

THE MADAME BUTTERFLY CONTROVERSY: CIO-CIO SAN'S GENDER, RACIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION IN ORIENTALIST METAPHYSICS

Hannah Kim

University of Utah

Introduction

Western representations of Asian femininity have often been misrepresented as inferior and cloaked in the mystery of sexual exoticism. The “Madame Butterfly” myth and the misrepresented gender identity of Asian and Asian American women are reinforced and perpetuated in and by creative art forms such as literature, film, television and theater. In particular, the perennial popularity of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* constantly resurrects the century-old Orientalist rendering of its protagonist, Cio-cio San – also known as Madame Butterfly. Since the enthusiastic reception of the opera after several revisions in the early twentieth century, it has remained a staple repertoire of opera companies all over the world. Its worldwide exposure has propagated misconstrued beliefs about Asian women and has blurred the lens through which they are perceived and therefore treated by modern-day society. In this essay I will explore the ramifications of such representations in Western culture, especially in America, and the Western conceptualization of the East by examining the cultural, racial and gender implications of *Madama Butterfly* from Asian American reflexive, postmodern feminist and musical perspectives.

Early Asian Immigration

It is widely known that Euro-American perception of Asians, specifically the Chinese, was heavily adulterated by Orientalism. Even before large-scale Chinese immigration to American soil in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘Yankee’ traders who arrived in China in the late eighteenth century observed and shared

similar sentiments. One trader described the Chinese as “the most vile, the most cowardly and submissive of slaves,”¹ demonstrating the ethnocentrism of their European heritage. The focus on the exotic and “strange and curious objects” was complemented by a featuring of vice—gambling and prostitution—as well as practices showing the “moral debasement” of the people, including idolatry, polygamy and infanticide.² This first impression of the Chinese undoubtedly contributed to the shaping of American racist attitudes and permeated the ethnocentric consciousness of Americans even before the first group of Chinese immigrants arrived.

Amidst such a racist climate, the first group of Chinese miners came to dig for gold at Sutter’s Mill in 1848.³ With their long queues, small stature and foreign outfits, Chinese men were viewed as exotic, effeminate and of inferior race. Elaborate ‘scientific’ explanations of nonwhite ‘inferiority’ and the belief that minorities should be kept in their place were widely accepted in the late nineteenth century, providing ideological justification for treating not only Asians but other people of color in a discriminatory and exploitative manner.⁴ By 1875, Congress passed the Page Act to prevent the entry of Chinese and Mongolian contract laborers and women who were thought to be economically vulnerable and might engage in prostitution.⁵ In this way, single women who were not attached to a family structure or to any means of financial support were rejected entry to the United States or were deported according to the dictates of the Likely to become a Public Charge (LPC) provision. The LPC provision was born from the idea that women are economically vulnerable and dependent on men. Single female immigrants were seen with the preconceived notion that they might engage in immoral behavior and escalate social problems.

Chinese women (and all Asian women by extension) were thus viewed as morally debased and hypersexual; their subsequent exclusion severely decreased their number in the United States. Also, anti-miscegenation laws, which forbade interracial marriage, were upheld by the US Supreme court in *Pace v. Alabama* in 1883, discouraging many Chinese men from permanently settling down.⁶

1 Min Song, *Asian American Studies: A Reader* (Fredericksburg: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 14.

2 Ibid., 15.

3 Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 2006), 9.

4 Song, *Asian American Studies*, 56.

5 *Page Act of 1875*, S, 43rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 141, daily ed. (March 3, 1875).

6 *Pace v. Alabama*, 106 S. Ct. 583 (1883).

Perception, Reception and Portrayal of Asian Women in American Theater, Film and Television

The earliest ‘Chinese’ theatrical works in America, written by Europeans and Americans, accentuate exoticism and the West’s Orientalist obsession. Americans were not interested in seeing Asia as it was but preferred to see Asia through the filter of mysterious, man-made Asia. The first appearance of Chineseness in American theater was Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* (1755), which was adapted into English by Arthur Murphy and opened at Philadelphia’s Southwark Theater on January 16, 1767.⁷ Asian characters were performed by Caucasian actors in yellowface to portray the exotic look that catered to the general fantasy of the audience. ‘Oriental’ exoticism always had more box-office appeal than the actual Asians and Asian immigrants in the United States.⁸ These productions gave absolute power and control to the Caucasian producers and performers to represent their disappointed notion of Asia and Asianness and conceptualize Asia according to their own fantasy.

