

Variations in Image, Gender, and Power: A Study of *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* from the Perspective of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature

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Abstract

The famous Italian composer Giacomo Puccini wrote the opera *Madama Butterfly* in 1904, which is widely circulated today. *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang which is embedded in the former is a variation of *Madame Butterfly*, full of political metaphors. This paper uses the theory of variation to analyze the “Butterfly image” in the eyes of Westerners as “otherness”, discusses how and why the changes between the two, and reveals the hidden sexism and Western-centrism.

Keywords

The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, image, Orientalism.

1. Introduction

Italian composer Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* is one of the Oriental plays that has been frequently performed since its premiere at La Scala in Milan in 1903. The drama takes the trans-oceanic love between an American officer and a Japanese woman as the main line, reflecting the virtue of tenderness and loyalty of Oriental women. But this East-west affair has gender and cultural metaphors. The opera is politically colored by the antagonism between the young girl Cio-Cio-San, who is seen as a symbol of the female East and the weakening of the East, and the white man Pinkerton, who is seen as the conqueror of the East. Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang realized that the deliberate Orientalization on the American stage would have a negative impact on Asians with related cultural backgrounds. In this regard, he focused on the gender politics, stereotyped images and power discourse in *Madame Butterfly*, and created *M. Butterfly* (1986), which has the meaning of variation. *M. Butterfly* is a representative work of Chinese American literature. It subverts the implicit gender relations and East-West relations in Italian writer Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*.

The theory of variation in comparative literature was formally proposed by Professor Cao Shunqing in 2005 in *Comparative Literature*, and he published his English monograph, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* in 2013. As an original international theoretical discourse proposed by a Chinese scholar, comparative literature variation has aroused great repercussions worldwide in the past two decades, which has made great contributions to the construction of Chinese discourse system and the promotion of international discourse power. This paper will analyze the “Oriental image” as “Otherness” in the eyes of Westerners from the angle of Variation, and reveal its fictionality and hidden sexism and Western-centrism.

2. Who is the Butterfly?

Madame Butterfly has shaped a kind of literary image of butterfly. The story takes place around 1900 in Nagasaki, Japan. An American Navy officer Pinkerton rents a house in Japan, in preparation for his marriage to a Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio-San. He is not serious about the

marriage, just for fun, while Madame Butterfly falls deeply in love with him and gives up her faith and family for him. The two spent a short, sweet time in the house. However later, Pinkerton had left Japan and returned to the United States without contacting Madame Butterfly again. During these three years, she remained faithful and waited for his return, and raised a son they had. She rejected proposals from other admirers and believed that Pinkerton would return to her in the spring. One day, she received a letter from Sharpless, American Ambassador to Nagasaki, telling her that Pinkerton was married and intended to come with his new wife to pick up the children. She is shocked and desperate, but decides to give the baby to Pinkerton to prove her love for him. Pinkerton and his new wife Kate arrive at the house to find that Madame Butterfly has committed suicide. She stabbed herself through the heart with a knife, and Pinkerton, distraught, called her name. In this opera, Puccini portrays Eastern women from a Western perspective, giving Cio-Cio-San the stereotype that she can give up her faith and even her life for Western men. The self-destruction of the ever-faithful, ever-feminine butterfly underscores the male dominance of the white man. The image of Cio-Cio-San feeds the white man's fantasy of self-actualization. "No matter out of what kind of motive and desire and no matter having shaped what kind of foreign image, a writer of a country considers a foreign country as "otherness," which is a mirror to reflect the "self". Therefore, the analysis of "otherness" is actually a way to inspect, discover, construct, and complete oneself." [1] Thus, the stereotype of Butterfly caters to Western tastes, which mirrors Western men's imagination about Eastern women. Western men have the absolute right to speak and tease Eastern women at will. In this sense, the more obedient and loyal, the more popular the image of Butterfly becomes.

