Reinventing Butterfly: Contesting Colonial Discourse in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold*

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ABSTRACT

In David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold*, two Asian-American texts exploring the relationship between America and Asia, the classic Orientalist motif of the infinitely submissive oriental female is reworked to articulate an Asian response to American hegemony. Both works mobilize the Asian female as a figure of contestation to destabilize and reconceptualize the patriarchal and Orientalist strategies of Western cultural and political domination. This paper explores the tactically different though strategically similar counter-discursive moves adopted in the two works to suggest a broader cultural realignment in Asian-American relations.

Key Words
David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, Shirley Lim, *Joss and Gold*, Puccini, postcolonial counter-discourse, Asian-American female, Madame Butterfly

Visit Macau and you are bound to see the Ruins of St. Paul's, an iconic symbol that has come to represent Macau in the way the Eiffel Tower

stands for Paris. The stone facade, all that is left of what was once Asia's grandest church, is testimony to centuries of European presence in Asia. At the foot of the grand flight of steps leading up the hill to the facade is a curious monument, the significance of which seems to be lost on the countless, mostly Chinese, tourists who pose there for photographs.

The monument, a sculpture cast in bronze, is one of a series scattered across the city commissioned by the outgoing colonial government to commemorate Sino-Portuguese friendship in the run up to Macau's reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1999. Slightly larger than life in scale, the sculpture depicts a youthful Portuguese man confidently poised with his hand extended for a handshake facing a Chinese girl, eyes closed as if in diffidence, offering to the proffered hand a lotus flower, the official emblem of Macau. This is classic nineteenth-century colonial discourse at its most typical: the feminized East offering itself to the West.

On a fine day the sculpture, cleverly positioned to offer an aesthetically pleasing composition with the Ruins in the background looming over the opposing figures set against the blue of a summer sky and ringed by a thin circle of red tubing embellished with a bronze cutout of a crane in flight, draws a busy crowd eager to remember their moment in Macau on this iconic backdrop. These moments recall Roland Bathes's reading of the cover of a French magazine in *Mythologies*, his collection of semiotic analyses of pop culture. The cover, depicting a saluting Negro French soldier, is an example of the aesthetic naturalization of French imperiality (115-118). What is striking about the St. Paul's Ruins sculpture is not its aestheticization of a staple colonialist trope but the fact that it was commissioned and erected in the closing days of the twentieth century to mark the end of Portuguese colonialism. There can be no clearer sign of the durability of colonialist discourse.

The gendering of colonial relations has a long history. Ania Loomba in her survey of colonialism observes: "from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolize the conquered

land" (152). Commenting on the genealogy of the myth of the submissive Asian female she continues, "The Biblical story of Sheba arriving laden with gold at Solomon's court and willingly surrendering her enormous wealth in return for sexual gratification initiated a long tradition of stories in which the desire of the native woman for the European man coded for the submission of the colonized people" (153). In colonial discourse the submissive Asian female has come to be a metonymy for complaisant Asian nations.

The most recent and arguably the most widely recognized version of this colonial myth is the Madame Butterfly story, immortalized by Giacomo Puccini in *Madama Butterfly*, one of the most well-known of operas worldwide. Puccini's hauntingly beautiful score aestheticizes a story that has its origins in popular nineteenth century travelers' stories about Japan. The evolution of Puccini's opera, from a story by John Luther Long to David Belasco's one-act play, illustrates an important process of travel writing outlined by Rana Kabbani in her study of European travel writing and painting. Travel writers "depended on each other's testimony in order to forge a communal image of the lands in which they travelled" (19). Kabbani's work draws on the main premise of Said's *Orientalism*, that Western representations of the East reinforced each other to produce a communal image of the Orient. Read in this context, the Madame Butterfly story is typical in its formation and propagation of a significant Orientalist idea. John Luther Long's story, it should be further noted, draws inspiration from another European travel story *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti, a tacky story of a European sailor and his encounters with a Japanese geisha. When Puccini first saw David Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly* in 1900 and was moved to write an opera based on it, he was responding to a well-developed way of seeing Asia as a congeries of cultural stereotypes.[1)]

1) For a fuller account of the evolution of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* see Kerr.

The basic plot of Puccini's story is familiar, though David Henry Hwang claims not to have known it when he hit upon the idea of writing a play to parody it (*M. Butterfly* 95). Pinkerton, a swashbuckling American naval officer, marries Cio-Cio-San (Butterfly), a Japanese geisha. Butterfly, genuinely in love with Pinkerton, forsakes her family and country, and converts to Christianity for him. Pinkerton does not return her devotion. For him the marriage is nothing more than an overseas fling, one that he promptly forgets when he returns home and marries a real, American wife. Meanwhile Cio-Cio-San waits for him. Three years have passed. Friendless and in poverty Butterfly remains faithful, turning down a devoted rich suitor who is prepared to take her in spite of her circumstances. Pinkerton finally returns but with his American wife. When Cio-Cio-San realizes the hopelessness of her situation, she commits suicide. To a contemporary audience the story celebrated the nobility of love – the pathos of selfless devotion. Puccini's music transforms the story into high art.

