

Andi Taylor

Professor Savelson

PWR 2KSC

20 March 2025

The Oxford Study Fallacy: Examining the Asian-Woman, White-Man Dynamic in Film, Art, and  
Social Media

*The power of the Caucasian kitty pouncer over the Asian female subconscious  
needs a full Oxford investigation.*

—@lightskinbyrei, April 10, 2023

The Asian-female, white-male relationship has been at the center of media fetishization and controversy for decades. From 18th century art to modern film, depictions of a submissive Asian woman against a dominant white male lover have evolved from a product of Orientalism to an internet phenomenon, both shaping and being shaped by the broader social and cultural landscape of the American and European West. After tracing iterations of the dynamic through popular film history, examining films like *The World of Suzie Wong*, *M Butterfly*, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, contemporary revelations can be made about the impact the Asian-woman, white-man relationship has had on the social media sphere, looking specifically at how internet groups like Men's Rights Asians have weaponized modern depictions of the dynamic to target Asian women online.

### **18th and 19th Century Orientalism Through Art**

Even before the Asian-woman, white-man dynamic's introduction into the popular entertainment sphere by the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong*, the fetishization of Asian

culture already had strongly-developed roots within Western art with the practice of chinoiserie (Balaji and Worawongs 224; Britney). Popularized in 18th century America and Western Europe, chinoiserie refers to the practice of adapting “Chinese or East Asian” artistic styles, practices, and themes to western visual and performing arts, according to the Cambridge Dictionary. East Asian culture began to straddle itself between sophistication and exoticism in the eyes of the West, leading to the development of late-18th and 19th century colonial Orientalism, or the Euro-American pursuit of Asian culture from an academic and artistic standpoint, highly reliant on preconceived stereotypes and underdeveloped research.



Fig. 1. Brands, Cornerstone. “Blue & White Chinoiserie Vase Collection with Timeless Style & Porcelain Craftmanship.”

And so by the turn of the 20th century, the fetishization of East Asian culture had been heavily embodied by popular Western intellectual thinkers and artists, and deeply internalized by public society. From an artistic standpoint, not only did Orientalist chinoiserie denote the translation of traditional East Asian art to dragon-embossed wallpaper in American homes, but it also facilitated the commodification of the Asian woman’s body, an image heavily depicted in the source art for chinoiserie. And from an academic standpoint, by 1952 the Welsh politician Aneurin Bevan had published *In Place of Fear*, which includes a reference to “the awakening of

the Orient under the impact of Western ideas,” essentially promoting the idea that East Asia was fully receptive to domination of the West (Orientalism).

### **Orientalism and the Asian-Woman, White-Man Relationship**

It was a combination of these factors—the prevalence of East Asian influence in Western art, the objectification of the Asian woman’s body, and the perpetuation of the narrative that East Asia sought the domination of the West—that contributed to the production of *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), a British film about a American architect moving to Hong Kong and taking a submissive Asian lover. While the film may have borrowed its portrayal of this coupling from previous media works like *Madama Butterfly*, it became the first popular film to circulate in Western society portraying this dynamic.

However, in the 65 years since the film’s release, the “dominant white male, submissive Asian female lover” dynamic has seen a drastic evolution in popular Western film. Following the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s, interracial marriage slowly became more normalized in American society, with Asians practicing interracial marriage more than any other ethnic group in the US by 2007 (West). In turn, film portrayals of Asian women in relationships with white men became less reliant on the “dominant/submissive” narrative. In *M Butterfly* (1993), a Chinese government informant uses this stereotype to his advantage, playing into it to exploit a French diplomat. And in *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2016), the central couple faces the trials and tribulations that stem from American public highschool, but not because of either characters’ racial identity.

While these films mark changing cultural reception of the Asian-woman, white-man relationship dynamic, working in their own ways to both stamp existing progress and propel public change, current social media trends tell a drastically different story. This paper aims to

merge the narrative surrounding the Asian-woman, white-man relationship dynamic apparent on social media in 2025 with the narrative told by popular film media post-1960 by examining how film culture has intertwined itself with advancements in the decolonization of the Asian women's image and progression of public interracial relationship acceptance, in contrast with regressive contemporary attitudes on social media exemplified by the "Oxford Study" trend.

