THE POLITICS OF ADAPTATION: ASIAN AMERICAN TEXTS AND FILM

THE POLITICS OF ADAPTATION: ASIAN AMERICAN TEXTS AND POPULAR FILM

By

JASON KOSKELA, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Jason Koskela, B.A. (Wilfrid Laurier University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Donald Goellnicht

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the politics and problematics of Asian American self-representation in popular cinema by focusing on film adaptations of Asian American texts.

In the first chapter I consider the Chinese American director Wayne Wang's adaptations of Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Louis Chu's novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961). Here I demonstrate how the representations of Asian Americans in the domain of popular cinema are "simplified" and constrained to universalizing tropes, such as "generational conflict," that negate the heterogeneous factors (i.e. culture, gender, class) that contribute to the making of Asian American subjectivity. As well, though I find that both films tend to de-problematize the United States as a context for the Asian American's assimilation, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, in its historicizing efforts and cinematic flair, manages to posit a more ironic view towards the narrative of assimilation than *Joy Luck* does.

In the second chapter I shift my discussion to David Henry Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* and its film adaptation by David Cronenberg. The opening (longer) section of this chapter explores Hwang's critiques of Western (American)

discourses of sexism, racism, and imperialism in relation to Edward Said's and Judith Butler's theories of orientalism and gender performance respectively. When Hwang's arguments are also understood in the context of Asian American history and contemporary debates over "identity" in the Asian American community, it is possible to see how his anti-essentialist stance challenges all (Western *and* Asian) impositions of discursive power. The second section of this chapter compares the formal/performative construction of the play to that of the film version. Here I argue that Hwang's utilization of Brechtian theatrical techniques corroborates his anti-essentialist political argument. Cronenberg's film, however, attempts to situate this critique within the traditions of realist cinema, and thereby significantly diminishes (and "simplifies") the Asian American perspective of the play.

Taken collectively, these film adaptations, despite moments of opposition, attest to the ideological limitations that severely restrict the possibilities for complex Asian American self-representations in the realm of popular cinema.

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INTRODUCTION: The Asian American Context

One of the fundamental contradictions sustained by American ideology is that Asian Americans are invited by a discourse of inclusion to enjoy the privileges of the dominant culture, but are ultimately denied these privileges by an actual practice of exclusion (Palumbo-Liu, 1990, 6). In the United States the rhetoric of inclusion is often most boldly conveyed through the ideas of "multiculturalism" or "pluralism." While these concepts suggest tolerance and the possibility for the free expression of difference, we see the limits of these terms revealed in the neutralizing assumptions they are based upon. On the one hand, pluralism, as Melanie McAlister writes, is

> something much more than a generalized tolerance and appreciation of diversity. It involves the assumption, within that general tolerance, that diversity does not mark stark differences in interests and power among groups (1992, 109).

Thus, politically, this ideology, as espoused by dominant white America, claims that all groups can be "brought in" (assimilated) to the mainstream paradigm because there are no "genuinely competing interests" (McAlister 105). Further, the discourse of multiculturalism also implies a basic level of equality amongst the various representative groups; however, as E. San Juan reminds us, a faith in this

concept "betrays an ignorance of the lopsided distribution of power and wealth in a racially stratified society" (551).

For years the Asian American experience of "multiculturalism" in the industry of popular cinema has meant their relegation to bit parts in films, often as stereotyped side-kicks or amoral villains. Only recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, have Asian Americans begun to realize opportunities for self-representation (as writers and directors) in Hollywood films and to produce material about the experiences of fellow Asian Americans. Yet, on the whole, Asian Americans in the film industry are subject to the commercial "realities" of the American ideological climate. In an interview about the future of Asian American cinema, film director Wayne Wang expresses his frustration with the economic priorities of the white-dominated film business in America:

> The industry doesn't give a fuck. The industry sees Asian films as non-profit films. They just don't make money for them. Audiences are not big enough to make it worthwhile for them. Basically, that's the bottom line. If you have a film that's Japanese, Chinese, or your characters are predominantly Asian, it's immediately against you. (Sakamoto, 1991, 72)

Wang's comments speak to the "lopsided" realities in the "distribution of power and wealth" in the American popular film industry. They also reveal how easily the rhetoric of inclusiveness within the ideal of multiculturalism

deteriorates into a practice of exclusion in Hollywood whereby Asian Americans are "othered" as "essentially Asian" (Emiko McAllister 8). Still, we must also question why, in recent years, films focusing on (as well as written and directed by) Asian Americans have been produced by major Hollywood studios. Further, we must also consider the extent to which it is possible for Asian Americans to achieve control over their self-representation in popular films. In other words, do these apparent openings into mainstream cinema offer a legitimate breakthrough for Asian Americans' self-representations, or are Asian Americans still ultimately constrained by the biases of an American ideology that governs the expectations and tastes of the white-dominated film industry and film-going public?

In this thesis I will examine these, and other, questions by considering the film adaptations of three works by Asian (specifically Chinese) American writers -- Wayne Wang's 1993 version of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (published 1989), Wang's 1989 adaptation of Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (published 1961), and David Cronenberg's 1993 version of David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* (first performed in 1988). Adaptations, I feel, are well-suited to a study of the politics and problematics of Asian American self-representation in popular cinema since the inter-diegetic changes between the original and filmic texts often

provide tangible evidence of the ideological preferences of the American cultural climate. In this sense, the general process of "simplification," which I will argue commonly occurs during the work of adaptation, can be regarded as an index of the power disparity between dominant and minority groups.[1] This "simplification" permits the amalgamation of Asian American stories to the mainstream by de-problematizating and excluding issues and concerns particular to Asian American experience and, instead, privileging universalizing themes that support the American rhetoric of inclusiveness.

Before investigating these Asian American texts as "political" documents, it is important to establish an awareness of the heritage of racism and discriminatory treatment in the United States from which this literature emerges, and against which it reacts. The usefulness of approaching these works in the context of an "Asian American" experience derives from the premise, put forward by Sua-ling Cynthia Wong, that "regardless of the individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification,

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[1] In focusing on the problematics of Asian American self-representation in relation to the U.S. film industry I do not mean to imply that the U.S. publishing and theatre industries are exempt from exercising significant power and influence over Asian American artists. The advantage of examining adaptations is that they provide us with more conspicuous evidence of the ideological constraints placed on Asian Americans since these processes are exposed in the work of cross-generic translation.

Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted" (1993, 6). Situating these films in the specific context of this history allows us to determine the ways in which they offer challenges to the stereotypical representations of Asian Americans, as well as the ways in which they are complicit with the dominant culture of America.

The emergence of an Asian American population in the United States has been characterized by a continual battle to overcome legislated discrimination and cultural stereotypes. America's largest Asian immigrant group, the Chinese, first came to the United States as sojourners during the late 1800s, but were no longer able to do so after 1882 when a series of exclusion acts restricted any more Chinese from entering the country. This law was preserved until 1924 when it was relaxed slightly so as to permit a China-born person who could prove his father was an American citizen to immigrate to the U.S. (Kim, 1982, 96). Still, the populations of Chinese American communities shrank steadily, and the decline was even further perpetuated by anti-miscegenation legislation and the prohibition of immigration for Chinese women which (until the laws began to change in 1943 as a response to the wartime alliance), made it virtually impossible for Chinese

men to father a subsequent generation in America (Cheung 235).

The problems faced by Chinese American men in establishing vibrant communities in the United States were also exacerbated by a series of anti-Chinese laws that prohibited them from holding certain occupations. As a result, the Chinese were forced into "non-competitive or ethnic enterprises in urban ghettoes" (Kim, 1982, 98) so that ultimately, as King-Kok Cheung reminds us, "Chinamen were better known to the American public as restaurant cooks, laundry workers, and waiters, jobs traditionally considered 'women's work'" (235).[2] Thus, coinciding with the "emasculation" of the Chinese American male as a result of the laws that blocked a normal sex and family life, Chinese American men were also positioned in occupations that, in a patriarchal America, were viewed as decidedly "feminine" (Cheung 235).

The dominant white American expressions of material and legislated power over Asian Americans served to corroborate the history of "orientalist" discourse that has situated the Asian in the role of "the silent and passive Other" (Cheung 235). Consequently, in the United States the power-dynamic inherent in stereotypes of Asian (American)s

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[2] Elaine Kim cites one study that reports that, in 1936, 75-80 percent of Chinese men in the United States were laundrymen or restaurant workers (1982, 98).

has been predicated upon a consistent gendering of ethnicity. Indeed, pointing to the "white male perspective that defines the white man's virility," Elaine Kim argues that the logic of American patriarchal self-empowerment makes "it possible for Asian men to be viewed as asexual and the Asian woman as only sexual..." (Kim, 1984, 64). In American popular culture, then, there have endured images of Asian American men as "feminine" (i.e. Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan), while Asian American women are often represented as "alluring and exotic 'dream girls of the mysterious East'" (Kim, 1984, 64).

Contemporary Asian American literary and cultural critics have, in response to the persistence of these stereotypes in the American context, sought to construct a politics of oppositionality from which a more "positive" representation of Asian American subjectivity can emerge. But some of these strategies have been problematic in their unwitting complicity with dominant American values and assumptions. For writers such as Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, the primary effort has been to debunk the racist images of "effeminate" Asian men by countering them with assertions of "actual" Asian masculinity. These writers appeal to the traditional Confucian values of family unity and loyalty, which are structured along hierarchical lines of male privilege. The strong patriarchal imperative of the

Confucian code makes having a son an "ethical obligation" (Hom 68) and "dictates that fathers do everything they can to protect the reputation of the family association, which in turn protects their livelihood" (Hsiao 156-7). Chin and Chan also base their vision of a renewed Asian American subjectivity in the heroic tradition of classic Chinese and Japanese texts -- texts often steeped in expressions of martial valor such as "I am the law" and "life is war" (Cheung 237).[3]

Yet, many feminist Asian American critics have questioned Chin's and Chan's efforts by criticizing the sexist and often homophobic overtones of their construction of Asian American identity, pointing out that it is premised on a patriarchal notion of masculinity (Cheung 236). Lisa Lowe, in particular, argues that this preoccupation with securing a "fixed masculinist [Asian American] identity" derives in fact from "a struggle between the desire to essentialize ethnic identity and the fundamental condition of heterogeneous differences against which such a desire is spoken" (Lowe, 1991, 34). Indeed, many male Asian American critics in their assertion of "true" Asian American identity as masculinist, rely on a binary logic that tends, for example, to view immigration to the United States in terms of a loss of the "real" Asian values of the "original"

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[3] See Chin's and Chan's "Racist Love" as well as their "Introduction" to *The Big Aiiieeeee!*

culture in favour of a "fake" American culture. Under this logic it becomes possible for Asian American feminists who challenge Asian American sexism to be cast as "assimilationist," as betraying Asian American "nationalism" because they challenge the masculinist perspective on the relationship between the "original" and the adopted culture (Lowe, 1991, 26,30). This implicit silencing of Asian American feminists shows that rather than constructing an Asian American identity that incorporates the concerns of all members of the community, the masculinist approach seeks to privilege the voices of heterosexual men and to deny voices of difference.