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* premiered in 1904. Today it would take a highly insensitive or willfully ignorant opera aficionado to overlook the implications of the story. If the aestheticized and naturalized notion of an Asian woman sacrificing her life for a Western man is discursively coded in performance art at the turn-of-the-century, a modern reciprocating gesture of counter-discursive resistance can be found in literary art. This reworking of one of the central myths of colonial discourse is a form of writing back, an instance of what Helen Tiffin calls canonical counter-discourse (97).

A recent sociological study of Asian women and their romantic relations with white American men attributed the resigned acceptance in Asian women of the inequalities that structure their intimate mixed-race relationships to a general desire for upward social mobility (Nemoto 31). Nemoto's findings confirm the subjugating power of "controlling images" such as the Madam Butterfly theme in Hollywood films (28).[2] The

refashioning of the Asian female into an empowered figure of agency in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold*, two late twentieth-century Asian American works, constitutes an imaginative reconceptualization of the dynamics of Asians in America and, by extension, of Asia's relationship to America.

M. Butterfly and *Joss and Gold* engage in dialogue with Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, the former directly and intimately, the latter only obliquely. Both works reconfigure the plot of Puccini's opera to present an Asian figure that is not docile and obliging – not Butterfly. Hwang's play is closer to Puccini's opera. It is a parodic reworking of Puccini's story, employing transgender espionage and cross-dressing to evacuate the colonialist assumptions of the Butterfly myth. *Joss and Gold* is a conventional realist novel about an ill-starred romance between a fiercely independent Malaysian girl and a naively perplexed American. Though structurally, stylistically, and generically different, both Hwang's play and Lim's novel are vehicles for an Asian assertiveness that anticipates the on-going global realignment of political influence in the twenty-first century.

M. Butterfly inverts Puccini's story by casting a male Chinese spy who poses as an opera diva, one Song Liling, in the role of Butterfly. Song plays to the white male fantasy of the infinitely submissive Asian woman and manages to ensnare the foolish Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat on a tour of duty in Beijing. "We have always held a certain fascination for you Caucasian men, have we not?" teases the coquettish Song (22). Gallimard begins an affair with Song that lasts for a quarter century and leads to his conviction for treason, incarceration, and ultimate suicide. Improbable as the story may seem, Hwang's play was inspired by the real life story of Bernard Boursicot, a French diplomat who lived

2) Nemoto provides a list of sociological and cultural studies on stereotypes and "controlling images" in American media and society: Yen Espiritu, Mary Dearborn, Gina Marchetti, Patricia Collins.

with a male Chinese spy masquerading as a Chinese actress for 18 years before he was uncovered and tried for treason (*M. Butterfly* 94).[3)]

One particular exchange in the play articulates the central strategy of de-aestheticization employed by Hwang throughout. Gallimard first encounters Song at a consular function where she has just staged a mesmerizing rendition of the closing scene of *Madama Butterfly*. Gallimard's attempt to make polite conversation by commenting on the beauty of Butterfly's sacrifice is reproved by Song.

> Song: It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.
> Gallimard: Well, I didn't quite mean …
> Song: Consider it this way: What would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah! – you find it beautiful. (16)

The de-aestheticization game is played with glee throughout *M. Butterfly*. Key arias in the opera are re-enacted in vulgar street slang calling attention to the Orientalist sentiment lurking beneath the lyricism of the libretto. Elsewhere, snippets of music from the opera are woven into key moments of the courtship ritual to highlight the irony that structures the play. Gallimard, in the role of Pinkerton, courts and gets Song, who becomes his Butterfly. But the relationship is a ruse. It is Song who courts Gallimard by making herself available as the object of courtship, playing to his male desire to possess a submissive Chinese mistress. Song, of course, is a man. The moment of revelation at the end of the play when he

3) See also David Ansen in *Newsweek*.

literally bares all, removing his clothes in the court scene, recasts him as Pinkerton. For Gallimard, now in the role of Butterfly the jilted lover, the illusion is broken and there remains only suicide. Song deceives Gallimard in order to extract intelligence. If this is despicable, so is Pinkerton's deception in Puccini's story in spite of the operatic grandeur.

The submissive Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's opera is powerless and entirely at the mercy of Pinkerton, like a butterfly specimen, a metaphor that appears in the Love Duet at the end of Act 1. The female figure in *M. Butterfly*, though modeled on the operatic soprano, exploits her submissiveness to manipulate Gallimard. In the play Asian submissiveness is an illusion, a tactic deployed to control. The stratagem works, the play suggests, because Gallimard is a willing accomplice to his own deception. He has fallen in love with his own idea of ideal Asian femininity.

