

Performing American Identity: The Plays of David Henry Hwang

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Abstract

What does it mean to perform an American identity? From the time of his breakout play, *FOB*, in 1980, playwright David Henry Hwang has grappled with this question. Over the 35 years of his career, he has consistently been described as a Chinese American, or Asian American, playwright and his work does indeed reflect aspects of the Asian American drama movement of the 1980's and 1990's, as it does also aspects of US multiculturalism in general. He has staged stories of the Chinese American experience and explored questions of race, culture, and identity.

The term Asian American is itself, however, contested and complex. Meanwhile, Hwang's privileged and Christian upbringing has bred suspicion of his right to interpret and stage the experience of the broader Asian American community.

In his plays, Hwang reinforces stereotypes, while simultaneously undermining them. The result is a view of identity defined by, but resistant to, definitions based on race, culture, and gender.

Few playwrights from marginalized ethnic groups have enjoyed mainstream success in the US. Hwang has. In contrast to previous Asian American playwrights, who have struggled to find an audience beyond their identity-based theatre companies, Hwang's plays seem to transcend specific personal, racial, or cultural experience, and as a consequence have been widely produced, published, studied, and anthologized.

Most of Hwang's plays are inspired by works in the American dramatic canon, suggesting his desire to situate the Asian American experience in the broader American narrative.

In this study, I will analyze selected plays by David Henry Hwang. I will consider Hwang's role as a voice for Asian Americans and the implications of that role. I will place his work in the context of the broader discourse on American identity and argue that it is insufficient to overly privilege his Asian identity in reading his work. Finally, I will explore some of the reasons his work transcends the confines of racial or cultural identity, and has found a place in the American dramatic canon.

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Introduction

Performing American Identity

What does it mean to perform a national, cultural or racial identity? How are national and cultural identities formed, represented, and contested in theatre? How do race and gender influence how we react to, and interact with, other people? Does the performance of stereotype disrupt subjugation or reinforce it? From the time of his breakout play, *FOB*, in 1979, David Henry Hwang has grappled with these questions.

Over the 39 years of his career to date, he has consistently been described as a Chinese American, or Asian American, playwright. It is, in fact, almost impossible to find a reference to Hwang that does not include a reference to his “hyphenated” identity.¹ His work does indeed reflect the influence of the Asian American culture movement of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, as well as the general evolution of American multiculturalism. He has staged stories of the Chinese American experience, and explored questions of race, culture, and identity. His role, however, in representing previously marginalized cultures is controversial.

David Henry Hwang is the most successful Asian American playwright to date. It is, therefore, appropriate, to view his plays through the lens of the Asian American story. Indeed, his family history, career, and success provide insights into the Asian American experience of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in America. Hwang came to prominence during an era defined by multicultural movements and demographic changes in American society that continue to challenge historic definitions and notions of American identity. Over the timespan of his career, he has come to accept his role as

a symbol of and, at times reluctant, spokesperson for, the Asian American community, often acting more as advocate than artist.

It is not sufficient, though, to study his works purely in the context of his Chinese or Asian American identity. The success of Hwang's plays with diverse audiences indicates his ability to transcend the potential limitations of writing for specific cultural communities, consistently finding commonalities and universal elements. In other words, it is important to consider his work and popularity in the context of the broader American dramatic canon.

His "coming of age" and success coincides with a late 1980's climate in mainstream theatre that saw unprecedented critical and commercial success for a generation of what I term "identity" playwrights. For my purposes, these include those playwrights who are strongly and consistently associated with an aspect of their identity, including but not limited to, race, gender, or sexuality, who also often incorporate exploration of these identities into their work. In simplest terms, they are the playwrights whose works are rarely discussed without their associated identity being referenced, such as "African-American playwright," "gay playwright," and so on.²

The concept of identity is, it seems, a particularly American fascination. In his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004) Samuel P. Huntington discusses the history and preoccupation of identity in the creation and reinforcement of a unifying American culture. He makes a distinction between individual and group identities, but suggests the power of individuals in informing and shaping constructed group identities.³ The acknowledgement of the constructed nature of identities, particularly those of a cultural group, is useful in understanding the power of

performance as a tool to create, disrupt, or reinforce identity associations and stereotypes.

What does it mean to create a cultural identity or narrative? To some degree, it implies agreement as to significant shared events, challenges, and experiences. The construction of an American identity is particularly problematic in comparison to other cultures or nations. The uniquely diverse population, regionalisms, and immigrant history of the US inevitably results in a myriad of cultural histories.

The major works in the American dramatic canon reflect the role of theatre in representing a vast array of American cultural, or perhaps subcultural, experiences. American playwrights stage versions of the same quintessentially American stories from the perspectives of different identity groups. Eugene O’Neil’s Irish immigrants, Tennessee Williams’ Southern belles, Neil Simon’s Jewish New Yorkers, and August Wilson’s African Americans all represent a version of the American family. In the case of these works, and numerous other American plays, an echo of the shared American “dream” and experience characterizes the text.

The emergent commercial and mainstream success of an increased number of works by identity playwrights has been reliant on the ability of playwrights from marginalized groups to develop plays that integrate aspects of the shared American identity into their work. Part of the genius of a work such as the musical *Hamilton* (2015) is its association with the story of the American project, even as it subverts the underlying associated racial assumptions. The same can be said of Neil Simon, Terrence McNally, or August Wilson, who wrote or write realistic, naturalistic dramas and comedies from the perspective of underrepresented American cultural groups, re-

appropriating the genre to place their stories in the context of the shared American experience.

While much of the scholarship on identity playwrights has been specific to individual racial, gender, or sexual identities, I would argue that it is useful to also consider their work in the broader framework of the particular American obsession with cultural identity, and, perhaps, as a collective of often hyphenated identities with similar goals for and concerns about representation.

Not all writers, of course, choose to identify with aspects of identity that others will emphasize. Edward Albee resented his work being seen through the prism of sexual orientation for much of his career, as did Tennessee Williams, who is more likely to be seen as a Southern writer. Paula Vogel is a gay playwright, but prefers to be identified as a playwright who is gay.⁴ That may be a fine distinction, but it is useful when considering the role of an author's identity and position in relation to their work. It should also be noted that in the case of sexual identity disclosure is, arguably, a choice, whereas racial identities are not something as easily denied or underscored.

What this new generation seemed to share is a desire to stage stories informed by their identities, often with a specific educative, political, or cultural goal in mind. This did not occur by happenstance, but rather was the culmination of several decades of active cultivation of works by minority playwrights by identity-driven theatre companies and affirmative action projects providing new opportunities to see these plays developed and produced. The drive for equal rights for African Americans, women, and gays changed American attitudes, even as shifting demographics began to change the racial and cultural makeup of American society.

From 1983, the year that Harvey Fierstein won the Tony award for *Torch Song Trilogy*, through Terrance McNally's 1997 award for *Master Class*, eight of the fourteen plays awarded the Tony award for Best Play were written by identity playwrights, including multiple wins for Tony Kushner and Terrence McNally, and wins for plays by August Wilson, Wendy Wasserstein, and David Henry Hwang. Along with their shared positions as identity playwrights, these writers all have demonstrated an ability to transcend their prescribed identity, and to write plays with broad appeal that resonate with diverse audiences. Considering that, prior to these years, no female, writer of color, or openly gay playwright had won the Tony award, this was a conspicuous trend. I would suggest that this era is characterized by an important shift in the staging of American identities to a much more pluralistic perspective, including stories by previously under-represented communities in American society.

A Brief Overview of the Performance of Race, Culture, and Identity in American Drama

Any attempt to summarize a subject as broad and complex as the history of and discourse on the performance of identity in American culture risks being cursory at best. It is, nevertheless, useful to have an understanding of some of the overarching questions and controversies that remain to a large degree contested and unresolved, and to compare some of the seminal stereotypes, works, and artists who are emblematic of specific identities.

Theatre has had a unique historical role in challenging and exploring the performance of American identity. In theatre, the body, by definition, becomes a site to

perform, contest, subvert, and reinforce meaning. The performance of race and identity in American theatre, particularly in the 20th century, has been complicated and controversial, arguably serving an important role in broader conversations about gender, race, and sexuality in American society.⁵ As William W Demastes points out in his introduction to *Interrogating America Through Theatre and Performance* (2007), “theatre can be seen as among the one or two central cultural institutions best suited to understand the pulse that sustains and re-visions the American Dream.”⁶

Brandi Wilkins Catanese observes that “performance has become the medium through which American Anxieties about race (and in particular, blackness) are pondered, articulated, managed, and challenged.”⁷ The performance of American identity has, in fact, a uniquely racialized history. In his book *Theatre and Race* (2013), Harvey Young discusses the significance of the legacy of blackface performance, proclaiming it to be “the most spectacular theatrical genre involving the staging of race and racial difference.”⁸

The performance of blackface⁹ has a long history including portrayals of “Moors” in 16th century British drama and the harlequin figure in Italian commedia dell’arte. Young traces the modern roots, and the American tradition, to the popularity of a character called “Cuff” developed by a white traveling solo performer named T.D. Rice dating back to Pittsburgh in 1830, actually based on a disabled black street performer. Cuff’s character became the archetype for the exaggerated language and performance of the American Negro. This distorted caricature generated a series of related trope characters, all reinforcing black stereotypes and based in parody.

By the end of the 19th century, blackface minstrelsy was hugely popular in the United States. Perhaps even more significantly, blackface performance became popularized around the world, particularly in Europe. Young points out that “blackface performance, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become the first significant and uniquely American contribution to global performance.”¹⁰ In other words, the performance of race became the defining feature of the export of American identity. Young asserts that blackface minstrel shows “relayed a sense of the dramatically interesting dynamic involving race in the country.”¹¹

As a consequence, black performers were often expected to perform these popular stereotypes, even going so far as to apply the burnt cork used for blackface. Ironically, the eventual performance of blackface and racialized characters by black performers led to access for many black actors into mainstream performance venues on stage and in early radio and film.¹² The expectation to perform a stereotypical representation of blackness was, arguably, sustained and reinforced by the black performers, a reality that remains a point of sensitivity.

The by the mid to late 20th century, African American theatre companies had found their place and played a critical role in developing and staging black stories and works. Plays such as Lorraine Hansbury’s 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1977), Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994), Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), and most recently Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat* (2017) were all produced on Broadway and have enjoyed success in regional and university theatre

productions. It is worth noting the number of female playwrights represented in this group.

The most successful African American playwright to date, in critical and commercial terms, is August Wilson. Wilson's ambitious series of plays, *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, stage the African American experience as he saw it, each taking place in a different decade of the 20th century. By the time of his death in 2005, Wilson was one of the most celebrated playwrights in America, having received two Pulitzer prizes, a Tony award, and countless other awards and nominations.

Wilson was a vocal advocate for the preservation of a separate African American theatre movement and tradition. In 1996 he famously engaged in a debate with Robert Brustein, a high profile theatre critic and founder of the Yale Repertory and American Repertory Theaters. While Brustein suggested racial assimilation as the necessary direction for theatre to move, Wilson strongly disagreed, suggesting color-blind practices and efforts to integrate black artists into existing theatrical structures were "little more than band-aids."¹³

The late 20th century saw the eventual eradication of the performance of "black face," and while it remains arguably the most pervasive and prominent example of the racialized performance of American identity, it is by no means the only example. In fact, Young's study unintentionally exposes a problematic consequence of the contentious legacy of blackface performance in America. In his book, Young devotes a section to blackface appropriately entitled "Blackface," and then moves on to the subsequent discussions of racialized identities in the ambiguously titled "Other Faces" section. Despite his excellent interrogation of the performance of race, he undeniably privileges

black performance in his study, ultimately going so far as to reference “non-black ‘faces’” in his discussion.¹⁴ For other marginalized American identities, including Asian Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans, this tendency for discussion of the performance of race to default to black identity problematically situates these non-white and non-black identities as the other-other.

The performance of Native American identity, or “redface,” is not only still tolerated, it remains integral to thousands of stagings of the Thanksgiving story by American schoolchildren every year. And while the performance rarely includes the actual makeup, the plays tend to locate race in the binary of the “pilgrims” vs the “Indians.” Redface performance was also central to a seminal moment in American history, as colonists costumed as Native Americans to stage the “Boston Tea Party” protesting British taxation without representation.

Performance of the Native American identity was popular in early American dramas staging stories of Westward expansion. White actors used dark makeup to alter their appearance. The portrayal of Native Americans became particularly prominent with the emergence of film. The dominant popularity of “the Western” genre in early American cinema required the constant performance of Native American stereotypes and exaggerated “savages,” not as Americans, but instead as a constant threat to the American heroes. These characters almost exclusively played by white actors using darkened makeup and wigs with long braids. Costumes were amalgamations of specific tribal costumes and buckskin, with no consideration of authenticity or difference.¹⁵

In his book *Latin Numbers: Playing Latin in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* (2015), Brian Eugenio Herrera chronicles and interrogates the history of

the performance of Latino/a identity in the U.S. He details the trajectory from specific culturally distinctive groups such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban at the beginning of the 20th century to broad and diverse categories such as Hispanic and Latino/a by the end of the century. In particular, he examines “popular performance”¹⁶ as an element of Latino/a identity in American culture, citing the popularity of music and nightclub performance of tango and conga in the 1940s and 1950s, as a major influences in emergent perceptions and representations of a Hispanic identity.

He also points to the “othering” of Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story* (1957) as an example of a play, or in this case a musical, creating an artificial and arbitrarily chosen social divide with far-reaching influence on the American consciousness. No Puerto Ricans were involved in the development of the musical, which had initially portrayed Mexican gangs in Los Angeles. *West Side Story* did, in fact, capitalize on immigration anxiety based on race, a relatively new phenomenon in the US precipitated by a large influx of Puerto Ricans post-World War II.

Herrera does acknowledge that Hispanic identities are often less racially apparent than black or Asian color and feature, and, in fact, includes a section on actors he characterizes as “stealth Latinos” who enjoyed successful careers performing in white roles. Jose Ferrer, Ricardo Montalban, and Anthony Quinn are all Hispanic Americans who came to fame and enjoyed long careers playing non-Latino roles.¹⁷

In 2008, Lin-Manuel Miranda became the first Hispanic playwright to win a Tony Award, which he won for the score of the musical *In the Heights*. But his real success came with the 2015 musical *Hamilton*. This marked the first time a Hispanic American has won the Tony Award for a play or musical writing. Miranda won awards for Best

Book and Best Original Score and *Hamilton* won Best Musical at the 2016 Tony Awards.

Latino/a portrayals and theatrical movements have served to create an amalgamated Hispanic identity in opposition to whiteness that does not include or account for difference within the marginalized group.

This is similar to the coalescing effect of Asian “yellowface” performance. Yellowface performance in American drama will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, but is noteworthy in its endurance. Eradication of the performance of blackface did not translate to eradication of yellowface, which remained in practice to varying degrees until the late 1980s, when the *Miss Saigon* controversy detailed in chapter IV sparked attention to the subject.

In either case, Hispanic and Asian American theatre movements share an additional layer of complexity in that both classifications are artificial and contested. There are, for instance, Cuban American and Chinese American theatre companies who prioritize actors of those specific heritages over other members of the broader culture group they might otherwise identify with.

A discussion of race in American theatre would be remiss to ignore the performance “whiteness” or to acknowledge it as an equally racialized performance. In her book, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (2011), Brandi Wilkins Catanese challenges “the silent conflation of whiteness with Americanness.”¹⁸ Perhaps because of the dominance of the white-American perspective in the dramatic canon, the performance of whiteness has not been actively interrogated and has, in fact, been privileged as the racial performance to

which all others are in opposition. Catanese theorizes that, “multiculturalism was in part a response to the fact that lopsided representation of American society normalized whiteness by making other racial groups (and by extension cultures) invisible.”¹⁹

The reasons for the domination by white straight male playwrights in the development of American drama are numerous and complex, related to education, access, gender inequity, and economics. Nevertheless, the consequence is both a historical lack of diverse portrayals of American life and a failure to interrogate whiteness as a racial classification to any degree.

Gender-based identities have been equally disproportionately male in terms of playwrights and representation. Susan Glaspell co-founded the first modern American theatre company, the Provincetown Players, with her husband George Cram Cook and is considered the first female American playwright of note. Her work was, however, largely “lost” or ignored for many years until she was somewhat “rediscovered” in recent years. Her 1916 one-act play *Trifles* is now widely anthologized and considered a classic.

A limited number of white female playwrights such as Lillian Hellman, Marsha Norman, Wendy Wasserstein, Paula Vogel, Tina Howe and Sarah Ruehl have had successful careers, and their works are widely produced, particularly in regional, off-Broadway, and university theatrical venues. In volume terms, however, as well as in representation on Broadway, female playwrights are still underrepresented.

The reality is that American theatre remains disproportionally dominated by white, male practitioners, from the playwrights produced, to the actors, directors, and designers employed. A study commissioned by the Dramatists Guild of America and the

Lilly Awards from a sample of just over 2,500 productions in American theatres between 2011-2014 found that just 22% were written by women, and only 10.2% by playwrights of color.²⁰ While the identity of the playwright does not necessarily determine the racial and gender makeup of the cast, the tendency of writers to draw on their own experience, or at least those with which they have some familiarity, results in less roles and opportunities for women and actors of color.

The exploration of gay sexuality and queer identities in mainstream American drama is widely agreed to have begun with the success of the play *The Boys in the Band* in 1968. Produced off-Broadway, the play ran for 1,000 performances and was adapted into a film in 1970. Harvey Fierstein's 1983 Tony Award-winning play *Torch Song Trilogy* proved the potential for mainstream success for a gay-identity story.²¹

Most theatre historians agree, however, that the watershed moment for queer theatre was the Broadway production of Tony Kushner's ambitious and complex 1993 and 1994 plays, *Angels In America: Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. The play in two parts is unapologetically and overtly about the broader question of American identity. *Angels in America* was produced at a time when the AIDS epidemic was at its height, and reflects the anxieties in American society at that time. It is, however, somewhat of a departure from some of its predecessors in that it portrays gay characters and relationships without the heavy reliance on some of the queer tropes and clichés. The gay characters are a part of the broader society and their lives beyond intimate, queer spaces are examined.

The agenda related to identity for queer-identified playwrights has created controversy. The success of playwright Terrence McNally, particularly his play *Love!*

Valour! Compassion! (1994) prompted criticism from scholars such as David Savran, who suggest that the play is too assimilationist, and “functions as a pretext for a particular kind of campy wit that clearly appeals to many straight-identified spectators.”²² Playwright Wendy Wasserstein was subject to similar criticism from feminist scholars critical of her Tony award-winning play *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988).

Discussions of gender identity, in particular, seem to frequently segue to broader questions of intersectionality.²³ The evolution of queer identity, especially as it relates to advocacy and political agendas, seems to have resulted in a particular tension for artists who may identify with multiple historically marginalized identities. Much of the groundbreaking theory of female gender performance was pioneered by theorists such as Judith Butler who approached female gender performance from the perspective of drag.²⁴ Their work illuminates consideration of female identity but does not necessarily consider race or sexuality.

Playwrights such as Maria Irene Fornes or Chay Yew self-identify, and are often associated with, their queer identities as often, if not more so, than their racial identities. Fornes is also studied as a feminist playwright of note. Multiple high profile playwrights, such as Lynn Nottage are increasingly vocally resistant to the limitations of assigned stereotypes and narrow identity labels. Nottage’s Tony Award-winning play *Sweat* (2017) is primarily concerned with “blue-collar” American identity rather than race.

Beyond the performance of specific identities, attempts to transition to what I would define as “post-identity” performance in American theatre prove liberating for some and problematic for others. Color-blind casting, or casting without regards to the implied or intended race of the character, has gained popularity in the US and is widely

employed by theatre companies and high school or university productions seeking to engage in inclusive practices and better highlight the talents of diverse performers.²⁵ The move toward color-blind casting has allowed countless actors of color access to roles and employment they might not have historically had access to. The practice, however, is problematic for some and not without controversy.

Scholars such as Pao, Herrera, Young, and Catanese caution that such casting seeks to suggest a “post-racial” environment that denies the influence of race. Catanese goes so far as to accuse such performances of producing “inauthentic blackness.”²⁶ Herrera observes that, “political approaches to casting advocate specific interventions into such casting mechanisms as a means of achieving social, economic, or cultural goals beyond a particular production.”²⁷

Angela Pao states the obvious but also gets to the heart of the dilemma by pointing out that modern, realistic, and naturalistic acting traditions force “two more or less fully constituted identities—that of the actor and that of the character—to inhabit the same body.”²⁸ The identity associated with the actor’s body, whether racial or gender, pre-exists the performance, as does the character as written and imagined by the playwright.

In other words, casting in the US can never truly be neutral, and, therefore, in my opinion, must always be acknowledged as an intentional intervention, its meaning always being interrogated. The term “blind” is often misleading or misused, especially when casting choices seek to intentionally reframe or interpret a role using race to challenge assumptions. In such cases, the casting is deliberately *not* blind, but rather acknowledges the role of race in the audience’s perception of a character or context.

Herrera suggests a framework I find particularly useful for discussing the history and context of race in casting roles representing a specific racial identity. He notes the shift from “racial mimicry” to what he terms “racial congruity” that began to become standard practice in the US in the 1950s. Just as it implies, racial mimicry describes performance of representative or stereotypical elements of physical, vocal, visual characteristics associated with a the cultural or racial identity being performed, so the casting does not rely on the actor’s identity as a necessity in the performance.

Racial congruity seeks to cast actors with some personal shared identity dimension to the role being performed, or, as Herrera defines it, “be of a kind with the character being portrayed.”²⁹ Needless to say this becomes complex, particularly as American culture is ever more racially intermixed and diverse, but the principles of racial congruity that came to prominence in the 1940s and 1950s provide important context in understanding the still unresolved debate in racial casting.

In his 2011 book *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance*, Marvin McAllister classifies “black actors appropriating white dramatic characters crafted initially by white dramatists and, later, by black playwrights” as “stage Europeans.”³⁰ McAllister suggests a need for interrogating what he contends amounts to “black artists explor(ing) whiteness in serious theatrical modes.”³¹ While his characterization of these performances as “European” is, in my opinion, a bit extreme, I find his suggestion of the pervasiveness of certain assumptions in the performance of canonical works useful, particularly as a lens for exploring the performance of whiteness.

Samuel P. Huntington suggests the importance of acknowledging several dominant elements of the constructed American culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These include Christian values and moralism, work ethic, English language, and the legal and cultural legacies of Western Europe. He point out that “throughout American history, people who were not white Anglo Saxons Protestants have become American by adopting American’s Anglo-Protestant culture and political values.”³²

By acknowledging the historical elements of the constructed, albeit evolving, idea of American identity, we can better understand the modes by which those outside of its perimeters have sought to perform Americanness. The artist of color who performs a role initially envisioned and written from a white-identity might approach the performance from multiple perspectives, including passing, re-appropriation, or subversion.