But the real Madame Butterfly in David Henry Hwang's work, *M. Butterfly*, is a Western man. As Pinkerton, French diplomat Gallimard, after seeing the opera *Madame Butterfly*, was fascinated by a Chinese actress, named Song Liling, who played the role of Cio-Cio-San. The opera shows submissive Eastern women sacrificing for cruel Western men, and at the same time awakens Gallimard's longing. In Act One, Scene 5, Gallimard said that "we deserve a Butterfly. She arrives with all her possessions in the folds of her sleeves, lays them all out, for her man to do with as he pleases. Even her life itself..." [2] Gallimard, as a western male,]longed for a woman who loves him and is willing to die for him. In addition, we can see it seems like every western man wants a Butterfly. Therefore, emotionally, Gallimard hopes that Song Liling is like the Cio-Cio-San in the opera: obedient and loyal until death, which also reflects his or western male subjective imagination of Eastern women. From Song Liling's perspective, *Madame Butterfly* is not moving at all, but contains Western arrogant assumptions. When they later have intimate contact, Song Liling deliberately misleads Gallimard about Eastern sexual habits. She perceives his fantasy of a Butterfly and cunningly takes on the guise of a woman, embodying a delicate and docile Butterfly persona. This Butterfly presents Gallimard with the opportunity to become a Pinkerton worthy of such a creature. Seizing this opportunity, Gallimard falls deeply in love with his Butterfly, never realizing the true nature of the person he adores. Song began the construction of Oriental, which seems to be real or invariable, running through all the contacts between Song and Gallimard, completely in line with the western imagination. For example, Song pretend to be conservative and act like a traditional Eastern woman. When Gallimard sent her home, she asked Gallimard stop at the door. She didn't unceremoniously invite him to go to her home to have sex, which fits with the behavior of Eastern women.

She pretended to be the traditional, reserved, unworldly figure of an Eastern woman. Gallimard was invited to the apartment by Song Liling, who said he was worried that the act would cause gossip, as being alone in a room late at night has long been frowned upon in Eastern culture. So she added "Monsieur Gallimard, I'm a Chinese girl. I've never...never invited a man up to my flat before. The forwardness of my actions makes my skin burn." [3] These actions made Gallimard even more convinced him that Song Liling was the shy and weak woman image he had expected.

What's more, She also creates the image of being desperate for love and losing reason like Butterfly. Gallimard deliberately snubbed Song to see if Song would be as afraid as Cio-Cio-San whether Western men would abandon her, she would be willing to pay her life for him. And Song Liling seized on this, pretending that she had lost her self and dignity for love. And Song seized on this, pretending that she had lost herself and dignity for love. In their relationship, Galima seems to be the dominant figure. Gallimard bluntly can not marry Song Liling as his wife, but Song Liling pretends to express her opinion that the wife's title is not important, her career is not important and she can sacrifice everything for love. Unlike Western women, Song never violates Gallimard, nor does she get angry with him, as if Song is used to being humble, and silent, so that Gallimard is completely lost. Then she feigns to be drawn into Gallimard's trap to be caught, writing to him "I have already given you my shame.[4]" Gallimard thought that Song's former behavior is to play hard-to-get game, and at last he won. He had found his butterfly and got it. He firmly believed that Song had fallen in love with him completely. But in fact all it was Song's disguise. She successfully releases the charm and becomes Gallimard's Butterfly, and she needs to continue to pretend to be a submissive and devoted Butterfly.

She should always exhibit her submission, because She had to report to the organization information he received from Gallimard about the American attitude toward Vietnam and the war. The relationship between the two seems to be that Song follows Gallimard in everything. but in fact, Song has the initiative. She tapped into preconceived notions of Orientalism, When it came to having sex, Song always dominated from beginning to end. In the two people get along always with Tang dress which not only covers her physical sexual characteristics, but also shows the Oriental female classical character characteristics. In Scene1, Act Three, later in the courtroom, Song Liling reveals there are two rules to follow in order to make Gallimard think he is a woman. "Rule one is: Men always believe what they want to hear...Rule Two: As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East---he's already confused[5]." Song Liling, a man of Eastern descent, is acutely aware of the West's imperialistic mindset, which he exploits by impersonating a woman, fulfilling a long-held Western fantasy. His understanding and ability to convincingly portray femininity play a crucial role in his strategy.

