

It was like having capillary tissues between the exterior world of realities and the interior world of conflict and emotions, between the reality and the imagination, between his interior vision and exterior physical deterioration, day and night, unreal and real. The tension between these two domains resulted in Yi Sang's own language, which is neither Japanese nor his native Korean, but rather a reshaping of his own words by alignment of numbers, codes, different sizes of type prints and figures, metaphors, and by ignoring much of that radical newness in turn by challenging what was transposed from Western writing. Yi Sang attempted to overcome the border between two worlds, that within himself and that of the outside colonial world and its subjectification. In the latter situation, what Yi Sang perceived was unacceptable and thus he expressed his desire to create "wings" and to "fly away" from the arbitrariness of the world, the morbid room, the impasse around him.

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The Ideology of Cultural and Gender Misunderstanding in D.H. Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

"by dehumanizing the enemy, we dehumanize ourselves" (Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, "Afterword")

With the development of intercultural dialogue and communication, an increasing number of literary works have appeared reflecting cultural relationships between the East and the West. On the critical landscape, the established binary approach of such scholars as Edward Said, for instance, has been further problematized in many aspects. For instance, the problematics of gender issues, forms of marginality, and ideology is one such area found in many studies (see, for instance, Palumbe-Liu). In this article, I will explore the question of ideology in D.H. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* from a Mainland Chinese point of view.

North American ethnic minority authors have increasingly received attention since the 1960s, and Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian literature, represented by such texts as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990), Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994), or Yan Li's *Daughters of the Red Land* (1995), have achieved considerable success in both readership and scholarly attention. Of course there is, connected to the specific issue of marginalities and (post)colonialism also the problematics of politics in the classroom, the canon debate, the various aspects of gender and race, etc.¹

When D.H. Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, received the Tony Award for best play of 1988, the author became another eminent Chinese-American writer after Kingston and the play received accolades from all sides. For instance, the director of the play, John Dexter, called *M. Butterfly* the best play he had read in twenty years (Hwang, "Afterword," 96). When it first opened in Washington at the National Theater, where such popular classics as *West Side Story* and *Amadeus* had

¹ For current Chinese and East-West perspectives on intercultural "misunderstanding" and literary perspectives, see Yue and Le Pichon; Yue and Meng; and Lee and Meng; for an interesting theoretical framework, *inbetween peripherality*, and a current East-West perspective, see Tötösy.

premiered, the critics and audience received it enthusiastically. The play was also adapted to film, which brought the author additional fame and recognition.²

In this article I will discuss some aspects of the play which, measured by the critical acclaim I have already mentioned, may be less obvious. On the one hand, it is clearly a positive development that ethnic minority writing receives increasing attention. On the other hand, it may be pertinent to ask more sophisticated questions about ethnic minority writing, such that go beyond the problematics of mere recognition (see, for instance, Chang). As it will become clear in the course of my discussion, my analysis pays attention to the question of ideology in literature, here with specific focus on the problematics of authorial intent and cultural and gender representation.

M. Butterfly is based on a true event: Bernard Bouriscot, a French diplomat on assignment in Beijing, fell in love with a Chinese actress who turned out to be not only a spy, but a man (see Bernstein). When Hwang read this account in *The New York Times*, "he was tantalized by the theatrical potential of its sexual and racial incongruities" (Street 41). Consequently, and by his own description, Hwang used this true case of espionage as a framework for his own imaginative world, turning the affair into a moving and distressing love story. In 1960, at the German ambassador's house in Beijing, French diplomat René Gallimard meets a beautiful Chinese actress, Song Liling, who speaks fluent French and performs arias from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Gallimard is immediately attracted to her and accepts her invitation to see her performance at a Beijing opera theatre. Gallimard and Song fall in love and secretly live in an apartment on the outskirts of Beijing. But underneath their love, Song is out to control Gallimard for her own purposes and to be able to do so Song pretends she is pregnant and seven months later brings him a baby boy as their son. While Gallimard believes that Song is the perfect woman for him, he is unaware that Song is a spy for the Chinese Government and that her main motivation is to control him to that end. After Gallimard is promoted to vice-consul, Song passes on valuable military secrets about the American involvement in Vietnam to the Chinese government. However, when the Cultural Revolution breaks out and society in China undergoes dramatic changes, Song Liling is exiled to a "nowhere-ville" in Hunan Province to be rehabilitated. The reasons of her exile are her own fame as an opera singer as well as her relationship with Gallimard. He returns to Paris with no hope of seeing her again. Four years later on a new espionage assignment, Song comes to see Gallimard in Paris, once again becomes his lover and urges him to get a job as a courier, handling sensitive documents. Gallimard photographs them for Song and she passes them on to the Chinese Embassy until