Performance of stereotype reinforces, but can also disrupt. This is true of characteristics associated with whiteness as well. The performer of color who performs a white role will often challenge meaning by the very nature of their body. Herrera observes that, “to deploy a stereotype in performance is to animate the ideological power scripted within that stereotype.”³³ This is, in my opinion, why the performance and creation of works that echo the meta-narratives of the American dream have proven an important tool for challenging exclusionary aspects of the American project.

While it is true that many of the early successes of identity playwrights have come through derivations of realistic, family-based dramas thematically focused on the pursuit of the American dream, I would argue that this does not necessarily constitute a

failure or compromise. Instead, I would argue that the reframing of narratives that resonate within the assumptions of American identity have proven an important tool in challenging notions about marginalized identities. Reading Hwang's work with this in mind both situates his work in the broader American context and suggests an effective strategy to foster new works representing diverse identities.

In any case, the landscape in American drama reflects the conflicts and complexities of the very notion of an agreed upon modern American identity. In an era of racialized violence and tension, the exploration and evolution of intentional identity performance offers an opportunity for intervention, but how to best reconcile identity and performance in American culture remains unresolved.

The Complexities of Performing an Asian American Identity

Until the production of the 2015 musical *Allegiance*, Hwang remained the only Asian American playwright to have plays, or musicals, produced on Broadway. Nor is the underrepresentation by Asian Americans in the arts limited to theatre. To 2017, there has never been an Asian American cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, the culturally powerful and iconic TV program that celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2015. There has never been a successful mainstream Asian American pop star or rapper. The first TV sitcom featuring an Asian American cast and writers, also titled *FOB* (but with no relation to Hwang's play) debuted as recently as 2014, and has been a success, as has the drama series *Hawaii Five O*, perhaps proving the existence of a broader audience for Asian American stories.

The term Asian American is, itself, contested and complex.³⁴ Unlike other American identity groups (African Americans, Irish Americans), the immigration trajectories span over two centuries and there is little shared history or experience within a group that consists of those of Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Indian, Korean, Laotian, Pakistani, Thai, Vietnamese, and other Asian-country descent. Indeed, the national and ethnic groups which constitute this identity category dating from the 1970's have histories of conflict with each other.³⁵

In his book *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (1998), David Leiwei Li explains the nature of contemporary Asian American culture and the process by which it was envisioned and created. For him, "a euphemism for race, culture has become an objective political force to either sustain or subvert the state's social rearrangement, and Asian Americans are compelled again to justify their newly acquired citizenship on cultural grounds."³⁶ In other words, Asian Americans, were being required to develop a shared culture in order to be a recognizable community in America.

Early advocates of Asian American culture made a distinction between "Asian American," and "Americanized Asians."³⁷ Some went so far as to contend that "what qualifies the Asian American clearly goes beyond race, geography, or nationality; it is a state of mind that nonetheless can be consciously nurtured."³⁸ There was, within the early years of this movement, a general rejection of assimilation.

The reputation of Asian immigrants as hard-working and obedient members of the community and state had, it was felt, resulted in inaccurate perceptions of weakness, and an acceptance of discrimination. Ronald Reagan often referred to the

“hard work ethic” and “shared values” of Asian immigrants and their descendants, resulting in the label “model minority.”³⁹ To angry Asian American activists, however, subservience touted as a model and virtue was unacceptable. There was also reluctance on the part of many in the newly evolving community to align with civil rights movements, a desire, perhaps, to retain a sense of superiority as an immigrant community, rather than identify with African Americans.⁴⁰

Indeed, a pecking order of sorts emerged as to *who* was Asian American. Those born outside the US were excluded, the assumption being that they had “chosen” America, rather than being born in the US. For Li, “the privileged hero of ideal Asian American sensibility appears as a victim of blatant institutional racism, a member of the native ghetto who, despite the odds against him, refuses to be pacified through assimilation.”⁴¹ Clearly, such a narrow definition could be highly problematic and limiting. However, the desire to have a voice in their identity was paramount, and there was a sense that a unified history might legitimize autonomy and political status.

The definition of Asian Americans, both as a cultural group and an area of academic study, has evolved rapidly from the early 1970s manifestos, to such a degree, indeed, as to challenge its relevance, definitions becoming so broad as to render them potentially useless. The artificiality and scope of the construction is increasingly called into question. As Maria Zamora suggests in *Nation, Race & History in Asian American Literature* (2008), “the separation of the two identities of ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ is false...this hybrid subjectivity is discursively produced.”⁴²

It is agreed that what is shared amongst Asian Americans is a set of imposed stereotypes and discrimination based on racial and cultural assumptions, as well as physical attributes, that prevent “passing” in the dominant Caucasian culture.

The question of how best to represent diverse experiences is clearly key. Early Asian American playwrights of note, such as Frank Chin, Rick Shiomi, or Philip Kan Gotanda, all come from Chinese and Japanese heritage, and staged stories that, to varying degrees, reinforced stereotypes, even as they sought to expose them. The majority of books, plays, and films categorized as Asian American have been produced by later generations of college-educated Americans of Chinese and Japanese ancestry.

Intersectionality in identity needs to be considered as well. Successful female novelists, most notably Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, complicate the discourse. Their works do not necessarily privilege culture over gender, and both are considered as much feminist as Asian American writers.

As Li and Zamora both point out, most scholarship on Asian American history and identity is dominated by voices from individuals of Chinese and Japanese heritage, to a degree that influenced, and continues, disproportionately, to influence, the Asian American identity creation project.⁴³ This has been true for theatre as well, as early artists and practitioners, as well as the founders of the early Asian American theatre companies, were primarily of Chinese and Japanese descent.⁴⁴ There is also a linguistic imperialism at play, the assumption being that work on Asian American subjects, whether literary or scholarly, will be in English.

Questions of authority inform and complicate scholarship and criticism of Asian American works. Non-Asian and non-Asian American scholars of Hwang quickly learn

that there is an identity-driven nature to much of the discussion of Asian American drama and literature, and the perspective and authority of the critic or scholar inevitably becomes part of the discourse. In specific regard to Hwang, this is additionally complicated by his broad appeal and popularity in Asia. Scholarship on Hwang's work is increasingly being produced by scholars in Thailand, Korea, Singapore, and China. While there is certainly acceptance and openness to scholars of other races, nationalities, and identities, the majority of Asian American literature and drama scholars are, themselves, Asian American. The ability of critics or scholars to understand the issues or dimensions of identity portrayed is, at times, questioned. Hwang's works have generated extensive scholarship to date. His success and resonance with non-Asian American and, indeed, non-Asians in general, emerges as a point of criticism.

As I will discuss in Chapter 1, the emerging Asian American theatre companies in the 1970s sought to address representation shortcomings in traditional dramatic works and models to make space for these Asian American artists.

The goals of these companies, and the works they produce, is evolving and contested. Texts driven by specific cultural contexts may seek to promote separate nationalisms, proving inflammatory between immigrant communities. An increased trend toward race-blind casting in non-identity-based companies provides opportunities for actors, but poses dilemmas for identity-based companies. Generations growing up in a more diverse American society increasingly assume a "post-racial" attitude that fails to see the relevance of identity-based initiatives in general, while artists and playwrights increasingly resist being restricted to identity themes. Hwang himself contends that

“America must not restrict its ‘ethnic’ writers to ‘ethnic’ material, while assuming that white males can master any topic they so desire.”⁴⁵

Thesis Intent, Methodology, and Biographical Notes

This thesis seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on David Henry Hwang by considering his work simultaneously as an Asian American playwright and as an American playwright, and in so doing, addressing the challenges identity playwrights face in situating themselves in the broader American dramatic canon. While Asian American versus American may seem a fine and often necessary distinction, it is my opinion that exploring this dual or hybrid perspective is the key to understanding his work, as well as accounting for both his success with mainstream audiences and the backlash he has, at times, suffered. Throughout my research, I have noted that critique or study of Hwang’s work often tends to privilege his Asian American identity disproportionately, and, thereby risks missing the complexity of the questions in regard to identity he has always sought to interrogate. I do not seek to diminish or in any way negate race as a central concern for Hwang as a playwright, but rather to suggest that his work resists the potential limitations of being relegated to the confines of a single American cultural experience.

For Hwang, the broader question of American identity, particularly in terms of its staging and performance, is central. In comparison to the other “identity playwrights” of his generation, Hwang’s plays have actively addressed the performance of race and identity in American culture most directly, and often beyond the boundaries of his Chinese American identity.

In her book *Performing Asian American* (1997) Jo Lee suggests that “the old theories of genre, form, and response that erase racial difference and that separate art neatly into either political or aesthetic dimensions are inadequate to the demands of new works.”⁴⁶ But the converse can be argued as well. New works can successfully integrate exploration of race, gender, etc. as part of the whole, but should not be viewed wholly within the confines of any single identity.

Why is a discussion of Hwang’s plays particularly informative in engaging with the broader implications of American identity-based drama in general, and Asian American theatre more specifically? Perhaps because his career, which is by no means finished, is so very “of its time.”

In his plays, Hwang reinforces stereotypes, while simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, undermining them. He deploys a multitude of theatrical elements, including racial casting choices and Orientalized costuming, that problematise the idea of identity as fixed and definable, and to exploit the physical nature of performance. The result is a view of identity defined by, but resistant to, definitions based on race, culture, and gender. The physical elements of race and gender are the tools he uses to maximum effect, constantly exploiting the corporeal and aesthetic elements of theatre. In theatre, the text is never the final authority, as the body becomes the site of meaning.

Few playwrights from marginalized ethnic groups have enjoyed mainstream success in the US. Hwang has. In contrast to other Asian American playwrights such as Frank Chin or Chay Yew, who have struggled to find an audience beyond identity-based theatre companies, Hwang’s plays seem to transcend specific personal, racial, or cultural experience, and as a consequence have been widely produced, published,

studied, and anthologized. Randy Reyes, the Artistic Director for the Minneapolis-based Asian American theatre company Mu Performing Arts suggests that, in choosing *M. Butterfly* for its 2009 season, “the Guthrie chose to stage a Tony award-winning play, not an Asian play.”⁴⁷

Most of Hwang’s texts are inspired by works in the American dramatic canon, suggesting his desire to situate the Asian American experience in the broader American narrative. He has gone so far as to attempt to “fix” popular but problematic works such as the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song*. How far, though, does that suggest compromise? Does his desire to create an Asian American narrative that echoes and responds to classic staging of the American experience deny the difference of the Asian American reality? And how does audience cross-cultural proficiency, or awareness of imbedded racial or cultural assumptions, influence the interpretation of texts written by playwrights from under-represented identity groups? The title of Samuel Huntington’s book, *Who Are We?* (2004), largely concerned with the growth of the Hispanic population, nonetheless surely reflects a basic American concern, this, after all, Native Americans aside, being an immigrant country in which the negotiation of identities is central and in constant flux.

In this dissertation, I will analyze and discuss the plays of David Henry Hwang, with a focus on selected works that have been mainstream successes, and, in one case, a high profile failure. I have approached it as a “critical biography,” as I provide an analysis of the texts as well as a discussion of his life, and the critical and public reception to the various plays. I will consider his use of structure, staging, costuming, and gender and racial performance techniques to interrogate the nature of identity. With

respect to several of his major works, I will explore his use of intertextual references,⁴⁸ and his desire to situate his work within the history and context of both Orientalist narratives and literature as well as the major works in the American dramatic canon.

I will consider Hwang's ambiguous role as a voice for Asian Americans and the implications and consequences of that role, as well as the autobiographical dimensions to his plays. I will place his work in the context of the discourse on Asian American identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and in fact, why his own evolution provides insight, or a "case study" of sorts, into shifts in the broader understanding of identity in America.

Finally, I will explore some of the possible reasons his work transcends the confines of racial or cultural identity, finding a place in the American dramatic canon, and why, perhaps paradoxically, this has been a source of criticism of his work. Jo Lee has suggested that, "to call a playwright, a play, or a theater Asian American inevitably conjures an image of Asian America as a coherent whole, promoting a dangerously simplistic racial category that erases diversity within itself."⁴⁹ Hwang works and lives in this liminal Asian American identity space.

My methodology has involved several research foci. The first is a close reading and study of the complete body of works written by David Henry Hwang over the course of his career. The texts I have chosen for analysis in this work reflect my desire to concentrate on his exploration of Asian American and American identity, and indeed issues of representation and authority in general. The second focus entailed a comprehensive review of the body of existing scholarship on Hwang's work, with an emphasis on the response of critics and scholars to identity representation in his work in

general, and Asian American or American identity more specifically. The third focus involved research on the history of Asian Americans including, but not limited to, the definition and evolution of the term and community and the ongoing discourse on the construction and performance of an Asian American identity in theatre.

Additionally, I attempt to ground the work in response to the general dominant dramatic texts of the American canon, particularly those of the second half of the 20th Century. As I discuss later, this is a specific and articulated goal of Hwang's and, therefore, critical to an understanding of his work. Finally, I integrate gender, sexuality, and post-colonial studies and theory, particularly as they relate to identity performance, throughout.

I have included perspectives gained through interviews with several noteworthy Asian American artists and scholars as well. I felt a responsibility to include Asian American perspectives and voice to my work, particularly as I have chosen to focus on a topic based on a lived experience I, myself, have not had.

In 2012, I had an opportunity to meet David Henry Hwang at the Comparative Drama Conference, where he was the keynote speaker. This led to an active correspondence and interviews, and, ultimately, the opportunity to organize and have full access to his archival materials from approximately 1994-2002, including correspondence, numerous versions of scripts, and research he requested to be compiled during his writing. I additionally reviewed earlier unpublished materials in his archives at Stanford University or as generously shared by Hwang himself. It is my hope that the unprecedented access I have had, both to the documents and to the author,

contribute to the existing body of scholarship, pose new questions, and shed light on his work in a unique way.

I am by no means the first scholar to embark on study of the work of David Henry Hwang. His Tony award-winning play *M. Butterfly*, in particular, has generated an enormous amount of scholarship, and studies of Asian American drama and literature inevitably include discussion of his work. This critical attention certainly contributes to his fascination as a subject.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude William C. Boles and Esther Lee Kim. Boles' book *Understanding David Henry Hwang* (2013) was the first comprehensive study of Hwang's work published, as part of the "Understanding Contemporary American Literature" series,⁵⁰ and includes detailed biographical information as well as excellent and comprehensive analyses of his plays. Theatre historian Esther Kim Lee's books *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006) and *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* (2015) were invaluable to my research. Kim's books situate Hwang's career and work in the context of simultaneous movements, conversations and controversies in Asian American studies and theatre, and, along with discussion on the plays themselves, provide detailed production notes and history.

The scholarship of Josephine Lee, particularly her book *Performing Asian America* (1997), has been equally influential. Lee's early exploration of the emergent themes, challenges, and influences in the Asian American theatre movement provided a critical foundation for my study of Hwang's work.

My study of Hwang's work will, however, focus on the question of cultural and national identity, the tension in his life and work which is surely key to an understanding

of his changing attitudes as exemplified in his plays. Additionally, the opportunity to integrate Hwang's own responses and reflections on his work, often with the benefit of hindsight, provides new perspective on the works themselves.

As students and scholars are likely to be studying individual works by Hwang in isolation, it is useful to highlight a few consistent aspects to his work worth noting or that assist in accessing his intended themes. Hwang is a meticulous craftsman, and in his writing almost nothing is done without deliberate intention. His subtlety and the particular cultural contexts, however, can obscure his meaning at time. I have, therefore, chosen to highlight aspects of his life and writing style that are of use in studying and understanding his work.

David Henry Hwang was born on August 11, 1957, in Southern California. He is the son of immigrant parents. His father, Henry, the "second son" of a wealthy Shanghai businessman, initially came as a student, eventually graduating from the University of Southern California. He went on to a successful career in banking. Dorothy Huang, David's mother, was of Chinese heritage, but grew up in the Philippines, where her family were wealthy merchants. She came to the US as a student at the University of Southern California, while also having the goal of becoming a concert pianist. The two met at a university dance in 1952, married, and settled in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California. David has two younger siblings, Mimi and Grace.⁵¹

His experience as a first generation American was significant in a number of ways. As immigrants, his parents "chose" America. Henry Hwang founded the first federally-chartered Asian American bank in the continental United States, the Far East National Bank.⁵² Henry Hwang was a devoted patriot, a staunch believer in the

American dream, who grew up watching American films, listening to Frank Sinatra, and romanticizing the country's promise. This patriotism is a theme in *Yellow Face*, but, perhaps, also helps account for Hwang's own underlying optimism and ongoing commitment to the American project.

His mother's family diaspora, by way of the Philippines, is equally influential, adding a layer of complexity and, perhaps, affording him an enhanced ability to engage with the broader Asian experience. Hwang visited his family in the Philippines before going to China, hence his youthful impressions of Asia were, admittedly, more informed by the Philippines than China.⁵³

Both of his parents came from affluent families. Their immigrant experience was not one of struggle, at least not in the economic sense. Their focus was on pursuing education and opportunities, but they chose, and could afford, to reside in wealthy, white, suburbia. Unlike the playwright Frank Chin, Hwang never lived the American Chinatown experience.

His parents chose to assimilate and did not teach their children to speak Chinese. As a result, certain tropes within the Asian American canon, such as the Chinatown experience, were not necessarily such that he could explore or stage them with any authority. And yet it is, perhaps, this experience of being an outsider on multiple levels, not Asian enough for the Asian Americans, and too Asian to assimilate into white culture, that determined his voice and perspective.

Dorothy's family were devout Evangelical Christians. Upon their engagement, Dorothy required Henry to convert, which he did, despite not being religious himself. Fundamentalist Christianity was central to his family's life, and yet their belief system

retained elements of Chinese ancestor worship. The impact of religion is a prominent issue in several of his plays, as are supernatural elements. His 1981 play *Family Devotions* portrays a family reunion, turned prayer meeting, where family histories and relationships become complicated, exposing secrets and lies. Hwang freely admits that the play was inspired by his own family, and is largely autobiographical, with the character of Chester personifying a young David.⁵⁴

Golden Child, first staged in 1996, depicts the family's conversion in China, and is based on stories Hwang's grandmother shared with him as a child. Ghosts and family worship are intertwined with Christian morality. In 1986's *Rich Relations*, the ending features a miracle of sorts, death and resurrection on the balcony of a home in the Hollywood Hills.

His use of space, time, reality, and memory bear the influence of Chinese culture, and are flexible constructs in his plays. Ancient Chinese warrior gods are in Los Angeles in *FOB*, and dead ancestors characters in *The Golden Child* and *Kung Fu*. He blurs the conventions of realism without completely abandoning them. Memory is proven unreliable and appearances deceiving. He seems to take delight in exposing the fragility of the assumptions we bring to the theatre, exposing tropes even as he subverts them. He breaks conventional theatrical walls only to expose internal walls still intact.

Dorothy Hwang was a piano instructor and performed professionally, so David grew up around music and musical performance, and is a proficient violinist in his own right. He played in the orchestra for several musical productions in high school, and in college played electric violin in an all-Asian rock band called Bamboo.⁵⁵ The impact his grounding in music has had on his plays is profound. He approaches playwriting as if

developing a musical score, and incorporates music in almost every play he writes, from the 80's pop soundtrack of *FOB*, to the reverberating gongs of *M. Butterfly*, and the music of the indigenous Dong ethnic group used in *Yellow Face*.

While he is best known as a playwright, Hwang has also had an impressive career in opera and musical theatre. He has written multiple opera librettos, including *1000 Airplanes On the Roof* (1988), *The Voyage* (1992), *The Silver River* (1997), *The Sound of a Voice* (2003) (adapted from his play by the same name), *Ainadamar (Fountain of Tears)*, (2005), *Alice in Wonderland* (2007), *The Fly* (2008), and *An American Soldier* (2014).

He has had success as a libretto writer for multiple high-profile musicals. In 2000, he co-wrote the book for *Aida* with Elton John and Tim Rice, and adapted the book of the 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song* for Broadway, which was nominated for a Tony award for Best Book of a Musical. He wrote the book for the Disney-produced musical *Tarzan* in 2006.

In 1993 he was asked to write lyrics for a song written by his musical idol, Prince, and the song "Solo" appears as a B-side on the 1994 album "Come."

He has also written an extensive number of film and TV scripts, including the screenplay for the 1994 film *Golden Gate*, starring Matt Dillon and Joan Chen, while co-writing the screenplay for the 2002 film *Possession*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart. He adapted his own play *M. Butterfly* into the draft of the screenplay for David Cronenberg's 1993 film version. Most recently, he has been acting as a co-producer and writer on the Showtime series *The Affair*.

Hwang was a champion debater in high school, and actually transferred, from San Gabriel High School to Harvard School in Los Angeles, after being recruited by the debate team.⁵⁶ This grounding in the art of debate becomes a signature element in every play Hwang writes. He has an uncanny ability to present both sides of a question, often being more interested in the debate than privileging one perspective or argument. He is a dialectical thinker who can hold contradictory thoughts in his mind simultaneously, and writes plays that require the audience to think in the same way.

He does not, however, privilege intellect over instinct. In her book *The Theatre of David Hwang* (2015), Esther Kim Lee suggests that, “these two impulses — one highly rational and the other deeply instinctual— coexist in Hwang’s mind.”⁵⁷ He still writes initial drafts in illegible long-hand on yellow legal pads, a habit he developed as a debater, and which he feels inspires his creativity. He admits to often incorporating an “ideological duality” into the structure of his plays.⁵⁸ To understand Hwang’s work is to understand the intellectual and emotional debates in which he is constantly internally engaged.

He enjoys the interrogation and scholarship of his own works with an, at times, almost disconcerting openness to interpretation. He clearly enjoys hearing reactions, valuing the opinions of students and scholars alike. He has confessed, “I’m not one of these people who believe that the author is the final authority on the work.”⁵⁹ It is rare for him to disagree with an interpretation, often replying to specific queries by saying “I think that is fair to say...” or “I don’t know why I did that.” I have yet to have him deny a possible interpretation. It is almost as if his work is a constant exercise in

psychoanalysis, and he invites audiences, students, and scholars alike to join him on his couch.

His style, particularly in his early works, bears elements associated with “magical realism,” and while that may be a broad definition, his work does, in fact, often include elements of fantasy. Space and time are fluid, while the gods, dead ancestors, and protagonists interact. Hwang’s particular take on magical realism incorporates elements of Chinese Opera and Asian motifs, using Orientalist fantasy to decenter.

