

The World of Suzie Wong; date: 1960; starring: William Holden as Robert Lomax; Nancy Kwan as Suzie Wong; Paramount Studios

Filmed on location in Hong Kong, the action begins aboard Star Ferry, a boat connecting "Central" (the business district on Hong Kong Island) with Tsimshatsui (the business district of Kowloon Peninsula). Robert Lomax spies a comely Chinese woman (Suzie Wong) in Western-style clothing on board the ferry and tries to make conversation with her, which she discourages, saying: "No talk!" When he later tries to return a pocket book to her which she has left on next to her original seat, after leaving to avoid him, she accuses him of stealing it. Fortunately for Lomax, a middle-aged Chinese lady carrying a child comes forth to explain immediately to the Chinese attendant (a uniformed guard) that Suzie had forgotten the purse and Lomax was merely returning it as a favor. The guard apologizes to Lomax, Suzie does not.

Lomax continues to pursue a conversation with Suzie in which she tells him she is the daughter of a wealthy man, a virgin, and would be beaten by her father if she were reported by the chauffeur of the car which is waiting for her on the other side for talking to a sailor. "You're not a sailor, are you?" Suzie queries. Lomax replies that he's an artist and has come to Hong Kong to paint. Suzie remarks that art is highly valued in Chinese culture. After the ferry docks, Suzie brushes Lomax off by saying: "I hope you become famous artist one day" and giving him a somewhat masculine and Western-style handshake. Lomax is more than a little intrigued.

He then makes his way on foot to the Wanchai District (on Hong Kong Island, a mile or more from Central). An English-speaking policeman in a traffic cage tells him not to go there ("Wanchai not for you, sir. The people there very poor.") but Lomax insists he wants to go, adding: "Then I'll have a lot in common with them. "I suggest you take a rickshaw, sir!" the well-intentioned policeman offers. "No thanks," Lomax declares in broad American English, "I prefer to walk." (Some Americans of Lomax' generation always refused to ride in rickshaws in the British colony because they were seen as "not democratic").

We are shown street scenes, a "native market" with food stalls, a rather dour-faced snake-handler and smoked ducks hung up to dry, as Chinese families ply their chopsticks. Lomax winds his way slowly through Wanchai until he thinks he sees Suzie coming out of a hotel. Though unable to recognize her by the fake name she has given Lomax, the hotel proprietor gladly rents Lomax "best room for whole month" at the princely sum of \$50. (US). Later that night Lomax discovers a "girlie bar," frequented mostly by American and British sailors, operating from the downstairs of his hotel. He sees Suzie in the hotel bar that night, but she refuses to admit she encountered him on the ferry earlier that day. She later offers to sell herself to him as his "steady girlfriend" for the month he plans to spend in the hotel, but he refuses, saying

he can't afford it.

Lomax then uses a letter of introduction from his firm to meet a British banker and his daughter Sylvia Syms. They have a huge carved ivory tusk in the corner of their meeting room. Here we learn that Lomax is an American architect who has taken a year off to try his hand at painting against the exotic background of Hong Kong. Sylvia takes a liking to him.

Back at the hotel, Lomax employs Suzie as a model, which at first offends her ("My friends will say I'm slipping"). In the course of their conversation she employs the English idiom "for goodness sake!" (her trademark) at least ten times. He takes her out for dinner at a European restaurant, where she can not read the menu and orders vinaigrette as a main course. They are stared at by the British banker, Sylvia, and his associates. They then eat their salad dressing like soup because Suzie insists she doesn't want Lomax to "loose face." At the end of the evening when he is about to kiss her, they are interrupted by a sailor rapping on the door, a painful reminder to Lomax of Suzie's trade. She departs, despondent.

Sylvia helps promote Lomax' art and wants to marry him, but eventually can no longer bear his ambiguous relationship with Suzie. In the meantime, Suzie has taken up with the middle-aged English playboy Ben, who is married. When forced by his wife to relinquish her, she is comforted by Lomax. She begins to walk the streets and Lomax realizes his feelings for her, so the two enter into a long-anticipated relationship. Suzie then begins to disappear for long periods of time and one day Lomax follows her to an impoverished shanty-town for refugees on top of the mountain, where she keeps her baby (to another man). Lomax seems accepting of the child at first, but when his money begins to run out and Suzie suggests returning to prostitution, Lomax throws her out in disgust. She disappears for many days and Lomax attempts to register her disappearance with the British colonial authorities, who are non-plussed at this attempt (she has no real name to them, no i.d. and is simply one among millions of Chinese -- two million refugees, we are told. Note: There is latter-day inter-textuality with this scene in the Chinese American film "Chan is Missing," set in the San Francisco of the 1980s).

385

A typhoon hits Hong Kong and mud slides demolish part of the refugee dwellings on the mountainside. Lomax goes searching for Suzie. Together they brave rickety bridges and steps, defy the British police and make it to where her house once stood. The house has collapsed and, they assume, killed the baby. Suzie and her bar-girl friends hold a traditional funeral for the baby at which they burn money and a paper rickshaw for his use in the afterlife. At the end Suzie asks Lomax to write him a letter of introduction for use in the nether world, which she poignantly dictates in English, emphasizing the baby's character ("He good baby, never cry too much..."). They burn the letter before an alter (Taoist folk religion) and he proposes marriage to her as

the story ends.

questions:

1. What does the film tell us about Hong Kong society in the early 1960s? Think about the role of the colonizers and the colonized.
2. How is the military presence in Asia reflected?
3. How did people dress in Hong Kong then as opposed to now?
4. Do you see similarities between Suzie Wong and Ah Q? What about her penchant for self-delusion. Is it the same as Ah Q's or is it different?
5. Does Suzie have "sex appeal" (to use her own term). Why?
6. Why does Suzie want to convince her friends that Robert beat her when, in fact, she was struck by a drunken sailor for refusing to go off with him (whom Robert Lomax subsequently hits)?
7. Nancy Kwan, the Chinese American actress who plays Suzie Wong, never got a leading role after this, despite her widely-acclaimed performance here. Why not?
8. Why have lead roles such as these played by Chinese Americans or white people with tape on their eyes (eg. Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, Wang Lung and O Lan in "The Good Earth," etc.)?