Gallimard is the most romantic fool, eager to permanently possess his own Cio-Cio-San like Pinkerton, so Song put on "her" own bathrobe that is like layers of hazy default, staged their special *Madame Butterfly*, and together complete a unconditional dedication to one party at the expense of life love fantasy. The deeper Gallimard indulges, the more he becomes a real Butterfly. When Song Liling in a suit stood in court and told everything with a man's voice line, Gallimard's heart began to disintegrate, and what he fell in love with was the phantom he constructed. In the despair of disillusionment, he became the Madame Butterfly in the previous story, in prison, while smearing himself with oil, dressing in a kimono and a wig like Cio-Cio-San, talking, longing, and using a mirror to end his life.

3. How Have Such Variation Happened?

Since images are involved, variations are inevitable. As mentioned above, *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* both narratives feature a compliant Asian female and a dominant European male, symbolizing the dynamic of power that is often associated with the dichotomy of the feminine/Eastern and the masculine/Western. It will be figured out the resemblance between *M. Butterfly* and *Madame Butterfly*, pointing out the variation of gender, butterfly image and power in the two plays.

3.1. Variation of Gender

The Oriental women have been materialized as Butterflies by the Westerners. Both *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* deal with power dynamics and the shaping of gender roles between Eastern and Western cultures. *Madame Butterfly* more embodies the colonial perspective of the

West to the East and gender inequality, while *M. Butterfly* criticizes and changes these traditional concepts through the reversal of gender roles and the discussion of cultural identity. The latter attempts to break the inherent boundaries of gender and culture, and proposes a profound reflection on gender equality and cultural diversity. The American gentleman's one-night fling made the Oriental woman give love, family and even life wholeheartedly. This lofty, self-righteous heroism complex was regarded as an epic, roaring romance, ignorant and ridiculous. With the awakening of female consciousness, Western women have become independent, confident and calm. Under the influence of patriarchal consciousness, men's attitude towards such women is rejection. Therefore Western men are more likely to despise Oriental women. Men's psychological desire to conquer women and dominate women has been verified again and again by the work. *Madame Butterfly* reveals that male writers still want women to be subordinate and under their control.

However, In *M. Butterfly*, "Butterfly" was male, Gallimard himself dressed as Cio-Cio-San and committed suicide in prison under the watchful eyes of the public. In the end of the drama, Gallimard said "and i have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris.[6]" He died as a woman. Furthermore, Gallimard has realized that Song is the processed Song Liling after his fantasy, the Oriental woman he loves, is the "otherness" in his eyes. In fact, he is the "otherness" in Song Liling's eyes, and Song has been controlling him in the name of love, letting him provide China with military intelligence about the United States in the Vietnam War. Excessive fantasy is futile. After awakening, Gallimard finally realized that he shares a similar fate with Cio-Cio-San. He, as a western man, has become the "Madame Butterfly" in Western culture.

Interestingly, the title of the play, *M. Butterfly*, also hints at Hwang's intention to subvert the stereotype of the butterfly. Initially, Hwang named the play *Monsieur Butterfly*, which is easily reminiscent of *Madame Butterfly*, who is considered a copycat. So, at his wife's suggestion, Hwang replaced *Monsieur Butterfly* with *M. Butterfly*. As mentioned in the afterwords in the play: "My wife, Ophelia, thought *Monsieur Butterfly* too obvious a title, and suggested I abbreviate it in the French fashion. Hence, *M. Butterfly*, far more mysterious and ambiguous, was the result.[7]" *M.* is an abbreviation of the French word *Monsieur*. Since the French words for *Monsieur* and *Madame* share the same initial letter, the revised name adds an air of mystery and ambiguity to the play. An equally satisfying Chinese version of *M. Butterfly*. In Chinese, the word "jun" can be used to mean both male and female. Therefore, "*M. Butterfly*" is neither "Mr." nor "Ms.", the ambiguity of gender reflects Hwang's original intention to create *M. Butterfly*, that is, to subvert the Western audience's stereotype of the image of Eastern women.