There are autobiographical aspects to the majority of his plays. Whether it is the inclusion of a young Asian American male who plays the violin (*Family Devotions* and *Trying to Find Chinatown*), an Asian man struggling with his confidence and masculinity (*FOB* and *Bondage*), or a character who is literally him (*Golden Child* and *Yellow Face*), David is ever-present. He has said he thinks that, “all authors create characters who are manifestations of themselves in one way or another,”⁶⁰ yet his are more transparent than most. In fact, multiple characters in his plays have autobiographical roots. Thus, Marcus in *Yellow Face*, can be read as the alter ego to the more obviously autobiographical character of DHH. He has gone so far as to admit this in interviews, stating, “they’re all autobiographical...they all explore something that I need to work out for myself.”⁶¹

It is, to some degree, ironic that most of his work should center on the cultural identity of which he was oblivious as a child. He claims to have been relatively unaware of this “otherness,” although he remembers feeling uncomfortable with portrayals of the few Asian characters he saw on TV or in film, recognizing that he “looked different” from most of his classmates.⁶² This anxiety, subconscious or not, contributed to an epiphany,

of sorts, during his time as an undergraduate at Stanford University. When offered the opportunity to explore Asian and Asian American culture through a critical and academic lens, including living in an Asian American dormitory, he pursued an understanding of his identity with the energy of a zealot.

Hwang has identified various stages in term of his personal identity development. He refers to the first as his “assimilationist” phase, or what he calls “the desire to ‘out white the whites.’”⁶³ He discusses this trajectory in detail in the introduction to a collection of his early plays, *FOB and Other Plays*, published in 1990:

The Asian child sees America defined as predominantly of one color. Wanting to be part of this land, he attempts to become the same. The difficulty is, of course, that this is not possible; our inability to become white at will can produce terrible self-loathing.⁶⁴

He goes on to discuss the negative psychological impact of the constant failure to successfully assimilate.

The next stage he identifies is what he has called his “isolationist-nationalist” phase, coinciding with his time at Stanford and his early playwriting years. This stage was characterized by an exploration of, and engagement with, his Chinese American ethnicity, and the broader Asian American community. This was a fertile time for his writing, and he still believes in the value of healing lost self-esteem through the comfort of “interacting with members of one’s own group.” He does, though, suggest this should, at best, be a transitory stage, intimating that it is “self-defeating for individuals of any nationality to define their circle of acquaintances primarily by race.”⁶⁵

He subsequently became interested in what he terms “interculturalism.” He saw this as the freedom to identify with multiple identities, including an individual’s root culture, but also integrating other identities. However, today he admits to being less

interested in multiculturalism, suggesting that “multiculturalism posits that different groups see the world differently. But I feel that it’s not enough anymore to just look at that within our own borders. Let’s look at these issues as they apply to the whole world.”⁶⁶ He sees this as being particularly relevant as people work transnationally and navigate in different cultural contexts as part of their daily lives. He also suggests that the Internet and social media allow for identity formation, manipulation, and disclosure in ways that were previously unimaginable, feeling that “it has become pointless to say ‘I’m only this’ or ‘I’m only that.’”⁶⁷

I recently asked him if he felt his 1990 observation that the Asian American child saw America as “one color” was still true. He responded, “I think that’s less true today, particularly when it comes to U.S.-born Asian Americans, (though) Asians who immigrate to America may still think of America as predominantly white, due to U.S. movies and television, which continue to portray an overwhelmingly Caucasian society.”⁶⁸

His studies at Stanford University, where he received a BA in English Literature, were particularly formative. He feels his grounding in literature has been invaluable. He went on to spend a year in the Yale playwriting program, but did not complete the degree. Nonetheless, he values the time he spent getting “a firmer grasp of theatre history,”⁶⁹ but as he was already having plays produced in New York and had no aspirations to teach, he left the program. He is now, ironically, an associate professor in the playwriting program at Columbia University.

His plays are often inspired by two elements: a question and a desire to experiment with form. He has said, “For each play I do, I feel that I need to have a

question that I'm trying to answer; I want to know basically where I'm starting and where I'm ending; and then there's some kind of formal experiment."⁷⁰ He cites examples such as staging a "mockumentary" in *Yellow Face*, integrating Chinese dialogue to an unprecedented degree in *Chinglish*, and making a martial arts based "dancical" in *Kung Fu*. He likes the notion of pushing performance and genres in new and provocative directions, often starting with the question "can this be done?"⁷¹

He suggests that he often initiates his process knowing where he is beginning, and often where he will end, but not *how* he will get there, comparing his writing to a road trip, allowing for surprises along the way.⁷²

His plays are almost always inspired by other texts he admires, but he tends to depart from such works. Thus, he has said that the structure of *M. Butterfly* was highly influenced by Peter Schaffer's plays *Equus* (1973) and *Amadeus* (1979).⁷³ These works are narrated by protagonists after the action has taken place, but where Schaffer's narrators retain control of the story, he wondered what would happen if his narrator lost such control. Similarly, he had long admired *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), and during meetings in China, as he noted the inadequacy of language, the idea of staging a bilingual version, set in China, was born.⁷⁴

Perhaps because he enjoys the dialogue, engaging with others about his work, and also because he is an artist who has learned to manage and exploit his celebrity, there are an overwhelming number of interviews with Hwang available. He has a Facebook page and is active on Twitter. He is interested in the development of a web-based site dedicated to his works, and as a repository for related scholarship and

sources. He was influential and involved in the 2016 establishment of the David Henry Hwang society.

Hwang was briefly married in the 1980s to Ophelia Chong, a Chinese Canadian artist. He later met, and in 1993 married, Kathryn Lanyng, a TV and stage actress who was cast in the Broadway production of *M. Butterfly*. They have two children, Noah and Eva. He currently lives in Brooklyn.

Organization of Thesis

The organization of this thesis follows a chronological approach to Hwang's work, focusing on selected texts. The chapter themes reflect Hwang's evolution, both in terms of particular concerns at various points in his career to date, as well as his own admitted identity development journey. While the chapters do reflect a loose chronology, I have chosen to suggest foci or subtle shifts in style that I see as relevant to his maturation as a playwright. The chapter titles reflect these stages.

Each chapter features analyses of selected plays by David Henry Hwang written during a stated span of years. I have attempted to additionally include foci for each chapter that I believe are relevant to his evolution as a playwright and reflect the particular concerns, as well as trends in American theatre that influenced his work at various points of his career to date. In the spirit of the critical biography approach, I discuss each play in the context of Hwang's life and maturation as a playwright, as well as the cultural context reflected at the time and in the locations of the various productions. I discuss noteworthy elements of staging and costuming, particularly as they relate to the performance of race and culture. I detail the structure, character

development, and relevant themes of each work, with an additional emphasis on their relationship or response to other works in literature, film, or the American dramatic canon. Each chapter encapsulates relevant stages of Hwang's career, but also intentionally situates the discussion in the broader context of American theatre and culture.

In Chapter 1, "Creating a Chinese American Narrative," I discuss Hwang's early plays, in particular his use of Chinese mythology, history, and immigration to the US to create a previously under-represented Chinese American narrative. His breakout play, written while still a student at Stanford, is *FOB* (1979). *FOB* features Chinese mythological warrior characters as "alter egos" for two college students meeting in a Chinese restaurant in 80's LA. The play explores the dynamic and clashes between "FOBs" (Fresh Off the Boat) and ABC's (American Born Chinese).

His second play, *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), portrays two immigrant railroad workers forging trust and friendship through teaching and learning the performance of Chinese dance, while facing the abuse and hardship involved in their indenture to the railroad company.

I discuss these works as historical and immigration-themed dramas, attempting to tell a Chinese American version of classic American stories. I will address how they contribute a new perspective to classic American narratives, and the aspects that suggest their universality.

Several of Hwang's plays focus on intimacy and vulnerability in sexual relationships, particularly across race and culture. In Chapter 2, "Staging Intimacy," I discuss how *The House of Sleeping Beauties* (1983) and *The Sound of a Voice* (1983)

are departures from his previous work and precursors to his later plays, particularly *M. Butterfly*. Both take place in Japan, and feature male characters lured to danger and death by women. These two plays are also significant in that he incorporates several theatrical and narrative devices that he will become signature elements of future work.

Chapter 3 focuses exclusively on his best-known play to date. *M. Butterfly* (1988) uses the real life story of the relationship between a French diplomat and a Chinese cross-dresser, as well as the plot of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, to explore the exoticification of the East by the West, and consider the impact of historical narratives on modern stereotypes.

I trace his use of intimate spaces and sexual relationships to explore desires, fetishes, and fears, particularly those with a racial or cultural dimension. In particular, I discuss his use of drag and costuming. I also address and provide a summary of the extensive scholarship this text has generated. In particular, I address the criticism *M. Butterfly* has received for reinforcing orientalist stereotypes.

Hwang has attempted to challenge assumptions about race and the politics of authority. In particular, his plays in the 1990s sought to explore the representations of Asians in American culture, and the complexities of race in American society. Chapter 4, "Exploring Face," focuses on these years. His most public failure is *Face Value* (1993), which attempted to use farce to satirize controversies around essentialist casting and the portrayal of Asian characters in drama. This unpublished work is the precursor to *Yellow Face*, which Hwang often characterizes as his attempt to "fix" *Face Value*.

In the one-act *Bondage* (1992), racial fantasies are played out by a couple in an “S and M” parlor, as they explore and challenge notions of race, and risk intimacy. It is his most intimate work to date, and one he refuses to discuss in interviews.

In the one-act *Trying to Find Chinatown* (1996), he challenges the relationship between biological race and family culture by portraying a Caucasian character adopted by a Chinese American family, exploring his father’s roots in New York City.

In this chapter, I map his attempts to address racial politics and issues of authority and representation over the arc of these years, and consider his position and role as a high profile Chinese American playwright.

In Chapter 5, “Re-claiming Asian American Identity,” I discuss his re-engagement with his heritage and family in the play *Golden Child* (1996), based on the life of his grandmother, and her family’s conversion to Christianity. I also discuss his one-act *Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet* (2000), in which he interrogates questions of authority and authenticity as they relate to art and literature.

Hwang’s autobiographical “docudrama” *Yellow Face* (2007) represents a reconciliation of sorts, as he reflects on his career, family, and Asian Americans in contemporary US society, using satire and self-deprecation as his deconstructive tools. This deeply personal work melds fact and fiction and provides insight into his personal evolution as an artist, an advocate, and as an Asian American.

In recent years, Hwang has shifted his interest from the multicultural to the international. This is reflected in his bilingual play *Chinglish* (2011), which is the primary focus of Chapter 6, “Beyond America.” This work uses subtitles and farcical elements to explore the challenges inherent in cross cultural communication and translation,

portraying an American businessman's attempt to win a large contract for signs in a Chinese cultural center. The play includes Chinese, American, and British characters. I will consider the questions of representation that his shift to writing Chinese characters pose. I will also examine the broader themes of cross cultural communication and culturally relative business practices, ethics, and diaspora he explores.

In his most recent work, the "dansical" *Kung Fu* (2014), Hwang experiments with movement to stage the biography of Kung Fu icon Bruce Lee. Hwang's study of Lee considers how Asian American identity is influenced by the broader global Asian context.

While I have chosen to focus on selected works for my study, a comprehensive list of Hwang's works appears in the bibliography. I have interwoven references to works not included for in-depth analysis where appropriate.

1. A hyphenated identity is one that incorporates multiple cultural, racial, sexual, or other aspects of personal identifications such as Asian American or African American.

2. For further reading on the representation of identity in American drama, see William W. Demastes and Inish Smith Fischer, *Interrogating America Through Theatre and Performance* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance* (London: Continuum, 2005).

3. For further reading on American identity, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

4. Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 291.

5. For useful reading on race and gender performance in American theatre see Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) in addition to Demastes and Smith Fischer, *Interrogating America*, and Uno and San Pablo Burns, *The Color of Theater*.

6. Demastes and Smith Fischer, 5.

7. Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 3.

8. Harvey Young, *Theatre & Race* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

9. "Black face" refers to the practice of using stage makeup to perform black characters and often included distorted facial features. This practice was common in nineteenth-century American theatre and featured in popular minstrel shows. The practice did not end until the Civil Rights Movements in 1960s. Similarly, "yellow face" refers to the same practice for Asian characters. While less common than in the past, this practice still exists to varying degrees.

10. Young, *Theatre & Race*, 41.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid, 36-46.

13. For a full discussion of the debate between August Wilson and Robert Brustein in 1996-1997 and an analysis of the related discussions on assimilation versus African American identity-based theatre, see Catanese, *Problem of the Color[blind]* pages 37-68.

14. Catanese, *Problem of the Color[blind]*, 47.

15. Ibid, 48-51.

16. Brian Eugenio Herrera, *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 9. Herrera defines "popular performance" as those practices and products within expressive culture that are 1) animated by a performer's voice, body, and words; and 2) developed to be "widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated; and widely viewed or heard or read," 9.

17. Herrera, *Latin Numbers*, 18-54.

18. Catanese, *Problem of the Color[blind]*, 17.

19. Ibid., 6.

20. Marsha Norman, "Why The Count Matters," *The Lilly Awards*, Nov.-Dec. 2015, <http://www.thelillyawards.org/media/2016/06/The-Count-by-The-Lilly-Awards-Dramatists-Guild.pdf>, accessed August 6, 2017.

21. For further reading on the queer theatre, see David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

22. Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 76.

23. Intersectionality refers to the influence or recognition of multiple identities of an individual or artists and attempts to acknowledge that identities are multifaceted. An artist may equally identify with racial, gendered, or sexual identities and resist one being perceived as dominant.

24. For further reading on female gender performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), and Carole-Anne Tyler, *Female Impersonation* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

25. For more reading on color-blind casting, see Catanese, *Problem of the Color[blind]*, 60-71, Young, *Theatre & Race*, 56-63; and Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theatre*, 42-64 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010).

26. Catanese, *Problems of the Color[bllind]*, 39.

27. Herrera, *Latin Numbers*, 58.

28. Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 23.

29. Herrera, *Latin Numbers*, 59.

30. Marvin Edward McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1.

31. Ibid., 5.

32. Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 61.

33. Ibid. 149.

34. For useful reading on the history, development, and definitions of Asian American identity see Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity On the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998); and David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

35. For a comprehensive study of Asian American cultures and immigration see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

36. Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 7.

37. Ibid., 8.

38. Ibid., 31.

39. Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 474.

40. Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 35.

41. Ibid., 35.

42. Maria C. Zamora, *Nation, Race and History in Asian American Literature: Remembering the Body* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 28.

43. Ibid.

44. For a complete history of the first four Asian American theatre companies, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42-91.

45. David Henry Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays* (New York: Plume, 1990), xiii.

46. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 5.

47. Randy Reyes (Artistic Director of Mu Performing Arts), interviewed by the author, May 17, 2016.

48. Intertextuality refers to literary texts that specifically respond to and actively reference other texts. For an in-depth study, see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

49. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 23.

50. The Understanding Contemporary American Literature series is offered by the University of South Carolina Press and is envisioned as “guides of companions for student as well as good nonacademic readers,”
<https://www.sc.edu/uscp/press/about.html>.

51. William C. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 2-5.

52. “History & Profile,” Far East National Bank, n.d.,
<https://www.fareastnationalbank.com/about-us/history-profile/>, accessed May 17, 2017.

53. David Henry Hwang (Asian American playwright), interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

54. Ibid.

55. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, 6.

56. Ibid., 5.

57. Esther Kim Lee, *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 3.

58. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

59. Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., “A Conversation with David Henry Hwang,” *Text and Presentation* 11 (2014):15.

60. Ibid., 15.

61. Ibid., 14.

62. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

63. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xii.

64. Ibid., xi.

65. Ibid., xiii.

66. Qtd. in Dennis Polkow, "Chinglish Lessons: The Playwright on the Chicago summer of David Henry Hwang," Newcity Stage, published June 15, 2011, <http://www.newcitystage.com/2011/06/15/chinglish-lessons-the-playwright-on-the-chicago-summer-of-david-henry-hwang/>.

67. Wetmore, "A Conversation with David Henry Hwang," 15.

68. Hwang, email message to the author, June 17, 2016.

69. David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001), 120.

70. Wetmore, "A Conversation With David Henry Hwang," 7.

71. Ibid., 9.

72. Ibid., 7.

73. Hwang, email message to the author, April 4, 2015.

74. Wetmore, "A conversation with David Henry Hwang," 11-12.

Chapter I: Creating a Chinese American Narrative

While the perspective, culture, and history of various cultural identity groups in the US varies significantly, they do have elements in common. The project to create an Asian American narrative, however, presents several additional challenges. As noted earlier, the term itself is problematic, representing multiple ethnic and national heritages, even as they do share a history of immigration discrimination.

This systemic and institutionalized discrimination began with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act was signed into law in May 1882, and denied US citizenship to thousands of Chinese laborers who had been encouraged to come to the US to build the railroads or immigrated during the Gold Rush. Legislation based on race was not new in US law. The Naturalization Law of 1790 specified that citizenship should be reserved for “whites.” But as Ronald Takaki points out in *Strangers From A Different Shore* (1998), the 1882 Act singled out individuals of Chinese origin and established, for the first time, the practice of discrimination in public policy based solely on race and culture.¹

In 1924 the National Origins Act prohibited Japanese immigration, while simultaneously permitting and supporting immigration and community building for Irish, Italian, Polish, and other European immigrant communities. This same law made provisions for, and in fact encouraged, European immigrants to bring wives “home.” Thus, the same law that encouraged the establishment of families and communities by European immigrants denied the same right and practice to Asian immigrants. The law barred entry into the US for women from China, Japan, Korea, and India. Asian wives of US citizens were ineligible for citizenship and inadmissible to the country, while, based

on the 1790 Naturalization Law, Asian immigrants were denied basic rights such as voting and land or property ownership. Shockingly, this law remained in effect until 1952.²

The most tragic manifestation of institutionalized discrimination against Asian Americans is undoubtedly Executive Order 9066, the law that denied Japanese Americans their most basic rights during World War II. The resulting persecution included the internment of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were American citizens by birth.

The Immigration Act of 1965 changed immigration patterns from Asia significantly, and permanently, by increasing quotas and allowing family members in on a non-quota basis. The result has been a dramatic growth in the Asian American population, from just under 900,000 in 1960 to approximately 17,321,000 according to the 2012 US Census.³ This represents a rise from 0.5% of the US population to 5% in a span of 50 years. Collectively, Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the US.

Yet, as Takaki points out, “very little is known about Asian Americans and their history. In fact, stereotypes and myths of Asians as aliens and foreigners are pervasive in American society.”⁴ A recounting of statistics, laws, and discriminatory policies does not tell the whole story, but in this case the impact of the legal history is useful in considering the emerging Asian American literary canon and narratives. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong suggests that Asian Americans are “permanent houseguests in the house of America.”⁵ The work of Hwang, and other Asian American writers, can be seen as an attempt to tell an underrepresented American story.

The profound impact these restrictive and extreme policies for citizenship have had on the Asian American community cannot be overstated, not least because they helped create the pervasive stereotypes often associated with Asian Americans. The exclusion of women, and the inability to reunite with wives, can be argued to have contributed to still pervasive perceptions that Asian males were asexual or homosexual. The inability to own land or property resulted in the need for immigrants to live in insular “Chinatowns,” perhaps unintentionally suggesting a preference for isolation from the broader community and a resistance to assimilation.

Asian Americans remained culturally marginalized well into the 20th century, and, by a combination of choice and exclusion, were not included in the equal rights agenda of the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ Meanwhile, the seeds of the Asian American theatre movement were planted in reaction to the continued prevalence and acceptance of “yellow face” casting on Broadway and in films well into the 1970s, far beyond a timeline in which “black face” became unacceptable.⁷

In 1968, a group of actors formed the “Oriental Actors of America” group to organize and formally protest the casting of non-Asians as Asian characters. This led to the development of several high profile projects, most notably the production of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Pacific Overtures*, directed by Harold Prince. *Pacific Overtures*’ Broadway debut in January 1976 featured an all-Asian American cast and went on to tour the US.⁸

In her book *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2011), Esther Lee Kim discusses the history and establishment of the first four major Asian American theatre companies: the Los Angeles-based East West Players, the San Francisco-based Asian

American Theatre Company, the Seattle-based Northwest Asian American Theatre, and the New York-based Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. While she suggests that the four companies shared the common goal of creating “a space for the development and expression of Asian American theatre,”⁹ she stresses that their objectives and strategies for achieving that goal varied.

Early founders and stakeholders sought a range of outcomes. Priorities included the staging of “classics” with roles played by Asian American actors, providing access to better training for Asian American actors, the development of new works staging Asian American experiences, and providing employment for Asian American actors, directors, designers, etc. While David Henry Hwang did not emerge directly from the movement, he benefitted from the advocacy efforts of its founders.

The shared concerns of Asian Americans, as well as the emergence of specific cultural groups, were central to the growing body of works in the Asian American dramatic and literary canon. Asian American dramatists increasingly sought to stage their history through stories of immigration, assimilation, and marginalization. Genny Lim’s 1982 play *Paper Angels* incorporates real poems scratched into prison walls by detained immigrants interned at the notorious Angel Island facility in San Francisco. Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lessons* (1977) and Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch* (1970) portray Japanese agricultural workers struggling with assimilation and persecution. Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) express the frustration and disenfranchisement of second and third generation Chinese Americans.

The project to create a body of identifiably Asian American works, however, faced several additional challenges, in that the “new” narrative being constructed also needed to subvert what Josephine Lee classifies as “the common legacy of misrepresentation.”¹⁰ American theatre has a long history of depicting “Orientals” on stage, usually limited to a few trope characters including Fu Manchu-style villains, evil seductress dragon-ladies, emasculated servants, and fragile lotus blossoms.¹¹ This history is complicated by the accepted use of Caucasian actors in exaggerated “yellow face” who performed these cliché Asian characters well into the 20th century, echoing the broader cultural exclusion of Asian Americans from society.

The desire to create a body of theatrical works authored and performed by Asian Americans can thus be understood as a desire to perform an identity denied by stereotypical roles and characterizations. In Philip Gotanda’s play *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1986), two Asian American actors struggle to make a living and find roles that don’t require them to perform and reinforce stereotypes they recognize as negative. The writing and producing of plays, and the resulting employment for Asian Americans in the arts, has always been part of the Asian American theatre and performance agenda.

In considering what defines this new emerging Asian American dramatic canon, Josephine Lee suggests that what Asian American plays often do have in common “are certain theatrical strategies that make issues of performance, dramatic form, and audience response inseparable from considerations of ethnicity and race.”¹² Indeed, in her book *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (1997), Dorinne Kondo suggests that the whole of the Asian American coalition project is, by its very nature, performative.¹³

I met with and interviewed two founders of the Minneapolis-based and nationally recognized Mu Performing Arts theatre company, playwright Rick Shiomi and theatre professor Dr. Martha B. Johnson, to discuss the evolution and role of Asian American theatre from their perspective.¹⁴ Mu, which was established in 1992, is now one of the largest pan-Asian American theatre companies in the US. Hwang accepted and maintains a role as a member of Mu's Honorary Advisory Council.

Shiomi reflected on the origins of the company and the influences that informed its development. The relatively small Asian American population in Minnesota grew dramatically in the 1980s, due in large part to an influx of Vietnamese and Hmong (Laotian) refugees who settled there. The Asian American community was also characterized by a high rate of adoptions from Korea in the early 1990s. From the very beginning, Mu's mission focused on the development of new and original works telling stories that would resonate with Minnesota's Asian American community. This was not, as it turned out, an easy venture. Shiomi points out that many Asian American plays seek to stage "an Asian American version of a Western theatrical form," but theatres and emerging companies did not address the fact that Western theatre was so dissimilar to popular Asian performance that it was not readily appealing or accessible, even when the content sought to stage Asian American themes or experiences.