both of them are arrested. In court, when Song appears as a man for the first time, Gallimard is shocked and disgusted to see that the woman he has adored for so many years has deceived him. He later commits suicide in his prison cell in the same way Madame Butterfly does in the opera. At the same time, Song Liling receives a French presidential pardon and returns to Beijing.

M. Butterfly is a re-contextualization and re-materialization of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* whose "heroine, Cio-Cio-San, also known as Butterfly, is a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave. And its hero, the man for whom she gives up everything, is ... not very good-looking, not too bright, and pretty much a whimp" (Hwang 5). Hwang suggested that with his play he deconstructs *Madama Butterfly* by attempting to juxtapose the love story of an American naval officer and a Japanese girl with that of a French diplomat and a Chinese spy in order to materialize the misunderstandings between men and women as well as the East and the West (95). Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* is a submissive, beautiful woman who sacrifices her life for an unworthy and cruel man, a white man. It is one of the most popular operas in music history, perhaps because it reflects the Westerner's favourite fantasy: the submissive Oriental woman who offers her love and loyalty to an Occidental man.

In the play, Hwang worked on the assumption that the French diplomat was so fascinated by the submission of an Oriental woman to him that he drowned in his love for his female ideal (see Hwang 95). But as it turns out, under the mask of "Butterfly," Song is a cruel spy who abuses Gallimard's love for his/her own gain and purposes. In the end, it is Gallimard, the Western man, who identified himself with *Madama Butterfly*, a symbol of love and loyalty.

In the following, I will discuss some aspects of authorial strategies with regard to image construction which I will base on the author's statements and on my own reading of the play. My first question is with reference to why the author decided to "deconstruct" and re-materialize the theme of *Madama Butterfly*. In the "Afterword" of *M. Butterfly*, the author states that Gallimard's prototype, Bernard Bouriscot, had attempted to account for the fact of his ignorance of his lover's gender by explaining that he had never seen his girlfriend naked. And that he did not see her naked because he thought she was very modest, in addition following the Chinese custom that a woman would never show her naked body (Hwang 94). Hwang was, in the first instance, shocked by Bouriscot's explanation which he regarded as a manifestation of arrogant ignorance of the West toward the East. Hwang, although as a Chinese American educated in the West, obviously incorporates a cultural and ethnic identity which has its own specific parameters (see Street 8-10). It is based on his "double" background through which he is able to read both cultures and it is this duality of cultural knowledge he could use for the re-contextualization of the *Madama Butterfly* theme down to such detail — contrary to the claim of Bouriscot — that Chinese women are not shy with their lovers and to the larger

2 For a detailed discussion of the reception and criticism of *M. Butterfly* in a context of gender, national politics, and minority discourse, see Lye. For a discussion of the problematics of gender issues and colonialism, see Chiu.

context that the Orient was/is never truly submissive to the West (94-95).