Exotic othering also perpetuated the fascination with Asian subjects, especially women.

In 1834, for instance, a “Chinese Lady” named Afong Moy was put on display for public viewing at the American Museum in New York City. This actual person “performed” her Chineseness along with magicians, glassblowers, “Canadian dwarfs,” and other spectacles for the next three years at several locations. As James Moy notes, her “simple foreignness” was “deemed sufficient novelty to warrant her display.”⁹

Female Asian performers have been in existence since the earliest arrivals of immigrants. However, the majority of substantial roles were denied to them and they were forced to live with the stereotypes that were created by male Caucasians and perpetuated by female Caucasian performers in yellowface. Asian women were seen two-dimensionally: either as a submissive ‘lotus blossoms’ or fearsome ‘dragon ladies.’ These images began to receive increasing visibility and popularity with the emergence of Orientalist romantic melodramas at the turn of the century—*The Darling of the Gods* (1902), *Madame Butterfly*

7 Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 8.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Ibid., 9.

(1900) by David Belasco and *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) by J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton.¹⁰ While many Asian women were denied the opportunity to portray their own race, American-born Chinese actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) was able to forge a successful career in Hollywood. However, tired of always playing the same stereotypical character, she eventually left America to pursue a career in Europe in 1928.

Although there have been a few groundbreaking Asian American women roles on television and film, stereotypes still permeate Hollywood productions even a century later. Margaret Cho and the supporting actors in the sitcom *All American Girl* were directed to portray a stereotypical model minority, or exotically foreign (and therefore funny) characters despite their – and the Korean American community's – resistance. Kelly Hu played a 'dragon lady' stereotype in *Scorpion King* (2002), *X-men* (2003) and *Devil's Den* (2006); Lucy Liu played a similar type in *Shanghai Noon* (2000), *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003) and *Watching the Detectives* (2007). Furthermore, the Hollywood film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) perpetuates the Madame Butterfly stereotype of Asian women.

However, there have been some Asian American actresses who have been given opportunities to play roles that were not rife with racial stereotypes. *Joy Luck Club* (1993), based on Amy Tan's novel, was one of the first of its kind in that it gave a glimpse of the humanness of Asian American women facing the same dilemmas and quandaries as women of other races about marriage, children and career, but also introduced the unique complexity of the cultural identity of Asian American women with Chinese roots. Sandra Oh in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003) played the role of a lesbian friend of Diane Lane that could have been played by a person of any race. Oh also currently plays a doctor on *Grey's Anatomy* alongside African-American and Caucasian doctors. Yunjin Kim, in earlier seasons of *Lost*, was initially viewed as a submissive, silent and self-sacrificing 'lotus blossom' but eventually developed into a multi-dimensional character with much more complexity. However, despite the slowly-changing landscape, there are still works that insist on the old-fashioned portrayal of Asian women via the constant resurrection of older works that are imbued with an Orientalist narrative.

The Origin of *Madama Butterfly*

The term ‘Madame Butterfly myth’ originates from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. The story of Madame Butterfly was first introduced to the Western world through an autobiographical novel of Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). Although this novel was based on Loti’s own experience in Japan as a French businessman, much of it was told through the filter of his own biases and preconceived imagination of Japan. This approach served to enflame the European obsession with *japonisme* to engender and market the exotic identity of Asian women, fueling the fantasy of European men. American writer John Luther Long heard the tragic story of a young Japanese geisha and a European man from his sister, who lived in Japan for two years, which inspired him to write a short story called *Madame Butterfly* (1898). This short story, in turn, inspired the English David Belasco to write a play, *Madame Butterfly* (1900), which Giacomo Puccini saw in London. Puccini, like his predecessors, could not escape the attraction of envisioning Japan as an imagined place of exoticism. The libretto of Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904), written by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, was based on Long and Belasco’s works, which were already imbued with Orientalist ideas of the feminine, and inferior Japan, and the masculine, and imperialistic Pinkerton. Naturally, Puccini’s greatest contribution to Orientalism was his music.

