

**The Chinese-Japanese Theatrical Traditions in
David Henry Hwang's Plays: The Dance and the
Railroad, M.Butterfly and Golden Child**

An M.A Thesis

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

"-- سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ"

صدق الله العظيم

(من الآية ٣٢ من سورة البقرة)

Abstract

The objective of this thesis, which falls into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, is to trace and investigate the Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions and techniques of the Chinese 'Zaju' and 'Beijing Opera' dramatic forms and the Japanese 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' classical theatres in three plays by the contemporary Chinese-American dramatist David Henry Hwang: The Dance and the Railroad (1981), M.Butterfly (1988) and Golden Child (1997). Besides, the thesis probes the main themes tackled by Hwang in the three plays: portraying the predicament of the Chinese immigrants in America and the acts of violence, oppression and racial discrimination they encountered; the clash between the East and the West, and Western religious and cultural imperialism in China in 1920s.

Moreover, the thesis investigates Hwang's attempt to 'de-construct' the Western Orientalist discourse which has presented a stereotyped and distorted image of Asians as weak, foolish, inferior, and depraved. It examines his enterprise to re-draw the true Asian image in the Western thought by exploring the origins of Asian culture. Hwang's commitment to Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions in his plays, then, reflects his endeavor to restore the Oriental cultural heritage and to construct a national identity for Asians in America. Accordingly, the thesis analyzes Hwang's plays from a 'post-colonial' perspective.

CHAPTER ONE scrutinizes and maps out the Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions and techniques of the Chinese 'Zaju' and 'Beijing Opera' and the Japanese 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' classical theatres in view of the elements of drama: Thought, Characters, Action, Diction, Spectacle and Melody. Chapters TWO, THREE and FOUR are dedicated to the exploration of these traditions and techniques in Hwang's plays: The Dance and the Railroad, M.Butterfly and Golden Child from a post-colonial standpoint. The conclusion presents the findings of the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

As a playwright drawing upon his heritage for his literary and aesthetic contributions, he joins the likes of other California-bred authors -- Luis Valdez and William Saroyan among others -- who likewise established international followings without sacrificing their ethnic integrity or their inborn cultural values. As a pure talent of theatre, Hwang has joined the elite of his craft. (Street 15)

The purpose of this thesis, which falls into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, is to trace and investigate the Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions and techniques of the Chinese 'Zaju' and 'Beijing Opera' dramatic forms and the Japanese 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' classical theatres in three plays by the contemporary Chinese-American dramatist David Henry Hwang: The Dance and the Railroad (1981), M.Butterfly (1988) and Golden Child (1997). Besides, the thesis investigates Hwang's attempt to 'de-construct' the Western Orientalist discourse which has presented a stereotyped and distorted image of Asians as submissive, foolish, inferior, and depraved. The study examines Hwang's enterprise to re-draw the true Asian image in the Western thought by exploring the origins of Asian culture and his endeavor to restore the Oriental cultural heritage and to construct a national identity for Asians in America. Accordingly, the thesis analyzes Hwang's plays from a 'post-colonial' perspective.

David Henry Hwang (pronounced 'Wong' and born in 1957) is a Chinese-American dramatist who has been described as "the first playwright to depict identity, culture, and history of Chinese Americans in mainstream American theater" (Argetsinger, "Hwang" 508). Misha Berson also maintains that in 1989 Hwang "became the first Asian American playwright to win a Tony Award, the prestigious honour bestowed for achievements in Broadway Theater" ("Fighting" 251). In addition, Hwang received many other awards like the Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, John Gassner Award and the L.A Drama Critics Circle Award. Besides, in his online article "Playwright Hwang Speaks on Asian

Issues" Kathryn Tong confirms that Hwang "has received international acclaim and recognition as one of America's foremost playwrights. He has also come to be known as the official Asian playwright and is often called upon to represent the views of all Asian Americans" (1).

Being an Asian American and belonging to the minorities in America, Hwang strives, from the beginning of his career, to de-construct the Western Orientalist discourse which, as Edward Said asserts in Orientalism, depends for its strategy on the "flexible positional superiority, which puts the West in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7). That Orientalist discourse has offered a counterfeit distorted representation of the Orient or Asia and the Orientals that have become the antithesis by which the West and the Westerners can define themselves: "The Orient and the Oriental, Arabic, Islamic, Indian, Chinese or whatever, became repetitious pseudo-incarnations of great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating" (Said, Orientalism 62). Thus, a division has been created between Asians as 'inferior', 'periphery', 'depraved' and 'different' on the one hand and Europeans as 'superior', 'centre', 'moral' and 'normal' on the other hand.