Since the sixteenth century, the Orient experienced Western political and economic imperialism, as well as social domination. In the world of artistic expression that found its manifestations in the domains of the economic, political, social, etc., the Orient has played the role of the female in both the Western structure of patriarchy and its image of the Orient. That is to say, in the structure of the play this can be expressed in the formula of "male = West = subject = perceiver = power" (see Haedicke 31). It is this specifically constructed analogy between West=Male and East=Female that inspired Hwang to write a play and to speculate about the misunderstandings between man and woman and East and West. As he explained to an interviewer later, he "wrote *M. Butterfly* as an attempt to deal with some aspects of Orientalism" (DiGaetani 141). In order to illuminate his theme, Hwang chooses *Madama Butterfly* as a deconstructive foil. This narrative strategy enables him thus to avoid the play becoming a docudrama but instead, it serves as a metaphor of all human relationships (see DiGaetani). In other words, Song can fool the world because he/she successfully satisfies a Western man's vanity. In court, Song acts as defender of the Orient and he/she explains: "rule one is: Men always believe what they want to hear" (83) and therefore, if a girl pretends to admire a man's sexual power, he will believe her because a man needs the esteem and confidence that comes from a woman's dependence, submission, and her worship of the male. But rule two is to pander to the Western man's "international rape mentality towards the East" (Hwang 83). Man thinks the woman's mouth says no, but her eyes say yes, and the "West thinks of itself as masculine — big guns, big industry, big money — East is feminine — weak, delicate, poor ... but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom — the female mystique ... The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated — because a woman can't think for herself" (84). So the West believes "good natives serve the Whites, bad natives rebel" (99).

It is thus that Song, behind the mask of the stereotypical Oriental woman, plays the role of espionage and with this metaphor Hwang attempts to warn the West that the East is no longer like a submissive woman. And he hopes that the East and the West, man and woman, will "deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings" (100).

Ironically, because *M. Butterfly* expresses criticism of the stereotype of women by men and of the East by the West, it has sometimes been considered as an anti-American play (see Hwang, 99-100). Indeed, in my opinion this may be one reading of the play. However, as a female and Chinese reader, my reading of the play is critical towards the accepted opinion. In my opinion, the play in reality defends Western hegemony as well as patriarchal society. It is undeniable that Hwang tries to portray the harm caused by the misunderstanding between man and woman, the East and the West, as suggested above. However, I also

believe that Hwang's Western half and his male perspective prohibits a true understanding of the East-West, Male-Female paradigm and only exacerbates traditional misunderstandings.

I am basing my criticism on several factors. First, although Chinese by heritage, the double forces of his Western education combined with his male ego cause Hwang to equate and underscore the Orient=Female principle despite appearances to the contrary in the play. In other words, in my opinion Hwang's own identity intrinsically encourages bias and consequently *M. Butterfly* itself is a misunderstanding of the Orient=Female principle the author *appears* to criticize. Second, with regard to the structure and content of the play, there is no female Chinese protagonist in the play as Song Liling pretends to be a woman. This I interpret as a double representation of the male paradigm: although forced to conceal his true sexual identity for many years, Song's male ego is as strong as that of any other male's in the play. Of the three female roles affecting the development of the plot, two are not Oriental. Helga, Gallimard's wife, is a housewife without any charm and like most Western diplomats' wives in China, she feels superior to Chinese women. The second female character, Renée, is Gallimard's short-term lover; a beautiful and intelligent student of Chinese in Beijing but whose character remains undeveloped. The third female character is again a reinforcement of male characteristics; Comrade Chin represents the dogmatic Communist, totally devoid of any femininity because of her obsession with politics and power. As a composite personification of Chinese traditional bureaucracy and the new Communist era, she tyrannizes Song exactly because she envies the superficial and only apparent femininity Song displays: slender fingers and body and beautiful dresses. In Chin's twisted perception, Song is a woman with a penis, which makes her (alternately, a *man* without a penis) feel inferior and jealous. Consequently, with new powers gained after the Cultural Revolution begins, she immediately exiles Song, the imperialist "plaything" (70), to a small village in Hunan Province. Chin's "creation" of the woman who is a man and a spy becomes also evident for Gallimard, who says: "I'm a man who loved a woman *created by a man*" (90; emphasis mine).