Audiences, it seemed, did not tend to cross heritages. Both recall that, particularly in the early years, Chinese audiences would attend a play by a Chinese American, but not be interested in Vietnamese American works. This was true across the various communities and ethnicities.

Shiomi is a great believer in the role of Asian American theatre companies, pointing out that the production of Asian American stories supports assimilation by contributing to a shared narrative. He goes on to suggest that, “at the same time, by the very nature of Asian American identity, culture, and community, you are creating an anti-assimilation spin” because those members of the audience “understand there is an element of separateness that they live with and should value.”

They recall that early workshops produced “horrendously frightening escape stories,” and reflected the deep desire of these refugee communities to tell their stories. Casting, staging and choreography quickly became hybrid, not by design so much as because of the shortage of actors and artists, and the diverse cultural backgrounds of the few artists involved. The director might be Vietnamese American, and the choreographer of Japanese heritage. The resulting works reflected the influence of culturally diverse artists.

Developing local productions of works by higher profile Asian American playwrights has been part of Mu’s mission from its inception, and as a result the company has staged seven plays by David Henry Hwang. While the dominance of Japanese and Chinese American stories and texts has presented some challenges for Mu, Shiomi suggests that this phenomenon was much more prevalent on “the coasts,” and that many second generation Asian American Theatre companies, referencing those established by Korean and Filipinos, were, in fact, frustrated by the exclusionary nature of the more established theatre companies. Shiomi recalls that by the late 1980s New York and San Francisco had so many Asian American theatre practitioners that the

companies became increasingly exclusive, had developed cliques, and were not particularly open to new writers or actors.

Shiomi feels this local saturation on the coasts fostered an organic element in the growth of regional companies that has resulted in a more interesting and complicated body of Asian American drama. For Johnson, Mu is now about “a very different Asian America than the one we jumped into.”

So what is Hwang’s role in staging an Asian American experience? Or as David Savran asks in his preface to his interview with Hwang for *In Their Own Words* (2001): “How, in the land of immigrants, does one deal with one’s heritage and construct a sense of identity?”¹⁵ Hwang’s answer, in his early plays, is to use Chinese mythology, history, and the immigrant experience to create a largely under-represented Chinese American narrative.

Maxine Hong Kingston observes that “telling true stories to one another is very important for those whose histories and literature have been left out of textbooks.”¹⁶ Hwang himself, however, has said that “to the extent that one’s own self-esteem has been damaged by racism in the larger society, it is good and often necessary to become whole by interacting with members of one’s own group. This having been achieved, however, it is self-defeating for individuals of any nationality to define their circle of acquaintances primarily by race”.¹⁷ Perhaps it is this reclaiming of a Chinese identity, this deep personal exploration of its history and complexity, that allows him later to engage with the perceptions of that identity in the dominant American culture so effectively.

FOB

The story of Hwang's first foray into playwriting is, in itself, a legendary version of the American dream. The success of *FOB* catapulted Hwang, at an extraordinarily young age, into the elite circles of mainstream American drama. While it certainly merits consideration as a play independent of the story of its development, the work's evolution from college student senior project text, to dormitory staging, to New York City production is equally compelling.

Hwang entered Stanford University in 1975, with the intention of later going on to law school but, upon arrival, began taking classes in Asian American literature, studying Chinese language, and engaging with on-campus Asian American cultural groups. He eventually changed his major to English and developed an interest in playwriting.

While Hwang's parents, Dorothy and Henry Hwang, were both Chinese immigrants, he has characterized his family "as white European Americans in terms of the things we celebrated."¹⁸ As is demonstrated in his portrayal of Henry Hwang in his 2008 play *Yellow Face*, his father was an enthusiastic advocate for the "American dream." David did not learn to speak Chinese while growing up. He was enrolled in Chinese language classes for a short period in his youth, but his parents wanted him to focus on English proficiency and his other studies. Henry and Dorothy's objective was to assimilate their family into American culture to the extent that David admits, of Chinese heritage, that "it never occurred to me that that had any particular implication or that it should differentiate me in any way."¹⁹

The Hwang family was devoutly Christian, and while his father first came to the US from Shanghai as a student, his mother's Chinese family had lived in the Philippines

since just before World War II. Elements of his experience differ from the dominant Chinese American narrative, though it was during his time at Stanford that his Chinese American identity suddenly became personally significant for him. At the same time he was beginning to write, though he has described *FOB* as “the play (I) wrote when I didn’t know how to write a play.”²⁰

FOB depicts interactions between three college-age students. Dale and Grace are cousins and are “ABC’s” (American Born Chinese), while Steve is an “FOB” (Fresh Off the Boat) international student. In Act I, Steve appears as a customer in Grace’s family’s restaurant. He demands “bing” (a Chinese wheat cake) and goes on to announce himself as Gwan Gung, the Chinese god of warriors, writers, and prostitutes. The two verbally spar and their conversation straddles 1980s LA and ancient China. Grace reveals that she is, in fact, Fa Mu Lan, the iconic Chinese Woman Warrior. Steve is incredulous that the American Chinese do not recognize him or his power, and Grace attempts to educate him about American culture. Dale eventually joins them and a love triangle, of sorts, emerges. Dale and Steve compete for Grace’s attention, at one moment engaging in a humorous battle to eat large quantities of extremely hot sauce.

In Act II, the three determine how and where they should go next. Dale is embarrassed to be seen with Steve, who has hired a limousine and driver for the evening. They agree to play “Group Story” to pass the time. The story culminates in a sword fight between Steve/Gwan Gung and Grace/Fa Mu Lan, and she emerges as victorious. As the action returns to contemporary LA, Grace gives Steve the gift of a box with his desired bing inside, dismisses Dale, and exits with Steve.

Throughout the above events, Hwang incorporates asides and monologues. Grace and Dale's asides provide insight into their lives and anxieties as Chinese Americans, while Steve's represent the experiences and voices of generations of Chinese immigrants coming to the US.

Hwang originally wrote *FOB* as a senior project at Stanford University. In the summer between his junior and senior year he applied for, and was accepted into, workshops as part of the Padua Hills Playwright's Festival, where he was able to meet and work with playwrights Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes. Hwang describes Fornes as "one of the best playwriting teachers on earth,"²¹ feeling that she taught him how to "access (his) subconscious."²² He still uses some of her exercises in his own teaching of playwriting.

As Hwang explained to me, *FOB*'s characters are fictional, but the storyline is based on an actual evening out with his cousin, also named Grace. Hwang and Grace did, in fact, go on a double date, and her date was a student recently arrived from Hong Kong who employed a driver and limousine for their night out in Los Angeles, which included a visit to Westwood where they saw *The Omen II*.²³

Early drafts focused on the limousine ride, but Hwang acknowledges that it failed to cohere until he decided to go "back to the premise of the double date, but to combine it with the Maxine Hong Kingston-like evocation of mythology."²⁴ Hwang's idea to incorporate the two Chinese mythological characters changed the direction of the story, and as a result the action in *FOB* does not leave the restaurant. He also reduced the cast to three, instead of the four on the real-life double date.

His intended initial audience was specifically Asian American students. *FOB* was performed for the first time at the Okada House, an Asian American culture-themed residence hall at Stanford. He admits that his primary interest at that time was in “working with and writing primarily for other Asian Americans.”²⁵ He went on to submit the script to the Eugene O’Neil National Playwrights’ Conference in the summer of 1979. He was accepted, and the play benefitted from further workshop development.

A reading of *FOB* was staged at the conference, and directed by Robert Alan Ackerman. David Oyama, an Asian American journalist, actor, and writer who had actively participated in the New York Asian American theatre movement of the 1970s, attended. Unbeknownst to Hwang, Oyama had an agenda. One year previously, he and other Asian American actors and artists had instigated a protest against the Public Theatre in New York City, in response to its ongoing casting of non-Asian actors in Asian roles and simultaneous denial of Asian actors access to non-Asian roles. In an act of conciliation, the Public Theater’s artistic director, Joseph Papp, had given Oyama a position at the Theater. His mandate was to develop and stage productions by Asian American playwrights and featuring Asian American artists.²⁶

Oyama was impressed by *FOB*, and suggested it to Papp for a possible production and after a reading it was selected and produced the following year, along with Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lesson* (1977), with Makoto Iwamatsu (Mako) directing. Mako had been heavily involved in the establishment of early Asian American actors’ coalitions, and was a founder and artistic director of the successful East West Players in Los Angeles. It was he who suggested the casting of John Lone in the critical

role of Steve. Lone had training in Peking Opera technique, and choreographed the symbolic battle sequences between Steve and Grace for the final version.

Hwang had originally conceived the Asian ritual elements in the play as being staged in an avant-garde style, confessing that while he had always felt that “a blend of Asian and Western theatre would interesting,” he “didn’t know how to go about it.”²⁷ The shift to using elements of Chinese opera proved critical.

The production was a resounding success. Its run at the Public Theater was extended, and it went on to win the 1980 Obie Award for best play, Hwang remaining one of the youngest playwrights to receive it.

Much has been made, by theatre historians and Asian American scholars, of Hwang’s accelerated access to mainstream theatre. He has been criticized for circumnavigating Asian American theatre circles, though he had, in fact, submitted early drafts of *FOB* to the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco the previous year. However, while he had received positive feedback, it was not selected for production.²⁸

What is, perhaps, most significant about the reception of the Public Theatre production of *FOB* is the immediate interest it generated beyond the Asian American community. The idea had originally been to appeal to the Asian American population of New York City, but despite the Public Theater’s efforts, these two inaugural works by Asian American playwrights attracted audiences which were predominantly non-Asian.²⁹ This is not necessarily unusual. Rick Shiomi of the Minneapolis-based Mu Performing Arts confirmed that despite their best marketing efforts, until recently the audience

demographics for their productions tended to be approximately 95% ethnically non-Asian until the last five years or so, with the current rate averaging 30%.³⁰

Shiomi suggests that the historical lack of incorporation of elements that reflect popular performance of Asian cultures contributed to this lack of interest. He pointed out that, “the go-to cultural activity for most Asian American communities is not Western theatre, it is Chinese dance, Japanese dance, or music, or those forms of performance that those in the immigrant community still connected to.”³¹

Both plays failed to draw Asian American audiences, and while *The Music Lesson* received positive reviews, it did not have the crossover appeal of *FOB*. Theatre historian Esther Lee Kim suggests that a large part of the success of that first production of *FOB* “can (and should) be attributed to the star-quality performance of John Lone and the direction of Mako,” but she goes on to interrogate the phenomenon of the play’s interest and success with non-Asian audiences, suggesting that its visual Asian elements fulfilled the mainstream expectation of an “Asian American play.”³² Even from this first work, then, it is evident that Hwang has the ability to stage distinctly Asian elements in dramatic works that resonate with audiences beyond the Asian American community, in part, in my opinion, because he capitalizes on the shared American immigrant narrative.

FOB takes place in “the back room of a Chinese restaurant in Torrance, California” (5).³³ The set is simple, consisting of a table and chairs. Spotlights are used throughout the production for the various monologues and sequences of internal dialogue. As Esther Kim Lee points out, the location is “an inherently assimilated space

in which Americanized Chinese food is served for customers who expect predictable dishes such as Almond Chicken and Chop Suey.”³⁴

The iconic Chinese restaurant situates the story, physically and metaphorically, in a space between Chinese and American cultures. The restaurant represents Chinese heritage and tradition, but embodies the story of Chinese immigration and assimilation into the US. While audience members may be unfamiliar with the myths and characters of Chinese history and culture, the ubiquitous Chinese restaurant is part of mainstream American culture. The location has the effect of normalizing the more surreal elements of the play by placing them in a location both familiar and mundane. As Lee suggests, “such details helped the mainstream audience to identify with character and plot.”³⁵

The restaurant symbolizes this liminal space between China and America, though in terms of the play it is also a contested space, a place of cultural transition. Grace reveals that “Working in a Chinese restaurant, you learn to deal with obnoxious customers...if the customer’s Chinese, you insult them by giving them forks. If the customer’s Anglo, you starve them by not giving forks” (10), thereby separating herself from both groups.

At first, the characters appear to represent archetypical roles in a classic relationship drama, but the conventions of realism are quickly disrupted as Steve introduces himself as the god Gwan Gung, even as his contemporary identity is that of a newly arrived Chinese student, wealthy, rude and ignorant of American culture norms. By ascribing him this dual identity, Hwang suggests that within the reviled “Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB” (7), the character and presence of the warrior god survives. Steve becomes a “shape shifter” of sorts over the course of the play. By turns, he tells Gwan

Gung's heroic Chinese myths, portrays a pleading immigrant in 1914 San Francisco, an 1860's railroad worker persuaded to go to America, and finally a desperate immigrant looking for domestic work.

Similarly, within the persona of the average, suburban, "nice girl" Grace, lies the spirit of Fa Mu Lan, the warrior woman. She seeks to avenge her family's destruction and betrayal at Gwan Gung's hands. She is a patient and waiting ghost, especially in her American identity, because "it is training to wait" (15). She constitutes the center of the story. The contemporary conflict follows the two men's competition for her affection, but she is their equal in the power dynamic and controls the action.

Given the dual identities Hwang assigns to the other two characters, it is noteworthy that Dale has no Chinese or mythological identity. When asked why he denied Dale an alter ego, Hwang responds that his "alter ego has been subsumed by self-loathing."³⁶

Hwang specifies that Grace is first-generation Chinese American, and Dale second generation. Together, the threesome represents a trajectory, or spectrum, of immigration. Steve is newly arrived, Dale American-born, and Grace in a temporal space in-between. The implication seems to be that the further away from a Chinese heritage, the less it evidences itself. Dale is a stereotypical "ABC," with clear anxiety about his identity. His need to differentiate himself from Steve and the "FOBs" underscores tensions within the artificially constructed Asian American community, as they seek to assimilate into the dominant American culture. As Josephine Lee points out, in *FOB*, "character, identity, and self are less coherent constructs. Instead (this

play) emphasizes a contradictory, fragmented self both constructed within capitalistic ideology and negotiating other possibilities and contradictions.”³⁷

Hwang’s use of the term “FOB” for the title is indicative of his desire to stage what he recognizes as a pervasive “pecking order” within the Asian American community, but the title is also consistent with his desire simultaneously to subvert and reinforce stereotype. Many non-Asian audience members will not know the meaning of the term, which is derogative. Therefore, it is potentially uncomfortable for the non-Asian audience member to hear Dale’s opening monologue, performed as a university lecture by actor clearly of Asian ancestry, with its litany of negative characteristics of the “FOB”:

F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Big feet. Horny. Like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. Very good. A literary reference. High-water pants. Floods to be exact. Someone you wouldn’t want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn’t want to marry. That assumes we’re talking about boy FOBs, of course. But girl FOBs aren’t really as...FOBish. Boy FOBs are the worst, the ...pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABC—oh, that’s “American Born Chinese”—of all ABC girls. Before and ABC girl will be seen on a Friday night with a boy FOB in Westwood, she would rather burn off her face. (7)

Dale’s diatribe is cruel, humorous, and goes immediately to the heart of a play in which the complications of identity are staged.

For all its mythological characters and non-linear plot elements Hwang does not completely abandon the conventions of realism. On one level, this is a play about two boys competing in seemingly banal ways for the attention of the same girl, over the course of an evening in which she is forced to choose between the two. On another level, it is the story of a god and a warrior meeting in the new world and battling to settle old scores.

Given that it began in workshop with Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes, Hwang maintains that while his intended audience was the students in the dormitory, it “fit into whatever the American avant-garde playwriting tradition at that moment was.”³⁸ He admits that *FOB* was heavily influenced by Shepard’s play *Angel City* (1976), particularly Steve’s monologues, and the convention of a character “jumping into another character.” To Hwang, its structure has “an internal or theatrical logic to it, but not necessarily any linear logic or linear story logic.”³⁹ There are also clear influences of the Shepard’s laid back vernacular, often characterized as “California cool,” popular in late 1980s American dramatic writing.

In production, the two stories merge surprisingly easily. The elements of the exotic and mythological reinforcing Asian motifs, even as the juxtaposition of the epic and the mundane creates a dramatic balance.

Steve’s first few lines are delivered in Chinese, but switch quickly into English before, on Dale’s entrance, he begins “speaking English with a Chinese accent” (22). Language, in other words is unstable but also becomes an indicator of cultural identity.

Hwang draws attention to linguistic assimilation. All three characters may look racially similar, but it is language which becomes the most important signifier as to their cultural identity. Thus Dale and Grace’s use of slang situates them as Americans, as do the multiple cultural references to disco and California 1980’s culture.

At its heart, *FOB* explores the complex trajectory of identity for the Chinese immigrant and Chinese American. Dale and Grace are both emphatically Chinese American, with an emphasis on American, as they struggle to assimilate into a mainstream culture from which they feel excluded. At the same time it is the characters’

“Chineseness,” which is their bond. Shared history, stories, and experiences force a Chinese/American hybridity.

As the three embark on telling their “group story,” these elements are interwoven, creating a Chinese American metaphor, albeit an absurd one. The story begins with familiar “bedtime story” with echoes of Goldilocks and the three bears, not least because it is about three bears. But it quickly takes a complex and modern twist, as the bears have cancer, with one bear deciding to swim 2000 miles from China to the Cedar Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles for treatment. Gwan Gung and Fa Mu Lan enter the story and engage in combat, ancient stories being mapped onto the modern one. Any attempt, though, to read the play as entirely coherent is likely to be frustrated, not least because it was not so for the author, who confessed, “This is one of those things about FOB that I really cannot explain as an adult. I think it was just purely intuitive, not at all directed or intellectually logical.”⁴⁰

In his opinion, family and cultural history provide “this mysterious thing...this cultural treasure trove.”⁴¹ In *FOB*, Grace and Steve have access to a Chinese cultural collective, but Dale does not. His opening racist monologue expresses the problematics of assimilation. It is his character who opens and closes the story, making this Hwang’s first use of a structural and metatheatrical device he will go on to employ in many of his later plays, including *M. Butterfly*, *Yellow Face*, and *Chinglish*. In the case of *FOB*, Dale repeats much of the dialogue from the opening monologue verbatim as the play ends, though in the end he does so with trepidation, suddenly doubtful rather than confident in his superiority. Dale ends the play by literally touching props and items, artifacts now recognizable to the audience as manifestations of cultural epistemology. He himself

does not recognize their meanings, and when I asked Hwang about this choice he suggested that perhaps the very act of touching and handling them represents the beginning of a journey of rediscovery for Dale.⁴²

Hwang's incorporates the characters of Gwan Gung and Fa Mu Lan but, significantly, his primary sources for exposure to both of these mythical characters are Asian American reinterpretations rather than their traditional Chinese origins.

The character of Fa Mu Lan, or Hua Mulan, dates back to at least sixth century China, when a ballad telling her story was first transcribed. It was retold in the twelfth century, presenting the story of the heroine who goes to war in her father's place. It is also the basis for the Disney film *Mulan*, though that version bears even less resemblance to the original.

Hwang's Fa Mu Lan is largely based on the character created by Maxine Hong Kingston's 1975 book *The Woman Warrior*.⁴³ He has repeatedly discussed his reading of her book as a seminal event in his education and in his development as an Asian American. She also provided personal inspiration. Hwang took encouragement from Kingston's work and success, which showed that engaging with his Asian American identity could appeal to a broad audience.

Kingston, however, has been criticized for her broad interpretation and reappropriation of the character of Fa Mu Lan, as well as for reinforcing stereotypes and deviating from the traditional stories, and, ironically, Hwang would be criticized for many of the same reasons.

His incorporation of the Gwan Gung character was inspired by Frank Chin's use of the spirit in his 1976 play *Gee Pop*.⁴⁴ In Chin's work, Gwan Gung is associated with

immigrants, as well as warriors, writers, and prostitutes. The character was inspired by the hero of an ancient Chinese epic poem entitled *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* but, once again, Hwang is working off an Asian American reinterpretation rather than an authentically Chinese text or story. To add additional complexity and layers of meaning, Chin was a vocal critic of *The Woman Warrior*. When asked if he was aware of Chin's criticism of Kingston, Hwang admits, "I was very aware that Frank had been/is a vocal critic of Maxine. I think that's why I have them battling."⁴⁵

It should not, necessarily, be surprising that Hwang used Chinese stories seen through the lens of an American experience as his primary sources. In Kingston and Chin he recognized a similar concern with negotiating a cultural identity, confessing that in the early days of Asian American cultural movements, "there was much more of a desire to define ourselves in opposition to the group culture,"⁴⁶ while effectively creating a hybrid story.

In any case, it is perhaps appropriate that Hwang's sources are as American as they are Chinese, though his were not stories that had been told in mainstream US culture. Apart from anything else, he was proposing a different model of this Chinese America, as is evident in the characters in *FOB*. As Josephine Lee points out the introduction of these characters "effectively counters the demeaned, unheroic roles of the Chinese immigrant in America and allows Steve and Grace personal fantasies of power and resilience in the face of past tragedy."⁴⁷

Hwang capitalizes on the relative obscurity of these characters to explore the role, or in this case the absence, of Chinese heritage in contemporary US society. Gwan Gung is shocked on his arrival, and angry to find that he is not known or

recognized. He is incredulous when Grace points out that “no one gives a wipe about you ‘round here. You’re dead” (14). She only knows who he is because she is studying Asian American history. Somehow he has been lost in the process of assimilation.

The play is full of significant cultural references, with the majority relating to 1980’s American pop culture and California, also showcasing the rewards on offer to the assimilated. Dale is proud of his X19, a two-seat sports car made by Fiat, popular at that time, and even Grace recognizes its status. Perhaps it is significant that Hwang owned a very similar Fiat 124.⁴⁸ In Act II, Dale references *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, as well as the Bee Gees, John Travolta, and Olivia Newton John. So, the contemporary lives alongside the mythological.

Nor, as was pointed out earlier, is it coincidental that the play is set in a Chinese restaurant. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong suggests that, “eating practices are shaped to an extraordinary extent by culture and can thus serve as elaborate mechanisms for encoding and expressing social relationships.”⁴⁹ More than that, though, the conflict portrayed in *FOB* takes place over a meal, and conjures images of the ancient banquets in the stories being told. The story of a banquet is, in fact, mapped on to the staging of the meal.