Regarding film adaptations of Asian American texts, it is crucial that we not replicate the ideological assumptions or simplifications that make them so persistently problematic. This, however, is what Chin's and Chan's nostalgic perspective would encourage us to do with its unquestioning relationship to patriarchal values. Lisa Lowe's theory of Asian American identity and community provides us with another option, one that would allow us to grasp both the oppositional possibilities and ideological vulnerability of Asian American texts and their film adaptations. Lowe insists that

> an Asian American subject is never purely and exclusively ethnic, for that subject is always of a particular class, gender, and sexual preference, and may therefore feel responsible to movements

> that are organized around these other designations. (1991, 32)

Thus, the articulation of an Asian American identity must be sensitive to the "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity" (Lowe, 1991, 24) that underlie the various experiences of Asian Americans, and thereby avoid an essentializing imperative that, in recent articulations, has been based on a nativistic (and in many ways uncritical) espousal of the "original" culture and upon a generalization of Asian American identity as inherently male. Lowe's arguments make a compelling case for the importance of situating Asian American works within the context of American dominant-culture stereotypes and within the debate over "identity" politics in the Asian American community. My discussion of the films (and original texts) will strive, then, to consider these works as participating simultaneously within these two distinct, but mutually implicated, debates/contexts.

In the first chapter of this thesis I begin by focusing on Wayne Wang's film adaptations of Amy Tan's and Louis Chu's novels. Here, I examine the ideological gaps between the original texts and the films and find that Asian American self-representations in the realm of popular cinema are "simplified" and limited to certain tropes (such as "generational conflict") of cultural intelligibility. In my discussion of *The Joy Luck Club*, in particular, I find that

the film relinquishes the novel's more challenging vision of the making of Asian American subjectivity and largely de-problematizes America as a context for "assimilation." Wang's version of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* also replicates the dominant culture's rhetoric of "inclusiveness"; however, Wang's slight plot alterations and twists in cinematic style create a more ironic perspective towards the narrative of assimilation, thus rendering it a more problematic issue than it appears in *Joy Luck*. Together, though, these films attest to the difficulties faced by Asian Americans in maintaining the complexity of their stories (or critiques) in the domain of popular cinema.

Moving to the second chapter of the thesis, I begin by looking at David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* and the ways in which the text posits, unlike *The Joy Luck Club* or *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, an overtly oppositional project. Reading *M. Butterfly* in the context of Edward Said's and Judith Butler's theories of orientalism and gender performance respectively, I argue that Hwang utilizes an anti-essentialist perspective of discursive formations to articulate a distinctively Asian American sensibility. In the second section of this chapter I compare Hwang's play to David Cronenberg's film adaptation of *M. Butterfly*. Here, I concentrate on the issue of form and find that, without the anti-realist and Brechtian techniques used in the play, the

film is severely limited in its ability to convey the Asian American concerns of Hwang's "political" critique.

In sum, then, my study suggests that the apparent openings for Asian American self-representation in popular cinema are highly suspect in the ways they still severely restrict the possibilities for complex articulations of issues impacting on Asian American subjectivity. But, what also becomes apparent is the necessity that Asian Americans continue to challenge, on both the thematic and formal levels, the conventions of their representation in film.

CHAPTER ONE

Ideological Constraints: Asian American Self-Representation in Popular Cinema

The Chinese American director Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) are two of the still very limited number of feature films that deal exclusively with stories about the experiences of Asian Americans (specifically Chinese Americans) and, as films that garnered relative critical and, in the case of *Joy Luck*, financial success, they provide important models for a discussion of the problematics of Asian American self-representation in contemporary popular cinema. Both of these films are adaptations of Chinese American novels. *The Joy Luck Club* is derived from Amy Tan's best-selling novel of 1989 about the relationships between four Chinese American mothers and their daughters as they struggle to reconcile their generational and personal conflicts. *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, set in the post-World War II New York Chinatown (when Chinese American men were first able to bring their wives to the U.S) and adapted from Louis Chu's less well-known novel of 1961, deals with the pressures for reproduction placed on a young couple by a Chinese American community eager to rejuvenate itself.

It is significant to note that, as certain Asian American literary critics have contended, Louis Chu's and Amy Tan's novels provide stories that in many ways are complicit with the dominant white American ideology's conception of the Asian American experience.[4] But, a comparison of the films to their originary texts nonetheless reveals that numerous changes to the stories and shifts in emphasis have been accomplished in the work of adaptation. As a result, we can see how in the cinematic medium (even more so than in the literary) stories of the Asian American experience become simplified and de-problematized to the degree that they are confined to "predetermined and necessarily limited sites of representation" (Palumbo-Liu, 1994, 76). In other words, following David Palumbo-Liu's theorizations about Asian American literature, I shall argue that Asian American self-representations in the filmic medium are constrained by the "mediating power [of the white dominant culture] that prescribes implicitly and subtly the

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[4] These issues of complicity will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. For critical analyses of these issues in Chu, see Ruth Hsiao "Facing the Incurable: Patriarchy in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*," Cheng Lok Chua "Golden Mountain: Chinese Versions of the American Dream in Lin Yutang, Louis Chu, and Maxine Hong Kingston" (page 40-5), and Lisa Lowe "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" (34-5); for Tan, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon" and Melanie McAlister "(Mis)Reading *The Joy Luck Club*."

manners in which the Asian American can (imaginatively) fit into its signifying order" (1994, 79).

In Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* it is the trope of "generational conflict" (Lowe, 1991, 34) that is the privileged metaphorical "site of representation" for Asian Americans. As an essentializing meta-narrative for Asian American experience, this trope foregrounds the struggle between immigrant and American-born Chinese, whereby the children's objective of assimilation is challenged by the influence of their "backward" and traditional parents. My point is that the reality of "heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple" (Lowe, 1991, 24) tensions in the Asian American experience (explored more thoroughly in the novels), are elided in the films by the predominance of the "generational conflict" theme and its symbolic resolution involving assimilation into the American melting pot.

It is feasible, then, that the subject matter of these narratives, especially after the changes made for the film versions, could be conceived as "marketable" by the white-dominated film industry because they endorse a conception of the Asian American experience that coincides with the dominant ideological rhetoric of multiculturalism and inclusiveness. In other words, the films are generally flattering to the ideology of white America because they

present stories that, firstly, assume that assimilation is both desired and possible for Asian Americans, and, secondly, largely de-problematize America as a context for the process of assimilation by locating tensions within and between generations in the Chinese American community itself. In this sense, the primacy of the trope of generational conflict in these films veils "more unruly issues, such as those of economic equality" and, in so doing, the "proper arena of struggle" for Asian Americans "is removed from material and political concerns in the United States and relocated in privatized psychology" (Wong, 1995, 199). The reproduction of an inclusive discourse of assimilation in these films neutralizes the reality that Asian American self-representation in popular film is limited to specific "sites" that are amenable to the myths of multiculturalism and the self-justifying demands of the American ideology.

Section One: *The Joy Luck Club: "Your* Story"[5]

Following the overwhelming success of Amy Tan's novel,[6] Wayne Wang's film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* has also

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[5] Desson Howe, "My Mother, Mah-Jongg" review of *The Joy Luck Club* in *The Washington Post* (1993).

[6] Remaining on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine months, the hardcover edition of Tan's novel was reprinted

met both tremendous praise by critics in the popular press and widespread approval from American audiences. The film proved to be a modest hit for its parent production company, Walt Disney Studios, and was widely recognized as "the first major studio film in memory to deal seriously with the Chinese American experience" (Medved 23). But given the curious phenomenon that *The Joy Luck Club* in its novelistic and filmic manifestations has suddenly become a "representative"[7] account of Chinese American experience, it is important to examine what image of Chinese Americans is being forwarded (McAlister 105).

Interviews with Wang show that in making *The Joy Luck Club* the director was highly conscious of operating within an American context that has historically excluded Asian Americans from opportunities for self-representation in popular film and limited Asian Americans to stereotypical roles. In response to these imbalances Wang formulated a rule that no Caucasians would play any of the parts written

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twenty-seven times. This success resulted in the paperback rights to the novel being sold for "an astonishing" $1.2 million (Wong 174).

[7] Attaining such "representativeness," however, is an impossibility. Maxine Hong Kingston in her article "Cultural Misreadings by American Reviewers" challenges white American critics who insist on casting Chinese American (and other minority) writers as voices for the entire culture; she questions: "Why must I 'represent' anyone besides myself?" (63).

for Asians. This action was justified, Wang argued, because "... it never happens that an Asian actress can go out for a major Caucasian role and get it. Until that day comes, there is no equity, so it was important to me that these roles all go to Asians" (Avins 14). The importance of Asian Americans playing the lead roles was heightened for Wang because he saw in Tan's novel Chinese American women characters who went beyond stereotypes[8] and instead conveyed "something real and truthful" (Stone D2). For Wang, then, making a film of *The Joy Luck Club* was a way to expand opportunities for Asians in Hollywood by working within the system, for, as Wang states:

> In the end, it's all about money. If *The Joy Luck Club* does well, then there will be more films like it made, and some of these [Asian American] actresses will be able to play more truthful characters more [often]. (Avins 14)

But, one must question the "truthfulness" of the representations of Chinese American experience that ultimately reaches the screen in Wang's film. First of all, while Tan's novel has been praised for exploring the multiple tensions impacting on the mother-daughter

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[8] Common stereotypes of Asian American women in print and on film usually fit into the binary opposition of the "lotus blossom," or "China doll," and the "dragon lady." As Gary Okihiro explains, the "China doll" is "diminutive and deferential, and exist[s] to serve men and the dominant group," while the "dragon lady... plotted revenge, and drew men to their doom with her siren calls" (144).

relationships between its Chinese American protagonists, some critics maintain that the novel has gained acceptance with the American public because it tends, nonetheless, to simplify the problematics of assimilation into America.[9] What we see in Wang's film, I want to argue, is the furtherance of this "simplification." In order for *The Joy Luck Club* film to succeed at the box office and, according to Wang, convince film studios that Asian American stories and actors are "marketable" in Hollywood, it had to appeal to a wide-scale audience. Wang relates how Ron Bass (who co-wrote the screenplay with Amy Tan) advised him to adjust his directorial approach to meet these imperatives:

> I learned a lot from him [Bass] about movies being a mass audience medium. I was always geared to art houses. He was like a conscience saying, 'Let's make this film so someone from Boise [Idaho] can learn something about the Chinese and identify with them.' (Stone D2)

What we see here, then, is an example of the "subtle" pressures that guide Asian American self-representations into conformity with the dominant "signifying order" (Palumbo-Liu, 1994, 79). Making the stories in *The Joy Luck Club* understandable for a predominantly white American audience involves de-problematizing their particular and

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[9] See Melanie McAlister's "(Mis)Reading *The Joy Luck Club*" and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon."

nuanced accounts of Chinese American experience so as to create increased "universal" appeal.

