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# **A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS BY DAVID HENRY HWANG**

Dissertation Submitted by  
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*Under the Supervision of*  
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جامعة عين شمس  
كلية الآداب  
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها

## دراسة لمسرحيات مختارة من أعمال ديفيد هنري هوانج

رسالة مقدمة من  
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## List of Abbreviations

<i>FOB "Fresh off the Boat"</i>	FOB
<i>The Dance and the Railroad</i>	D.R
<i>Family Devotions</i>	F.D
<i>M. Butterfly</i>	M.B
<i>Golden Child</i>	G.C.
<i>Trying to Find Chinatown</i>	T.F.C
<i>The Chickencoop Chinaman</i>	C.C
<i>The Year of the Dragon</i>	Y.D.
<i>The Glass Menagerie</i>	G.M.
<i>The Buried Child</i>	B.C.



## Preface

Hwang has been chosen as the subject of this dissertation because his dramatic work as a Chinese American is marked by a quest for identity, conflicting with the mainstream white community. Not much has been written about this particular aspect of his work. He himself grew up without considering that his Chinese roots had any particular significance. However, his ethnic consciousness came to the foreground when he was a student at Stanford University. His encounter with Asian American well-known figures, such as Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, aroused in him the desire to search for his ethnic roots. He started writing dramas, while he was an undergraduate. In 1978, he wrote the play, *FOB* "Fresh Off the Boat", which was performed at his dormitory in Stanford and achieved great success at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center.

After the success of *FOB*, Hwang's work mostly centered on the experiences of Chinese immigrants in American society, as in *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), and *Family Devotions* (1981). He saw that many Asian Americans confronted the notion of being perpetual foreigners, although they might have been US citizens for

many generations. They felt that they were not accepted as fully American.

With the help of Sam Shepard, Hwang attempted to create a Chinese mythology, after delving deep into both Chinese history and Chinese American history. Playwriting was a clear-cut motivation for him to think about the Chinese American experience, explore his own identity as a Chinese American, and also deal with other concerns such as racism, imperialism and sexism.

This study consists of five chapters, and is followed by a bibliography of the works consulted.

Chapter I, "The Background", gives a brief account of David Henry Hwang's life and career, showing how these have affected his playwriting. It also considers "The Historical, Social and Cultural Scene", giving a bird's eye-view of the various stages of the development of Chinese American literature.

Chapter II, "Assimilation and Preservation of Traditional Culture and Ethnic Identity", provides a close examination of Hwang's two plays, *FOB* and *The Dance and the Railroad*. In *FOB*, Hwang shows how the assimilated American-born Chinese suffer a dual identity.

This is revealed through the play's protagonist. He is not accepted by the mainstream community, and at the same time he denies his ethnic roots and attacks his China-born counterpart. The protagonist and his counterpart represent the Asian American culture clash. *The Dance and the Railroad* reflects the racism Chinese immigrants are faced with, despite their heroic efforts in the construction of the transcontinental railroads. This chapter also explores Hwang's use of figures from Chinese mythology and the Chinese Opera in his dramatic presentations.

Chapter III, "Smashing Stereotypes of Asians", shows Hwang's attempt to smash the racial stereotypes associated with the Asian woman in the Western mind through his play *M. Butterfly* (1997), where the victim unexpectedly, is the Western man not the Oriental woman.

Chapter IV, "The Myth of Family History", demonstrates how Hwang draws on his own family history, showing how the interaction between the Western community and the Chinese community has led to many recent changes within the Chinese community, such as the desertion of ancestor worship and conversion to Christianity, and the resulting clash as depicted in his play, *Golden Child* (1995). It also discusses how some

assimilated Chinese Americans are fond of going back in life to their ethnic roots, attempting to create a balance between their assimilation and their ethnicity, while others are not. This is examined in the two plays, *Family Devotions* (1981) and *Trying to Find Chinatown* (1996).

On the technical level, each chapter considers the particular devices Hwang has used in the plays under discussion. These devices include flashback, tragedy, comedy, contrast, the technical shadow/double, and suspense.

Chapter V, the Conclusion, considers Hwang's achievement in his analysis of the Chinese American experience. It also examines how he has contributed greatly in the field of drama by his dramatic skill, which is still in progress.