For Wong, the use of food in Asian American literature is often based either in necessity or the desire to represent exotic extravagance. In *FOB*, it is noteworthy that it is, in fact, both. The use of hot sauce represents the simultaneous exotification and exploitation of a familiar aspect of Chinese culture. Playwright Frank Chin, as well as other Asian American critics, has expressed concerns that the use of food in Asian American literature has bordered on “food pornography.” Wong suggests that such a

“tourist guide” approach to food in texts serves to “supply the white reader with an amusing but not too taxing glimpse of the mysterious ways of the Chinese.”⁵⁰ In her foreword to the anthology *FOB and Other Plays*, however, Maxine Hong Kingston confesses that “One of the happiest moments I have ever had at the theater was watching the young me in *FOB* pour hot sauce on their food and gulp it down in an eating contest.”⁵¹

Steve’s quest for “bing,” a wheat cake that sustained immigrant Chinese railroad workers in the 1880s, is equally significant and may be recognized and understood by Chinese American audiences, and Wong, indeed, has said that “what unites the immigrants in these stories is an ability to eat unpromising substances and to extract sustenance.”⁵² Whether the significance of this would be recognized by a non-Asian audience is doubtful. Wong suggests that the inclusion of foods associated with necessity serves a specific purpose and “to put it symbolically, it is the ability to cope with the constraints and persecutions Asian American have had to endure as immigrants and racial minorities.”⁵³

Considering that the dominant American narrative is based on the assumption of a shared immigrant experience, the bing is, in my opinion, likely to resonate with non-Asians, as they will identify with the significance of an immigrant community brought together through food. As Kondo observes, “foods, sounds, and smells serve as symbolic vehicles of ethnic heritage”⁵⁴ and, in this case, provide a universal access code to uniquely shared American experience.

Dimensions of *FOB* are perhaps best understood from a performance perspective. Whether he did so consciously or not, in his very first play Hwang began

his exploration of what it means to perform culture and identity. He stages what Esther Kim Lee suggests is “the dilemma of assimilation.”⁵⁵ In Dale and Grace, we see the desire to assimilate come into conflict with the underlying recognition that they are undeniably racially different from the dominant American culture. They are, as Wong characterizes Asian Americans, the “unassimable alien.”⁵⁶ We hear and feel the anxiety they have internalized as a result. In one of the most poignant moments in the play, Grace shares her childhood struggle to fit in. While she identifies as “ABC,” she actually came to the US at the age of 10. Her story suggests the complexity of the relationships within a group that is, by definition, constantly absorbing new members. Grace explains that:

There were a few Chinese girls in the fourth grade, but they were all American-born, so they wouldn't even talk to me. They just stayed with themselves and compared how much clothes they all had, and make fun of the way I talked. I had a better chance of getting in with the white kids than with them, so in junior high, I started bleaching my hair and hanging out at the beach—you know, Chinese hair looks pretty lousy when you bleach it...Until my senior year in high school—that's how long it took for me to get over this whole thing. One night I took Dad's car and drove on Hollywood Boulevard, all the way from downtown to Beverly Hills, then back on Sunset. I was looking and listening—all the time with the window down, just so I'd feel like I was part of the city. (31)

She *wanted* to mimic the role of California blonde surfer girl, but found herself unable to physically “pass” as white. In the monologue, she simultaneously exposes her desire to be a part of the dominant culture, to “fit in,” and the painful recognition that she will never be able to do so, but her isolation from those who are racially and culturally similar is equally disturbing. It suggests that she has a better chance of being accepted by the “white kids” if she shares their pastime of choice (surfing), than she does by the “ABC's.” In this case, subcultural identity based on interest rather than race offers

assimilation of a different sort. And I would suggest this monologue provides a moment of identification with anyone who has felt excluded, particularly during teenage years.

Grace goes on to perform her heritage culture to an extreme extent by assuming the identity of Fa Mu Lan. She becomes the warrior woman, celebrating her patience, bravery, and fortitude. With this dual identity, Hwang suggests that Grace has successfully integrated her Chinese identity into her American persona, and emerged with a powerful and confident self. As Boles suggests: "Grace represents a balanced identity between Eastern and Western influences."⁵⁷

At the other end of the spectrum, Dale is unable to reconcile his Chinese and American identities. It becomes clear that his determination to distance himself from any association with the "FOBs" is driven by his own insecurity and shame, even as he desperately attempts to perform the role of confident, affluent, American. Many of his boasts are revealed to be things he "could" do rather than things he does do. As he says at the beginning of Act II, "I go out now. Lots. I can anyway. Sometimes I don't ask anyone, so I don't go out. But I could" (33). He has a friend with a house "up in the Hollywood Hills where I can stand and look down on the light of L.A. I guess I haven't really been there yet. But I could easily go" (33). Despite his bravado, he seems oddly ambivalent, crippled, and paralyzed.

He clearly resents his family heritage, referring to his parents as "yellow ghosts" (33), and has attempted to create an American identity based on consumption and what he perceives to be American behavior. Josephine Lee suggests that these "characters show young Asian Americans attempting to define themselves through the value system

which assigns worth to their activity and their bodies; their anxieties about ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are intimately related to their positioning within capitalism.”⁵⁸

Later, Dale suggests that Steve try to be a little “less Chinese” and mimic the stance and walk of John Travolta, assimilation through performance, even as he “had to work hard—real hard—to be myself” (33). As Josephine Lee observes, his “preoccupation with material goods is satirized; the excessive consumption indicates dissatisfaction with the value system of American capitalism.”⁵⁹ As the play closes with the diatribe by Dale it seems that nothing has changed for him. He is left alone on the stage, oddly unresolved.

Language is clearly critical to the performed self, a claim made on identity, if also a way for audiences to place characters on a cultural spectrum. Fluency, vernacular, and accent may be a sign of successful assimilation, but it is not without its ambiguity. Grace and Dale may be more recognizable to non-Asian audiences precisely because their language is more recognizable.

The importance of language and accent in “passing” or performing a dominant cultural—in this case American—identity is critical. In performance, their accents (in contrast to Steve’s) are the primary way the audience differentiates their cultural identities. We immediately accept Grace and Dale as American based solely on verbal performance, but anyone who has ever felt like an outsider will identify with Grace’s story and Dale’s insecurity.

For the Asian American audience, however, the very presence of the Asian body on stage changes the nature of the spectator relationship, even as non-Asian audiences “might identify with the reality in even grossly insufficient characterizations of Asian

Americans.”⁶⁰ Ambiguity, in other words, is not only a product of the text, but also of audience response.

Hwang belongs to what Esther Lee Kim calls the “second wave” of Asian American theatre artists, a group characterized by an ability to “move toward the center of American mainstream theatre.”⁶¹ Hwang identifies not only with the mainstream theatre, but also with common American concerns, most notably the question of identity, here played out in a drama which explores not only the virtues or failures of assimilation, but the problematics of a Chinese identity under the pressure of a past part real and part mythical. Is that identity the source of celebration or shame?

When asked if he felt an element of shame or embarrassment during the actual evening out in the limousine, Hwang agrees he felt “sufficiently conflicted about his FOBness,” but that he was also aware of their respective economic positions, as Steve, as he pointed out to me, was the one who showed up in a limousine.⁶²

The desire to distance from “all things Chinese” is juxtaposed with the celebratory spirit involved in staging the epic stories of ancient China. Perhaps that is a reflection of Hwang’s own feelings as a young college student. His engagement with his Chinese identity was complicated, simultaneously empowering and problematic.

As noted earlier, this play is particularly instructive when read in the context of his later work. In *FOB*, we see the emergence of the structural elements, thematic concerns, and identity questions that will come to characterize his work. In addition, the play’s popularity with mainstream audiences suggests Hwang’s ability, from this very first play, to resonate beyond Asian American audiences.

In his review of *FOB*, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich stated that, “*FOB* is the first show that has ever attempted to marry the conventional well-made play to Oriental theatre and to mix the sensibilities of Maxine Hong Kingston and Norman Lear.”⁶³ In *FOB*, we see this ability to subvert and reappropriate Asian elements, and his employment of problematic stereotypes that will continue to invite criticism throughout his career. In her introduction to her book *The Deathly Embrace* (2000), Sheng-Mei Ma states that “a minority’s survival in American society often hinges on exploiting rather than subverting stereotypes and banalities.”⁶⁴ An argument can be made for either case with *FOB*, but when accepted as the project of a young Asian American student finding a new sense of pride and community in his identity, the incorporation of Asian aesthetics is, in my opinion, more reflective of exploration and celebration, and a real desire to see oneself in the stories circulated in American culture.

It is true, though, that throughout his career, his location in terms of his cultural identity would reflect this conundrum. On the one hand, he was and is embraced by and resonates with non-Asian mainstream theatre circles and audiences, while on the other, that success owes a debt to affirmative action and contributions by critical players in the Asian American drama movement, and has been criticized for not conforming to notions of what is or should be Asian American theatre. As William Boles points out in *Understanding David Hwang*, “with his meteoric rise he suddenly found himself defined as *the* Asian American writer for theater.”⁶⁵ As a result, from a very young age, he assumed a prescribed, high-pressure role as an identity playwright.

What is, perhaps, more noteworthy is that in attempting to reconcile facets of his own identity, Hwang found a formula for staging identity in general, and a hybrid

approach to the Asian American narrative that would ultimately become his signature. He suggests that one of the reasons *FOB* has “continued to have a life, particularly with that age range,”⁶⁶ is because of this evolving tension in American society and on college campuses. Beginning in the early 2000’s American universities have become increasingly heavily populated with Chinese students representing a new, highly affluent group while the uneasy dynamic he identified has become even more prevalent. As he has said, today “Chinese-born national students feel superior to the American students...or at least there is some fluidity there.”⁶⁷

Unlike several of his other early plays, he has not revised *FOB* since the version at the Public even though he suspects that some cultural references might preclude its production. He also confesses that he “doesn’t really understand how that play works” and is sure he “would not be able to create something like that today.”⁶⁸

The Dance and the Railroad

Following their successful collaboration and incorporation of Chinese Opera movement into *FOB*, Hwang and actor/director choreographer John Lone were interested in collaborating on another project. Now he “consciously set out to write a play that would combine Western and Asian theatre forms”⁶⁹ while maximizing the unique opportunity afforded by Lone’s training in Chinese Opera.

The Dance and the Railroad was produced in 1981, only months after *FOB*’s successful run at the Public Theater. It was initially commissioned by the New Federal Theatre as part of its Ethnic Heritage Series, and was envisioned as a children’s play. The first staging took place at the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side in

New York City. The Settlement House, which dates from 1892, serves the community through social services and arts programs. Performances were exclusively during the day, and audiences were comprised of school children bused in from around inner city New York.

The production was truly collaborative, as Hwang wrote the script with Lone in mind, while Lone choreographed and directed. One evening performance was scheduled, which the *New York Times* theater critic Frank Rich attended, giving it an extremely positive review the following day, in which he observed that: “By at once bringing West and East into conflict and unity, this playwright has found the perfect means to dramatize both the pain and humor of the immigrant experience.”⁷⁰

Due in no small part to Rich’s review, and Joseph Papp’s ongoing support, the production eventually transferred to the Public Theater where it had a successful six-month run and was nominated for a New York Drama Desk Award for best play. It was later produced as a film for ABC’s then-new A & E network.

The play epitomizes Hwang’s sustained enthusiasm for staging the Chinese American story and was written during his self-proclaimed “isolationist/nationalist” stage. As Esther Kim Lee observes, “rediscovering history has been an important, shared goal of Asian American writers, artists, and scholars, and in the early 1980’s there was still a sense of urgency and a determination to tell Asian American stories.”⁷¹

The Dance and the Railroad portrays the development of a friendship between Lone and Ma, two “coolies”⁷² working on the transcontinental railroad in 1867. The story opens with Ma disturbing Lone as he practices his Peking Opera craft on a hillside above the Chinese workers’ camp. The workers are striking to improve working

conditions, hours, and pay. Ma is newly arrived from China, brash, confident, and naïve. Lone has been in the US for two years and takes no part in the gambling and storytelling sessions of his compatriots.

Ma begs Lone to train him in opera so that he can perform the role of the warrior god Gwan Gung upon his return to China, and clearly believes the stories he has been told of a fabled “Gold Mountain” and the wealth he will accumulate.

At first Lone scorns his request and foolish bravado, calling him an “insect,” but over the course of the next day he relents and begins to train him. Lone tries to teach Ma patience and humility, requiring him to spend the night in the pose of a locust. The following morning the strike has ended and they share food before they begin to act out a story, but instead of Gwan Gung’s tale the story they tell is that of their journey to America by boat and their labor on the mountain. The performance features song, story, dance and stage combat. Once the performance is done, Lone offers to continue Ma’s training, even as he now acknowledges that he is unlikely to return to China. Both seem resigned to their situation. The play ends with Lone continuing to practice on the mountainside, once again alone.

The Dance and the Railroad takes place on “A mountaintop near the transcontinental railroad” (56),⁷³ though it is not specific in terms of state or territory. The action covers 6 days in the course of the strike. The story focuses on the relationship between the two young men rather than the strike itself, though the strike, and the incredible hardships and challenges faced by the Chinese laborers, act as a prevalent undercurrent. Hwang calls for a minimal set and most productions have used simple features such as rocks or trees to suggest the mountainside location.

John Lone and Tzi Ma played the two main characters in the original production, so that each character derived his name from the actor who portrayed him. The character of Lone, at twenty, is the older of the two. He has been in America for several years. He has a reputation as a loner and has earned the nickname “Prince of the Mountain” (58) from the other workers. He reveals that his parents had sold him to an opera company, and that he had spent eight years training to play the part of Gwan Gung. His family later removed him from the opera and indentured him to the railroad company.

Ma is eighteen and has been in America for a month, having been evicted from his home by his three brothers for being “the lazy dreamer of the family” (80). He believes he will become wealthy on the “Gold Mountain” and insists that “nothing would make my brothers angrier than seeing me rich” (81). Meanwhile, he plays dice and listens with rapt gullibility to the stories of the other workers. He is a dreamer, desperate for Lone’s approval and friendship.

Hwang got to know both John Lone and Tzi Ma during the production of *FOB* at the Public Theatre. He feels he drew from both their personalities and abilities in creating *The Dance and the Railroad*. Lone’s influence, in particular, was critical: “I think John’s training and story were integral to *The Dance and the Railroad*. I would never have been able to envision or realize the piece without him (and Tzi Ma), and drew on his history to some extent to create the character of Lone (as I did Tzi’s, for Ma).”⁷⁴

Like the character Lone, John Lone spent years of his childhood training in the art of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. He eventually came to Los Angeles and studied

at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He was an orphan and chose his English last name, in part, to reflect his status as a loner.

Hwang's Lone is stoic and ambivalent as to how he is perceived by the other workers. His continued commitment to training in opera, despite what we can assume to be long and grueling workdays, indicates his need to retain this integral part of his identity. He is not like the other crude laborers, who sense that he feels he is “too good to spend time with them” (58). His solitary performances on the hillside indicate the necessity of performance to his sanity and sense of himself.

In contrast, Ma is easily influenced and lacks focus. He has clearly spent time trying to gain the approval of the other workers, and now seeks the mentorship of Lone. He personifies the exuberance of youth, but is endearing in his lack of guile and blind trust in his Chinese friends.

The two reflect and represent aspects of the immigrant experience. In Lone we see the desire to preserve a culture and an identity beyond that of a nameless and expendable worker. He is an artist. His decision to train Ma suggests a desire to share and preserve his culture in the face of isolation and exploitation. Ma, in contrast, represents those in search of the “American Dream,” believing the most implausible stories in the hopes of a better life and the acquisition of wealth.

Hwang can no longer remember why he chose to call his play *The Dance and the Railroad*; perhaps it was the juxtaposition of the two elements that resonated with him.⁷⁵ Lone's disciplined artistry and dance give a poignant humanity to a brutal capitalism, and a face to the story of thousands of expendable workers associated with the construction of the railroad. Ironically, historical accounts collected by The Chinese

Workers Railroad Project refer to the precision, efficiency, and speed with which the Chinese workers laid the tracks and completed sections of the railroad and often use the term “choreographed.”⁷⁶

Hwang has stated in interviews that he wanted to write a historical play at that time in his life and chose the setting he did because “the experience of the Chinese building the American Transcontinental railroad was something that people vaguely knew about but there wasn’t much literature on it and (he) had never seen it explored in any depth in a movie or play.”⁷⁷ The railroad unites the states geographically, at the price of those who were regarded as socially and culturally marginal even as they constructed it. His play, by contrast, puts them at the center of attention. Esther Kim Lee suggests that, “for Hwang and other Asian American writers, Asian American history had to be reclaimed and integrated into existing narratives of American history,”⁷⁸ and few American narratives are as pervasive as that of the romanticization of Westward expansion.

He placed the story during the strike because he “found the strike story intriguing, because it contradicted our image of Chinese workers as obedient and servile.”⁷⁹ In *The Dance and the Railroad*, they are active in defining their own identities and roles. To Hwang, “the strike is important because it reminds us that in historical fact these were assertive men who stood up for their rights in the face of great adversity.”⁸⁰

As was the case in *FOB*, he suggests a pecking order within the Chinese immigrant community. In this case, experience and tenure on the mountain merits superiority. Ma’s interaction with the other workers involves a “hazing” process of sorts for the newcomers. They have lied to him and taken his money in dice games, telling

him he will recoup it in his “end of the year bonus” (63). In turn, Ma warns Lone of the others’ dislike of him and the threats he has heard. Ma cautions Lone:

You never sing songs, never tell stories. They say you act like your spit is too clean for them, and they got ways to fix that...Like they are gonna bury you in the shit buckets, so you’ll have more to clean more then your nails...Or they’re gonna cut out your tongue, since you never speak to them. (58)

This is clearly not a homogenous community. They may be linked by their common labor and country of origin, but in other respects are suspicious of those who follow their own path. There is, it seems, a power in communal action, a sense of social solidarity, but equally there is strength in asserting a resistant individuality. They are all Chinese workers, but they are also individuals.

Lone’s opera practice, while almost unimaginable after 10 hours of physical labor, keeps him “alive” in contrast to his fellow worker who, “are dead. Their muscles work only because the white man forces them. I live because I can still force my muscles to work for me” (66). His only the fear is that he might become “one of them.” It is that which keeps him motivated.

At the end of the play, when they learn that the strike is over and construction will resume, Ma gives voice to the mental anguish of the workers, admitting:

I get so frustrated sometimes. At the rock. The rock doesn’t give in. It’s not human. I wanna claw it with my fingers, but that would just rip them up. I wanna throw myself head-first onto it, but it’d just knock my skull open. The rock would knock my skull open, then just sit there, still, like nothing had happened, like a faceless Buddha. (86)

Isolation and hardship steal the men’s humanity, as they battle the elements in the name of a country and a culture which regards them with contempt. They seek to work together to improve their circumstances and, in the final scene, Lone concedes he

may have been wrong about the others, acknowledging that at least they are sending money home. They are not, after all, merely self-serving, in pursuit of an alien dream.

Hwang cites Sam Shepard's 1980 play *True West* as an inspiration for *The Dance and the Railroad* and, while the role reversal in Hwang's play is less dramatic, there is a similar shift in the relationship from beginning to end as we witness Ma losing his naiveté and ultimately refusing Lone's offer to train him. In his review, Frank Rich suggested that "the two characters have subtly traded positions until finally we wonder if the wise Lone might not be the real slave, the real fool, the man who has lost the illusions of both his worlds." (C5). As the play ends, Lone's cynicism is replaced by the belief that collective goals can be achieved. Even Ma comes to recognize the power of institutions to deny individuality.

Hwang felt strongly about telling the relatively unknown story of the Chinese workers strike, and immortalizing the thousands of Chinese men who labored in harsh and dangerous conditions to build the transcontinental railroad. By 1865, over 12,000 Chinese men were employed by the Central Pacific Railroad and collectively represented 90 percent of the work force. The Chinese workers were recruited for no other reason than their acceptance of lower pay and worse working conditions than white workers. They were initially hired from around California. Once that population was exhausted, the Central Pacific Railroad arranged to recruit workers from impoverished areas of China, primarily from Guangdong (Canton) Province.⁸¹

The railroad companies' own historical accounts and documents of the construction project provide details praising the Chinese laborers' skills and tenacity, even as they reveal their shocking exploitation. Workers were sent down narrow shafts

for hours at a time with hammers, drills, and explosives to build tunnels through mountain passages. They cleared trees and laid tracks, and were forced to work through the harsh winter of 1866, living in tunnels under snowdrifts reported to be over sixty feet high. Many died, and in the spring corpses were found still gripping shovels and picks.⁸² It is estimated that approximately 1200 workers died from a combination of accidents, snow slides, landslides, and a smallpox outbreak over the course of the railroad's construction. There are no official numbers, as names, information, and death records were not kept for any of the laborers.

The American companies transporting workers did not understand Chinese naming protocols, so any surviving lists of workers are inaccurate. As most laborers were illiterate, no written accounts of their experience exist. What little is known about these men and their lives has been preserved through oral history.

In the late spring of 1867, approximately 500 workers did, indeed, go on strike. They demanded better wages, a reduction in their workday from eleven hours to ten, and a decrease in the dangerous tunnel digging shifts to no more than eight hours. The strike was peaceful, but the railroad companies cut off supplies. After eight days the workforce, near starvation, ended the strike.⁸³

As Josephine Lee points out, "Asian American history plays tend to be set in locales that recreate the harsh conditions of immigration and settlement, and to focus on specific moments demonstrating a history of systematic exclusion."⁸⁴ As to why Hwang chose this particular event as the backdrop for the story, he has said that:

I remember hearing about a Chinese railroad workers' strike, though I can't remember from whom. ...I tried to research the subject at the Chinatown History Project in NYC (now the Museum of Chinese in America) and UCLA's Asian

American Studies Center (now the university's Asian American Studies Department), though there was very little material back then.⁸⁵

He also cites Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* as an influence. Though he integrates an account of the harsh working conditions and facts of the strike into the conversations between Lone and Ma. The result, though, is anything but didactic. Indeed, Lone contradicts the exaggerated tales the other workers have told the young and naive Ma, even as Ma brags of the stories they will tell when they return to China. In the role of Gwan Gung, he will say, "We laid tracks like soldiers. Mountains? We hung from cliffs in baskets and the winds blew us like birds. Snow? We lived underground like moles for days as a time" (61).

The baskets, dangerous, fragile, and small, were used to lower and raise workers into tunnels and shafts, but to Ma they become evidence of the strength and physical prowess of the laborers. He insists that that the others have told him about "the mild winters and the warm snow" (62) and plans to bring a sample of American snow back to China to show his brothers. He thinks the idea of living underground in winter "exciting" (62). Ma's naiveté becomes a device for exposing the realities of life constructing the railroad.

Later in their dance, Lone and Ma tell the story of a coolie's journey to and experience in America. They introduce the "water-crossing" dance with Lone's impersonation of a "white devil" stating: "The one-hundred-twenty-five-dollars passage money is to be paid to the said head of said Hong, who will make arrangement with the coolies that their wages shall be deducted until the debt is absorbed" (81).

They go on to recount the ocean passage in verse, with Lone playing the role of a dying laborer, and Ma that of a survivor. The narrative of the journey concludes with

180 of the group of 303 failing to reach the shores of America. Ma mimes throwing Lone's body overboard.