In their introduction to Reading the Literatures of Asian America, Lim and Ling point out the distorted image of Asians in the Euro-American consciousness emphasizing that "Euro-American images of Asians in the United States were frequently degrading, racist or ignorant – influenced by fear, xenophobia and economic competition" (5). Besides, Lisa Lowe in On Asian American Cultural Politics: Immigrant Acts (1996), adds a further insight: "The Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the 'foreigner within' [...] the American of Asian descent remains the symbolic 'alien', the metonym for Asia who by definition can not be imagined as sharing in America" (5).

The Western biased attitude has also extended to Asian theatre which has been exposed, for so many centuries, to scorn and severe attack by Western playwrights, critics and scholars who adhere to the same ethnocentric myopic presuppositions that "Western artistic principles were simply assumed to be superior" (Brandon, "New World" 33). Despite the

richness of Asian theatre whose "forms and acting techniques have had a growing influence on many Western theatres and theatre artists" (Arnold 363) and whose traditions have been described as being "ancient, highly developed and beyond imagining in their diversity" (Brandon, Cambridge 1), it was scorned and perceived by those prejudiced Western theatre professionals as the "distant Other" (Brandon, "New World" 29).

To Hwang, this Euro-American stereotyping of Asians and of their theatrical heritage has "originated from the Western Orientalism which – inventing the Orient as its Other in order to consolidate the self – was part of the European global conquest and colonization" (Knip 45). Lisa Lowe also adds that the American prejudice towards the East has been obvious because "Asia has emerged as a particularly complicated 'double front' of threat and encroachment for the United States" (5).

Consequently, Hwang, who is completely aware of the Western ethnocentrism and partiality, strives to defy the fake distorted stereotyped perceptions adopted by the West towards the East. He struggles to 'destabilize' the Western Orientalist discourse. He tries hard to 'deconstruct' the cultural clichés and to look beyond the push-pull relationship between Europe and Asia. He tries to 'subvert' the bigoted Western assumptions. He tries to re-draw the Asian image in the Western thought by resorting to the roots and the foundations of Oriental culture that has been deformed by imperialism. In "Hwang's Heritage Reaffirms Writing Style", Mark Blankenship sustains that Hwang's "disdain for such stereotypes rested in the fact that 'poor writing created them' [...] He wanted to depict them in both their original and American cultures with an authentic, innovative voice" (1).

As long as post-colonial theory is concerned with "migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe" (Ashcroft, Post-colonial Reader 2), Hwang's plays, then, can be studied from a post-colonial perspective. In his own article "Worlds Apart", he admits:

I had simply wanted to be a playwright. But as I began to let my unconscious take over, surprisingly concerns began to emerge from my pen – East/West conflict, cultural fusion, immigration, assimilation. I hadn't thought these issues mattered to me. I thought I was simply a kid who happened to have Chinese parents. It was writing that taught me otherwise, that revealed me to myself. Its voice was my voice. (50)

As long as post-colonial writers endeavor to re-draw the boundaries between the centre/margin, the oppressor/oppressed and colonizer/colonized, subsequently, Hwang is considered a post-colonial dramatist who tries to demolish the stereotyped Western assumptions and construct new lines of thought that try to re-evaluate the relation between the East and the West. In an interview, he admits: "Writing for me tends to be closely bound up in the exploration of my identity as an Asian American" (Kolin 289). In addition, in his introduction to his play The Dance and the Railroad, he reflects on the issue of ethnicity:

By confronting our ethnicity, we are simply confronting the roots of our humanity. The denial of this truth creates a bizarre world, cut from the past and alienated from the present, where cosmetic surgeons offer to un-slant Asian eyes and makeup artists work to slant the eyes of Peter Ustinov, 1981's Charlie Chan. (7)

The plays of Hwang, then, reflect the "evolving self-image and consciousness of a misunderstood and increasingly significant racial minority group" (Kim, "Asian American" 811). Edith Oliver also sustains that the underlying theme of Hwang's plays, from the beginning of his career, has been "the elusive, enduring power of the Asian spirit vis-à-vis the West" (72). In addition, Misha Berson asserts that Hwang and his generation were the "first to dramatize this Asian American participation, and chart its reverberant implications" ("Fighting" 251). Berson adds that Hwang and his generation have used theatre as a medium of personal and political discourse to reflect on issues of the relationship between them and the American West:

Hwang and some others used it [theatre] as a major conduit for information, insights and questions about historical facets of the American West – facets long ignored in the mainstream stage literature, but ripe for vivid dramatization. Essentially, Asian American playwrighting was born in the American West, and unsurprisingly, many of its recurring themes and motifs reflect dimensions of the Western experience. (252)

Moreover, in Reading Asian American Literature: from Necessity to Extravagance, Sau-ling Wong confirms that Asian Americans do share some similarities with Native Americans and African Americans such as "dislocation, poverty, prejudice as well as conflicts between the first and second generations" (43). However, what distinguishes Asian Americans from the minority groups is that they are the "unassimilable alien"(6) and that they have their "outlandish, overripe Oriental cultures" (6). For that reason, Qun Wong assures that "indeed, to recognize the dialogic richness of Asian American literature is to understand tradition's hegemonic impulse" (120).