### **The Oxford Study**

After @lightskinbbyrei's post to TikTok in 2023, TikTok users were quick to find a 2010 study published by the Oxford Press entitled, "The New Suzie Wong: Normative Assumptions of White Male and Asian Female Relationships." The study, co-authored by researchers Murali Balaji and Tina Worawongs from Lincoln University and Pennsylvania State, respectively, uses *The World of Suzie Wong* to examine how the Asian-woman, white-man relationship was introduced into popular media and has affected television advertisements today. However, in 2025, the term "Oxford Study" has evolved into slang used primarily on TikTok to target Asian women in relationships with white men, uphold infantilizing stereotypes influenced by colonization, and undermine the legitimacy of Asian-woman, white-man relationships, despite the fact that the so-called "Oxford Study" centers on case studies in the media, not real-world couples. In a 2024 statement to The Guardian, Balaji urges internet users to consider his article in its intended context, saying it is "not necessarily about white men and Asian women in dating relationships," while Worawongs even expresses that the paper is largely outdated now with the rise of Asian representation in popular media, such as within the Marvel franchise (Cao). UCLA undergraduate student Chloe Nimpoena, in an opinion piece for Pacific Ties, argues that the "Oxford Study" trend is "problematic" because it is primarily maintained by Asian men

villainizing Asian women, accusing them of internalized racism, while still expecting them to conform to the submissive and child-like ideal developed by white colonizers.

### **Submission and Domination: Suzie Wong and Robert Lomax**

Turning back to 1960, *The World of Suzie Wong* stars William Holden as American artist Robert Lomax and Nancy Kwan as Chinese prostitute Suzie Wong. Despite being released in Britain, it tells an American-centered story, released during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, before *Loving v. Virginia* made interracial marriage legal across all 50 states of the US (Archie).

Sex is one of the main draws of the film. Actress Nancy Kwan's personal website describes her own performance as "combining genuine sex appeal with girlish innocence and



Fig 2. "The World of Suzie Wong." (1961) - Turner Classic Movies, Turner Classic Movies, 1 Jan. 1961

courage"—the legitimacy of the quote as a personal attribution is debatable, but the plot's revolution around her character as a prostitute is indisputable. When Lomax and Kwan first meet, she tells him that she is a "virgin," only for them to meet again at a hotel and reveal herself as a prostitute; the film banks on the balance that Kwan strikes

between pure and explicit (00:08:35).

Peter Kwan, an Assistant Professor of Law at the Santa Clara School of Law, writes about media depiction of the Oriental woman in film, stating how "pedophilia" and "sexual aggression" are reoccurring themes "upon the bodies of Asian women," particularly from white men (101). He explains how *The World of Suzie Wong* is actually quite progressive for its time;

unlike Butterfly in the opera *Madama Butterfly*, Wong is not a “virginal, self-sacrificing Asian lotus blossom,” though she wishes to be one (103). Nonetheless, the film does not escape from the grips of pedophilia. In resisting Wong’s advances, Lomax exclaims, “You’re not even twenty. I’m pushing forty,” only for Wong to respond with, “That not good reason, Robert” (1:15:15). When he first calls her to his room to paint her, despite claiming that he has no sexual intentions towards her, he positions her seductively on his bed, where she sings a children’s song about clouds falling in love. It becomes clear that Lomax sees Wong as a child; he refrains from crossing any boundaries initially to show the audience that he is a moral man, but eventually cannot resist, and takes her as a lover.

When they first decide to consummate their relationship, Suzie says, “I never do anything like this before. You my first man.” Lomax says, “And you’re my first girl” (01:29:15). This is simply untrue—Wong is a prostitute, and Lomax makes a prior reference in the film to having his “share of women” (01:15:04). This roleplay situation demonstrates a virgin fetishization, one no more progressive than in *Madama Butterfly*.