Hwang, however, departs from the known facts in one crucial regard. In his version, the workers settle the strike but make some gains:

LONE: For the first time. I was wrong. We got eight dollars.
 MA: We wanted fourteen.
 LONE: But we got eight hours.
 MA: We'll go back on strike.
 LONE: Why?
 MA: We could hold out for months.
 LONE: and lose all that work?
 MA: But we just gave in.
 LONE: Your being ridiculous. We got eight hours. Besides, it's already been decided.
 MA: I didn't decide. (86)

According to most historical accounts, the actual strike was not successful. Correspondence from railroad managers makes it clear that the strikers' demands were not met. So why does Hwang take such artistic license? When I asked Hwang about this re-interpretation of history, he responded:

I felt then that the outcome of the strike was ambiguous, which is why Ma and Lone interpret the results differently. Even today, with more research available, I feel that same case can be made. We now know that the owners starved out the strikers (which the play references), but conditions then did improve somewhat. So the extant sources may reflect the railroad barons' attempt to spin the outcome so as not to encourage other strikes.⁸⁶

Hwang's point about the reliability of the accounts provided by those guilty of the exploitation the workers were protesting is valid. But that does not necessarily absolve him of responsibility and has further implications. If the project of staging Chinese American history is to tell the untold stories of the immigrants and their struggles, then what responsibility does Hwang have to accurately represent the events he chooses to stage? Is the point of staging Asian American history to inspire pride or to expose an

ugly truth of oppression and exploitation hidden beneath the existing dominant cultural narrative?

Josephine Lee observes that, “rewriting the ending so that the strike is not broken suggests the playwright’s desire to see a positive outcome to the communal effort.”⁸⁷ Hwang’s distrust of the documented history, justified or not, derives from a desire to find meaning in the strike itself. Its success or failure becomes secondary. His focus, on the one hand, is on the solidarity of the workers, and, on the other on the friendship of Lone and Ma. As Esther Kim Lee suggests, “its two characters must be read as surrogates of the Asian American who struggled to gain civil rights and enfranchisement as Americans in the second half of the twentieth century.”⁸⁸

In the opening scene of *The Dance and the Railroad*, the audience joins Ma as voyeurs watching Lone practice his performance training. When Lone asks Ma “Did you ask my permission?” (57), Hwang is implicitly questioning the legitimacy of appropriating cultural expression for entertainment. The tension between performing culture and exoticizing stereotype is implied in Lone’s assertion that “You can’t expect to get in for free” (57). There is a price to be paid. That price, in Hwang’s play, is evidently the need to learn and to understand. As in his other works, East and West come together and there is a risk of mutual misunderstanding. The play itself becomes the route to understanding.

As Ma learns to respect the artistry of the opera, so does the audience. This is not a passive admiration of a performance; it is an education in the training, commitment, and mastery of the performer. Lone creates a character through his performance and his level of expertise is clear. In his review of the original New York

production in 1981, critic Frank Rich points out that: "Much of the action is humorous - especially when Ma is trying, ineptly, to imitate the dazzling grace of Lone's gymnastic tricks."⁸⁹

The conventions of Chinese Opera have their roots in specific songs and dances performed at the Chinese emperor's court by travelling troupes in the late 18th century. Multiple styles from various regions of China coalesced over time to converge into a format now recognized as distinctly that of Cantonese opera. Perhaps most notably, the inclusion of acrobatic performance was introduced in the mid-19th century, an era widely considered to be the peak for popularity and performance of the operas. The recognition of the opera as the most popular and respected form of performance in China in 1867, the year of the railroad workers' strike, magnifies the insult of a talented performer's exile and indenture in manual labor.

Chinese opera performers are expected to achieve excellence in four skills: song, speech, dance-acting, and combat. Elements of acrobatics are particularly prevalent in the dance acting, or pantomime, and combat with variety of stage-weapons.⁹⁰ These elements should merge effortlessly in the performance. The scene in *The Dance and the Railroad* depicting Lone and Ma improvising to tell the story of their countrymen's journey and experience in America should, in particular, draw on all of these elements, as the Opera becomes the vehicle through which Hwang encapsulates the odyssey of so many Chinese immigrants.

Hwang once again evokes the warrior god Gwan Gung to tell his Chinese American story. Both men aspire to play the warrior god; he represents successes in conquest, as well as being the starring role for an opera performer. Lone insists that

“everyone must earn the right to play Gwan Gung” (69) and suggests that training and commitment are rites of passage. Again, as in *FOB*, Gwan Gung is used to represent the Chinese warrior battling forces in the new world.

Much is lost, or at the very least missing, when working with *The Dance and the Railroad* exclusively as a text. The absence of the critical dance and musical elements is almost palpable when reading this script, and, indeed reviews of various productions often focus on the power of the Opera performance elements. In his review of the 2014 Signature production, Jonathan Mandell of *New York Theatre* suggests that: “it is the exquisite use of movement here that gives the play much of its appeal”.⁹¹ In his review for the *New York Daily News* Joe Dziemanowicz also observed that, “They exchange a few chilly words. Then they move. Legs sweep in graceful arcs. Arms tear like knives through the air. One man kneels and whirls his long black braid enough times to give you a neck ache.”⁹²

Dziemanowicz’s reference to the “long black braid,” suggests recognition of a feminized or erotic dimension to the performances, and, in fact, many of reviews mention the braids specifically. The costume and braids used in most productions are authentic representations of the dress and hair of male Chinese immigrant workers, but their association with female clothing and hairstyles plays, for better or worse, to stereotypes related to feminized images of Asian men. The close male relationship also has the potential to be read as having homosexual overtones, which is itself complicated by associations the audience may have with cross-dressing in the Chinese Opera, in which males historically performed female roles.

For Hwang, though, what might appear as easily feminized Chinese characters emerge as strong and physically powerful men, and I would argue that is part of the play's power. They are "angry, articulate, cynical, and complex,"⁹³ as they recount feats of endurance and strength, and engage in combat with a series of weapons. *The Dance and the Railroad* can be seen as Hwang's "buddy" play, and his use of Chinese immigrants only reinforces the universality of the theme of friendship in the face of hardship and isolation. His incorporation of the braids ultimately serves to subvert rather than reinforce feminization.

The austerity and formality of movement of the Peking Opera, performed on a mountain hillside, is contrasted with the crude physicality of railroad conditions, but equally, perhaps, the crude motivations of those who build their own success on the labor of those they despise. Hwang brings two civilizations together and in doing so raises questions about the meaning and function of civilization in an industrialized world, and, indeed, the meaning of the word civilized. We do not see the brutalities or harsh conditions referenced in the dialogue. We do, however, see something of the beauty of Chinese art and culture.

There is, of course, a danger in this strategy. The distancing of the action and characters from the realities of the history in which he locates them may blunt the force of that history and risk romanticizing the camaraderie of the group. His focus, though, is elsewhere.

Because Hwang uses the Cantonese Opera performance as an essential element to the plot and a formative aspect of Lone's character, the performance of culture is woven into the very fabric of the play. This is, ultimately, a performance of

performance. The juxtaposition of the beauty of the dance and the tragedy of the worker's circumstance ascribe an urgency to the preservation of the art. The performance of his culture and his own personal identity as a performer are essential to Lone's strategy in coping with conditions that deny his humanity and individuality. The preservation and teaching of the dance become analogous to, and evidence of, the preservation and sharing of a culture. In performing his identity he preserves his identity. The two are inextricable.

Ma's final decision not to pursue the training implies more than a recognition that he is not likely to return to China; it is an acceptance of the fact that his Chinese identity will not be cultivated in America.

The Dance and the Railroad relates to Hwang's cultural identity, particularly as it was written at the time when the playwright was most engaged with Chinese American cultural history. His desire to stage this particular story serves a variety of purposes. As mentioned earlier, it humanizes the experience of thousands of unknown and unrecognized Chinese immigrants and acknowledges their contribution to American history, while simultaneously offering an alternative, masculinized, Chinese version of the pioneer hero. Hwang is writing the Chinese role model he was denied in his youth.

The Dance and the Railroad stages an untold American story. As Josephine Lee points out, the play "proposes racism as institutionalized rather than individual and suggests that necessary action can only be achieved through the solidarity of the Asian American characters."⁹⁴

The play was also written and produced at a seminal time for Asian American history, culture, and arts. In reflecting on his research for this work, Hwang has

commented on the fact that: “In those days, Asian American studies and history was in its infancy, and any information available was often closer to oral history than documentation.”⁹⁵ *The Dance and the Railroad* suggests the necessity for cultural preservation, and reveals an activist aspect to Hwang’s identity that will characterize his work and role as a playwright in the future.

This play is not staged as often as several of his other works, almost certainly because of the demands it makes in terms of movement and style. When New York’s Signature Theatre staged a full offering of Hwang’s works for the 2013-2014 season, he chose to include *The Dance and the Railroad*, in part because of its special movement and dance requirements, though also because of his desire to see it staged again and at a time when the exploration of cultural identity remained as relevant as ever.

1. Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 14.

2. For more reading on Asian American immigration and exclusionary laws and policies see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, and Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*.

3. “2012 National Population Projections,” United States Census Bureau, n.d., <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2012/demo/popproj/2012-summary-tables.html>

4. Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 6.

5. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), 6.

6. Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 5-8.

7. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre*, 31.

8. Ibid., 29-39.

9. Ibid., 43.

10. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 10.

11. For further reading on portrayals of Asian characters in American theatre, see Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 89-120, and James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 7-22.

12. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 26.

13. Dorrine Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 9.

14. Rick Shiomi and Martha B. Johnson (Founders, Mu Performing Arts), interviewed by the author, December 4, 2016. The following quotations are taken from this interview.

15. Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 119.

16. Maxime Hong Kingston, foreword to *FOB and Other Plays*, vii.

17. Ibid., xii.

18. Marty Moss-Coane, "David Henry Hwang," in *Speaking On Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 284.

19. Jeremy Gerard, "David Hwang: Riding On the Hyphen," *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/13/magazine/david-hwang-riding-on-the-hyphen.html>.

20. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

21. Ibid.

22. Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 119.

23. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

24. Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 119.

25. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xi.

26. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 129-133.

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27. Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 121.
28. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 132.
29. Ibid., 133.
30. Rick Shiomi and Martha B. Johnson, interviewed by the author, December 4, 2016.
31. Ibid.
32. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 135-136.
33. Hwang, *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays of David Henry Hwang* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition (unless otherwise noted) and cited in-text.
34. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 14.
35. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 134.
36. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
37. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 167.
38. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Random House, 1975).
44. Hwang, email message to the author, August 17, 2015.
45. Hwang, email message to the author, August 17, 2015.
46. Ibid.

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47. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 180.
48. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
49. Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 18.
50. Ibid., 66.
51. Kingston, foreword to *FOB and Other Plays*, vi.
52. Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 25.
53. Ibid., 26.
54. Kondo, *About Face*, 198.
55. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 12.
56. Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 6.
57. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, 19.
58. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 167.
59. Ibid., 175.
60. Ibid., 57.
61. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 125.
62. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
63. Frank Rich, "FOB Rites of Immigrant Passage," *New York Times*, (June 10, 1980): C6.
64. Sheng-mei Ma, *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xix.
65. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, 9.
66. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 121.

70. Frank Rich, "Stage: 'Dance and the Railroad' by David Henry Hwang," *New York Times*, (March 31, 1981): C5.

71. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 21.

72. "Coolie" was a derogative slang term for unskilled laborer hired by a company, mainly from India or Southern China.

73. David Henry Hwang, *The Dance and the Railroad*, in *FOB and Other Plays*, 51-86 (New York: Plume, 1990). All subsequent citations are taken from this edition (unless otherwise noted) and cited in-text.

74. Hwang, email message to the author, September 13, 2015.

75. Ibid.

76. "About Our Project," Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project (Stanford University), n.d., <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/about-our-project/>, accessed September 12, 2015.

77. Ibid.

78. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, 22.

79. Hwang, email message to the author, September 13, 2015.

80. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xii.

81. For more reading on Chinese railroad workers in America, see Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), and the "Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project," Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/about-our-project/>.

82. Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 85-86.

83. "About Our Project," Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project.

84. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 142.

85. Hwang, email message to the author, September 13, 2015.
86. Ibid.
87. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 147.
88. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 22.
89. Rich, "Stage: 'Dance and the Railroad,'" C5.
90. "Beijing opera," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing_opera, accessed September 29, 2015.
91. Jonathan Mandell, "*The Dance and The Railroad* Review: David Henry Hwang on Artists and Immigrants," New York Theater, last modified February 26, 2013, <https://newyorktheater.me/2013/02/25/the-dance-and-the-railroad-review-david-henry-hwang-on-artists-and-immigrants/>.
92. Dziemianowicz, Joe. "Theater review: 'The Dance and the Railroad' at the Signature Center," *New York Daily News*, last modified February 28, 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/theater-review-dance-railroad-article-1.1275538>.
93. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 23.
94. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 146.
95. Hwang, email message to the author, September 13, 2015.

Chapter II: Staging Intimacy

Hwang's early plays were fresh and characterized by an exploration of the Chinese American experience, but he began to feel the weight of, and to some degree resist, his status as the anointed voice of Chinese Americans. His interests, perhaps out of necessity to escape tokenism, began to evolve and shift in the mid-1980's. As he has said, "that model became less appealing."¹

The pleasures and dangers of intimacy now became a focus. Several of his works from this period attempt to stage the complexities of sexual and interpersonal interactions, suggesting the tenuous distinction between desire and obsession. Secret fetishes are staged and exposed, as he explores the potential allure and danger of performing identity and exposing the self to another.

Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* is the best known and studied of these works, but two earlier one-act plays—1983's *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*—map his developing interest in the intersection of fantasy, the supernatural, intimacy, and death.

While these works ostensibly appear to portray stories and contexts outside of American or Asian American identities, they constitute variations on the themes, motifs, and style that converge so strikingly in *M. Butterfly* and retain Hwang's American perspective. The plays suggest a desire on Hwang's part to reappropriate Asian theatrical techniques and storytelling traditions to create works written with American audiences clearly in mind.

But this is, indeed, dangerous territory. An exploration of the role of culture and identity in seduction and relationships has broad implications. Hwang's attempts to

simultaneously explore and stage the personal, cultural, and political exposes a complex history and recognition of complicated intercultural and gendered power dynamics. Beyond that, as Esther Kim Lee suggests, the use of specific Japanese tropes provides him with the opportunity “to examine how gender is embodied and performed in the game of power and love.”²

After writing three plays in succession (*FOB*, *The Dance and the Railroad*, and *Family Devotions*) concerned with Chinese American themes and perspectives, Hwang was interested in expanding his scope beyond the potentially confining constraints of his Chinese American identity. He wanted to explore new areas, “while remaining committed to working within the Asian community.”³

During his Asian studies classes at Stanford he had developed an avid interest in Japanese culture and art. In particular, he was drawn to the works of the Japanese writers Yasunari Kawabata⁴ and Yukio Mishima,⁵ as well as the films of Masahiro Shinoda.⁶ While integrating some conventions of Japanese Noh theatre, he cites Japanese films and literature as being much more influential than Japanese theatre on these two particular works.

When asked about his fascination with Japan, he admits that:

As a young Chinese American in the 70s and early 80s, when I looked to Asia for aesthetics which combined Eastern and Western influences, everything inspirational and “cool” was coming from Japan. China hadn’t been open to the West long enough for its artists to have absorbed foreign forms in any meaningful way. So at that point in my life, I was fascinated by Japanese literature, fashion, design, and film (I got to work with one of the giants, Eiko Ishioka, and still love Japanese fashion today). Both *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties* were tributes to those influences.⁷

They were originally offered on the same bill under the title *Sound and Beauty*, and opened at the Public Theater on November 18, 1983. Reviews were mixed. Several

reviewers suggested that he lacked the confidence he had shown in staging Chinese American stories. Even his historical champion Frank Rich suggested that the audience felt “keenly conscious of his efforts to duplicate the mood of Japanese literature and theater” and that these effects ultimately felt “synthetic and laborious.”⁸

While neither has been produced extensively, *The Sound of a Voice* continues to have an active life, particularly in universities and colleges. A televised version of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* had been planned for production by the BBC, starring Laurence Olivier, but he died before it could be produced.⁹ In 2003, Hwang collaborated with Composer Phillip Glass to adapt *The Sound of a Voice* into an opera.

The titles of these two works are taken specifically from the stories that inspired them. Their staging, while sparse, is a critical element. The desire to preserve a Japanese aesthetic was a primary goal. In both, we see him develop his fascination with the distinction between public and private spaces. Both plays, albeit very differently, evoke myths such as Homer’s sirens or European fairytales, and interrogate the allure of a private women’s space, seductive but dangerous.

The Sound of a Voice

The Sounds of a Voice tells the story of a warrior who seeks to locate and kill a witch, feared by the local population. The legends suggest that the men who visit never escape her house. She welcomes him into her home and invites him to stay, asking for help with menial tasks. He agrees, and eventually finds himself reluctant to leave, as she plays beautiful music nightly to help him sleep. They develop a mutual attraction and fondness, and spar in swordplay. One night he peeks into her back room, and finds

her transformed into a young and beautiful woman. He ultimately determines he is unable to kill her, but must instead leave the house and escape. After he departs, however, he finds himself compelled to return. When he does so, he finds she has hung herself.

The Sound of a Voice has nine short scenes, all taking place in a house on the edge of a brothers Grimm-inspired magical forest. The opening stage directions call for a sparsely furnished space, but require a “vase of brightly colored flowers” that should “stand out in sharp contrast to the starkness of the room” (155).¹⁰ As the action evolves, it is revealed that the wall we see is a scrim hiding the woman’s private space.

Throughout the production, the music of a shakuhachi (a Japanese end-blown flute) is used. The music comes from the woman’s private space, and lures the man into observing her from a voyeuristic perspective. As in his earlier work, *The Dance and the Railroad*, and later in *M. Butterfly*, he uses the relationship between voyeur and subject to call into question the assumed power dynamic of performance. As the woman performs for him, she uses the music as a means to mesmerize, or, as the text suggests, to cast a witch’s spell.

As in several of his other works, Hwang employs Asian instruments to evoke this Asian motif. As the set is sparse, the music is a particularly critical tool to establish a Japanese or Asian setting. In this case, it has the added effect of being the primary tool of seduction. As its volume increases, so the man becomes enveloped in her web.

The use of the scrim is equally critical. Most of the action takes place in the anteroom of the woman’s house, but his use of the area beyond the scrim suggests that interiors have additional layers of intimacy and privacy. By employing a second interior

space Hwang invites the audience to join the man in peering into that space, supposedly uninvited. The use of the scrim, and what is revealed behind it, suggests the possibility that what is hidden can deviate dramatically from what is seen or intentionally revealed. What is concealed yet open to intrusion is both a method of seduction and potentially its consummation. It is the essence of her spell.

The casts of both one-act plays feature one man and one woman, and in both the female character is initially denied a name, but in *The Sound of a Voice*, the name of the man is also never revealed. The woman does eventually allow him to call her Hanoko, but when he asks if that is her name, she responds, “It’s what you may call me” (157). The man will not share his name, admitting, “If I gave you a name, it would only be made up. Why should I deceive you?” (157). The woman suggests he should be called “Man Who Fears Silence,” after he admits to an inability to sleep in total silence. When he responds with the suggestion of “Man Who Fears Women,” she retorts, “that name is much too common” (157). In this exchange, the relationship between naming, power, and intimacy is both refuted and reinforced. His refusal, and her implication that he still does not know her real name, suggests their mutual unwillingness to reveal their true selves to the other. To do so is to surrender power.

Conversation and music are proven to be critical sensory elements. Early on, the man confesses that he can’t sleep in silence and the woman admits: “I don’t consider time when there is no voice in the air. It’s pointless. Time begins with the entrance of a visitor, and ends with his exit’ (156). Sound becomes the manifestation of existence. The woman plays the shakuhatchi, mimicking a human voice, to keep herself “from choking on many a silent night” (163).

The need for the characters to validate their existence is reminiscent of Beckett, and, indeed, the characters find solace in creating a mutual actuality much as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Yet, these are plays that also imply the inadequacy of language, particularly to explain the supernatural. When the man questions the nature of the woman's cultivation of her eternally blooming flowers, she cannot explain because "words are too inefficient. It takes hundreds of words to describe a single act of caring. With hundreds of acts, words become irrelevant" (159). While conversation and music are tools to connect and ensnare, they also have the potential to destroy the tenuous nature of intimacy, perhaps because of their inherent inadequacy.

It is revealed that the man is just the latest in a long line of visitors, men who are initially content, but who all eventually sneak away. The woman suggests that there are boundaries to what her visitors really want to know about her, and yet the boundaries are not consistent or fixed. She laments the fact that:

They say they'll all stay. And they do. For a while. Until they see too much. Or they learn something new. There are boundaries outside of which visitors do not want to see me step. Only who knows what those boundaries are? Not I. They change with every visitor. You have to be careful not to cross them, but you never know where they are. And one day, inevitably, you step outside the lines. The visitor knows. You don't. You didn't know that you'd done anything different. You thought it was just another part of you. The visitor sneaks away. The next day, you learn that you had stepped outside his heart. (168)

In his development of the character of the woman, he interrogates the role of the female in a traditional domestic or romantic relationship. Although it is suggested that she is a witch, a Japanese Kitsune, or fox spirit, and she demonstrates supernatural powers, she is oddly subservient in her interactions with the man. Domesticities are critical tools in her seduction, while he performs hyper-masculine duties such as

chopping wood. As Esther Kim Lee points out, she is “an ideal Japanese wife” and “provides Man with food, lodging, comfort, intimacy and pleasant conversation.”¹¹

The woman also desperately attempts to create what she perceives to be a perfect “home”, so that he will stay with her, even as she struggles to avoid the threshold she suggests she has crossed in the past. There is always a sense that she is holding back. Kondo suggests this is a particular concern for Asian American playwrights, who “problematize notions of a singular home and of a singular identity...dislocation, contradiction, unforeseen cultural possibilities, multiple geographies of identity exceeding the boundaries.”¹²

This will later become a critical point in *M. Butterfly*, but the question of preservation of the fantasy as opposed to revelation of the true self emerges as a theme in *The Sound of a Voice*. Yet Hwang also suggests that the constant reproduction of the illusion is not sufficient or sustainable either. It is never clear if the man desires her more because he does, in fact, believe her to be a witch. In either case, he eventually becomes restless and cannot stay in the supernatural space permanently. The woman’s prophecy of having reached a boundary is realized. As is noted in a review of a production by the Paragon Theatre in Denver in 2010, “The weight of both characters’ fears and foibles grows, and eventually become the unseen, unavoidable villain of the piece.”¹³

Ultimately, he finds himself unable to fulfill his quest. He cannot bring himself to kill her, and attempts to leave, as the others had before him. For Hwang, here, contentment without purpose denies meaning in life and results in complacency. The man has to leave because the woman has created a world that is over-determined, and

in which he has no role, essentially defeating him. He insists that he “can’t live with someone who defeated him” (174), and so it appears she has ultimately, and ironically, defeated him in her desperate attempt to keep him.