Musical Orientalism

Although Puccini was interested in incorporating Japanese folk melodies into the music of *Madama Butterfly*, much of the music was imbedded with Oriental signifiers. It was not that Puccini did not know how to accurately portray Japanese people and culture musically, as he was not interested in going against the popular trend of *japonisme*. Edward Said advises that:

We need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do... is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors and *for* Europe, and only for Europe.¹¹

Oriental signifiers in music cross ethnic boundaries, as “musical Orientalism has

11 Derek B. Scott, “The Twentieth Century: Orientalism and Musical Style,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 309.

never been overly concerned with establishing distinction between Eastern cultures and an interchangeability of exotic signifiers proved to be commonplace.”¹²

Here is a list of Orientalist devices, many of which can be applied indiscriminately as markers of cultural difference: whole tones; Aeolian, dorian, but especially the Phrygian mode; augmented seconds, and fourths (especially with lydian or phrygian inflections); arabesques and ornamented lines; elaborate “ah!” melismas for voice; sliding or sinuous chromaticism (for example, snaking downward on cor anglais); trills and dissonant grace notes; rapid scale passages (especially of an irregular fit, e.g., eleven notes to be played in the time to two crotchets); a melody that suddenly shift to notes of shorter value; abrupt juxtapositions of romantic, lyrical tunes and busy, energetic passages; repetitive rhythms...and repetitive, small-compass melodies; ostinati; ad libitum sections (*colla parte*, *senza tempo*, etc.); use of triplets in duple time; complex or irregular rhythms; parallel movement in fourths, fifths, and octaves (especially in the woodwinds); bare fifths; drones and pedal points; “magic” or “mystic” chords (possessing uncertainty of duration and/or harmonic direction), harp arpeggios and glissandi...double reeds (oboe and especially cor anglais); percussion (especially tambourine, triangle, cymbals, and gong); and emphatic rhythmic figures on unpitched percussion (such as tom-toms, tambourine, and triangle).¹³

For the purpose of this essay, I will examine the musical Orientalism attached to the exposition and resolution of Cio-Cio San’s character and how they support or contradict the literary engendering of Butterfly as exotic, infantile and inferior.

The entrance of Cio-Cio San begins with the change of musical mood from chattery staccatos, tremolos and melodic preview of Cio-Cio San’s childish uttering to a paradisaical atmosphere with parallel octaves supported by tremolos in the strings. The chorus of women alternates between arpeggiated augmented triads and repeated pitches in sets of sixteenth notes to indicate their foreignness and the ‘prattling’ of the Japanese language. Over the chorus, Cio-Cio San also sings repeated pitches in sets of 16th notes but in a higher, and more elevated register since she is the bride of the day. After her initial part, Puccini gives her more lyrical phrases to alternate between her repeated pitches until she and the chorus come to a more solidly homophonic texture. This entrance of Japanese women and Cio-Cio San sounds clearly illusive, glamorous and dream-like.

12 Ibid., 321.

13 Ibid., 327.

Amidst the busy and cacophonous wedding prelude, Pinkerton and Cio-Cio San find some time alone before the ceremony begins. This scene is musically initiated by the repetition of the entrance theme of Cio-Cio San but with arpeggios by the harp instead of tremolos accompanying the melody. In their dialogue, Cio-Cio San's line is introduced by a fantastical glissando by the harp, followed by a melodic motive in octaves as if to remind the audience that Cio-Cio San is a delicate, fragile fantasy that could be found only in European-made Butterfly.

She is finally given the opportunity to show her 'things,' her dowry that she has been wanting to show him. She takes various objects from her sleeves: a silk handkerchief, a pipe, a belt, a buckle, a mirror and a fan. She displays them with great pride and attaches a sense of importance to each item as she shows them to Pinkerton. Puccini comments on the ludicrous tabulation of her 'dowry' by lowering the register of the accompaniment to denote Cio-Cio San's seriousness yet accompanies her with the voice of the bassoon, the clown of all instruments and giving it an air of childishness through the use of staccatos.

In an effort to level out the incompatibility of her and Pinkerton's cultures, Cio-Cio San tries to adjust her lifestyle to complement Pinkerton and America by denouncing her religion and adopting Christianity. Her confession of secretly visiting the Mission to Pinkerton is melodically outlined by a mysterious and foreign-sounding whole-tone scale that eventually settles in the key of A major—a key that is associated with Cio-Cio San's rejection of her heritage.