Hwang and Asian Americans dramatists, hence, "reject assimilation into what they view as a sterile and spiritually bankrupt white American mainstream that demands nothing less than denial of one's ancestry and heritage" (Kim, "Asian American" 820). Thus, he detests melting in the American melting pot and strives to tell the Asian American story from his own perspective and to restore "the foundations of a culture that has been damaged or denied by racism" (Kim, "Asian American" 816). Besides, Lim and Ling posit the difference between the literary traditions of Euro-American and Asian-American literatures:

The difference in founding myths already predicts differences in literary traditions between Euro-American and Asian American literatures: differences in the kinds of ideals, controlling metaphors, conditions for discourses, and imagined worlds that produce and are presented in novels, short stories, poems, plays and other cultural forms. (5)

Accordingly, Hwang's adherence to the Chinese theatrical traditions of 'Zaju' and 'Beijing Opera' and the techniques of the Japanese 'Noh' and

'Kabuki' theatres in most of his plays is an attempt to restore the foundations of Asian theatrical legacy and to regain appreciation for Oriental cultural heritage. In The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin maintain that "in the early period of post-colonial writing, many writers were forced into the search for alternative authenticity which seemed to be escaping them" (41). Therefore, Hwang endeavors to authenticate his works by exploring his Chinese and Asian tradition.

In an interview with Savran, Hwang confirms his obsession with his Chinese heritage: "For me, it's really the impulse to reclaim my heritage. It's scary not to have a sense of past because it implies not having a sense of future" (127). In addition, he asserts, in another interview, that "there is a desire to reach back for some thing that feels secure, that has the weight of tradition and inertia behind it [...] somehow traditional values are supposed to save us" (Bryer 137). Moreover, in his own article "Evolving a Multi-cultural tradition", he admits that his most popular plays are those that reek of the Orient or Asia: "I began to wonder first of all if I was sort of creating Orientalia for the intelligentsia. I looked at my plays and some I liked and some I didn't. But the ones that seemed to be the most popular were the ones that had Oriental things in them like gongs and dragons" (16).

In consequence, the Chinese-Japanese theatrical themes and traditions are apparent in most of his plays. There are religious themes concerning Confucianism and supernatural themes of ghosts, demons, spirits and magic. There are also social themes about Chinese traditional marriage, polygamy and filial piety. The characters are portrayed through Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions like 'Role Category', 'Double Transformation' and 'Onnagata' traditions. The action of Hwang's plays is progressed through either the 'progress-in-the-present technique' (genzai-shinko-ho) of the Japanese phenomenal Noh or through the 'reflection-in-vision technique' (mugen-kaiso-ho) of the Phantasmal Noh theatre. Moreover, Chinese-Japanese props, costumes, makeup, music, singing, dancing, ritual gestures, mime, choreographed movements and acrobatics are all basic constituents in most of Hwang's plays.

Hwang, then, by adopting Chinese-Japanese themes and theatrical traditions, strives to explore the Chinese heritage and create authenticity for his works. He and his contemporary Chinese American writers have a dual burden on their shoulders that is, "subverting an American Orientalist discourse based on their cultural oppression and reconstructing a Chinese American tradition that would mark their cultural liberation" (Lim 323). In Voices of Multicultural America: Notable speeches Delivered by African, Asian, Hispanic and Native Americans 1790 1995, Hwang admits his obsession with the question of creating authenticity in his works by resorting to the Chinese theatrical tradition:

Clearly, I was trying to search for something authentic beyond the stereotypes. And I was searching out to a Chinese American literature as well as a root-culture Chinese tradition, and through this I thought I was touching something authentic. The question of authenticity continues to haunt me. For instance, the use of Chinese opera in my work – what is the significance of the Chinese opera in my life? I hadn't actually grown up with a lot of Chinese opera. It was something that I kind of appropriated as a cultural symbol. (Straub 573-74)