Yet he returns in the final scene. The end of the play poses more questions than it resolves. Did he return to kill her or to stay? Is her suicide part of her ritual or unique to their relationship? Is she spirit or human? Given that the story is inspired by Japanese ghost stories, the ambiguity is indicative of the genre, but Hwang’s refusal to clearly identify her as a spirit forces an ambiguity and, I would argue, allows the potential for a more feminist interpretation. She can potentially be seen as merely a strong, independent woman used by the man who intended her to love him in order to destroy her through abandonment.

Hwang’s fascination with elements of Japanese culture begins to emerge, as he explores the question of honor as a powerful character motivation. The man must leave in shame because he has failed at his task, even as it is possible that it is his fear of her power, rather than his actual failure, that motivates his shame. He intended to kill her, but instead came to love her. As a warrior, he cannot accept this as anything less than failure. As Gerald Rabkin suggests, “he cannot surrender his supremacist values, his restlessness, his love of danger.”¹⁴

The Sound of a Voice is influenced by classic, Japanese, ghost and folk stories, and the conventions of Noh theatre. Traditional Noh theatre incorporates music, dance, and combat elements, and often features supernatural characters taking on human forms.¹⁵ While Hwang did not take the story from one single source, he does cite Japanese folklore and ghost stories, as well as Japanese films, as influences. As

mentioned earlier, there are also echoes of classic European fairytales, a “Brothers Grimm” quality with the house on the edge of an enchanted forest. In fact, in a the introduction to a collection of plays including *The Sound of a Voice*, he admits it has occurred to him that “with only minor alterations, it could be set in a mysterious forest on any continent.”¹⁶

He also cites Harold Pinter as an influence. When asked what about Pinter specifically inspired him, Hwang notes his use of silence as a powerful tool in performance. Indeed, the power of silence becomes the central theme of the play.¹⁷ Once again Asian and Western theatrical techniques are deployed. The musical instruments and combat weapons are Japanese, as is the style of the set, but the dialogue and lexicon is modern American. While the Noh tradition is distinctly Japanese, there are similarities to the techniques of Beijing opera Hwang employed in *FOB* and *The Dance and the Railroad*.

The House of the Sleeping Beauties

In *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, the real-life Nobel prize-winning Japanese author Yasunari Kawabata appears as a character in an adaptation of his own story. The writer visits a secret house where older men are given sleeping potions and allowed to sleep with young, naked women who are drugged to a state of unconsciousness. He initially visits under the guise of researching a story. The proprietress of the house serves him tea; they talk, and play a game of balancing tiles. She persuades him to stay for the night. Over time, he becomes a frequent visitor, and admits that the experience triggers memories. As these memories become more

painful, he increasingly seeks the conversation and company of the proprietress. He begins to discuss suicide. In his final visit, he reveals he has written his experiences there into a story that will expose her. He has brought her a beautiful kimono, money, and poison, and convinces her to assume the costume of a Geisha and serve him the poisoned tea that will put him to sleep permanently. She reluctantly complies. He dies on her lap as she sings. She takes the rest of the tea for herself.

In contrast to *The Sound of a Voice*, the entirety of *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* takes place in the sitting room of the House. Initially, this space appears to be a liminal zone through which Kawabata must pass before he can experience the magic of the House itself. Yet, as the action evolves, the focus never moves. We are denied any view of the bedrooms. It becomes increasingly apparent that the central relationship is not between Kawabata and the sleeping beauties, but rather between him and the proprietress.

The bodies of the sleeping beauties are never revealed, nor are the chambers in which they slumber. Hwang's denial of a view of the body supposedly exciting passion confirms that, in this story, the real intimacy takes place in the sitting room. This relationship may be unique to Kawabata, or part of the allure for all the woman's clients. Hwang, perhaps intentionally, never makes this clear. He chooses, instead, to focus on the interpersonal, simple, and domestic aspects of intimacy.

In *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, the woman is also denied a name. She is initially reduced to, and characterized by, her role as the head of the house. In contrast to *The Sound of a Voice*, however, it eventually becomes important to Kawabata to learn and speak her name. It is only in the final scene that he reflects: "It's funny. I've

known you all this time, and I don't even know your name" (212).¹⁸ In the final lines of the play, he repeats her name four times, as if acknowledging the shift in intimacy the use of her name implies.

The choices, on Hwang's part, suggest a desire to create stories that function on an allegorical level, or stage a genre more than a specific story. The characters are composites of archetypes and, in both works; the female characters are reduced to a supernatural or cliché idea of women rather than a "real" character. Yet there is an element of intersectionality at play, as the tropes rely on culture as much as gender.

The costumes reinforce the Asian motif. When the Woman in *The Sound of a Voice* is "transformed," she appears in a brightly colored and beautiful kimono, while in *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, the proprietress dons an exquisite gold kimono and geisha makeup for the final death scene. In her book *About Face*, Dorinne Kondo explores the potential intersections between Asian American theatre and Japanese fashion, suggesting that, "both are key arenas for the performance of identities, from the 'individual' to the 'national.'"¹⁹ Here, Hwang uses the kimonos to reinforce multiple identities, including culture and gender.

Honor and death is also a central theme in *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, but while the woman and man in *The Sound of a Voice* seem to seek connection, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* explores the desire to escape the pain of memories and relationships. From a sensory perspective, the man and women in *Voice* seek auditory stimulation, while the old men in *House* seek comfort in human touch and warmth.

When asked what appealed to him about Kawabata's novella in writing *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, Hwang explained that he was drawn to it "because of its

juxtaposition of sadness and sensuality, sex and death, as well as a meditation on youth and age.”²⁰ He is not concerned with intimacy in the traditional sense of sexual consummation or human connection, but rather with the notion that passive intimacy, an allusive sense of peace, and an ability to sleep soundly, become seductive with age.

Hwang’s choice to focus on the relationship between the proprietress and Kawabata suggests that spiritual and intellectual human connection is ultimately more important than merely the physical. The shift in focus is purely Hwang’s, as their relationship is cursory in the original novella.²¹ He has explained that he chose to make this change because, “the proprietress seemed to me a central figure in the story, yet rather underdeveloped in the source material. Because I hit upon the idea of Kawabata himself visiting the House of Sleeping Beauties, it seemed his primary relationship would be with the Madame of the house, rather than with one of the girls, who would all have been unconscious during his visits.”²²

As in *The Sound of a Voice*, there are elements of magical realism. We know Kawabata is researching the house for a story. When the woman suggests that the revelation of the House’s existence will result in its destruction, he responds, “people will likely think its all from my head” (194). The possibility exists, therefore, that this is, in fact, merely the staging of Kawabata’s story. The woman replies that to him it is only a story but for her it is her life, and yet he desperately wants to tell this story.

While the House initially provides Kawabata an escape and respite from his life and memories, it ironically also triggers painful memories. Hwang is concerned with memory, nostalgia, and what he perceived at that time to be the despair associated with aging. The men who seek the House are, by implication, impotent and sad, and Hwang

suggests that the past is, perhaps, a dangerous place to try to inhabit. Kawabata initially finds solace in the memories of lovers and friends, but comes to feel embittered and imprisoned by the past.

After several months of visits, he admits:

When I began coming here, I'd lie awake at night, too, but I'd love it, because I'd remember...things I'd forgotten for years—women, romance. I stopped writing—even exercises—it all seemed so pointless. But these last few weeks, I smell their skin, run my fingers between their toes—there's nothing there but skin and toes. I wake up in the middle of the night, and all I can remember was what it was like to remember, and I'm a prisoner in that bed. (199)

Hwang seems to suggest that a space which only exists as a reproduction of an ideal will lose its allure and become empty. Rapture loses its power with familiarity, and an existence in memory is not, ultimately, satisfying.

As in *The Sound of a Voice*, the central female character has constructed an environment predicated on the seduction of men. Kawabata protests early in his visit, offended that she “identifies (him) as just one type of man” (183), but, as their conversation continues, she prepares for his stay as a “guest,” as if it is a foregone conclusion. The suggestion is that the men are malleable and their desires neither complex nor difficult to anticipate. She knows he will become dependent on his visits as a matter of course.

Unlike the allegorical pairing in the previous work, the relationship between Kawabata and the proprietress deepens and becomes more personal. They share formative experiences from their past. The proprietress discloses her betrayal by her sister and fiancée in her youth, while Kawabata reveals that he mourns the suicide of his good friend Mishima. Despite the story's premise suggesting that the comfort of

dispassionate touch can replace human interaction, the characters' catharsis is reliant on their mutual understanding of past personal tragedies.

As is *The Sound of a Voice*, Hwang once again employs suicide to resolve the plot. In so doing, he inserts what seems to have been his own Japanese obsession at this time, the notion of "death with honor." As Kawabata reflects and obsesses on the death of his friend Mishima by seppaku (a Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment), he begins to romanticize suicide himself, even as the woman argues the inherent selfishness of the act, observing that he "shouldn't give (his) friend more respect than he deserves" (200).

As he will later do in *M. Butterfly*, Hwang plays with fate and time in the final scene. It is revealed that Kawabata has published the story, but suggests that it ends with the unintentional death of a client. The woman refutes this, arguing that, "this story. That never happened. No man ever died here" (205). Kawabata himself will, however, be that death. In the final scene, and at his request, the woman performs the geisha identity for Kawabata. He asks her to put on the gold kimono he has brought her and watches her apply her makeup. Esther Kim Lee suggests that "the makeup symbolizes their futile attempt to change the past,"²³ but I would argue that it equally subverts the Asian "butterfly" myth. The female who sacrifices herself for love is a familiar trope, so that in performance the geisha makeup and kimono suggest a somewhat grotesque, distorted representation of the traditional geisha girl.

Kawabata admits that the story came out of him "like a wild animal" (209), correlating his newfound sexual virility in the House with his impotent artistic production. After years of writer's block, his experience with the naked, sleeping girls has stimulated

his creativity. However, the proprietress's participation in the suicide is not of his design, and further demonstrates the story's refusal to be contained. Despite Kawabata's preparations and the money he provided for her future care and independence, she proves equally untamable, and refuses to comply with the ending he has prescribed. She drinks the poisoned tea, perhaps intentionally or perhaps by mistake. If she has chosen to die, is it because of a love for Kawabata or a fear for her future? Her motivations are not clear, and the end, once again, is ambiguous.

The House of the Sleeping Beauties is based on the 1969 Kawabata novella of the same name, and focuses on the musings of the central character, "Old Eguchi," as he spends a series of nights in the House of the title. The novella is considered one of Kawabata's greatest works. In his story, each young woman Old Eguchi is paired with is described in great detail. The skin, coloring, hair, and in particular the scent of each "beauty," evoke a different set of memories and emotions. Old Eguchi's responses include feelings of lust, regret, and violent thoughts. It is, indeed, particularly disturbing, as the female characters he is responding to are all asleep. Kawabata goes into incredible detail in their descriptions; to such an extent that each is oddly well developed and distinct, despite never speaking or interacting with Old Eguchi.

In Hwang's adaptation, the main character is the writer Kawabata himself. The premise is that he is researching the House, as he has heard about it from his friend old Eguchi. Instead of focusing on the experiences with the beauties, Hwang shifts the focus to the relationship with the proprietress. While she is a character of some import in the novella, the relationship Hwang develops between the two becomes of central significance in his text.

In Kawabata's novella, Old Eguchi learns that another client has died at the house, while he himself is in the company of a girl who dies during the night. He, though, does not die, nor is it implied that his death is immediately impending. In Hwang's adaptation, Kawabata learns that a girl has died, but is not present for the event. In both cases, the specter of mortality is coalesced in the knowledge of an actual death in the House.

In his Introduction to a collection of his plays including *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, Hwang explains that "subsequent to the play's composition, several people who knew the author during his lifetime confided to me that the bizarre brothel described in the novella does actually exist."²⁴ It seems that Hwang's imagination is, once again, not far from the truth.

He chose to integrate an additional macabre real-life plot line that demonstrates his increased fascination with the interface between fact and fiction. Yukio Mishima was a Japanese author, poet, playwright, actor and film director. He was a contemporary and close friend of Kawabata, and the two competed for the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968, which Kawabata won. Mishima, famously, committed a ritual suicide after a disastrous attempt at a coup with a small group of dissidents in 1970.²⁵ Ironically, he wrote the introduction to a 1969 collection of Kawabata's works, including *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*.

Kawabata also went on to commit suicide in 1972, although the circumstances were contested. It has been suggested that his death (by gassing) was an accident rather than a suicide, in part because he left no note or explanation.²⁶ Nevertheless, the suicides of these two friends and seminal figures in Japanese culture and literature

struck Hwang. Having determined to feature Kawabata, he admits that, “those facts came in very handy while working out the plot.”²⁷

His incorporation of Kawabata as a character is important as it is his first foray into integrating a real person into a text as a fictional character. This will eventually become an element in many of his later works.

Both of these plays focus on a relationship between a man and a woman, and have a similar structure. They both begin with a meeting, and end with a suicide. Yet these are intimate stories played out in intimate spaces. The characters yearn for connection and meaning. The fact that both plays are resolved by death indicate Hwang’s interest in, or concerns with, the potential danger of intimacy.

In these two works, characters both seek and resist intimacy and connection. Fantasy and reproduction of gendered roles seduce men and destroy women, and, as Boles suggests, both plays “focus on the antagonistic nature of male/female relationships.”²⁸ Hwang’s formula is relatively consistent, but his point is less clear. While the themes are discernible, these two works seem to lack a greater universal element that characterizes some of his other works. Arguably, his focus on style was at the expense of substance. Yet these two plays provided him with the opportunity to develop in new directions and identify elements of plot and structure he would later refine. They also demonstrate his desire to stage stories infused with Asian elements for American audiences.

These works represent Hwang’s first attempts to stage other cultures beyond his Chinese American identity, even as he chose to specifically incorporate elements of amalgamated Asian music and aesthetics, demonstrating his attention to metatheatrical

conventions. And while this may not seem particularly risky in retrospect, for a young playwright whose reputation had been made through staging the Chinese American experience, it should be acknowledged as a bold departure. These works were his first attempt to escape the confinement of an exclusively Chinese American identity and experiment with writing beyond his own lived identity.

There is an irony in his seeking refuge in the performance of Japanese culture. Given the controversial emerging political and cultural assimilation of specific Asian cultures into a “pan-Asian” identity at the time this work was written, a transition to Japanese characters, styles, and myths might appear, to those unindoctrinated to the complexities or nuances of Asian cultures, as natural. While mainstream audiences are unlikely to know the differences, the styles and traditions are dramatically different.

Hwang was beginning to embrace a pan-Asian American identity. In so doing, though, he had resorted to several cliché tropes, most notably the use of Japanese ritual suicide, which serves to underscore the problems of appropriating elements of another culture. Surprisingly, this attracted little or no criticism at the time, although his employment of the same devices in *M. Butterfly* would be widely criticized.

There is an additional complexity in the initial casting of the plays. In the inaugural production at the Public Theatre, the role of the Man, in *The Sound of a Voice*, was played by John Lone, who is Chinese. Considering the concerns around essentialist casting that have plagued Hwang throughout his career, the casting of Lone, a well-known Chinese actor, was not without its significance.

Is Hwang’s appropriation of a Japanese story less problematic or more authentic because he is Asian American? What defines authority in staging another culture?

These works demonstrate the first attempts by Hwang to avoid being seen only in term of his Chinese American identity, and were suffused with what Kondo calls “counter-Orientalism,” or a generalized “Asianness” which would be contested in future plays.

Sound and Beauty is, in my opinion, a critical work in Hwang’s evolution. As William Boles points out, in *Understanding David Hwang*, “his broadening of his writing style and his thematic focus would be essential to his continuing development as a playwright.”²⁹ Most notably, he experiments with several components that will become signature features of his later plays.

As mentioned earlier, his inclusion of the writer Kawabata as a character marks his first incorporation of a real person into a fictional work. He will go on to do this in many of his later plays, including *M. Butterfly* and *Yellow Face*. Hwang himself sees this as a turning point in his craft, explaining that, “I can’t remember why I thought to focus on Kawabata himself visiting the house, though that was my initial conceit. In that way, one might argue that it became the first of many meta-theatrical devices that would follow, in works like *M. Butterfly* and *Yellow Face*.”³⁰

Hwang was developing an almost obsessive fascination with Japanese ritual suicide, arguably romanticizing the practice. At the very least, the visual imagery and ritualistic aesthetics clearly appeal to his dramatic sensibilities. When I asked if the final scene of *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* could be interpreted as a precursor to the ending of *M. Butterfly*, he agreed that was possible, responding, “I suppose that’s fair to say. Obviously, I had no inkling of *M. Butterfly* at the time I wrote this play, but, clearly, I had already begun to experiment with donning a costume (in both cases, a kimono) as part of a theatrical ritual which leads to suicide.”³¹

These works also demonstrate Hwang's continued interest in challenging notions of space and time in theatre. The timeline is never clear in *The Sound of a Voice*, and, in fact, that indeterminacy is underscored. As Josephine Lee observes, "on stage, time functions differently."³² In these works Hwang begins to challenge the already malleable boundaries of theatre in new and provocative ways. Anxiety about time and space become significant in the relationships he stages for the first time.

Finally, in these two plays Hwang begins to consider identity in a broader context. His focus subtly shifts away from identity solely defined by race or a single culture, towards an identity-driven performance that acknowledges, and incorporates gender, age, and relationships.

While less studied than his other major plays, these two works were, in my opinion, critical to Hwang's evolution as a playwright and when read in retrospect provide a roadmap of sorts of what is to come.

1. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xiii.

2. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 37.

3. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other*, xii.

4. Yasunari Kawabata was a Japanese novelist and short story writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968, the first Japanese author to receive the award.

5. Yukio Mishima is the pen name of Kimitake Hiraoka, a Japanese author, poet, playwright, actor, and film director. Mishima is considered by Japanese literature and film scholars to be one of the most important Japanese authors of the 20th century.

6. Masahiro Shinoda is a Japanese film director, originally associated with the Shochiku Studio, who came to prominence as part of the Japanese New Wave in the 1960s.

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7. Hwang, email to the author, November 8, 2015.
 8. Frank Rich, "'Sound and Beauty': Two One-Act Plays," *New York Times* (November 7, 1983): C13.
 9. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 12, 2015.
 10. David Henry Hwang, *The Sound of a Voice*, in *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays*, 151-76 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000). All subsequent citations will be taken from this version (unless otherwise noted) and cited in-text.
 11. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 42.
 12. Kondo, *About Face*, 198.
 13. Adam Goldstein, "Review: 'The Sound of a Voice' at Paragon Theatre," AsiaXpress.com, last modified May 23, 2010, <http://www.asiaxpress.com/Articles/2010/may/sound-of-a-voice-paragon-theatre/1.html>.
 14. Gerald Rabkin, "The Sound of a Voice: David Hwang," in *Contemporary American Theatre*, ed. Bruce King, 97-114 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 108.
 15. "Noh," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noh>, accessed May 20, 2017.
 16. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xii.
 17. Hwang, email to the author, November 8, 2015.
 18. David Henry Hwang, *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, in *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays*, 177-214 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000). All subsequent citations will be taken from this version (unless otherwise noted) and cited in-text.
 19. Kondo, *About Face*, 5.
 20. Hwang, email to the author, December 27, 2015.
 21. Yasunari Kawabata, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories* (New York: Kodansha America, 1969).
 22. Hwang, email to the author, December 27, 2015.

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23. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 41.
 24. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xiii.
 25. "Yukio Mishima," Wikipedia, last modified October 5, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yukio_Mishima.
 26. "Yasunari Kawabata," Wikipedia, last modified September 26, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasunari_Kawabata.
 27. Hwang, email to the author, December 27, 2015.
 28. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, 40.
 29. Ibid., 36.
 30. Hwang, email to the author December 27, 2015.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 45.

Chapter III: *M. Butterfly*

In May of 1986, David Henry Hwang attended a dinner party that would change his life. A friend asked if he had heard the scandalous story of a French diplomat, named Bernard Boursicot, who had carried on a 20-year relationship with a Chinese actress, Shi Pei Pu, who, it was subsequently revealed, was male, and a spy. The diplomat swore he had never seen her naked, believing her simply to be “shy,” or behaving according to Chinese cultural norms. After his trial for treason in France, he insisted that “my conviction remains unshakable that for me at that time he was really a woman and was the first love of my life.”¹

As a Chinese American, Hwang was aware that such modesty was not a Chinese custom though he recognized it as prevalent in Orientalist fantasies and stereotypes. He speculated that the spy had, perhaps, even encouraged and exploited such misperceptions in order to preserve the charade. He knew he had found the premise for his next work.²

He has always maintained that, aside from reading the two-paragraph story in the *New York Times*, he purposely avoided researching more about the actual case. He did not want the “truth” to interfere with his speculations.³ He approached his friend, producer Stuart Ostrow, initially suggesting a musical which could be “*Madame Butterfly*-like.” Ostrow provided funding to develop the project.

In his *Afterword* to the printed edition of the play, Hwang explains that he kept asking himself what Bouriscot “thought he was getting in this Chinese actress?”⁴ He speculated that he believed he had found his own *Madam Butterfly*, or at least a recognizable lotus blossom derivative. So the idea of a deconstructivist *Madam Butterfly*

was born. Hwang wrote the first draft of the script in six to eight weeks, with the storyline of *Madame Butterfly* providing the scaffolding for the plot and narrative arc.

Ostrow sent it to John Dexter, who had recently directed highly successful productions of Peter Schaffer's play *Equus*. Dexter had experience directing opera, and was well suited to stage the enhanced meta-theatrical elements the text called for. John Lithgow was cast as Gallimard and, after an extensive search and audition process, an unknown actor named B.D. Wong was cast as Song Liling.

Expectations were high and the investment was considerable. *M. Butterfly* started its pre-Broadway run at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., on Feb 10, 1988. The initial reactions by the D.C. audiences seem to have been primarily confusion and shock. Hwang recalls that numerous audience members screamed when Song disrobed and was revealed to be a man, which pleased him enormously. He remembers hearing one audience member saying, "It was both fun and unnerving when audiences first encountered this show, knowing nothing about it. Some audience members thought they had purchased tickets to a production of *Madame Butterfly* and attended the play unintentionally, surprised that there was no singing."⁵

Washington Post critic David Richards left the performance uninspired and confused, titling his review "Chinese Puzzle." He seemed fixated on the missing realistic elements, suggesting that "some fundamental questions go unanswered,"⁶ feeling those answers to be critical to the audience's understanding, most importantly the central questions as to whether or not Gallimard "knows" Song is a man. He recognized that "Hwang seems far more concerned with the symbolic aspects of the saga" but felt "we need to know a lot that Hwang isn't telling us."⁷

It was a response which reflected that of American audiences at that time. Multiculturalism was new territory in 1989 America. Few plays dealing explicitly with race or sexuality had been produced in mainstream theatre, or on Broadway. In reaction to the indifferent reviews, co-producer David Geffen attempted to abort the Broadway production, forcing Stuart Ostow to mortgage his house for funding.⁸

M. Butterfly opened on Broadway on March 20, 1988, at the Eugene O’Neil Theatre. In the words of Dorinne Kondo, it “marked a moment of Asian American arrival on the mainstream stage.”⁹ This was the first play written by an Asian American to be produced on Broadway, but while Hwang was new to Broadway he was not new to New York audiences or critics. His long-time champion, Frank Rich, gave the play a critical endorsement by lauding its ambition and complexity. In his review, he points out that the play “has nothing to do with journalism,”¹⁰ even if it was rooted in an actual event.