3.2. Variation of Butterfly Image

In *Madame Butterfly*, Cio-Cio-San succumbed to oppression and finally committed suicide. The image of the butterfly is utopia, "The essential feature of utopia is to 'maintain the open state of the possible city', thus implying an unknown field with positive significance for the current society." That is to say, Butterfly is a kind of a symbol of yearning success of patriarchy. The more popular *Madame Butterfly* is, the more Westerners assume the inferiority of the East.

However, the Eastern woman in Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is no longer docile, passive, and at the mercy of others. By replacing the female character in *Madame Butterfly* with a male character, Hwang is showing the masculinity of the Oriental people. Song Liling also faces the oppression of Gallimard, and she is treated as a plaything. Clever as her, she creates the ideal submissive female image in Gallimard's mind, in order to manipulate Gallimard and extract information from him, and finally her true identity is discovered by Gallimard. Unable to accept the fact, Gallimard commits suicide, and Song Liling leaves him. If Cio-Cio-San is a beautiful but fragile butterfly and a virtuous woman, but Song Liling, is not only a butterfly that will never surrender, but also a butterfly that combines hardness and tenderness and has the courage to resist, fighting for dignity and fighting for fate. In Act one, Scene5, when Gallimard first talk to Song

liling, when Song Liling, who is a man, has already hinted at his own attitude: he is not a butterfly attached to people, on the contrary, he has a kind of attitude between compassion and disdain for the butterflies that Westerners are keen on. Song expressed her displeasure by accusing the Japanese of killing hundreds of Chinese. In other words, a Japanese woman will not be perfectly portrayed by a Chinese woman. Song's counterpart, Cio-Cio-San, even renounced her Japanese religious beliefs and became a spiritual convert to the American people. The inconsistency between Song and Cio-Cio-San signals a rupture within Asian culture that contradicts deeply held Western stereotypes of the Eastern world and a variation between two totally different butterflies. However, Gallimard, enthroned in love with a perfect Oriental woman, could not take the hint. When a fanatical belief gradually evolves into a paranoia, the Butterfly Image becomes a template that has already been poured, rather than an entity, how sincere and warm the love was at the beginning, how disillusioned and bleak the mask is when it recedes. Like Butterfly that had always been proud of suddenly revealed its original appearance as a caterpillar, his inner image had been constructed and collapsed.

3.3. Variation of Power

Madame Butterfly by Puccini creates two very representative characters: Cio-Cio-San, being perfectly submissive and humble, who is the exact incarnation of Asia, and Pinkerton, being extremely domineering and aggressive, who is the vivid epitome of the Europe. The essential relationship, on political, was seen—in the West, which is what concerns us here—to be one between a strong and a weak partner. Being an eastern girl, Cio-Cio-San can't escape the fate of being controlled and dying for Pinkerton's western strength and domination. This is the western stereotype towards the eastern, implying that all oriental people, including man and woman, are doomed to succumb to occidental people under their formidable power. "The Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power[8]". The stereotype has historically dictated the dynamics of power between the East and the West. In *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang, orchestrates a performance that features an Eastern character, Song, and a Western character, Gallimard, initially as a satirical take on the racial tropes present in *Madame Butterfly*. However, beneath this performance lies a deeper intention: to deconstruct the prevailing Orientalist narratives and to pave the way for a reimagined, more equitable dynamic between the Western and Eastern cultures.

In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling represents the East and Gallimard represents the West. In Act Three, Song Liling stands in the West authority court and says that "The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East...The West thinks of itself as masculine---big guns, big industry, big money---so the East is feminine---weak, delicate, poor." He condemns the fallacies about the East and the colonial rule of the West by artillery fire. This is discussed by Said in his masterpiece *Orientalism*. He believed that "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as 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: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient[9]". Orientalism represents the Western perspective on the East, a construct born from their imagination and interpretation. As a dominant force in politics, economics, and culture, the West often harbors a prejudiced understanding of the East. In Western cultural depictions, the East is depicted as a realm brimming with ancient enigmas and distinctive, exotic practices, and is personified as a submissive, docile, and devoted female figure. It is a fictional world created by the West.