In general terms, when considering the history of gender of human kind, I agree with the statement that for three thousands years, "the female's subordination to the male has been regarded as a natural law" (Wu, 78). In a phallogocentric society, women are marginalized, subordinated, disempowered, and in many instances depending on time and place, ostracized. In literature and art, since the male owns not only the components but also the codes of fantasy, the female is deprived not only of the control of industrial and commercial production, but of imaginary productions as well. In a patriarchal society, men regard women as "the blank page" (Gubar, 292-309), on which they can freely write the things they desire, such as beauty, chastity, and virtue (see Wolf 12). Thus, only those women who obey or at least follow the codes of male fantasy

can be regarded as "lovely" women. Helga is not beautiful, so Gallimard cheats on her without any guilt; Renée is too passionate and active, so Gallimard leaves her, for he is unable to enact power in their sexual and domestic lives. Only Song Liling fulfils the double demands men impose on women, those demands which prescribe that they both excite sexual desire and possess the grace of chastity.

The original Madame Butterfly is the "perfect" woman whose life centres on pleasing a man and sacrificing herself for him. Song Liling delicately plays the role of Madame Butterfly for Gallimard and deliberately makes him believe he finally has found his female ideal. Even Gallimard himself knows he does not really love Song as a person, but as the stereotypical Oriental woman Song plays. When Song wears a dress, Gallimard adores her, but when he is in a suit, Gallimard decries the lie and his dream and his faith in the beautiful Orient is completely destroyed. Can real beauty be made of wigs and dresses? Can real love be based on a fantasy? As Mary Jacobus argues:

if it is clothes alone, i.e., a cultural sign, an institution, which determine masculine and feminine and insure sexual opposition as an orderly, hierarchical polarity; if indeed clothes make the man — or the woman — are not sex roles as such, inherently, but travesties? Are not sex roles but travesties of the ambiguous complexity of real sexuality, of sexual difference? (15)

Gallimard does not love a *specific* Oriental woman; he just loves the woman he created in his imagination. In some ways, he is like Pygmalion, who loves his own creation. Therefore, the most important female character is the result of one man's fantasy and another man's disguise. Although Hwang states that one of his purposes in writing the play was to portray the lack of understanding between men and women, in fact, he only portrays the lack of understanding between man and his own sexual imagination. Woman is excluded from the text of the play and it discloses no misunderstanding between man and woman. Rather, it is a story of two men at war, told by men, with only a token inclusion of a female voice.

Sex is a natural part of human life, but man creates laws and entire ideologies that make sex a matter of politics and property. From this end, too, language itself serves politics. In the discourse of humanity, the female has been made silent and this is represented in the play, contrary to the objective of its author. Song, the Oriental female ideal in the Western man's fantasy, always caters to Gallimard's tastes and values. Song's discourse is intentionally twisted to conform to a Western male chauvinist standard in order to please Gallimard's patriarchal and egotistical desire for possession. For example, when they become lovers, Song tells Gallimard she has no experience with any man, but as an Oriental woman, she knows how to please him. As Gallimard says, Song is so passive that she only begins to please him when he wants sex. Even when she

learns that Gallimard has found a new lover, she keeps telling him that she will wait for him without regret or sorrow. She also says she feels inferior before a Caucasian woman and flatters Gallimard by telling him how great and intelligent he is in her heart. Clearly, while Song may be a fine spy, she is certainly not a woman. The things she says only reflect a man's imagination, the things a man wants to hear.

The audience or the readers of the play should always keep in mind the gender identity of Song Liling. As a transvestite actor who plays an onnagata role in traditional Chinese opera, although biologically a man, he is socially a woman. Thus, Song is confident before Chin, a woman without female attraction, because he believes that "only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (63). Song is fully aware of his male identity throughout the play. For example, he confidently calls himself "an artist" before Comrade Chin. And even more, he tells Gallimard before he comes back to China that "I'm an artist, René. You were my greatest ... acting challenge" (63). Although Song successfully plays the role of the perfect Oriental woman in his espionage career, exactly because he is a spy and an actor, he cannot be viewed as a representative of the Asian female. In fact, several Chinese critics with knowledge about female roles performed by males in Chinese opera have pointed out that the transvestite tradition indicates sexual discrimination against women and thus the female voice is silent and erased in *M. Butterfly* (see, for example, Qiu 68).