It is evident from most film reviews of *The Joy Luck Club* that it is indeed the movie's "universality" that has won it appreciation. For example, Todd McCarthy in *Variety* suggests that "the universal emotional qualities" of *The Joy Luck Club* make it "widely accessible" and a film (he correctly predicts) "that the mainstream general public will very likely embrace" (32). Similarly, Janet Maslin in *The New York Times* cites the "welcome degree of universality" expressed in Wang's film and titles her review "Intimate Generational Lessons, Available to All" (C15). Michael Medved of *The New York Post* also praises the film for its "warm-hearted universality" (23). Finally, Desson Howe of the *The Washington Post* even goes so far as to suggest that the "universalities" behind the "age old clash between generations" in the film virtually erase cultural difference: "You may think you're being pulled into a different world in *The Joy Luck Club*. But this saga about Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters is really *your* story" (italics in original) (42).

In Wang's film adaptation, then, the process of "simplification," that occurs concomitantly with a broadened "universality," is accomplished through the virtual elimination of racial/cultural conflict between Chinese and

whites, and through the neutralization of class disparities. While Amy Tan's novel is praised by critics such as Lisa Lowe because it "multiplies the sites of cultural conflict" for Chinese Americans and "posits a number of struggles... without privileging the singularity or centrality of one" (35), we see in Wang's *Joy Luck* how the novel is made more palatable to a white American audience through the nullification of many of these tensions. In particular, issues of class and economic inequality in a racially stratified contemporary United States, which are clearly evident in the novel, are offset in the film by the affluence of all the daughters and mothers in the American context. This is evident, for example, in the mothers' clothing; the film shows them wearing elegant outfits and expensive jewellery while in Tan's book the mothers are dressed in "slacks, bright print blouses, and different versions of sturdy walking shoes" (16). Thus, not only does the film present a limited cross-section of the Chinese American community, but, in so doing, it also upholds a version of the model minority myth of dominant white America because it shows Chinese Americans "whose entry into the middle class is assumed and unproblematic" (McAlister 105).[10] Indeed, the film suggests that for Chinese

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[10] The model minority myth suggests that Asians have succeeded, through "hard work, education, family values and self-help," in moving from the margins to the American

Americans the United States has undeniably proven to be "the land of opportunity."

In addition to the erasure of economic disparities, Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* also takes liberties with Tan's novel to create more flattering portraits of white Americans. In fact, the film strategically incorporates polite criticisms of clichéd white characters in order to foster in the (white) viewer a feeling of moral superiority. As a result, when Waverly Jong's white fiancé, Rich Schields, succeeds in breaking Chinese cultural codes when the couple have dinner with Waverly's parents, the viewer can inwardly chuckle at Rich's ignorance since he/she identifies with the "insider's" position granted by Waverly's voice-over narration (she explains the "correct Chinese way" while we watch his blunders). Yet, interestingly, in the context of the film Rich's ignorance of Chinese customs is presented as understandable since (unlike in the novel) Waverly accepts part of the blame

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mainstream (Okihiro 140). However, as Lisa Lowe reminds us, this myth "distorts the real gains, as well as the impediments, of Asian immigrants; by leveling and homogenizing all Asian groups, it erases the different rates of assimilation and the variety of class identities among various Asian immigrant groups" (1991, 40; fn. 7). As well, Gary Okihiro notes how the model minority myth, which appears to be the obverse to the "yellow peril" myth of threatening Asian hordes, can actually be conflated with this concept -- if Asians are "too" successful in America they are seen by the dominant white majority as aggressive and self-serving overachievers (141-2).

because she "had forgotten" to remind Rich of a few tips about how to conduct himself. Thus, at the end of the film when we see the married couple happily sharing dinner celebrations with the families of the Joy Luck Club, viewers are re-assured that gulfs in cultural heritage can still be bridged by bumbling, but lovable whites.

The presentation of white Americans in Rose Hsu Jordan's story also offers viewers a satisfyingly positive impression of racial tolerance and assimilation in America. Here, this is achieved by providing the viewer with a token scene of racial discrimination and then countering it with an emphatic assertion of liberality in America. We see this when, at an outdoor party, Ted Jordan's wealthy upper-class mother expresses her anxiety to Rose about the "political" implications of Ted having a relationship with an Asian woman. Viewers are able to disregard this presentation of white racism not only because Ted's mother suits the stereotype of a snobby upper-class racist, but also because it is Ted himself (the progressive, college-educated white liberal) who, in Rose's words, "rescues" her by interrupting the conversation and berating his mother. Since Ted's dynamic "rescue" of Rose is not in Tan's originary novel, it is conceivable that this scene was designed to create a vision of white American tolerance that matches the rhetoric of the dominant ideology. In the film, then, the

generational conflict in white society (between Ted and his mother) echoes the generational conflict that is the primary trope in the Chinese American narrative -- in each case the demonstration of the second generation characters' greater liberality reassures the viewers that they are part of a progressive age of racial tolerance. In a similar way, this moral reassurance is also cultivated through the film's efforts to win the spectator's confidence in the cinematic apparatus as a source of "truth." This becomes apparent in the film, for example, when, during Rose's encounter with Mrs. Jordan, the dialogue fades out and is replaced by Rose's voice-over narration that compares the incident to "something out of a racist movie." The self-reflexive implications of Rose's comment (again not included in the novel) serve as a congratulatory device that flatters the viewer by enticing him/her into believing that he/she is participating in a morally righteous cause simply by watching a supposedly "non-racist" film.

Some of Tan's criticisms of dominant white America are also neutralized in Wang's film by the removal of certain characters and the substitution of others. For example, Ying-Ying St.Clair's unrewarding marriage to an Irish American (a man who eagerly Westernizes Ying-Ying by changing her name to "Betty" (107) and who perpetually misunderstands his wife), is left out of the film entirely.

This is a significant omission since, in the novel, the difficulties in Ying-Ying's first generation interracial marriage mirrors the problems in Rose Hsu Jordan's second generation marriage to a white American. This comparison emphasizes the persistence of interracial problems in the contemporary American context rather than advocating a simple ideology of generational progression. In Tan's novel, then, Rose's eventual separation from Ted comes as she realizes he has stifled her feminist and cultural "consciousness." In the film, however, the problematics of communication and assimilation in cross-cultural marriages are abated -- the couple stays together and Rose actually tells Ted "It's not your fault. I was the one who told you my love wasn't good enough." Thus, white America is again freed from any responsibility for the struggles of Chinese Americans.

The film's substitution of Lena St. Clair's (Ying-Ying's daughter's) frugal and domineering Euro-American husband with a Chinese American one also blunts Tan's subtle critique of dominant white America. In the novel, Harold Livotny's skewed version of economic equality[11] and total control over the architectural firm he and Lena created together (though Lena comes up with almost all of the

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[11] Harold believes that the couple's expenses should be divided "fifty-fifty," so that, for example, Lena pays for half of the ice cream that only Harold eats.

marketing ideas, Harold still "makes seven times more" (173) than her), evokes an ironic comparison with the historical reality of white America's exploitation of minorities. But in the film this irony is lost as Lena's oppression is shown to originate from within the Chinese American community. Consequently, since Lena's story of oppression parallels closely with the mothers' confrontations with male authority in China, the film insinuates that the Chinese American Harold's domineering treatment of Lena betrays the trace of patriarchy in Confucian Chinese culture, but simultaneously implies that patriarchal oppression is not a reality in the dominant white culture of America (i.e. the relationships between Waverly and Rich, Rose and Ted in the film).

The net effect, then, of the "positive" treatments of white Americans in Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* is not only to make the film more amenable to the sensibilities of a mainstream audience, but also to reinforce the ideological message corroborated by the economic prosperity of the Chinese American characters: that the United States is unquestionably a desirable nation to assimilate into and that assimilation for Chinese Americans can readily be achieved. Thus, the rhetoric of inclusiveness prevails in Wang's film -- the political and material circumstances of the U.S. supposedly hold no limits for Chinese Americans.

The irony of this rhetoric of inclusiveness is revealed in how the film's ideological work succeeds in limiting (excluding) Chinese American self-representation to the essentializing trope of "generational conflict." Under this model the American context is further de-problematized and the barriers to assimilation are located in the conflicts between "traditional" mothers and "modern" daughters. We see this process of re-contextualization at work when the young Jing-Mei Woo's comment in the novel that "My mother believed you could be anything in America... America was where all my mother's hopes lay" (141) is subsequently changed in the film adaptation of *Joy Luck* to the statement "my mother's version of believing in me was believing I could be anything." Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out in her discussion of Tan's novel that Mrs. Woo's unrealistic expectations for Jing-Mei are phrased "in terms of the American myth of immigrant success" and that Mrs. Woo does not seem to realize that "it is precisely because this myth has *not* worked for her that she has to displace her hopes onto her daughter" (1993, 40). The removal in the film of this implicit criticism of America's failure to deliver the success promised by the rhetoric of inclusiveness, serves to re-locate the problematics of assimilation in the generational conflict between Chinese American mothers and daughters (and so to psychologize it).

Thus, in the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* we see the novel's discussions of the specific problems faced by the Chinese immigrant mothers in their move to the American context wholly eliminated. Lindo Jong, for example, speaks in the novel against the pressures of assimilation when she narrates that "It's hard to keep your Chinese face in America," admitting she "had to hide [her] true self" when she immigrated (294). As well, contrary to the film's assumption of economic prosperity for Chinese Americans in the United States, Lindo's story in Tan's novel describes her limited employment opportunities and exploitation as a worker in a fortune cookie factory. Without the mediating perspective(s) provided by these immigration experiences a distinct binary opposition is constructed between the "old world" of China (associated with the mothers) and the "new world" of America (associated with the daughters). Since, in the film, the mothers' experiences in the United States are de-problematized, China comes to be identified as the place "where individuals' lives are deprived of choice, shaped by tradition and buffeted by inexorable 'natural' circumstances," while America is "where one can exercise decision making and control over one's life and where learning from the past is possible" (Wong, 1995, 186).