However in *M. Butterfly*, the Orientals take the initiative at every turn, and the hubris suffer their own consequences: the French diplomat Gallimard is fired and imprisoned for his strategic failure in Vietnam. In *Madame Butterfly*, an Asian woman's obsession with Western men leads to her suicide; In *M. Butterfly*, the fantasies of Western women ---French diplomats

are really *Madame Butterfly*---about Eastern, Song Liling, lead to their own failure. If the former *Madame Butterfly* preached the glory of Western colonizers, then Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is a warning to Western colonialists: fantasies about the East can only lead to the ultimate defeat of the West.

For an extended period, the West, particularly the United States, has viewed Chinese individuals and immigrants through the lens of "orientalism," resulting in the Chinese being reduced to submissive archetypes in their collective consciousness. Oriental women are often portrayed as embodying exotic allure, characterized by their compliance, tenderness, and readiness to sacrifice for love. Meanwhile, Eastern men are depicted as naive, inept, and resigned to a life of dependency on others. However, the creation of David Henry Hwang has gradually shattered the illusion of Orientalism in Western. As a Chinese-American writer, the publication of novels, poems, plays and other literary works written in English is like the angry cry of the Chinese, breaking the Western dream of self-intoxication and self-flaunting.

Butterfly is a metaphor of discourse ethics, reflecting the dilemma of Chinese self-speech under the control of the Western discourse system. In *Madame Butterfly*, Cio--Cio-San is the Gallimard's act of suicide in pursuit of truth and the ascendancy of Song Liling, the fictional *Butterfly* representing the marginalized East, signifies a reversal of power dynamics. Song Liling, once perceived as a symbol of weakness, now wields significant influence over Western discourse. Conversely, Gallimard, a figure of Western might, succumbs to defeat and powerlessness. In essence, Song transcends her Oriental identity to become a symbol of empowerment, while Gallimard, the white man, embodies the absence of power. This is a challenge to the construction of orientalist discourse system, an allusions to the strategy of the construction of Western-centric discourse system, an eastern voice, and a guide to literature from Western-centric to multi-civilization mutual learning.

Clearly, in 1989, David Henry Hwang introduces two characters, Song and Gallimard, who initially take on the roles of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton from *Madame Butterfly*. However, the characters in the play *M. Butterfly* is the variation of these roles by reimagining Song as male and Gallimard as "female". This dramatic reinterpretation challenges the power dynamics, questioning and dismantling the unjust and traditional power structures between Eastern and Western cultures.

4. Why These Variation Happened?

"Although images are the imagination of "otherness" and foreign cultures by "self," they have inseparable relations with the outside world that they have generated".[10] It is the authors who have created images. Thus, it is important to know author, David Henry Hwang. He was born on August 11, 1957, live with Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles, California. His father is from Shanghai and his mother is Chinese Filipinos, from Fujian province, China. Hwang came from a privileged family and received a good education from an early age. Hwang's masterpiece, *M. Butterfly*, won him a Tony Award in 1988, the first Asian American to do so. Based on a love story between a French diplomat and a Chinese Peking Opera actor in the context of the Cold War, the work subverts traditional gender and cultural roles and explores themes of cultural conflict and identity between the East and the West. Reflecting his exploration of cultural identity and artistic creation as a Chinese-American writer, Hwang's works have not only had a significant impact on the American theater, but have also provided global audiences with profound insights into the cultural exchange between East and West.