Despite this, the film did yield positive social consequences. In November of 1960, American writer Bosley Crowther and film critic Eugene Archer wrote a review of *The World of Suzie Wong* for the *New York Times*, calling it a tale of “sheer romance.” They pose the question: “Who dares be so unromantic as to state that Western boy and Eastern girl cannot meet, separate, and then get together, just like they do in Hollywood films?” Written seven years before interracial marriage became legalized across the US, Crowther and Archer’s nationally published film review marks a progressive cultural shift. Although the characterization of Wong and the power dynamic between her and Lomax is stereotypical and problematical, it helped perpetuate the the normalization of relationships across ethnicity and nationality—a significant feat,

especially written by a critic like Archer who was born and raised in Texas, a state which still upheld anti-miscegenation laws at the time of the film's release ("Eugene Archer," "Miscegenation").

### **Deception and Fetishization: Song Liling and René Gallimard**

*M Butterfly* (1993), based on the 1988 play by David Henry Hwang of the same name, features the relationship between French diplomat René Gallimard (Jeremy Irons) and Chinese opera singer Song Liling (John Lone) in 1964 Beijing. What Gallimard does not know, however, is that Liling is a male Chinese spy using the fetishization of Asian women by the West to trap Gallimard and gain access to sensitive French documents.

The couple first meets at an exhibition of excerpts from the Italian opera *Madame Butterfly*, performed by Liling. In the opera, a young Japanese girl is taken as a lover by an American soldier, only to for him to leave her after she falls pregnant with his child, leading her to commit suicide. Gallimard finds Liling after the performance, expressing his admiration for the show, calling Butterfly's "pure sacrifice" a "very beautiful" act of love (00:08:02). She responds, saying, "It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman, the cruel white man" (00:08:22). It is with this line that Liling directly identifies the dynamic presented not just in *Madama Butterfly*, but in *The World of Suzie Wong* as well, creating a self-referential moment that defies the established stereotype. It is "ironic reversals" like this that challenge the "power relation" between Liling and Gallimard, and by effect the East and West (Wen 47).

As a 1993 film set in the mid-1960s through the 1970s, *M Butterfly* embeds itself within the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Vietnam War, a time of high tensions between Western capitalism and support of South Vietnam, and the rise of Mao Zedong's communist revolts and

China's support for North Vietnam. Kathy Hsieh, actor and dramaturg of ArtsWest's 2019 production of Hwong's stage play, calls the play an exploration of "the socio-political relationship between East and West," as well as a reconstruction of racial stereotypes (Ray). Liling and Gallimard's "love" is soiled by a mutual deception encouraged by their respective government alliances. Liling plays into the "submissive Oriental woman" stereotype she identifies in her first scene with Gallimard in order to confirm his already preconceived notions about the Asian worldview. During their first sexual encounter, Liling resists Gallimard, refusing to answer him as he repeatedly asks, "Are you my Butterfly?" (00:35:35). Eventually she submits:

**LILING:** Ren, please let me keep my clothes on. It all frightens me. Modesty is so important to the Chinese.

**GALLIMARD:** My little treasure. I don't want to be cruel. I want to teach you. Gently.

**LILING:** Know now that we embark on the most forbidden of loves. I'm so afraid of my destiny. (00:37:15)

Gallimard, in turn, then uses his acquaintance with Liling in the bedroom to better inform his European superiors on Eastern attitudes towards the West. He says, "Deep down, they're attracted to us ... The Oriental will always submit to the greater force" (00:45:05). When asked to inform the Americans on a proper plan of attack on Vietnam, Gallimard encourages them to go full-force, implying that the Vietnamese, if like the Chinese, wish to be overtaken by a greater power.

This marks a significant shift from the self-contained, sexually-charged romance depicted in *The World of Suzie Wong*, released and set just four years before the opening scene of *M Butterfly*. By incorporating moments of self-awareness within the film, and a major reversal of power dynamics once Liling is revealed to be a man, *M Butterfly* combats the popular narrative between the Asian woman and White man introduced in contemporary film before.

Where the film debatably falls short in its progressive thinking is in the depiction of the demasculinization of the Asian man. Liling's true identity is revealed to Gallimard and to the greater world once the two are exposed as Chinese government informants and forced to testify in front of an American judge. As Liling walks into the court with his hair short, wearing a suit and tie, Gallimard turns to face him, seeing Liling as a man for the first time, and smiles at him. The judge asks Liling the question: "Did he know you were a man?" Liling responds with: "You know, your honor, I never asked" (01:21:49).