With China identified as the origin of a restrictive and oppressive culture and America idealized as the place where maximum freedom is possible, the trope of generational conflict situates the forces that block articulations of Chinese American subjectivity in the lingering after-effects of the mothers' personal histories, not in the material and economic oppression of minorities in the American context. Generational conflict in Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* occurs partly because the daughters do not recognize the "universal" truth of their mothers' ambitions to give them a better life, but also, the film suggests, because the mothers are unable to rid themselves of the psychology of oppression they learned in China. We see this revealed near the end of Wang's film when An-Mei comments to her daughter Rose, "I was raised the Chinese way. I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other peoples' misery and eat my own bitterness." Clearly, the implication here (since An-Mei's advice to her daughter is to break free of this pattern) is that this "Chinese psychology" is oppressive and the "correct" solution to this "psychosis" can be found in a whole-hearted enjoyment of the "freedoms" offered by America. Thus, the film suggests that coping with the problematics of the Chinese American experience is less a matter of negotiating the multiple sites of cultural conflict (issues of race, class, and gender) in an American

context of racially-based economic and material oppression, than it is merely a matter of mutual cross-generational recognition, and exorcism, of an oppressive Chinese heritage. America, then, is privileged as the context where the greatest spiritual and economic freedom exists and therefore it openly invites assimilation. In this way the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* provides a self-congratulatory story expressive of the dominant white American rhetoric of inclusiveness, while masking the reality that this presentation is contingent upon the inherent limitations of a trope of generational conflict that simplifies and de-problematizes the Asian American experience.

Section Two: Subtle Subversions in Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

Clearly, the case of Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* shows the difficulties faced by Asian Americans in the white-dominated popular film industry in escaping the exclusive realities of the limited "sites of representation" for Asian American experience. However, a consideration of Wang's earlier film, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, reveals that there are possibilities for more complex self-represented accounts of issues faced by Asian Americans. Even though the

Hollywood-based Columbia Pictures was the primary financial backer and marketer of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, it appears as though the fact that it was also produced in association with American Playhouse (which is supported by funds from public television stations) helped Wang acquire greater artistic control over the film. Consequently, though the film ultimately suffers, like *The Joy Luck Club*, under the limiting trope of "generational conflict" and its symbolic resolution in assimilation, Wang is able to problematize this transition through subtle alterations and additions to the plot of Chu's original novel.

On the surface, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* seems to privilege the simplifying trope of "generational conflict," whereby American-born Chinese children seek to free themselves from the influence of their traditionally-minded immigrant parents, as the metaphorical "site of representation" for Chinese American experience. Initially caught between competing versions of masculinity (one Chinese and one American), Ben Loy, the Chinese American protagonist, is able to overcome his sexual impotence by rejecting traditional "Chinese" ideals and adopting "American" values of individualism, independence, and the pursuit of happiness. Even though his wife (Mei Oi, the village girl he marries in China and brings to New York) becomes pregnant as a result of an affair, Ben is not concerned with

preserving family honor by seeking revenge on Ah Song, his wife's seducer, nor does Ben observe the Confucian ideal of respect for parental authority when he rejects his father's (Wah Gay's) appeals that he get this revenge.[12] Instead, Ben asserts his independence by moving (with Mei Oi) out from under the supervision of his father, and the community, and "going West" to San Francisco. Thus, the coincident return of Ben-Loy's virility with his adoption of an American "style" of masculinity suggests, as we saw in the film of *Joy Luck*, that successful navigation of generational conflict by Chinese Americans is rightfully resolved in assimilation.[13]

Still, in his film Wang is able to problematize this equation by stressing the heterogeneous influences of the American social context. In particular, Wang is careful to historicize the Chinese American experience within the context of dominant white America's racist ideology. The repeated references to the Chinese exclusion laws at the beginning of the film and at Ben's and Mei Oi's wedding banquet (explicit comments not included, but taken for

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[12] Frustrated by his son's complacency, Wah Gay decides to take revenge into his own hands; this he achieves by cutting off one of Ah Song's ears.

[13] This is not to suggest, however, that Chu's novel is entirely and unambiguously pro-assimilationist. Indeed, Chu complicates the issue of assimilation by having the traditional Chinese "bowl of tea" serve as the ostensible cure for Ben's impotence.

granted, in the 1961 novel), help to frame the ensuing generational conflict within an historical reality of oppression. As a result, viewers are reminded that, while the intense pressure placed on Ben Loy and Mei Oi to have children is derived from the older generation's Confucian ideals, it is also exacerbated by the desire to rejuvenate the Chinese immigrant community that is diminishing under racist American laws (as described in the introduction to this thesis).

Interestingly, while most reviewers of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* were eager to embrace it as a "wry, irreverent, endearing new comedy" (James C13), some, evidently, didn't appreciate Wang's efforts to sustain the (above mentioned) edge of historicized dramatic realism alongside his humour. Hal Hinson in *The Washington Post*, for example, complains: "the scenes in which the couple struggle to launch their family are ruthlessly protracted and dead serious. And they kill the movie" (B9). As well, Desson Howe argues that the film's "charm" is squandered by "[Mei Oi's] improbable affair and [Wah Gay's] even more improbable act of revenge" (31). Howe, apparently, is unwilling to acknowledge the significance of tensions between American and Chinese cultural contexts that motivate these characters' actions. These critics' comments suggest that some white reviewers (and film-goers, given the poor box office showing) were not

ready for the historically accurate and culturally sensitive narrative that Wang presented in his adaptation of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*.

Returning, then, to consider the film's complication of issues in Chu's novel, we see that Wang also takes the representation of Chinese American experience beyond the limits of "generational conflict" by accenting the gender-based tensions between Ben Loy and Mei Oi. Wang explores these *inter*-generational tensions more thoroughly than Chu by adding scenes to the story that show how the American context problematizes the couple's relationship. In particular, Wang reveals the painful artificiality of Mei Oi's construction as "American" housewife when she arrives in New York. Silent long-shots of Mei Oi alone in the apartment emphasize her loneliness, and images of her domestic activities, when contrasted with scenes of Ben Loy in the boisterous kitchen of the Chinese restaurant he manages, evoke the profound boredom of her daily routine. Further, when Ben Loy introduces a television to the apartment (again a scene not included in Chu's novel) to provide Mei Oi with "company," she rebuffs his peculiarly "American" offer of a commodity substitute with the comment "A machine is not the same thing as a husband." Ultimately, though, the film (and novel) endorses Mei Oi's assimilation into the position of a traditional American housewife, but

Wang is, nonetheless, able to show how the pressures of this gender ideology in America complicate the process of assimilation beyond the simple binary of parent/sibling conflict.

In an interview about his adaptation of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Wang laments that the film is "too tame" and the "tone and mood had to be milked down for a certain audience" (Sakamoto, 1991, 73). Undeniably, the film's comedic tone and often light-hearted approach to the processes of Chinese American assimilation into white American culture attests to Wang's caution in presenting "acceptable" versions of Chinese American experience.[14] Still, in comparison to *The Joy Luck Club* we can see how Wang is able to maintain a distinctive style in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* that, along with the alterations to content mentioned above, preserves a critical edge in the film. Thus, while in *Joy Luck* the visual presentation of the story is in accordance with a highly conservative Hollywood approach (very little camera movement, naturalistic lighting, unobtrusive camera angles), Wang in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* offers a more subjective delivery of the material. In part Wang's strategy is to accentuate the constructedness of the film by creating shots and scenes that draw the viewer's attention to the cinematic apparatus. The most effective use of this self-reflexive technique

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[14] Indeed, as we saw earlier, critics tended to praise the more whimsical elements of his film.

occurs when Ben Loy travels to China to meet and marry Mei Oi. The night after the marriage arrangement is made Ben and Mei Oi, while waiting to receive confirmation that their horoscopes match, watch a Clark Gable film with the rest of the inhabitants of the Chinese village. When word comes that their marriage has been approved, the scene shifts so that the image of Ben and Mei Oi professing their love for one another is superimposed onto the screen image of the film they are watching - as we watch them in a film. Here, Wang establishes an ironic contrast between the cliché-ridden Hollywood love story and the complex racial, political, and cultural matrix to be faced by the Chinese American couple. This, of course, is a much different use of self-reflexivity from Rose Hsu Jordan's meta-fictional statement in *The Joy Luck Club* about her encounter with Mrs. Jordan as "something out of a racist movie." While Rose's comment encourages the viewer to trust the current cinematic apparatus as a source of unbiased vision, Wang's break from realist conventions in this scene disturbs the viewer's faith in soothing verisimilitude and, consequently, encourages us to take a guarded, ironic approach to the "reality" being presented to us in the rest of the film. As a result, it is possible to interpret the conclusion of Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* as more than a simple presentation of generational conflict resolved through Ben Loy's escape

from Chinese cultural constraints to assimilation into America. Instead, the hyperbolized final image of the Chinese American family, with both grandfather's present, Mei Oi pregnant with a second child, and Ben Loy cooking hamburgers on the barbecue, all within the boundaries of a white picket fence, places this assimilationist ending equally in the realm of fantasy. It is the persistence of such ambiguities throughout Wang's film that prevents *Eat a Bowl of Tea* from being wholly complicit with the dominant American ideology that de-contextualizes Chinese American experiences from the material and political concerns in the U.S.

CHAPTER TWO

The Politics of *M. Butterfly* in Dramatic and Filmic Contexts

The impact of the dominant culture's ideological appropriation of Asian American filmic self-representations becomes even more apparent when we examine an Asian American text that is written as an overtly "political" challenge to such expressions of Western (American) power. Unlike Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* (1988) offers a deliberately argumentative approach, one that encompasses Asian American experience by confronting the larger context of Western stereotypes of "the East." What makes Hwang's *M. Butterfly* so intriguing for the purposes of this thesis, are the ways in which the play, despite its international settings, none of which is America, is so infused with issues distinctly pertinent to the "politics" of Asian American self-representations. I will argue in the first section of this chapter that the nature of Hwang's radical questioning of the ideological formations that underwrite Western power in *M. Butterfly* is informed by Asian American concerns and highly sensitive to the American context. Hwang's play, then, posits a complex and nuanced vision of

Asian (American) subjectivity as deriving from multiple and heterogeneous discourses.

The second section of this chapter addresses David Cronenberg's film adaptation of Hwang's play and focuses specifically on the differences in technique between the two versions. Cronenberg eschews Hwang's Brechtian theatrical form (that corroborates the anti-essentialist arguments of the play) and attempts to work within the traditions of psychological realism and linear narrative development that dominate popular cinema. With these alterations we see that, while Hwang's critique is partially sustained in the film adaptation, the "voice" of Asian American self-representation is, once again, simplified in the process of conforming to the ideological demands of the dominant culture's signifying order.

Section One: *M. Butterfly*: Hwang's Asian American Critique of Discursive Power

The basic plot of *M. Butterfly* was inspired by an article (now serving as the preface to the play) in the *New York Times* of May 11, 1986 that reported:

> A former French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer have been sentenced to six years in jail for spying for China after a two-day trial that traced a story of clandestine love and mistaken identity... Mr. Bouriscot was accused of passing

> information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi whom he believed for twenty years to be a woman.