Gallimard's newfound confidence attracts the attention of his superiors. With a Chinese mistress he suddenly achieves the status of expert on Asian psychology. He is promoted to vice-consul and is put in charge of intelligence. The play suggests that the American decision to escalate involvement in Vietnam is based on the advice of Gallimard, who declares reassuringly that "If the Americans demonstrate the will to win, the Vietnamese will welcome them into a mutually beneficial union," because "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (46). This tongue-in-cheek historicizing should not be taken seriously, just as the comic portrayal of Chinese communism in the character of Comrade Chin is not historical commentary. There is sufficient cheekiness in *M. Butterfly* to preclude a reading of the play as properly historically grounded. In a debriefing session with his handler Song is admonished to uphold Communist Party principles:

> Chin: Just checking. Remember: when working for the Great Proletarian State, you represent our Chairman Mao in every position you take.

Song: I'll try to imagine the Chairman taking my positions.

Nevertheless, the larger point is not without certain validity. The point is that America, and perhaps by extension the West, in its dealings with Asia is arrogant and presumptuous. Hwang makes this explicit in the afterword: "The neo-Colonialist notion that good elements of a native society, like a good woman, desire submission to the masculine West speaks precisely to the heart of our foreign policy blunders in Asia and elsewhere" (99). The resilience of the Vietnamese in the face of American napalm is offered as an example in *M. Butterfly*. A further anachronistic example, I venture to suggest, is the failure of the shock-and-awe strategy in the American campaign against Iraq in the opening days of a war that has proven more complex and protracted than the Bush administration had anticipated. The Iraqis did not throw down their arms and embrace America as its armored columns rolled into Baghdad to topple Saddam Hussein's statue.

Like *M. Butterfly* Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* participates in the rethinking of Asian-American relations through the revision of racial and gender stereotypes, though it engages with Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* in less intimate a manner. Lim's novel does not remake or invert Puccini's story with which it has only a tenuous correspondence. The novel contends with only the basic premise of the opera: the Asian female's willing submission to the Western male, an idea that was axiomatic at the turn of the century and which yet survives in the general imagination albeit less pervasively.[4)]

The Asian female figure in *Joss and Gold* is Li An, a Malaysian Chinese English literature major married to a bio-geneticist researcher, the son

4) Nemoto's study of "Asian American's different and complex engagements in racialized feminitity" begins by acknowledging the fact that "Mainstream [American] society views Asian American women as over-feminine and submissive" (28).

of a wealthy Chinese family. The novel, neatly divided into three parts, spans a decade from 1968 to 1981, a crucial period in the formation of Malaysian national policy, and three geographical locations: Malaysia, America, and Singapore. The first part of the novel, set in Malaysia in the crucial year of 1969, is preoccupied with Li An's struggle to find her place in a society of fermenting Malay nationalism. In love with English poetry, she is determined to make a career of teaching it. English is her language and yet it is in the process of being marginalized by the gathering momentum of ultranationalist politics. The question of what it means to be Malaysian and the place of the Chinese and the Indians in the postcolonial nation are examined through the vehicle of Li An and her friends, the westernized Ellen and the proudly Chinese Gina, who eventually commits suicide when her romance with an Indian boy encounters fierce opposition from her family.

Li An meets Chester Brookfield, a young American Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia to get an authentic Asian experience. Chester is naively pro-Malay and does not see the implication of the politics of his Malay friends on the Malaysian Chinese community. His Malay nationalist sympathies rile Li An but his sincerity and openness touch her, and in spite of herself a mutual attraction develops between them. The attraction evolves into an undercurrent of subdued romance, a development that begins to draw attention. Abdullah, a Malay friend, offers her cautionary advice: "My good friend Li An you must be careful. These Peace Corps people, they leave us and go back to America. They are not our people" (62). The romance is consummated on the fateful night of May 13, a date of great historical significance in Malaysian history.[5] Discovering to her dismay shortly afterwards that the night of romance was to Chester's mind no more than a one night stand, Li An keeps the news of her

5) May 13, 1969, marks the beginning of serious race riots in Malaysia that led to a declaration of a national state of emergency and the suspension of Parliament.

pregnancy to herself and allows Chester to return to America ignorant of the child he had conceived. The general contour of the Butterfly story is there: an American on a brief sojourn in Asia has a romance with an Asian girl and then returns home and forgets her.