The question raised is legitimate. It is clear throughout the film that Gallimard had doubts. On a picnic date, before Liling's reveal, she asks Gallimard why he feels attracted to a "poor Chinese" girl with the "chest like a boy" (00:42:58). He contemplates and deflects, saying that her flat chest is more like an "innocent schoolgirl waiting for her lessons" (00:43:08). Before a drunken affair with another woman, he looks at her and says: "You look exactly as I imagined you would under your clothes" (00:50:40). It is clear that he has Liling's body in mind, which he still had not seen in its entirety, for that night he stumbles to her home and demands that she strip for him. Liling, however, does not strip for Gallimard until their final scene together in the film, after his identity as a man is revealed. In the back of a prison transportation vehicle, the naked Liling tells Gallimard: "I'm not just a man," as he caresses his face, bringing a hand down his body (01:25:49).

It is this blurred boundary between the male and female that becomes problematic. While some film analysts argue that a "nonbinary approach" should be taken to interpreting Liling's character, others claim that Liling's weaponization of transgenerness as a form of deceit is harmful (Andrews). While Liling's refusal to take off the costume and makeup when alone by himself could be interpreted as an expression of gender fluidity, it becomes a perpetuation of

demasculinization when paired with Gallimard's blurred perception of Liling as a woman even when he subconsciously knows that he is a man. It is the escape from this perpetuation that has influenced the Oxford Study trend, which has mainly been perpetuated by Asian men online.

### **Hopeless Romantic and Heartthrob: Lara Jean Covey and Peter Kavinsky**

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) follows the high school pretend-relationship-turned-real between aspiring writer Lara Jean Covey (Lana Condor) and popular lacrosse player Peter Kavinsky (Noah Centineo). After Lara Jean's five secret love letters are accidentally mailed out to her former crushes, including Peter, she and Peter decide to fake-date to make Peter's ex-girlfriend jealous and to convince Lara Jean's sister's ex-boyfriend, Josh (Israel Broussard) that Lara Jean is not still in love with him.

Tiffany Besana, a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Chicago, had a film analysis published on Asian representation in film, focusing on the amount and quality of representation. She notes that roles "peaked in 2018," the year of the films' release, with six major films portraying Asian characters in the lead. This film marks not only an example of increased Asian representation in popular film media, but also an example of stereotype-resisting representations of Asian women in film. The main romantic lead, Lara Jean, can be described as "compassionate," "playful," and "romantic," in contrast to the "menacing" and "timid" portrayals of Asian women in films such as *The World of Suzie Wong* and *M Butterfly* (Besana).

Lara Jean Covey is also neither child-like nor sexually explicit, unlike Suzie and Liling. She kisses Peter in front of Josh during their PE class in order to deter Josh from saying anything to her about the love letter, but once Lara Jean and Peter officially decide to fake-date, she says, "I don't want you to kiss me anymore" (00:31:59). Her reasoning has nothing to do with virginal purity, but instead it is because she "doesn't want all of [her] firsts to be fake" (00:32:19). She

wants physical intimacy to be accompanied by romantic connection, an ideal which both Suzie and Liling strive for as well, but only after a history of prostitution or with ulterior motives. Peter initially protests, not because of his own sexual desires but because “people will get suspicious” if he never touches her—an issue which quickly resolves itself when he comes up with the idea of writing her love notes and slipping them in her pocket when people are watching (00:32:35).

Later on in the film, once Lara Jean and Peter genuinely fall for each other, they kiss on a school trip, but are secretly video recorded without their knowledge (01:07:14). The video, which appears as a pornographic tape, gets leaked on social media. Lara Jean comes back to school to see stills from the video taped to her locker, along with the words “IT’S ALWAYS THE ONES YOU NEVER EXPECT” (01:23:09). She cries as students laugh and tease her, but as soon as Peter comes back, he yells to everyone in the hallway, “If I hear anyone slut shame Lara Jean or say anything about that video ever again, I’ll kick all of your asses. Do you understand?” (01:23:35). In this way, Peter still exemplifies the “White Knight troupe” that Peter Kwan describes in reference to Robert Lomax from *The World of Suzie Wong*, but without the undertones of pedophilia and sexual aggression, which drastically sets Lara Jean and Peter’s relationship apart from Suzie and Robert’s (99).