Despite the "tabloid" quality of this scenario, Hwang's particular adaptation of the story eschews its melodramatic allure in favor of a definite "political" interpretation -- one that posits an indictment of Western presuppositions about "the East." As Hwang explains in the "Afterword" to his play, he interpreted the French diplomat's (Bernard Bouriscot's) account of not having seen his "girlfriend" naked -- "I thought she was very modest. I thought it was a Chinese custom" -- as based on an assumption "consistent with a certain stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, blushing flowers," and he concluded that "the diplomat must have fallen in love, not with a person, but with a fantasy stereotype" (94). Fueled by these ideas, Hwang devised what he terms "a deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*,"[15] whereby

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[15] The original story of Puccini's opera, set at the turn of the century, tells of an American sailor (Pinkerton) who arrives in Japan and purchases a house and wife (Cio-Cio-San or Madame Butterfly). Unknown to Cio-Cio-San, however, is the fact that Pinkerton has no intention of sustaining a long-term commitment to her, and he plans to take advantage of a clause that allows the marriage to be annuled at a month's notice. When Pinkerton inevitably abandons her, Butterfly clings to the hope that he will one day return and, having borne Pinkerton's child, even rejects a marriage proposal from a Japanese Prince. In the final act Pinkerton does in fact return to Japan; but when Butterfly realizes he now has an American wife she kills herself and leaves the child to them.

the French diplomat Gallimard (based on Bouriscot) fantasizes that he is Pinkerton and that the Chinese opera singer he meets (Song Liling) is Butterfly. Seduced by the image of the innocent and self-denying Asian woman, Gallimard's sense of masculine power -- which had previously been called into question -- increases when his feigned indifference to their relationship is met with Song's apparent willingness to "shame" herself (himself) in order to keep his affections. The diplomat is so smitten with Song's devotion that he even derives his foreign policy assessments of "the East" from the example of Song's "passivity." Arguing that "the Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power" (45), Gallimard assures his advisor (Toulon) that the Americans will succeed in Vietnam. Even when these predictions fail, and Gallimard is sent back to France, he still retains his "vision of the Orient" (91). However, this "vision" is finally subverted when a court trial reveals that Song is not only a spy for the Chinese, but also a man (91). Gallimard, then, has actually been Butterfly and Song is therefore the real Pinkerton (Hwang, 1988, 95-6). Unable to deal with the revelation of his lover's "true self," the play concludes with Gallimard's actual suicide as he, dressed as Madame Butterfly, performs the final scene of Puccini's opera. We see, then, that

Hwang's parodic treatment of the classic operatic text, hinges upon the mutual implication of Western ideologies of "imperialism, racism, and sexism" (Savran, 127) as the foundational elements for the French diplomat's self-delusion. In fact, *M. Butterfly* demonstrates the radical de-stabilization of the Western subject himself, as Western stereotypes of "the East," upon which the West depends for its own self-image, are shown to be artificial.

It has been Hwang's concern with discourses of power, and his coincident elaboration of the constructedness of identity categories such as "race" and "gender," that has led several literary and cultural critics from both inside and outside the Asian American community to identify *M. Butterfly* as a decidedly "political" drama. Dorrine Kondo, Karen Shimakawa, Marjorie Garber, and Robert Skloot have each, in their respective articles, read *M. Butterfly* as exemplary of an anti-essentialist position on gender, as it rejects the idea that there are "natural" connections between one's sex and certain character traits. Kondo, for example, suggests that the play shows how "'woman' is a named location in a changing matrix of power relations, defined oppositionally to the name 'man' (18), while Garber argues that the "figure of the cross-dressed 'woman'" in *M. Butterfly* "... functions simultaneously as a mark of gender undecidability and as an indication of category crisis"

(125). These authors also maintain that *M. Butterfly* demonstrates how gender and race are implicated in Western imperialism. In this regard, Skloot argues that "Hwang challenges our perceptions of international relations by insisting on their cultural foundation which, in turn, have a sexual basis" (4), and Shimakawa suggests that the play reveals oppressive stereotypes to be founded on "compartmentalized conceptions of male, female, gay, straight, East, West..." (362). All of these critics, then, see in *M. Butterfly*'s interrogation of discourses a significant challenge to the predominant ideologies that underwrite Western culture.

However, though these critics acknowledge that Hwang's attack is focused on a questioning of discursive apparatuses, they do not attempt to bring their analyses into direct connection with Asian American issues. I want to argue that it is possible to locate the particular political thrust of Hwang's play within the current context of Asian American theory, as outlined in the opening chapter. As such, Hwang's position corroborates Lisa Lowe's insistence that any understanding of Asian (American) subjectivity be informed by the realities of "heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple" factors that constitute individual identity formations. More specifically, I submit that Hwang's criticism of Western discourses that construct the

Asian as Other are also joined by a concomitant questioning of *Asian* patriarchal discourses of power that also attempt to homogenize difference in the Asian community. Thus, we will see how Hwang's critique bears testimony to the paradoxes inherent in the problematics of formulating Asian American identity -- the necessity of confronting the dominant ideology that perpetuates stereotypes while resisting the tendency to idealize the native country as simply signifying a purely oppositional alternative.

In examining how *M. Butterfly* enacts its "political message" I will also recall the work of Edward Said and Judith Butler, whose theories of orientalism and of gender respectively are particularly pertinent to a discussion of Hwang's play. Though Hwang wrote *M. Butterfly* (1988) prior to reading Said's *Orientalism*, and before the publication of Butler's key anti-essentialist text, *Gender Trouble*, his play, as some critics have noted,[16] bears a strikingly similar focus to the critiques these authors posit. The writings of Said and Butler present challenges to essentialist notions of the self -- notions which, under white Western patriarchy, are often deployed as a means to sustain and justify dominance over women and racial "others." In their respective critiques, Said and Butler utilize the Foucauldian notion of "discourse," whereby

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[16] See, in particular, Dorrine Kondo and Karen Shimakawa.

objects of "truth" and "knowledge" are understood as historically determined constructs produced by a power-based set of institutions, linguistic practices, and material processes that delineate and manage subject formation (Stam, et al... 211). The self, then, is produced from a matrix of discourses, and Said and Butler develop this notion to discern how discursive patterns work to produce "others" along racial and gender lines. I will try to adumbrate in what follows how Hwang's play can be productively read first in relation to Said, then Butler, to show how *M. Butterfly* integrates Asian American concerns and sensibilities with a critique of discursive/ideological mystification. When Hwang's play is interpreted as a theoretical text in its own right, one that links "anti-essentialism" to the Asian-American experience, what emerges is a sense of just how nuanced and sophisticated Hwang's critique(s) are.

Though his work was published almost twenty years ago, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains a crucial text for any discussion of Western attitudes towards "the East." While it is important to acknowledge that Said uses the term "Orient" in his analysis to refer to the Middle East and India, his ideas, nonetheless, are adaptable to conceptions of the "far East." Said identifies "orientalism" as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and...

'the Occident'" (2). This basic attitude, Said argues, is fostered and perpetuated through

> the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it... [so that] in short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Inherent in the discourse of orientalism are dogmas that justify and sustain the West's position of authority over the East. For Said, these attitudes are apparent in both a series of oppositional binarisms that designate the West as "rational, developed, humane, superior" and the Orient as "aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior," and through stereotypes that conceive of the East as "eternal, uniform... incapable of defining itself" and "at bottom something either to be feared... or to be controlled" (300-301).

In taking up the story of American imperialism in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Hwang tackles the tradition of Western stereotypes that have justified "control" over "the Orient." On one level, it is apparent that Hwang's parody of the opera challenges the power-infused binarisms of orientalism by reversing the power dynamic -- Gallimard (Bouriscot), the French diplomat assigned to "know" China ultimately finds that he in fact has been the victim of espionage by the Asian figure. But Hwang's subversive

approach is far more complex than this, for he emphasizes a point not explicitly voiced in Said's formulations in *Orientalism* by illuminating the implicit "gendering of ethnicity" underlying Western orientalism, whereby the East is positioned as "feminine" (which, under Western patriarchal logic, signifies "passivity" and "submission"). Thus, Hwang's play articulates a perception of orientalist stereotypes that derives from the experience, identified by Asian American critics, of orientalism in the United States. As I examined in the first chapter, Asian men in America were, historically, cast into a "feminized" or "emasculated" subject position by racist laws (a stereotype that has persisted in media representations), while Asian American women have been cast as "ultra-feminized" figures.[17]

Hwang's parody of *Madame Butterfly*, then, is firmly rooted in debunking the potency of this discursive gendering. In the play we find a critique of Western cultural expressions of such gendering in the first encounter between Song and Gallimard, just after the diplomat sees the singer's performance of the death scene

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[17] See King-Kok Cheung's "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism," Elaine Kim's "Asian American Writers: A Bibliographical Review, " and Gary Okihiro's study *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, Chapter 5.

from the opera. Here, Song rebukes Gallimard for his admiration of the *Madame Butterfly* story:

> It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man... 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. (17)

Song's references to "cheerleaders" and "a young Kennedy" make the critique of stereotypes in this particular passage quite pertinent for an American audience. Here we see how Hwang's "international" play incorporates a distinct concern with the American context. Yet, in terms of his overall contention with Orientalism Hwang is clearly interested in extrapolating from incidents of stereotyping to reveal the relationship between "cultural mystique" and "political power" (Savran 127). We see this expressed most directly during the trial scene when Song Liling "theorizes" about how he was able to "fool" Gallimard about his gender for over twenty years. Song suggests this was possible because "...when he [Gallimard] finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I [Song] am an Oriental. And being an

Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (83). This "vision of the Orient," Song argues, is grounded in a binary logic whereby, "the West thinks of itself as masculine - big guns, big industry, big money - so the East is feminine - weak, delicate, poor... but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom - the feminine mystique..." (83).

The delusions that are sustained by this gendered imperialism, the play shows, have a direct impact on political interactions between the West and East. Bolstered by his sense of superiority in his relationship with Song, Gallimard proposes to the French ambassador that the United States will be successful in Vietnam because "the Oriental will always submit to the greater force" (46). Thus, as Dorrine Kondo contends in her article on *M. Butterfly*, we see how Hwang is able to "explicitly link[] the construction of gendered imagery to the construction of race and the imperialist mission to colonize and dominate" (24-5). By accentuating the particular "gendering of ethnicity" consistent in American expressions of orientalism, Hwang is able to reveal the complex interdependence of racism, sexism, and imperialism as discourses that intersect to produce and to underwrite Western power. Consequently, *M. Butterfly*, in the playwright's words, is still a "very American play, in spite of the fact that it's about a number of intercultural topics" (DiGaetani 152).