Accordingly, the core of this thesis is to probe the Chinese-Japanese theatrical themes, traditions and techniques of the Chinese 'Zaju' and 'Beijing Opera' dramatic forms and the Japanese 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' theatres in Hwang's plays: The Dance and the Railroad (1981), M.Butterfly (1988) and Golden Child (1997) and examines, from a post-colonial perspective, to what extent the influence of these traditions is existing in the three plays. The study examines these Chinese-Japanese theatrical themes, techniques and traditions through an integrated and an unprecedented analysis that balances 'Content' and 'Form'. This kind of analysis has been requisite due to the nature of the Chinese-Japanese theatrical experience which takes into full account all the elements of drama concerning 'Content': Thought, Characters, Action, and those of 'Form': Diction, Spectacle (Locale, Props, Costumes, Make-up, Masks, Lighting, Mime, Stylized Movement, Gestures and Acrobatics) and Melody (Music,

Singing, Dancing). Therefore, the analysis of 'Spectacle' and 'Melody' has required depending on the stage directions, Hwang's introductions and notes to the three plays, his interviews, and the critical reviews and articles written about his plays.

CHAPTER ONE, entitled "The Chinese-Japanese Theatrical Traditions", explores and maps out the Chinese-Japanese theatrical traditions through the elements of drama. It starts with tracing the beginnings of the Chinese and the Japanese theatres illustrating the most popular theatrical forms of both countries and explaining how these theatres, by balancing content and form, have preceded the modern and post-modern Western theories of drama towards the concept of 'total theatre'. The chapter then explores and investigates, in detail, the themes and the theatrical techniques and traditions of Zaju, Beijing Opera, Noh and Kabuki theatres in view of the elements of drama.

CHAPTER TWO explores the themes and the theatrical traditions and techniques of Zaju, Beijing Opera, Noh and Kabuki theatres in Hwang's play The Dance and the Railroad (1981) which won Guernsey's Best Play of 1981-82 and received Drama Desk nomination. This play is an examination of the Chinese immigrant identity. Set in 1867 during a transcontinental railroad strike, the play dramatizes the predicament of the Chinese railroad workers and the acts of oppression and racial discrimination they encountered. It presents two 'coolie' Chinese labourers: Lone, a two-year veteran, who uses the dance techniques of the Chinese opera as a means of finding dignity and control in a world filled with dead and enslaved men, and Ma; a newly arrived optimist. Becoming Lone's apprentice, Ma aspires to play Gwan Gung, the Chinese warrior god, for the labourers below. With the victory of the Chinese labourers' strike, Lone declares near the end of the play: "We forced the white devil to act civilized" (V, 38). Ma and Lone improvise a Chinese mock-Opera, to celebrate the victory of the Chinese workers in their strike, about Ma as a Chinese immigrant to the Gold Mountain in America.

The play, thus, through presenting assertive Chinese characters -- who

refuse to be held in a system that seeks to exploit their bodies and turn them into mere nameless marginalized workers -- offers a counter account to the Orientalist discourse that has described them as submissive, inferior and passive. Besides, through the solidarity that arise between the characters, it struggles to achieve a national identity for the Chinese in America. Moreover, the play, by implementing Chinese-Japanese dramatic traditions, confirms Hwang's commitment to his Chinese theatrical heritage and his endeavor to put it in the 'centre'. Therefore, the play is studied from a post-colonial perspective.

CHAPTER THREE is dedicated to analyzing Hwang's play M.Butterfly (1988) in which he strives to de-construct the counterfeit stereotyped image that the West adopts towards the East. The play is based on a real story published in newspapers in 1986 about a French diplomat (Rene' Bouriscot) who carried a twenty-year affair with a Chinese actor and opera singer (Shi Peipu), not realizing that his partner was in fact a man masquerading as a woman. The diplomat apparently became aware of the deception only in 1986, when he was charged by the French government with treason -- it transpired that his companion had been a spy for the Chinese government, and had passed on sensitive political information that had been acquired from the diplomat. This real story stimulated Hwang's imagination and from it, he created a drama that highlights the deformed perceptions that the West adopts towards the East.

Weaving into the play many parallels with, and ultimately ironic reversals of Puccini's opera Madama Butterfly (in which a Japanese woman commits suicide due to the abandonment of her Western lover), Hwang -- from a post-colonial stance -- explores the stereotypes that underlie and distort the relations between Eastern and Western cultures. Gallimard tells Toulon that "the Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power" (II, iii, 2846). In addition, Hwang takes Puccini's opera as an analogous to his play to expose the political, intellectual and sexual dimensions that epitomize the relationship between the East and the West, in the light of the eternal myth of male superiority and female submissiveness. The diva, during the trial, explains to the judge