However, perpetuating the “White Knight troupe” still means reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Although Besana finds that Lara Jean’s representation is far more stereotype-resisting than previous depictions of Asian women, like those of Suzie Wong and Liling Song, she still finds that Lara Jean is played for “comedic relief,” a popular stereotype-confirming troupe. Peter Kavinsky is thus there to be Lara Jean’s rock, a grounding presence against her clumsy and nervous air—for example, Lara Jean is a terrible driver (a popular conception of Asian women), and so Peter picks her up every morning to drive her to

school. She is far too anxious to attend parties, and so he forces her to agree to accompany him to one by writing it into their fake-relationship contract. While perhaps not pedophilic in the same way that Liling and Gallimard or Suzie and Robert's relationships are, there is still an undertone of infantilization within their relationship that comes about when Lara Jean is always slightly less competent than Peter—except in the area of academics, which once again, enforces the stereotype that Asians are the smartest in the classroom.

On popular social media today, especially Instagram and TikTok, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* is one of the most popularly referenced pieces of media in relation to the Oxford Study trend. As a two-time Kid's Choice Award winner in 2019, the film became Generation Z's most popular example of an Asian-woman, white-man relationship dynamic, and it still tops global charts in 2025 (Biggin). As noted by entertainment and culture writer Olivia Truffaut-Wong, it was one of the only popular Hollywood films in mainstream entertainment to showcase an Asian-American *teenager* as the lead, making it all the more relatable to a Generation Z audience during the height of TikTok. However, the dynamic between Lara Jean and Peter has been weaponized against real Asian women on social media; many of these women openly compare themselves to Lara Jean, captioning videos with their white boyfriends with, "They hate when we serve Oxford Study." Some users even attribute Peter Kavinsky to their romantic preferences, like user @froyoyoyolo who claims, "I think [the film] is why I started liking white men," calling author Jenny Han, who wrote the novel that the film is based on, the "CEO of Oxford Study." Many users even accredit their attraction to the "Peter Kavinsky Effect," an unofficial name for when viewers of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* fall for the "playful but sincere, confident but not cocky, protective but never possessive" charm of Peter Kavinsky (Mahoney). Although Peter's constant tendency to protect and care for Lara Jean may

push the line of infantilization, the women referencing him in the Oxford Study trend did not care. Thus the film has allowed Asian women to be more vocal and open about their relationships and desires, but it has also sparked major backlash online, especially from Asian men, for there is a clear omitted presence of Asian men within the film.

New America, an educational organization which reports on social issues in the US, has identified a grouping of Asian-American men called “rice-cels” or “Men’s Rights Asians” (MRAsians) who attribute their inability to find romantic companionship to the demasculinization of Asian men in comparison to white men, taking the Asian-woman, white-man dynamic popularized in the media as evidence to support their claim. And just as Asian women have taken to TikTok to comment on the film, so have these Asian men. Take for example user @evvdeng, who called it “one of the most harmful movies ever made to the AAPI experience,” in large part because of Lara Jean’s interest in “mediocre white men.” It is with the same mindset that MRAsians target Asian women participating in the Oxford Study trend, commenting things like, “internalized racism,” “result of colonialism,” and “white fever” under their posts.

Thus emerges a significant tension between progressive attitudes emerging from increased healthy representation in popular film and harmful attitudes displayed online by conservative, anti-feminist groups. Films like *The World of Suzie Wong* and *M Butterfly* have worked to normalize interracial coupling and critiqued harmful conceptions of Asian women, paving the way for healthy, stereotype-resisting depictions of Asian women in *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, which has allowed Asian women to feel more comfortable sharing their romantic lives and desires online. However, even more universal, more accurate representation of Asian women and men in film and popular media is an ideal which the entertainment industry

should strive for; even Jenny Han agrees that casting Asian men in leading roles is important, and she acknowledges that some of the criticism towards *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* is warranted (Nguyen). But MRAsians are only one small piece of a broader issue of far-right incel groups online, which prey upon young men and perpetuate an online social regression. Along with representation must come inclusive, feminist education, to equip young online users with the proper context and critical thinking skills to reject incel ideology.

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