While on one level Hwang's play shows how, unlike Said's formulations of a monolithic orientalism, "the East" can subvert Western discursive power "from within," by using its logic "against itself" (Lowe, 1991, 5), Hwang is wary of suggesting that a mere reversal of stereotypes constitutes a legitimate alternative or answer to discourses of domination. Though some critics, such as Colleen Lye and James Moy, contend that *M. Butterfly* does ultimately reinscribe the binary logic of Western stereotypes by utilizing ironic reversals, an examination of Hwang's efforts in the context of Judith Butler's work reveals his more thorough concern with questioning *all* discourses of power and the potential for subaltern subjects to seize and transform them. Consequently, as we shall see, the sensitivity of Hwang's analysis to the complex issues of Asian American subjectivity prevents his overall critique from "demanding legitimacy in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they were] disqualified" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101, qtd. in Cheung 246). Rather than simply desiring to participate in the dominant culture on its own terms, Hwang conceives of the possibilities for agency and self-representation for Asian Americans in an effort to actually reform those terms.

Butler's concerns with discursive formations focus on the problematics of gender and identity, issues which Hwang

consciously implicates alongside his exploration of Western orientalism. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler sets out to demystify the notion that identity categories (such as one's gender) have an essential origin in a transcendental self, and instead contends that these designations are "in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (viii). The self, according to Butler, is not a preexistent entity but, rather, "a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained" and "constituted by discursive injunctions" (33). Gender, then, is a discursive formation that has been "naturalized" as foundational (just as stereotypes of the East are naturalized under orientalism) and thereby used as a premise for the legitimation of regulatory hegemony by Western patriarchal power (2). In this sense Butler identifies gender as "performative" and claims that it is perpetuated through "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of regulated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33).

But despite the imperatives of discursive formations of gender that regulate the codes of "performance," Butler (unlike Said in *Orientalism*) rejects a discursive determinism and instead argues that there are possibilities

for agency by the subject. Firstly, we should note that Butler does not categorize gender as a monolithic discourse that overrides and negates the influence of other discursive formations; in this sense Butler's work is more amenable to Hwang's efforts in *M. Butterfly* that show how multiple discourses of "gender" and "race," for example, may intersect and correlate. As well, Butler demonstrates the possibilities for agency within a discursive system, while still rejecting the argument that "a pre-existing subject [is] necessary to establish a point of agency that is not fully determined by... culture and discourse" (142). For Butler it is the very multiplicity of discursive injunctions that in their coexistence and convergence "produce the possibility for a complex reconfiguration and redeployment" of power (145). The regulated process of repetition that sustains the gendered subject can be subverted, according to Butler, through parodic variations in these repetitions that reveal the idea of an original, essential, gendered self to be "nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (31). Gender, then, can be performed in such a way that "repeats and displace[s] through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which [it] is mobilized" (31). In sum, this parodic redeployment of regulative power reveals the constructed nature of the category of "gender," even of

"identity" itself, and consequently renders these discourses "permanently problematic" (128).

In considering *M. Butterfly* we can see how the play foregrounds the performative nature of gender (and race) constructions to undermine the regulative limits of these essentialized categories. Song's seduction of Gallimard is based upon a literalized, hyperbolic "performance" of the diplomat's ideal of "femininity" -- and Song's success is possible because Gallimard assumes there is a transparent relationship between outer appearance and the inner truth of self (Kondo 15). The eventual invalidation of this feminine ideal, when it is revealed to be a contrivance, emphasizes how a naive belief in the notion of an original undoes the Western subject -- Gallimard's own confidence betrays him. Further, Gallimard's response to the sexual aggressiveness of Danish student Renee (who also becomes the diplomat's lover) as "too masculine" (54), in contrast to the "truly feminine" Song, ironically reveals how "appropriate" gender behavior is subject to the artificial demands of patriarchal discourse. Hwang makes this same point even more forcefully through the voice of Song when she/he comments to Comrade Chin that men play women's roles in Chinese opera "because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (63). Here Hwang ironically implies that "woman" is a "collection of cultural stereotypes connected at best to a complex,

shifting 'reality'" -- a "reality" that has been defined under a patriarchal discourse of sexism (Kondo 18). In this sense, Hwang provides a "parodic" variation on the trope of the "submissive oriental woman" in the figure of Song. Song's performative "reconfiguration and redeployment" (Butler 145) of the mutually implicated discourses of race and gender enables her/him to subvert Gallimard's confidence in this Western patriarchal ideal of femininity, which has become for Gallimard the foundation of his power.

In considering Hwang's anti-essentialist arguments, it is important to recognize that he questions all discursive formations and contests both sides of binary oppositions such as "femininity/masculinity" and "Asianess/Westerness" in order to demonstrate their mutual dependency. Thus, Hwang's thorough critique of the construction of masculinity is achieved coincidentally with his deconstruction of the racial and gender discourses that produce femininity. This doubled attack enables Hwang to execute a political argument that speaks both from and to the contemporary context of Asian American concerns of identity and oppositionality. We see how Hwang implicitly addresses these issues, for example, in his provocative representation of Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*. Critics such as Marjorie Garber and Colleen Lye[18] argue that the eventual revelation of Song as male

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[18] See Lye's "*M. Butterfly* and the Rhetoric of Antiessentialism" (1995) and Garber's "The Occidental

serves to reconstitute the Asian subject as "really" masculine. They suggest that this reversal fails to evade the logic of Western patriarchal and orientalist inscriptions because it replaces the stereotype of the submissive, "feminine" Oriental with the strong, "masculine" Asian. Conversely, some male Asian American critics, such as Frank Chin, James Moy,[19] and members of a panel discussion of *M. Butterfly* at the Asian American Studies Association conference in 1989 (see Kondo's footnote page 27), contend that Hwang actually reinforces the stereotype of the "effeminate" Asian, since Song is "the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass" (Chin, et al. xii). The problem is that both of these, apparently conflicting, interpretations of Hwang's play are premised upon a reconstitution of the essentializing imperatives that Hwang challenges.

First, I would argue, the suggestion that Hwang resurrects the Asian subject as "really" masculine ignores the deliberate ambiguity the playwright creates in the disjuncture between the revelation of Song's male sex and Song's subsequent conflicting "performances" of masculinity

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Tourist: *M. Butterfly* and the Scandal of Transvestism" (1992).

[19] See Chin's "Introduction" to *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991) and Moy's article "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*: Repositioning Chinese-American Marginality on the American Stage" (1992).

in the courtroom ("macho") and alone with Gallimard ("effeminate"). In particular, Hwang emphasizes the constructedness of masculinity by having Song wear during the trial (and later remove) an Armani (Western) men's "power" suit; this detail implies that "male" power can be "put on" and ultimately insinuates the instability of Song's performance of maleness. Through this "permanent problematization" of race, gender, and identity Hwang is able to assert Asian (American) agency, without reinscribing it in an essentialized site of male-coded Asian (American) subjectivity.

Second, critics, such as Chin and Chan, who suggest that the image of Song as a transvestite and homosexual reinscribes the stereotype of the effeminate Asian also fail to acknowledge the play's extensive evaluation of gender (and sexuality) as "performative" (shown in relation to Song above). As well, these critics neglect the political importance of refusing to fix an ideal representation of Asian (American) identity laden with the traditional masculinist elements of sexism and compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, much of Hwang's purpose seems to be to debunk "'white, male, macho' notions of masculinity" (Hwang, qtd in Kondo 27) as a legitimate and admirable expression of male identities.[20] Thus, it is vitally

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[20] In this way, Hwang's argument implicitly challenges the macho image of Asian masculinity espoused by Chin and Chan.

important to recognize that, for Hwang, "'man' is likewise [to 'woman'] not fact but artifact, himself constructed, made of detachable parts" (Garber 142).

In addition to his critique of essential gender identity through Song's various performances, Hwang explores the inherently sexist and power-based constructions of the Western subject's masculinity through Gallimard's accounts of his maturation, and through his depiction of male relationships. Notably, Gallimard recalls his first encounter with pornographic material in terms of gaining a position of dominance over women:

> I first discovered these magazines at my uncle's house. One day, as a boy of twelve. The first time I saw them in his closet... all lined up - my body shook. Not with lust - no, with power. Here were women - a shelfful - who would do exactly as I wanted. (10)

Later, when recalling Gallimard's first sexual experience, Marc (a friend from high school) and Gallimard summarize the encounter in terms of possession -- "You got her... I got her" (34). Hwang's play shows, then, how the development of Gallimard's sense of masculinity becomes predicated upon his authority over women. He "tests" his relationship with Song by ignoring her for several weeks and, as she "shames" herself to try and win back his attention, he feels "that rush of power - the absolute power of a man" (32). Further, as Gallimard's sense of "masculine" power builds, he is

encouraged to continue his performance by the respect he earns from his adviser, Toulon, who promotes Gallimard to vice-consul as a reward for becoming "this new aggressive confident... thing" (38). The "thing" that Gallimard has become, evidently, is a symbol of white heterosexual phallic authority -- a position which Gallimard is keen to perpetuate since it earns him status (Eng 103). He explains, "I was learning the benefits of being a man. We form our own clubs, sit behind thick doors, smoke - and celebrate the fact that we're still boys" (46). Here, then, Gallimard realizes that "being" a man in the patriarchal economy is not simply a matter of biological sex; rather, it consists in performing an ideal of masculinity that is infused with an imperative of heterosexual desire based in positions of dominance over women. Thus, Gallimard sustains his relationship with Song because, unlike the "too masculine" (54) Renee, she/he remains "humble and silent" (56) and allows Gallimard to maintain his position of "superiority." Finally, then, when Gallimard's "ideal woman" is revealed to be actually a man, Gallimard's Western male identity is thrown into doubt as the sexist, racist, and imperialist foundations for this "masculinity" are revealed as wholly artificial.

Alongside *M. Butterfly*'s critique of Western masculinity there also exist poignant criticisms of

masculinist expressions of power in Asia. Hwang's play rebukes this tendency in Chinese politics, further complicating these issues by demonstrating that Song is not immune from sexist biases. Thus, Hwang's insistence on problematizing Asian as well as Western characters in *M. Butterfly* reveals his sensitivity to an Asian American perspective that acknowledges the "heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity" of discourses that intersect at the site of Asian American identity. Understood in this context, the ambiguities and ambivalences (Moy 85) in the representation of Asia and Asians in *M. Butterfly* are one of the strengths of his critique. Instead of constructing an oppositional politics based on a nativistic idealization of China and a tendency to essentialize ethnic identity in masculinist terms (Lowe, 1991, 34), Hwang posits the necessity of recognizing and negotiating the pressures of multiple discourses at various points of articulation.