On the other hand, Comrade Chin is biologically an Oriental woman, but her obsession with politics cancels all gender specifics under a blanket of masculine rhetoric. Both Song's sweet words and Comrade Chin's cruel cursing are only echoes of male domination in the female world, not examples of Oriental women's real discourse. Thus, Song's discourse represents a creation of Western man and Chin's is dictated by an Asian Communist male discourse. As a man, Song Liling is an impressive speaker before the judge. Like a defender of the Oriental, he bitterly scoffs at the prejudice and ignorance of Westerners. However, one must notice that Song and the Orient he represents are still tried in a Western court, and Song is finally sentenced by a Western judge. The Orient is not the legislator of the world order. No matter how stupid and arrogant the West appears to the Asians, it still makes the rules of the world's political games, and the East voluntarily participates in those games.

Naturally, Hwang employs Westernized and patriarchal discourse in his play because the Orient and woman are still marginalized in modern society. In this vein, it is notable that Song first appears as a man in the court room, for that is a completely male arena — the voice of woman is totally silenced there. Song would only be a political/sexual victim had he spoken the same words as a woman. As a man, though, his words possess a greater ideological weight. The Orient feels culturally superior to the West because of its delicate and graceful

art which so fascinates the West. But the Orient's position in the world political order is one of weakness and silence, and it has accepted Western judgements and values for hundreds of years, despite the Orient's frustration and confusion with the inequality and injustice of it all. As in a patriarchal society, women "manage" the inferior arts, no matter how important those art forms are. Thus, when Song employs make-up and dresses to deceive Gallimard, these are such "feminine" inferior arts, which work in the Oriental=female realm and which at the same time are valueless in the court of law where masculine rhetoric reigns.

Two counterpointed dialogue segments show the difference in the two worlds I discussed above. In China, at the Beijing opera house,

Song: Yes, You, White man, I'm looking straight at you.

Gallimard: Me?

Song: You see any other white men? It was too easy to spot you. (20)

Whereas in court,

Song: Yes, you, White man.

Gallimard (To Song): Who? Me?

Song: Do you see any other white men?

Gallimard: Yes, There're white men all round. This is a French courtroom. (89)

In the first situation Song as woman uses her voice only to massage Gallimard's ego. In the latter dialogue, the white male Gallimard in a white male courtroom, has the final say. As a man, Song has no charm for Gallimard, and no power to conclude the banter in the courtroom.

In my reading and interpretation of the play, it is obvious that the voices of both the Orient and the "real" Oriental woman — as tenuous such a general idea may be — are suppressed in this play. And I contend that contrary to some claims, including Hwang's own claim, he has not successfully (or at all?) addressed age-old misunderstandings of East-West intercultural and intersexual communication.

The ending of the play suggests a similarly unsatisfactory result of Hwang's aim to explore the misunderstanding between man and woman, the East and the West. By inscribing Gallimard with a heroic demise, this too continues the misunderstanding of the two paradigms, gender and culture. In my opinion, Gallimard, in fact, is a selfish and vulgar individual, who makes all French diplomats lose face. However, at the end of the play, the author gives him a chance to redeem his soul in the name of love: committing suicide to protect the love in his heart. But my initial question remains — had Gallimard ever loved Song Liling? If not, the nobility of his suicide is dubious. In my opinion and as I suggested above, Gallimard only loved the stereotypical woman of a

Westerner's fantasy. And looking back to his early life in the text of the play, one will find further evidence of his relationship having more to do with ego than with love. Gallimard is not a handsome or brilliant man and therefore lacks self-confidence and fears rejection by beautiful women. In his forties, he meets Song Liling, a young and attractive Chinese actress. Because of his feeling of cultural superiority, he needs not to fear to take this delicate Oriental woman into his big Western arms and so this situation of power lets him believe he has met his perfect woman. Gallimard is too cowardly to face the reality that he is sexually sterile and cannot really accept a healthy and passionate woman like Renée. Only Song Liling, a woman always clothed and bound by traditional social mores, can give him the pleasure of being the master. Only with her can Gallimard indulge in his sexual desire and egoistic fantasy. Thus, the emotion Gallimard holds for Song is clearly not love, but a kind of sexual power in which he becomes her slave because she is the only woman he can master.