Now while the intent of Butterfly's act of renunciation is clearly different from that of Pinkerton—after all, Pinkerton's rejection of Butterfly is an act of selfish egotism, while Butterfly's renunciation of her own heritage is one of selfless sacrifice—the actions are in the end analogous, the common thread being the act of the renunciation and rejection of things Japanese. Thus A major is—even if in a slightly roundabout way—as much a negative tonal area for Butterfly as it is a positive one for Pinkerton.¹⁴

After being denounced by Uncle Bonzo, friends and relatives for rejecting her religion, Pinkerton consoles Cio-Cio San but gets distracted by her beauty. He compliments her on her fair skin and dark hair and Cio-Cio San responds with melodic motives in a whole-tone scale to describe herself as the frail goddess of moonlight—musical and literary Orientalism working hand-in-hand.

14 Allan Atlas, "Crossed Stars and Crossed Tonal Areas in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*," *19th Century Music*, 188.

The most famous and beloved aria of the opera, *Un bel di*—as musically heart-wrenching as it is—is sung and accompanied with one-dimensional simplicity. Cio-Cio San sings of her devotion to Pinkerton with unbelievable and almost robotic faithfulness. The myth of Asian women’s blind faithfulness is realized by the manipulation of the musical subtext—the accompaniment that follows Cio-Cio San’s melody verbatim in open octaves for almost the entire aria renders the sound foreign and exotic.

One piece that is devoid of Oriental signifier is Cio-Cio San’s suicide aria. Whether it was to punch Cio-Cio San’s dramatic moment with the stark scarcity of the accompaniment or give her a break from being displayed as a product of *japonisme*, Puccini allows Cio-Cio San to sing, to have a voice without musical commentary. Perhaps, his logic was that the devastation of giving up a husband and child doesn’t need to be supplemented by an accompaniment. Puccini renders the beginning of this aria more universally human than Japanese as he refuses to comment with any Oriental signifiers. Perhaps, this is what appeals to the audience, especially the female—the relatability of motherhood and abandonment. At least in this moment, the musical boundaries give way and the silent accompaniment embraces Cio-Cio San not as Japanese, but as human. But eventually, musical commentaries come back informing us that although she’s human, she is ultimately Japanese.

Conclusion: Microcosmic view of Orientalism vs. macrocosmic reaction to the music

Miura Tamaki, the first ‘original’ Japanese Butterfly wrote in *Sekai no Opera* (The Opera of the World) about the incongruence between reality and Puccini’s representation and the operation of *Madama Butterfly* within the world of Orientalism: “Seen from our Japanese eyes, the Japanese culture and customs that appear in this opera are not merely extremely strange but rather infuriating. However, judging in terms of its musical value, it seems understandable that the piece received unprecedented acclaim in Europe and America.”¹⁵

If Asians and Asian Americans have a problem with the production of *Madama Butterfly*, it is because of the perpetration of Butterfly myth and misrepresentation of Asian culture that Asian American activists have fought so hard to eliminate. However, *Madama Butterfly*’s enduring popularity isn’t found in American imperialistic beliefs or in the acceptance of Japan and Japa-

15 Mari Yoshihara, “The Flight of the Japanese Butterfly: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Performances of Japanese Womanhood,” *American Quarterly*, 982.

nese women as inferior. The moral of the story is not to congratulate American imperialism and reduce Japan as a helpless feminine victim. It is the opposite. Its perennial popularity is found in the ability of Cio-Cio San's music to manipulate the emotions of the audience. In this operatic context, the character of Cio-Cio San could be seen as the one who holds the scepter of authority as the most powerful manipulator—the person who gets the last laugh.

However, if one is heavily invested in the Orientalist narrative, the music might not speak as loudly or if it does, it may be regarded as an alibi for perpetuating the myth. Even for those who are not too invested, the question remains: is the music convincing and powerful enough to deconstruct the Butterfly myth or does the music camouflage the Orientalist narrative to deny the allegation made against it? Is Cio-Cio San a triumphant heroine or just another 'lotus blossom' with musical wings? Are we at a place distant enough from racial discrimination and preconceived gender construction that we are able to look at *Madama Butterfly* from a reflexive perspective and see it as a historical exhibit without perpetrating the myth? The answer is complicated and one that warrants a critical as well as visceral analysis.

PEAR