Some experts believe that the work did not go beyond the level of great bitterness, but once again creating a new "East and West" binary opposition, on another level and strengthen the East such as Song Liling strange, cunning, feminine, good at illusion stereotype image. From the female *Madame Butterfly* to a male spy, the identity of the victim was subverted, replaced by

the image construction of the evil manipulator, and the image of the Chinese was stigmatized. While deconstructing and counterattacking, *M. Butterfly* also provides Western audiences with the Oriental image they yearn for. To criticize the cultural hegemony of Orientalism, while at the same time thinking within the framework of the same East-West duality, is to identify not only with this framework, but also with the antagonism and hostility that it contains.

However, Actually, there are glimpses of Hwang's attitude toward East to West. *M. Butterfly*, which came out in 1988, was inspired by a 1986 news story about the true relationship between a French diplomat and the Chinese Peking Opera actress Shi Peipu, which caused an uproar in the West and was considered a diplomatic scandal. Since the production of this work, involving diplomatic events, the entire framework has been embedded in the opera *Madame Butterfly*, which is familiar to Western countries, full of political metaphors, as well as rich political and cultural elements through the parody structure, which has attracted much attention and controversy.

He wrote in the afterword of the play, "*M. Butterfly* has sometimes regarded as an anti-American play, a diatribe against the stereotype of the East by the West, of women by man. Quite to the contrary, it is a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings. [11]" It is indicated that *Butterfly* can be Easterner or Westerner. Hwang sought equality, and he shows his equal to Western and Eastern. As a Chinese American writer living in the gap, Hwang, like an amphibian, struggles in the context of unequal knowledge and rights and under the shadow of cultural hegemony. In the face of the two cultures, he tries to stand in the third party perspective, hoping to seek a balance between the two in an equal situation and dissolve the confrontation between the two sides.

What's more, in Act One, Scene5, Song for the first time communicated with Gallimard, Song said: "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.[12]" Hwang's hypothesis is whether the identities and roles of the two sides can be exchanged. We can conclude that Hwang simply called for a possible dialogue between East and West on an equal basis, and that *Madame Butterfly* could be an Eastern woman or a Western man.

In addition, in 2017, Hwang revised *M. Butterfly*. In new play, the original butterfly prototype came from *Madame Butterfly*, but the butterfly prototype in the new version is Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo in the *Butterfly Lovers*, which is a Chinese traditional drama. At the end of the play, a devastated Gallimard cuts his head in theatrical makeup, dressing up as Zhu Yingtai compared with the original version in which he was dressed as Cio-Cio-San, and then kills herself with a piece of her makeup mirror. Song Liling rushed onto the stage and shouted "Butterfly, butterfly" at his body. Then Song Liling collapsed beside Gallimard, and two butterflies flew up from their shadows. As we can see, the butterfly story not only exists in western work *Madame Butterfly*, but also in the Chinese work *Butterfly Lovers*. The 2017 reimagining of *M. Butterfly* has mitigated the racial stereotypes and the subversive impact that were more pronounced in its earlier iterations. Hwang has created a kind of Chinese opera that is opposed to the Western opera *Madame Butterfly*. This is Hwang's further exploration of the theme of anti-Orientalism, and he tries to find other ways out of taming and being tamed. Hwang changed the speechless status of the Oriental people and gave them the ability to express their opinions. As Cao Shunqing wrote in his book, "Foreign images are generated during the interactions between literature and culture.[13]" The East must break its silence and challenge the constructed image imposed by the West, no longer accepting the unjust portrayal it has endured. Consequently,

"M. Butterfly" stands as a rebellion against the dominant American cultural narrative that marginalizes and misrepresents the Oriental community through arbitrary depictions and alterations.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, the mutual learning of diverse civilizations has become a global consensus. It can be said that Hwang's variation and rewriting of *Madame Butterfly* and cross-civilization research and development reflect the need for dialogue between literatures, which is also the historical inevitability of human civilization exchanges and mutual learning in the era of globalization. The purpose of this work is to break the discourse hegemony of "Occidentalism" and rebuild the image of the East from the perspective of Western culture, and it is also an appeal to the Eastern discourse. This endeavor aims to address the existing disparities in the relationship between the East and the West by fostering increased cultural exchange and dialogue.

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