Chester returns to Westchester County, marries an American woman and lives an uneventful middle-class life. Although he learns through a mutual friend of Li An's child and his paternal role in her conception, he does not attempt to contact them, and neither do they him. This is the second part of the novel. In Part 3 after a twelve-year lapse Chester, heeding an urge for fatherhood, makes a trip to Singapore where Li An has resettled in search of the daughter he has never met. Li An allows her daughter Suyin to meet Chester and leaves it up to them to work out their reconciliation. In the end Chester leaves without reclaiming his lost daughter. The ending of *Joss and Gold* is no Madame Butterfly story. Li An, far from mired in helpless poverty, has carved out a successful career for herself in multi-racial metropolitan Singapore, an emblem of Asian modernity. When Chester meets her again she is independent and confident.

The correspondence between *Joss and Gold* and *Madama Butterfly* is not readily discernable, yet the strategically placed reference to Puccini clearly invites a comparison. Seated in Li An's office in their first reunion in a dozen years Chester's gaze wanders from the urban skyline to the interior workspace. He feels a little intimidated as he ponders the new Li An.

> She must have changed to be comfortable in such a space.
>
> He felt the cosmic irony of his visit. For the past twelve years, he had imagined, even feared, the image of Li An as abandoned.
>
> When Meryl [his American wife] had dragged him to the Met to listen to Pavarotti in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, he had been overcome by the obscenity of the pathos. The soprano in her tarted-up kimono, cradling a plastic baby to her bellowing bosom, was only an orientalist

> vision, he had explained to Meryl as they drove home to their fake Tudor in Westchester. This was the West's degradation of Asia, the imago of what had gone wrong in Vietnam. Asia was independent of the West, had been independent for centuries, did not need America to know itself. (202)

The contrast between Li An and Cio-Cio-San could not be more pronounced. The latter commits suicide out of despair when she loses her man; Li An has taken command of her life and fashioned it in her own manner. The Asian female in *Joss and Gold* does not need the Western man to complete her life. But Li An is no Song Liling either. There is no malice in her rejection of Chester. When she decides to keep her pregnancy from him it is out of a realization that he has no plans to commit himself to their relationship; and she is not about to play the begging game even if she does love him. When she rejects his friendly overtures in their reunion, it is not out of resentment. She still remembers their friendship. It is just that there is no longer a place in her life for Chester.

Joss and Gold portrays a woman who, though not averse to men, will not compromise herself to accommodate them. Li An's ex-husband abandons her when Suyin was born only to return voluntarily at the end of the novel to assume the role of surrogate father. With Chester unavailable Suyin was brought up in a household of women. Although Li An would have liked to have found a father for her daughter, she does not feel compelled to fashion her life around a man. A recent study of Shirley Lim's poetry notes that "in her poetry, Lim protests against oppressive representation by patriarchy and colonialism (Tay 304). This observation can apply to *Joss and Gold*, a novel that rejects patriarchal and colonialist stereotyping of women.

Madama Butterfly belongs to the age of high imperialism, a time when the West could see its relation to Asia in sexist and racist terms with confidence and without irony. That age is long past as are the former

colonies of Europe and America, the overwhelming majority of which have severed their colonial ties. The last Asian outposts of European colonialism ceased to exist with the return of Hong Kong and Macau to China. The two works of late twentieth-century American literature discussed here contribute in their own ways to the dismantling of the world view encoded in the music and spectacle of *Madama Butterfly*. They are counter-discursive in the sense that they seek to imagine alternatives to "the circuit in which the dominant construction of the world asserts its self-evidence, its naturalized currency" (*Discourse/ Counter-Discourse* 87). Although not explicitly political in their concerns, both David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* exhibit an awareness of the connection between ideas circulating in the popular imagination and the politics of nations in which they circulate. The reinvention of Madame Butterfly as the confident and assertive Asian female in the two works suggests an Asia no longer complaisant in its dealings with the West, America in particular. A misguided Pinkerton will find no diffident Butterfly here; Asia will have no need of him.

It is now a century and a decade since Rudyard Kipling exhorted America to "Take up the White Man's burden." The general consensus, at least among intellectuals, is that the United States has replaced the old empires of Europe: "France and Britain no longer occupy center stage in world politics; the American imperium has displaced them" (*Orientalism* 285). The United States is the new champion superseding the ageing prizefighters of European colonial powers (*Empire* 178). The idea that America has become a metonym for imperialism is a staple of Fundamentalist Islamic discourse. It would not be far-fetched, therefore, to read the engagement with America in the two works discussed in this paper as engagements with colonialist discourse in general. *Madama Butterfly* is, after all, an Italian composition drawing on a European genealogy of ideas. The Asians in the constellation of texts discussed here – Chinese, Japanese, and Malaysian – suggest a general idea of the East, though this is not to

say that the East is defined exclusively by these Asians. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the vast body of fiction dealing with the Asian American experience. The modest ambition here is to suggest that the conscious intertextual dialogue with *Madama Butterfly* articulated in *M. Butterfly* and *Joss and Gold* gestures towards a rethinking of Asia's response to colonialist stereotyping and offers a literary analogy to contemporary geopolitics.

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