Hwang appears to gloss over Gallimard's egoism by suggesting a certain heroism in this slavery to Song. His "love" for the Oriental beauty transforms him into the noble Madame Butterfly of Puccini's opera, as the following quote illustrates:

My mistakes were simple and absolute — the man I loved was a cad, a bounder. He deserved nothing but a kick in the behind, and instead I gave him ... all my love ... love wrapped my judgment, behind my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face ... until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but ... a woman. I have a vision. Of the Orient, that deep within its almond eyes, there are still women, women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth. Death with honor is better than life ... life with dishonor. The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things — unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment. But how can it face the one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than ... a man. It is 19—I found her at last. In a prison of the outskirts of Paris. My name is René Gallimard — also know as Madame Butterfly. (91-92)

Gallimard achieves his self-redemption by suicide. Like Madame Butterfly, he defends his love and honour, castigating his cruel and unfaithful lover by killing himself. Like many critics point out, the "identity is unstable and ultimately undeterminable in *M. Butterfly*" (Shimakawa 353). Hwang's not-so-successful deconstruction and re-materialization of the Madame Butterfly theme it is Gallimard who identifies himself with Madame Butterfly and not the Oriental object, Song. Here, Madame Butterfly is no longer a representative of sexual and cultural identity, but instead a symbol of choices in lifestyle and morality, which include chastity, innocence, and pride. And thus in effect, Western man has again colonized Eastern woman.

As Hwang writes in his "Afterword," "by dehumanizing the enemy, we dehumanize ourselves" (99). In demanding an artificial woman and through her

true humanity, Gallimard — and the West — force a role on themselves, thus depriving themselves of free will, effectively continuing the process of dehumanization. Song Liling, the supposed representative of Oriental femininity, who takes off the mask of Madame Butterfly, becomes a nasty, wily, and chatty cad. Immorality is shifted again onto the Oriental and onto the colonized: "bad natives rebel."

Because in the play the author makes such a clear counterpoint between Male=West and Female=East, this ending can only further the Western stereotype of the Eastern man as wily and feminine (see Chin 3-9) and the Western man as noble, faithful and brave. As a spy, Song Liling is triumphant; as a person, he is always guilty. Like a rebellious colonial, he is sorry and lost when his master dies, although he knows that in Gallimard's eyes he is no more than a little plaything. This ending of the story in the play makes me, at least, believe that Hwang subconsciously defends Western patriarchal and colonial society.

I do not wish to deny either the literary or the social value of this play and I admire Hwang's courage in addressing sensitive issues in contemporary society. His attempt at criticising Western Orientalism makes his work powerful and the play's success speaks for itself. The author is very perceptive in establishing a literary representation of similarities of the misunderstanding between the East and the West and between man and woman, enacted in the historicity of Orientalism on the stage. But in my opinion and as an alternate critical reading of the play, *M. Butterfly* does not succeed in correcting or even adjusting the cultural and sexual misunderstanding although the play offers a fresh look at the stereotypical ideas of the West about the East in a specific and novel configuration of man and women. In my opinion, based in a patriarchal and Westernized society, Hwang subconsciously accepts many Western paradigms and these contribute to the ideological shortcomings of his play. While one could argue that *ideological* shortcomings of a literary text may be unimportant and that to interpret a literary text in such a manner leads us nowhere, I submit that especially in the case of a successful literary rendition ideology may be of importance. In the case of *M. Butterfly* the absence of female Oriental protagonists, the lack of any Oriental discourse, and the final redemption of Western man work together to inhibit the fulfillment of Hwang's obvious and professed objectives. And thus ideology indeed plays an important role here *because* the author professed an ideological objective. Most importantly, the misunderstanding is further strengthened by the Western male ideal triumphing in the end, as always.

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