Hwang is careful in *M. Butterfly* not to romanticize China and the Cultural Revolution as ideal alternatives to Western imperialist expressions, for Comrade Chin's homophobia and empty rhetoric ("You'll [Song] pollute the place where pollution begins - the West" (72)) reveal an intolerance and a simplified stereotyping of the West that matches Gallimard's ignorance. Still, these criticisms of communist China, most often developed through the female

character Comrade Chin, have led several critics to contend that Hwang presents a view of modern China that is itself orientalist, and to suggest that the play retains a misogynist bias against the female cross-dresser as a sign of "failed 'femininity'" (Garber 141). In particular, these critics have focused on Song's disparaging aside that Comrade Chin is "what passes for a woman in modern China" (Hwang, 1988, 49). For Marjorie Garber, Song's comment is decidedly "anti-butch" (142) and Colleen Lye argues that the remark is indicative of Hwang's effort to seek "humorous mileage from establishing a connection between political movements in Asia and a fall from cultural 'authenticity'" (276). But I want to argue that Garber's and Lye's criticisms are only tenable if we view Song as Hwang's attempt to offer an unproblematic representation of "good" "Asianess." Hwang uses Song as a voice of criticism, but not as a character who is beyond criticism; consequently, the play rejects the very idea of a "true" or "ideal" Asian subject who can provide a purely oppositional image. My point is that Song's comment about Comrade Chin is highly ambivalent -- in one sense it implies a critique of the "totalitarian erasure of difference" (Garber 141), but it must also be read as indicative of *Song*'s sexism (and not, as Garber and Lye suggest, the playwright's). This ambivalence becomes even more evident when we realize that

Hwang is critical of both modern and "old" China. The audience's laughter at "failed femininity" in modern China is later checked by the revelation that the "authentic" alternative femininity in "old" China is represented by an equally sexist Chinese Peking Opera, where, as I have discussed earlier, women are excluded from playing parts because "only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act."[21]

By simultaneously problematizing the representations of Asian subjectivity and those of the Western subject, Hwang presents a thorough critique of discursive formations. He eschews simple reversals of power relations in favor of power-sensitive awareness of the complexities of negotiating multiple and heterogeneous interests. Thus, when *M. Butterfly* is read in the context of Asian American issues a fuller comprehension of the play's "political" drive becomes apparent. The illumination of the "gendering of ethnicity" that underwrites the racism, imperialism, and sexism of Western/American attitudes toward Asia enables Hwang to show how discursive formations are manipulated to coincide with Western expressions of power; yet, Hwang is also able to show how these discourses can be used against themselves to reveal the artificiality, and performative dynamic, they are

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[21] In an interview with John Louis DiGaetani, Hwang acknowledges the persistence of a patriarchal bias in China when he refers to this line in his play as representing an idea that is "obscene" and "inherently sexist" (146).

based in. As well, Hwang's expansion of his critique to include Eastern expressions of patriarchal and totalitarian power discourages a nostalgic faith in a "pristine space of resistance" (Kondo 27). For Hwang, Asian (American) oppositionality must avoid reduplicating the logic of essentialism and accept that subjectivity is to be found in the "heterogeneity" of experience. In this way, Hwang's play posits a thorough questioning of complicity with gender and racial hierarchies (Cheung 246) as a means to resist the power of discursive/ideological formations that limit Asian American self-representations to simplified, stereotypical manifestations.

Section Two: *M. Butterfly* on Film: Questions of Technique and the Politics of Adaptation

"I wrote *M. Butterfly*," Hwang states in his interview with John Louis DiGaetani,

> ...as an attempt to deal with some aspects of orientalism. I assumed that many in the audience would be coming to the theatre because they hoped to see something exotic and mysterious, but what exactly is behind the desire to see the 'exotic East'? (141)

While I have already argued for the importance of reading the critique of discursive mystification in Hwang's play-text as a form of Asian American theory, it is clear from

Hwang's statement above that he sees the play's "politics" achieving full effect only if the abstract ideas can engage and confront the preconceptions of the actual audience. In the context of the United States, a nation whose history has been underwritten by the production and perpetuation of orientalist discourse on both domestic and international fronts, Hwang's play bears considerable political relevance because it represents an overt attack on the dominant ideology, an ideology that disregards this history. In this sense, *M. Butterfly* fits into a Brechtian tradition of theatre because it offers not simply theorizing on Western discursive power, but also posits an argument that is aimed at, Hwang himself claims, "evok[ing] a political response" in the mind of the viewer (Savran 121).

In this section of the chapter I will compare the play of *M. Butterfly* to the subsequent film adaptation to reveal how each version utilizes distinctly different formal strategies for "political" effect. Hwang's critique in the stage version is significantly reinforced by his exploitation of the generic possibilities of contemporary theatre, including manipulations of set design, narrative intransitivity, and use of Brechtian techniques, formal elements of the play I will explore in greater detail later. The film, which was scripted by Hwang but significantly worked over by the director David Cronenberg, follows some

of the principles of the stage presentation, but shuts down (in certain ways) the play's Brechtian dynamic by enacting its critique primarily by exploiting the demands of realism and linear narrative development that dominate popular American cinema. As we shall see, it is in the process of accommodating to these demands of popular cinema that the paradigmatic force of Hwang's story is diminished in the film adaptation: the radical de-stabilization of discursive and ideological mystification loses its complex, nuanced expression in favor of a more simplified account. Thus, as with the adaptations of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, we see Asian American self-representations still in many ways constrained by the mediating power of the dominant culture that "implicitly and subtly" limits the manners in which the Asian American can "imaginatively fit into the signifying order" (Palumbo-Liu, 1994, 79).

In order to accentuate his critique of discursive mystification in the play *M. Butterfly*, Hwang develops a performative strategy that will make his stage "a forum for society to confront itself" (Savran 130). This pedagogical imperative is indicative of Hwang's affinity with the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his approaches to the theatre that sought to encourage the spectator away from passive receptivity to a position of critical observation (Brecht 37). For Hwang, cultivating this "distance" is a crucial

part of his project since his play must persuade the viewer to eschew the (Broadway) theatre conventions of the linear trajectory of chronological narrativization and progressive psychological revelation in favour of a metaphoric or paradigmatic reading "that is critical to making sense of the play" (Pao 9).[22] Thus, in order to encourage this reading from his viewers Hwang deploys various Brechtian "alienation effects." As outlined by Brecht, these effects involve

> ...taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view. (Brecht 125)[23]

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[22] Indeed, Hwang's anti-essentialist argument is premised on the strategic deployment of metaphor, and implicitly corroborates Susan Willis's description of the figure's potential:

> What's at stake in the use of narrative metaphor is not the particular relationship of a specific signifier to its signified, but the whole of the metaphor to the history whose meaning it allegorically evokes. Once the particularity of signification is no longer in question, the articulation of contradiction emerges as the crux of the narrative. Metaphor... based on condensation, delights in defining similarity out of contraries... [and can] produce the distancing necessary for critical scrutiny (21).

[23] It is worth noting here how Brecht's theory of performance parallels the similar strategies of dissonance, parody, and hyperbole that Butler advocates for revealing

For Hwang, then, disrupting the spectator's normal mode of theatrical perception will best enable him to convey his critique of the ideological foundations of racism, sexism, and imperialism.

As I have noted earlier, Hwang imagined that many of the predominantly white American theatre-going audience would be drawn to the play in anticipation of seeing something about the "exotic East." In order to debunk these prejudices Hwang posits an ironic contradiction to the viewer by offering images of orientalist seduction (mixtures of Chinese and Japanese elements that parody Western conflations of Asian nationalities into a homogeneous "Orient"), while simultaneously arguing against such constructions. Consequently, the set design of the original Broadway production utilized red shoji (paper) screens and elaborate costumes, the idea being that it is "more subversive to present this *chinoiserie* in its full glory, and *then* to question the reasons for the audience taking pleasure" (Hwang, "Acting Edition," 90).[24] Hwang encourages the spectator to interrogate this pleasure and recognize the

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the performative nature of gender and other discursively constituted identity categories.

[24] That this *chinoiserie* of the set design is used as an ironic metaphor for ideological mystification is emphasized by the fact that, as Robert L. King has observed, "the oriental panels that define Song's flat in one scene become part of Gallimard's [prison] cell in the next" (135).

artificiality of such orientalist constructions by positioning the audience as critical observers of the play, rather than passive receivers. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by presenting the story of Gallimard's "seduction" in a non-linear, non-realist way. Immediately the play begins, the audience is made aware of the secret that Song is a man, and Gallimard himself speaks from a self-conscious position of this awareness. Consequently, the emphasis of the play clearly shifts away from progressive psychological revelation to a focus on ideology and metaphor "that undermines any 'logic' that might be expected to exist at the most superficial levels of plot and character consistency" (Pao 8).

Hwang further invites the audience to interpret the play in terms of the constructedness of character by having the actors directly address the theatre audience -- an "alienation effect" that erases the imaginary "fourth wall" between the audience and performers. This occurs, for example, in the opening moments of the play when Gallimard declares to the theatre spectators: "I imagine you - my ideal audience - who come to understand and even, perhaps just a little, to envy me" (4). As critical observers, then, the audience is able to "understand" Gallimard and his "vision of the Orient" within the frame of discursive mystification; but more importantly, because Gallimard is

de-psychologized, they are able to read his story as a metaphor for Western perceptions, not simply an individual's self-delusion.

Another example of Hwang's effective use of direct address occurs at the conclusion of Act Two of the play when Song is about to exchange her/his "woman's" costume for a "man's" suit. Song explains to the audience, "The change I'm going to make requires about five minutes. So I thought you might want to take this opportunity to stretch your legs, enjoy a drink, or listen to the musicians" (78-9). Song, however, stays on the stage while removing her/his make-up and changing her/his costume and, though the theatre house lights come up to signal an intermission, the audience remains seated to witness the transformation.[25] The element of theatrical reflexivity in this episode, whereby traditional "behind the scenes" actions are staged for the audience, breaks down the distinction between performance and "reality" and literalizes the play's argument on the constructedness of identity.

In considering the film adaptation of *M. Butterfly*, it becomes possible to see how Hwang's Asian American critique of discursive categories is altered in order to conform to

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[25] In his production notes to the "Actor's Edition" of *M. Butterfly* Hwang claims "on Broadway it was a rare evening where even a couple of individuals would actually leave their seats" (91).

the dominant signifying order of popular cinema. Yet, though the film of *M. Butterfly* was produced by David Geffen under the major Hollywood studio Warner Brothers, the director David Cronenberg is regarded as an unconventional, risk-taking filmmaker who eschews the notion of "pander[ing] to public taste" (Collison 47). As well, for the making of *M. Butterfly* Cronenberg was given a substantial budget of 18 million dollars (the highest budget of the director's career) and virtual "creative freedom" (Collison 46).[26] On the surface then, with Cronenberg directing and Hwang himself enlisted as the screenwriter, it would seem that the adaptation of *M. Butterfly* was established in a position to translate, without neutralizing, the play's radical interrogation of ideology and discursive mystification to a popular audience. It would also appear that this was an opportunity for an Asian American voice to reach the mass American movie-going audience without being simplified by the filter of dominant American ideology.

