same title by James Clavell.

The drama, concerning trade rivalry between two rival British merchants is set against a backdrop of the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the seizure of Hong Kong by the British. Dirk Struan, the main Tai-Pan (Da4 Ban1) or "Big Boss," calls his family operation "Noble House". At the outset of the film he represents all the European merchants in a confrontation with Lin Tse-hsü (Lin2 Ze2xu2), a high commissioner sent from Peking by the emperor of China to eradicate the Opium trade. Prior to their meeting, May-May begs Dirk Struan to kowtow (kou4tou2) to Lin. Struan replies: "I kneel to no man." (But later does). Her deep love for the ultra-macho Struan is already apparent.

Lin Tse-hsü is depicted as an exotic oriental despot who arrives out of a cloud of mist (suggestive of the murky state of China?) in a pavilion-like boat. Approaching Lin's "ya2men5" or court, Dirk Struan witnesses brutal decapitations and arbitrary judgements, yet he refuses to let himself be intimidated. After his attempts to "reason" with Lin fail, he tries to bribe him. Lin angrily rejects the bribe. Interestingly, the merchant's Chinese translator fails to render Lin's admonition against bribery into English.

Lin orders all the European merchants' opium stocks burned and refuses to pay them compensation. Britain declares war on and defeats China. (Historically, the decision to go to war against China for this was the subject of a virulent debate in Parliament). In the film we are shown none of the fighting, only the merchants' flight to the Portuguese enclave of Macao and, later, the British victory celebration. Among the spoils, the British are allowed to annex Hong Kong.

Struan's pious son arrives from Glasgow, bearing news that his mother and siblings were all killed in the plague. Struan hopes to groom his son to be his successor, but the son dislikes him for having a Chinese mistress and a illegitimate Eurasian son (Gordon) about his own age. Struan's son becomes involved in a too-close-for-comfort friendship with the evil son (Goff) of his principal rival. Strains of sado-masochism pervade throughout the film. Goff is found whipping a Chinese prostitute in a bordello, which is considered an aberrant act by the Europeans who discover him. Meanwhile, May-May, who now hopes to become Struan's new "first wife" intrigues to be spanked by Struan for a minor tiff she instigates over her inability to attend a European ball. This has to be suggested to the clueless Struan by a man at the party taken to be an "Old China Hand" (a practical expert on things

Chinese). It is treated in the film as a revelation about the Chinese concept of "face." May-May then interprets the spanking as a sign of commitment and informs him, in the course of it, that she is pregnant.

Struan's son falls in love with Tess, his rival's daughter. Her brother Goff then tries to get him to catch "the pox" (syphilis) in a whore house, but this fails because the pious boy secretly refuses to engage in premarital sex, paying the prostitute just the same as though he had. Struan's rival Brock then tries to wipe him out by purchasing bonds drawn against Noble House and then demanding repayment. Struan is saved by his old friend Mary's Chinese merchant lover, who loans him enough silver to buy back the bonds and inconvenience the rival by paying in cash, which he then has to transport and guard.

After Struan's son elopes with Tess (at his father's suggestion), her brother Goff attacks Struan in a club for suggesting that his "pox-ridden" son elope with his sister. Struan kills his attacker in a fair fight, witnessed by many of the merchants. Brock then challenges him to a dual, to be fought on a certain knoll, real estate they both coveted. It is typhoon season on the China coast and May-May is in labor. Her child is stillborn. She immediately awakens from a nightmare and goes outside in a storm to find Struan, whom she still insists on calling "Tai-Pan". Struan kills his rival and is reunited with May-May during the calm of the "eye" of the storm. When the typhoon resumes, Struan tells her it is useless to try to take shelter from a typhoon, so they plan to ride it out together in their home.

After the storm, they are found dead, lying together crushed by a beam. Orlaff, a captain who worked for the Tai-Pan, approaches his son with orders from his father's rival to the effect that he will take charge of the funeral and that the body of "his China lady be disposed of". The son refuses to comply, issuing counter-orders that he will be in charge of the funeral and his father be buried together with the "China lady", etc. He tells Orlaff that he and his half-brother Gordon will be taking charge of Noble House and that Orlaff is to board the rival's ship with as many armed men as necessary in order to forcibly remove his wife, Tess from her father's control. Orlaff happily complies, since Noble House was always considered the more moral of the trading firms and his principal loyalty always lay with Struan. The movie fades into a shot of modern Hong Kong, with its towering skyscrapers.

Questions for discussion:

1. What does the final shot of modern Hong Kong, with all its skyscrapers and modern harbor imply?
2. How are the Europeans portrayed in this film, as opposed to the Chinese?
3. Do you see any symbolic connotations in the spanking scene? Aside from their complicated master-slave relationship, why does May-May want to be beaten by Struan?
4. How much does this film tell us about the Opium War?
5. What is the central focus of the drama?
6. Do you see orientalist stereotypes here? What about the portrayal of the Chinese again -- into what sort of types do they fall?