Before he began work on his adaptation of Hwang's play, David Cronenberg saw a performance of *M. Butterfly* in Los

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[26] The notion of "creative freedom" in Hollywood filmmaking should be considered highly suspect, however. In fact, a large budget carries with it implicit studio pressure to make a film that will be a money-maker -- in order to recoup production costs. Such pressure discourages formal experimentation in favour of the proven success of a traditional aesthetic.

Angeles about which he responded, "I didn't get any emotional buzz from the play at all... You were watching schematic struggles between forces rather than individuals" (Rodley 173). Cronenberg's comment provides an intriguing starting point for a discussion of the "political" differences between the play and film adaptation, for we see in this criticism a striking difference between the director and the playwright about what the purpose of the *M. Butterfly* story is and about how to best convey that message to the audience. As we have already seen, Hwang views his play primarily as a "political" critique, and employs Brechtian techniques to corroborate his argument against oppressive discourses. Cronenberg, however, is less concerned with overt politics and more interested in working within the formal logic of traditional narrative cinema to explore unconventional themes such as the perverse (human) body or "the desire and capacity for physical and mental transformation" (themes with which the audience members can identify as individuals)(Rodley 174).[27]

The fact that Cronenberg's "vision" was, ultimately, the one that was followed in the making of the film reveals, once again, the limits on Asian American self-representation in popular cinema. Evidently Hwang was interested in

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[27] See, for example, earlier Cronenberg films such as *Scanners* (1980), *Videodrome* (1982), *The Fly* (1986), and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

transferring some of the Brechtian strategies to the film version and in further developing his critique of America for the screen, but Cronenberg vetoed his efforts. In an interview with film scholar Chris Rodley, Cronenberg reveals specifically that Hwang's original screenplay had "too much self-awareness on the part of Gallimard," which the director "thought was bad" and had changed (173).[28] As well, in his first draft Hwang added a sub-plot to the story that focused more directly on the American presence in Vietnam (thereby, it would seem, enhancing the pertinence of *M. Butterfly*'s political critique for an American context), but Cronenberg told Hwang, "I'm not interested in that; it's about these two people and what goes on with them" (Rodley 173); he advised the playwright to strip the script of everything extraneous to the relationship (Collison 46). The de-politicization, then, that is evident in Cronenberg's insistence on excising the play's overt commentary on racial, sexual, and cultural stereotypes, involves shifting the scope of the critique from Western (American) society as a whole to the individual: metaphor and paradigm, which produce a critical relationship to history, are exchanged for privatized psychology (like we saw in the adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*). Though, as we shall see later,

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[28] Unfortunately, it is not possible to examine more specifically what exactly Cronenberg rejected or had changed in Hwang's early drafts since these have not been published.

Cronenberg does manipulate progressive psychological revelation and linear narrative development in ways that challenge their conventional deployment in popular film, we must first consider how this shift alters Hwang's original political intent.

In one sense, the replacement of the Brechtian techniques with a realist aesthetic in the film adaptation results in a literalization of the characters and events; this discourages a metaphoric reading in favour of a focus on personal psychology. This alteration marks a considerable dissolution of Hwang's critique of America, the critique which is so subtly maintained in the stage version. The anachronistic use of American slang for the French (and even Chinese) characters was one "alienation effect" that gave the play an American "feel," despite the imaginary Chinese and French contexts. This language use is most poignantly employed to appeal to an American viewer during the scenes, often occurring in memory or beyond a consistent space and time, between Gallimard and Marc; as Angela Pao contends, "[the] language and adolescent experiences are more commonly found in American high school locker rooms and college dormitories than any French setting" (10).[29] But,

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[29] Cronenberg's film actually eliminates the Marc-Gallimard relationship entirely, thereby diminishing much of Hwang's critique of Western masculinity as a homosocial construction.

since the French and Chinese settings in the film are distinctly and literally realized in visual presentation, the characters in these contexts must speak in an appropriate "tone" if the pretense of realism is to be sustained. Without Hwang's original "American" dialogue, and its effect of implicating the United States in its critique, the film spectator is more inclined to receive Gallimard's racist and sexist comments as his personal prejudices rather than as expressions of Western patriarchal power or, more specifically, as direct challenges to the American viewer. Indeed, it is also worth noting that the particular casting of Jeremy Irons, an English actor whose career has been built upon playing repressed upper-class Europeans,[30] in the role of Gallimard further makes possible an American audience's ability to distance themselves from the critique and interpret the story as an individual's self-delusion rather than as a metaphor for the artificiality of Western constructions of the East.

But, despite the very considerable de-politicization of the play, and the consequent simplification of the complex, multiple directionality of its distinctly Asian American critique, Cronenberg's film adaptation of *M. Butterfly* still retains some of the basic critical elements of the stage

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[30] For example, consider his roles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), *Waterland* (1992), and *Damage* (1993).

version. This is the case because, while Cronenberg conforms to the dominant aesthetic of linear development and psychological realism inherent in American popular cinema, he does, nonetheless, manipulate his deployment of these structures in *M. Butterfly* to enliven them with greater political potential. We see this, for example, in the way that the style of Cronenberg's film opposes the image that the studio, Warner Brothers, marketed to the general public. As Chris Rodley explains, previews for *M. Butterfly* appealed to the perceived audience desire for "eastern exoticism" by emphasizing the Chinese setting and "maximiz[ing] location shots and crowd scenes [so that] Cronenberg appears to have made a movie of epic proportions and vision" (177). However, in the film such shots are kept to a minimum, and when landscape is used it is subordinated to the story; for example, the scene with Gallimard and Song at the Great Wall of China places them in the foreground and quickly shifts to close-ups of the characters so that the Wall "isn't window dressing" (Rodley 178). Thus, audience members enticed to *M. Butterfly* by the studio's solicitation of orientalist intrigue are confronted with a film that contextualizes these images in such a way that their easy appeal is diminished.

Cronenberg also challenges his audience from within the conventions of popular narrative cinema by encouraging

spectatorial engagement with Gallimard and Song as psychologically real characters. While this cultivation of psychological realism, as I have already argued, disables much of the metaphorical resonance of the play's critique, Cronenberg problematizes the viewer's conventional relationship with the film's aesthetic by having him/her "sense" that Song is actually a man.[31] Cronenberg explains that when casting the part of Song, "I didn't want an unknown who was incredibly female, who was like a wonderful drag queen and almost undetectable. I wanted a man. When Gallimard and Song are kissing I wanted it to be two men. I wanted the audience to feel that" (Rodley 180). The presentation of Song as noticeably "masculine" -- at times John Lone's stubble is evident under the heavy make-up -- allows Cronenberg to introduce an "alienation effect" to the film's traditional formal arrangement in such a way that the viewer suspects the "secret" without being directly informed of it. But, while in the play the audience and characters self-consciously explore Gallimard's vision of the "Perfect Woman" as a construction underwritten by racist, sexist, and imperialist discourses, the contrast in the film between spectatorial awareness and Gallimard's persistent ignorance suggests, instead, that it is his personal, psychologically-

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[31] Hwang, of course, makes the fact that Song is a man blatantly clear from the beginning of the play.

willed capacity for self-delusion that sustains the relationship.

It is evident, when considering a selection of newspaper and magazine reviews of the film *M. Butterfly*, that Cronenberg's effort to expose to his viewers the psychology of repression generally fails to convince. While most critics (predominantly white American men) follow Cronenberg's cue and identify Song as a man, they tend to interpret Gallimard's ignorance of this fact as indicative of his "foolishness" rather than legitimate ideological mystification. Richard Corliss writes in *Time* magazine, for example, "On-screen, the opera singer's gender is never in question; his 5 o'clock shadow gives him away to everyone but the diplomat" (87). And Todd McCarthy laments in *Variety*, "But as much as one tries to buy the notion that Jeremy Irons' Rene Gallimard is so smitten with John Lone's Song Liling that he overlooks the hefty frame, masculine fingers and moustache stubble beneath the makeup, it just doesn't wash" (26). Thus, while the viewer's awareness of Song's "real" gender in the play is what enables "political" comprehension, in the film this awareness clearly inhibits a metaphorical or political reading. This disparity is indicative of the importance that such an "alienating effect" be framed in a formal context that encourages its viewer to sustain a critically engaged, rather than

passively receptive, viewing position. It seems that, coinciding with the excision of the overt discursive critique and Brechtian distanciation effects, Cronenberg's effort to challenge his viewers from within the tradition of realism and narrative intransitivity is ultimately unsuccessful because it fails to posit an aesthetic logic that will cultivate in the audience a political approach to the text.

When we consider the films of *M. Butterfly*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* together, and recall the ways in which these films are reconciled to the ideological constraints of the dominant culture, they attest to the ironies of the Asian American experience of "multiculturalism" in the United States. Though the American pluralist ideology affirms the "opportunities" for Asian American self-representation in the popular film industry, the examples provided by each (to varying degrees) of these film adaptations shows how this rhetoric of inclusion actually obscures exclusive practices. Indeed, participation in the dominant signifying order of Hollywood film requires the "simplification" of complex accounts of Asian American subjectivity and the de-problematization of the U.S. context, in favor of "universalized" images of Asian American experience that corroborate the American ideology of assimilation.

Conclusion

Given the considerable ideological influence over the nature and content of Asian American popular films, there seems to be very little latitude for Asian Americans themselves to actively take possession of their own representations in this arena. The rise of a vibrant independent Asian American film community in recent years has offered an alternative space for Asian American film artists[32] who want greater authority over self-representation. Hollywood studios, it seems, are all too content to prioritize the economic potential of films and are therefore quite willing, when presenting stories about Asian Americans, to diminish the "heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple" aspects of Asian American experiences in order to give (predominantly white) audiences comforting stories of inclusion and racial tolerance that affirm the messages of the dominant American ideology. Still, the oppositional moments that persist in Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and in Cronenberg's/ Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, show that it is possible to push the aesthetic and thematic limits of Asian American

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[32] See, for example, Peter Wang's *The Great Wall* (1985), Wayne Wang's *Dim Sum* (1985), Roddy Bogawa's *Some Divine Wind* (1991), and Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1995). As well, Peter Feng's article "In Search of Asian American Cinema" includes a filmography of contemporary titles.

representations in Hollywood films. Perhaps, then, through the combined work of both independent-based and Hollywood-based Asian American film artists we will see the cultivation of a popular audience that demands the industry produce films that challenge, rather than concede to, the dominant American ideology's treatment of Asian Americans.

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