Rich suggests that the work is “the inverse of most American plays” and that, “Instead of reducing the world to an easily digested cluster of sexual or familial relationships, Mr. Hwang cracks open a liaison to reveal a sweeping, universal meditation on two of the most heated conflicts - men versus women, East versus West — of this or any other time.”¹¹

The production went on to a highly successful run of 777 performances. It was nominated for 7 Tony awards, including Best Play, Best Direction, Best Performance By a Lead Actor, Best Featured Actor in a Play, Best Scenic Design, Best Costume Design, and Best Lighting Design. It won the Tony for Best Play in 1988, as well as Tonys for John Dexter, and B. D. Wong. Additionally, the play was awarded the Drama Desk Award, the John Gassner Award, and the Outer Critics Award. It was nominated for a

Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1989. With numerous regional and international productions, extensive critical analysis, and a solid place in anthologies and the American dramatic canon, the play has endured, but continues to generate controversy and discussion.

The main character Gallimard's continued and determined claim of ignorance about his lover's gender provides the central conflict and point of interest for the drama. Beyond that, its basis in fact and the scandalous trial of Bernard Boursicot, adds a dimension that has undoubtedly contributed to its success.

A survey of the scholarship on the work exposes fascinating and consistent critical disagreements, which mirror the ambiguities in the text. Critics' choices of gender pronouns for the character Song in reviews and scholarship is itself revealing, suggesting differing interpretations and, indeed, there is a problem in this regard. The very choice of pronoun becomes loaded, and is potentially contestable. For the sake of clarification, I will be using feminine pronouns when referring to scenes or content when Song performs the identity of a woman, and masculine pronouns for scenes or in contexts when he performs a male identity.

The play opens with Gallimard already in prison. He provides his personal history and current circumstances, but also a summary of the opera *Madame Butterfly*. The story moves back in time to Beijing, where he meets performer named Song for the first time as she performs a scene from *Madame Butterfly* at an embassy party. She suggests that Gallimard should attend the Peking Opera, where she performs, which he eventually does. The two begin an affair.

Gallimard sets Song up in an apartment. She is visited by Comrade Chin, a Chinese government handler, and supplies the information provided unwittingly by

Gallimard. Gallimard's wife, Helga, is unable to conceive and suggests he should be tested for potency. As a reaction, he embarks on an affair with a Danish student named Renee. He visits Song less frequently, until he finally returns and confronts her with her refusal to disrobe for him. She accuses him of not respecting her culture, inviting him to strip her if he wishes. He apologizes for his insensitivity.

She tells Gallimard that she is pregnant, disappearing for a few months before returning with a baby. But Gallimard has been a failure at his position and is sent back to France. Song is abused in a Chinese communist camp and eventually sent to France to resume her relationship and spying. In the meantime, Gallimard is miserable in France and Helga has left him. Song arrives and the two resume their relationship.

During the interlude between Acts Two and Three, Song stays on the stage and removes her makeup, so that when the lights come up for Act Three, he appears in a suit and is revealed to be biologically male. Song takes up the narration, and the scene shifts to a French court. Song explains to the courtroom that he urged Gallimard to take a post as a courier and photocopy documents.

The attention finally shifts back to Gallimard in his cell, as he and Song meet in the context of Song's new gender identity. Song undresses, and the illusion is destroyed. Gallimard comes to the realization that he loved the myth, not the woman he thought him to be. In the final scene, Gallimard puts on the kimono and Geisha wig, and kills himself in a simulation of Japanese hari kari.

Hwang's work before *M. Butterfly* had already consolidated his role as a leading voice in a new generation of Asian American playwrights. The potential tension implied by that double identity is at the heart of his work, and the critical and commercial

success of *M. Butterfly* made him a focus for discussions of representation and identity politics in America, and, indeed, his earlier concern with cultural clashes, the allure of Asian aesthetics and stereotypes, culminate in *M. Butterfly*. He has been both lauded for “reappropriating the conventional narrative of the pitiful Butterfly and the trope of the exotic, submissive Oriental woman,”¹² and criticized by scholars who claim that the play reinforces Orientalist stereotypes. This was a play of its time, and reflects the concerns and conversations of late 20th Century American society and culture.

The working title was initially *Monsieur Butterfly*, but at the suggestion of his then wife, Ophelia Y. M. Chong, Hwang changed it to the more ambiguous *M. Butterfly*.¹³ According to Graham Allen, in his book *Intertextuality*, a title “on the threshold of the text,” helps “to direct and control the reception of the text,”¹⁴ containing, as it does, the ambivalence at its heart, and that is certainly the case here.

M. Butterfly is, by Hwang’s own admission, a blatant “deconstructivist *Madam Butterfly*.” He uses the extraordinary circumstances of the sensational news story as a point of departure, though while the “true” story was the catalyst for the work, it is not the only, or arguably most important, of the texts to which he refers.

In *Ulysses*, James Joyce never addresses, refers to, or divulges his mapping of Homer’s work *The Odyssey* in any specific way. Similarly, playwright Tom Stoppard does not address the texts his works respond to in plays such as *Rosencratz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) or *Travesties* (1974). By contrast, Hwang weaves an annotated retelling of *Madam Butterfly* into the story. It is critical to him that the audience recognize, and engages intellectually with, the cultural and artistic productions he accuses of reinforcing gender-related Orientalist stereotypes. To that end, he has

Gallimard retell and narrate his own interpretation of *Madame Butterfly* and the Butterfly trope.

In Edward Said's post-colonial treatise *Orientalism* (1978) he cites the power of "representations" and the necessity to recognize the evidence "for such representations *as representations*, not as 'natural' depictions of the Orient."¹⁵ Said emphasizes the relationship between Western-created representations of the East in art, history, politics and culture, in modern/post-modern Western perceptions of the East. He calls for a need to reflect on the relationship between art, culture, and historical and political power dynamics.

His ideas are consistent with the assertions of postmodernists such as Johannes Birringer, who insists that the postmodern reflect a "retrospective process" with both an "absolute dependence on the past...as well as its structural dependence on the current institutions and conventions of representation."¹⁶

Hwang's deliberate choice of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, first produced in 1904, both to structure his plot, and to provide a point of reference for the audience, is designed to confront the power of stereotype, as the audience is invited to consider notions of "East" and "West."

Madame Butterfly is about a love affair between an American soldier (Pinkerton) and a Japanese Geisha (Cio-Cio-San or "Butterfly" in Japanese). Over the course of the opera Pinkerton marries, impregnates, and abandons Butterfly, who ultimately commits suicide in order to save her honor, a distorted devotion of sorts. Hwang regards the opera as the quintessential example of the West's exploitative attitude toward and romanitization of the East.

M. Butterfly's dependence on stereotypes, paired with its use of postmodern techniques of re-appropriation, hybridity, and its use of intertextuality, locate the play at this pivotal post-colonial and postmodern intersection. While it may be the nature of adaptation to view a story through the prism of the original, this is a play written by a Chinese American, about a French man and a Chinese cross-dressing male, based on an opera, by an Italian man, about an American man and a Japanese woman. *Madame Butterfly* is, itself, based on a short story by the American writer John Luther Long, which is partially based on the novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), by French writer Pierre Loti. This is adaptation and textual chaos, a copy five times removed, what Graham Allen terms a "radically plural text,"¹⁷ or what Jean Baudrillard termed the "hyperreal- the generation of models of a real without origin or reality."¹⁸

By using this particular story and opera as Gallimard's reference point and fantasy, Hwang recognizes the influence of internalized narratives on "real" intercultural relations, such as the relationship between Bouriscot and Shi Pei Pu. Gallimard prefaces his own story with the admission that "In order for you to understand what I did and why, I must introduce you to my favorite opera: *Madame Butterfly*" (4).¹⁹ The text's relationship to other texts and cultural references is critical, and Hwang's use of Gallimard as narrator of both this story, and the tradition of stories it exemplifies, exposes the depth of the fantasy and the stereotype in which it is rooted.

New York Times critic John Gross dismissed Hwang's suggestion of the power of the opera, calling *Madame Butterfly* "a fable of submission, both female and Oriental, of a kind that no enlightened audience could comfortably endorse today."²⁰ *Madame Butterfly*, however, is currently one of the ten most performed operas in the world, and

its enduring status as a “classic” seems to contradict his assertions. This is not a work viewed as dated and racist, but is, instead, a widely produced and popular opera. To suggest it has no influence on perceptions of the East is naive.

In his afterword to the play, Hwang argued that, “anyone who believes such stereotypes are a thing of the past need look no further than Manhattan cable television, which advertises call girls from ‘the exotic east, where men are king; obedient girls, trained in the art of pleasure.’”²¹

The persistence of these stereotypes underlines their pervasive influence on general cultural perceptions. Other contemporary works such as *Miss Saigon* are often cited as perpetuating these same stereotypes. Ironically, *Miss Saigon* was created and produced after *M. Butterfly*, which seems to suggest a continued appetite for a new version of the story, as well as a general failure in Western society to repudiate its cultural implications. *Madame Butterfly*, perhaps more than any other single work, “enacts the white male’s desire for the submissive oriental woman, metaphorically and musically likened to a fragile butterfly.”²²

Hwang uses the opera as a constant point of reference for Gallimard. Introducing it as his “favorite,” Gallimard immediately communicates his own internalized desires in relation to the Oriental female. From his first meeting with Song, the power of the “Butterfly” myth is a crucial element in distorting his expectations for the relationship, to the extent that it limits his ability to consider the reality of the Butterfly he finds. He is so sure he “knows” the Oriental woman, based on this opera, that his desire to recreate the myth renders him incapable of recognizing the deliberate construction of the fantasy Song performs throughout their relationship.

Hwang chooses to stage Gallimard's, and, in turn, the audience's first exposure to Song in the context of her literal performance of the *Madame Butterfly* fantasy, in a staged recital at an embassy event. The convincing nature of Song's performance, the power of exotic spectacle, and Gallimard's predetermination to accept her as a Japanese Geisha, foreshadow both Song's ability to effectively perform the stereotype, and Gallimard's cultural confusion and ambivalence. As he observes, "she had the grace, the delicacy...I believed this girl" (15). Again, Hwang emphasizes the power of the performance, as well as the imposition of the stereotype, rather than any realities. This "believable" Japanese girl is, in fact, a Chinese man.

Song actually expresses scorn after the performance:

Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you. (17)

Not only does Gallimard miss the irony, he does not recognize the significance of Song's ability to be complicit in performing a role she personally reviles.

Nor are the implications restricted to this relationship, as Gallimard's paternalistic assumptions about the Vietnamese suggests a wider relevance. Gallimard's assertion that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (46) proves disastrously wrong. Ambassador Toulon eventually determines to send him home to France because "In general, everything (he) has predicted here in the Orient...just hasn't happened" (69). The implication is that the same Orientalist assumptions on which he bases his faulty logic were at play in the Indochinese and Vietnam wars. As Kondo suggests, Hwang "plays with the levels of the personal and political by situating Gallimard and Song

historically during the era of the Vietnam war and Cultural Revolution, taking them up to the present.”²³

Hwang’s fictional embodiment of the factual Bouriscot is the protagonist, René Gallimard. Though René is a male name, he later has an affair with the Danish student “Renee,” who comments upon their meeting: “Weird. I’m Renee too” (54); gender lines, it appears, are easily blurred. As to Gallimard, Hwang has explained that this name came from the fact that Stuart Ostrow had tried to get the rights for a musical version of Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* from the publisher Gallimard, but was turned down.”²⁴

Gallimard is both narrator and cultural translator, but is exposed as unreliable in both capacities. To the degree that he is meant to personify the Western male gaze, his personal history and lack of confidence in his masculinity suggest something more complex at play. On one level, Hwang is using Gallimard as the embodiment of the Western colonizer. On another, he is suggesting that the Orientalist conqueror is, by nature, liable to suffer from certain inadequacies. In other words, Hwang chooses to inflict a myriad of cliché characteristics upon Gallimard: a dominating hypersexual best friend, a questionable history of ability to perform sexually, a mediocre career trajectory, and, perhaps, a tendency towards the mildly effeminate. Casting choices have tended to support this, and certainly the casting of a more masculine or attractive Gallimard would create a different dynamic.

Song, on the other hand, should embody the ultimate Orientalist lotus blossom fantasy. There has been considerable scholarly discussion as to how explicit Song’s biological gender should be. Some productions, and in fact the film version of *M. Butterfly*, have chosen to reveal, or at least suggest, Song’s gender earlier and more

explicitly. In so doing, the nature of Gallimard's denial is changed, along with the nature of his sexuality. For Hwang, though, Song should be convincing enough as a woman to support Gallimard's initial mistake. When asked about his choice in naming this character, Hwang says that, "When I wrote the first draft, I used Shi and Boursicot. 'Song' came from the Soong Sisters, in a pinyin transliteration, but I also liked the double-meaning, since Shi was a singer."²⁵

Key to our understanding of Song is that everything we learn about him is filtered through Gallimard's memory. Inevitably, therefore, he is over-determined, at times bordering on caricature, denied real autonomy. Though this has been a source of criticism, I would argue it is key to consider the implications of the reality that he is, in effect, no more than a product of Gallimard's memory and imagination.

Song's introductory scene is pivotal, as she performs the aria from *Madame Butterfly* at an embassy cocktail party. The audience not only watches Song perform, but simultaneously observes Gallimard's reaction, savoring, as he does, the Oriental aesthetics and costuming, and making assumptions based on stereotypes. Some in the audience will have full knowledge of the drag being performed, while others will not.

A series of supporting characters, with actors often playing multiple roles, round out the story. Marc, Gallimard's childhood friend, and the source of much of his sexual and masculine angst, replaces Pinkerton's insensitive and misogynist military friend in *Madame Butterfly*. Cio-Cio San's Japanese girlfriend, Suzuki, later becomes Comrade Chin. The other women in Gallimard's life, his wife Helga and lover Renee, are Western, uninhibited, slightly domineering, and contribute to Gallimard's feelings of inadequacy.

In early, unpublished versions of the script, Gallimard's wife is named "Florette," with Hwang describing her as "a woman not renowned for her looks". In the final version, there is no specific mention of her looks, but instead she is described as "older" than Gallimard, and the daughter of a British Ambassador to Australia.

The amalgamation and incorporation of Asian design motifs, gongs, and music generated by Asian instruments, are critical in production, and Hwang goes so far as to suggest distorting them to underscore the exotification of Orientalist stereotypes. He details what he requires, or suggests, for the set, costumes, and sounds. The production should feel at times as if it were opera, and as scenes from *Madame Butterfly* and Beijing opera are re-enacted, the notion of performing the Orient is both interrogated and reinforced.

The settings are complex, with multiple spaces and locations. Hwang is, once again, concerned with intimate and domestic spaces but, in this work, public and institutional spaces also play a role. The courtroom and jail cell become sites of revelation for both Song and Gallimard, perhaps suggesting that the intimate spaces have become suspect, locations of deception and danger. The set must also suggest the limitations of Gallimard's memory and imagination. As Andrew Shin suggests, "the theatrical manipulation of lights emphasizes Gallimard's retrospection as scopophilic fantasy, rather than social performance."²⁶

What some see as Hwang's overt and excessive use of Asian motifs has provoked criticism. From its preview in Washington DC through the many subsequent productions, reviews focused on "gongs reverberating"²⁷ and Orientalist images and

elements in the sets, even as they were critical of Hwang's desire to create an almost "hyper-Asian" fantasy. That, though, was precisely what he was looking to do.

Song's, after all, were performances in a number of different ways. She provides what Gallimard wants. The issue of what is or is not authentic is central to the play, a work in which identity is staged. Song is a spy and a lover, a man masquerading as a woman. Behind the action of this play lies that of another work, *Madame Butterfly*, itself a performance which deals with deceit. Song performs the cultural as well as the personal identity which Gallimard wishes her to be, but that in itself inevitably raises questions about expectations when it comes to cultural performances. Gallimard reads Song in the way he does because it serves his psychological needs. A similar logic applies when it comes to the understanding of all cultures. Gallimard exoticizes Song. To accuse Hwang of doing likewise is to miss the point. Inauthenticity is his subject, not his offence.

Hwang has discussed his interest in "theatricality" (his term) as a tool in his work. Along with elements of music and dance, the set is highly stylized. As the son of a musician, who plays the violin himself, his own introduction to Chinese culture was through music and performance. So, in spite of his lack of direct experience of China, he did grow up in an environment that appreciated and celebrated Chinese art and culture. Additionally, he is fascinated by the impact music and visual performance have on the audience.

M. Butterfly employs, and, in fact exploits, the potential of Asian music and design. He does not invoke Brecht, despite his use of techniques that are consistent

with the theatre of alienation, but he does stress the importance of theatricality, which he sees as essential in contemporary drama:

I use music because I came up during a period when we were beginning to understand that theater maybe was not going to be able to compete with film and television in terms of naturalism. So then it became for me: "What does theater do better than these other mediums" There was a movement in the 70's called "theatricalism" which I feel I was influenced by: the idea that live dance, live music, all these things are more exciting to experience than on a recording or on a screen. So I tended to incorporate that into my work, as well as opera and Chinese opera.²⁸

The plot line, ostensibly sensational and implausible, is, as we have seen, based on fact. Hwang, indeed, has commented on "both the impossibility of the situation and the inevitability of it."²⁹ While he did not attempt to tell a "true" story, he used this seemingly "impossible" story as an opportunity to address the complexity of race in American society.

Indeed, despite its distracting and ambiguous Asian locales and trappings, this is, in essence, a play about American culture and identity. When seeing or reading the play it is easy to forget that there are no elements of the story that are technically American, other than references to the American war in Vietnam. None of the locations are in the US, and none of the characters American.

This is a critical departure from most of Hwang's predecessors and contemporaries. It is highly unusual for a play which seeks to portray aspects of American culture to involve a story with no authentically American components, locations, or characters. *M. Butterfly* is set in France or China. So how does the audience understand the intended American metaphor?

The answer is that he integrates elements of American culture into the text. He liberally incorporates American references throughout the play. At their first meeting, Song challenges Gallimard with a cultural analogy:

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, and 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)

The Orientalist cliché becomes improbable when mapped onto American culture. Butterfly's servant Suzuki even delivers a take on the plot straight from the American "mall" of the 1980s, observing:

Girl, he's a loser. What'd he ever give you? Nineteen cents and those ugly Day-Glo stockings?" Look, it's finished! Kaput! Done! And you should be glad! I mean the guy was woofer! He tried before, you know—before he met you he went down to geisha central and plunked down his spare change in front of the usual candidates—everyone else gagged! These are hungry prostitutes, and they were not interested, get the picture? Now, stop slathering when an American ship sails in, and let's make some bucks—I mean, yen! We are broke! (12)

The high-culture tragedy of the Puccini's opera is juxtaposed to 1980s American slang.

Later, as Gallimard's lover Renee recites a litany of slang terms for penis—"weenie, prick, dick"—they are all American. In fact, most of the dialogue, particularly that of Song, is in American vernacular, the American context being reinforced at the linguistic level, rather than through character or location.

Within the "reality" of the play, and, in fact, the actual scandal, Gallimard is French and Song Chinese, yet the source of the adaptation, *Madame Butterfly*, is set in Japan. Song's reference to the Geisha, however, is equally transgressive, Chinese culture having no historical Geisha equivalent, and while Hwang actively subverts ideas

of authentic representation, it is important to recognize the degree to which he creates his own hybrid East and West.

By mapping his story onto *Madame Butterfly*, and the Geisha trope it romanticizes, he chooses to embrace his audience's ambivalence toward, and likely inability to make sense of, nuanced distinctions between specific Asian cultures. Instead, he critically engages with, and exposes, the problematics of a constructed "Asian" identity.

The audience is liable to be unaware of Gallimard's ignorance, or the error of his assumptions not least because they are liable to be equally ignorant of Chinese and Japanese feminine norms and roles. In his afterword, Hwang discusses the use of the term "Butterfly" within Asian American culture: "I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype; speaking of an Asian woman, we would sometimes say, 'She's pulling a Butterfly,' which meant playing the submissive Oriental number."³⁰ Therefore, the Asian American audience member is likely to recognize the stereotyping, beginning with the play's title. It becomes an "inside joke," a recognizable appropriation, performance, and manipulation of a Western-created stereotype. Non-Asian American audience members are not likely to recognize the irony.

Hwang's technique of mixing specific Western and Asian cultural references and stereotypes serves an important function, despite the challenges such subtleties pose. References easily identifiable to non-Asian American audiences provide examples of the tendency toward cultural generalization. The play forces an acknowledgement of hybridity if it is to be fully understood.

Hwang engaged extensively with Asian American studies and ethnic studies while studying at Stanford, at a time when post-colonial studies were emerging as an academic area. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* was a major influence. His previous American plays had focused exclusively on the Chinese American experience, but *M. Butterfly* allowed him to consider race and culture outside of the American discourse on multiculturalism. Instead, he became interested in the broader Western tradition and its capacity, as evidenced in Puccini's work, to appropriate, use, and dictate non-European tropes.

As Edward Said suggests in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), stories by explorers and novelists "othering" the rest of the world "become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history."³¹ Post-colonial theorists such as Said have long suggested that the West tends to feminize the East, resulting in a weakened position. In *M. Butterfly*, it is suggested that Gallimard can only realize his masculine potential in a relationship to a submissive Asian woman, while other Western female characters tend to be assertive and highly sexualized.

Early scripts have his wife, Helga, at home reading an Agatha Christie novel on the evening he meets Song at the Beijing Opera. In the final version, she has returned from a martial arts demonstration, and is impressed by the men "when they break those thick boards" (23). These changes suggest Hwang's increasingly chose to reinforce Gallimard's anxieties about his marriage and masculinity, and make Song's ultra-femininity all the more desirable. He has defined the Asian woman in opposition to the

cliché, modern, Western woman, even as, paradoxically, cultural stereotypes lead him to self-actualization.

Critics have assumed Gallimard's failure to recognize Song's sexual identity as a manifestation of denial, whereas in the climactic scene, in which he demands to see Song naked, she responds by invoking a modesty, rooted in cultural appropriateness: "I thought you understood my modesty. So you want me to—what—strip? Like a big cowboy girl? Shiny pasties on my breasts? Shall I fling my kimono over my head and yell "ya-hoo" in the process? I thought you respected my shame!" (59).

Clearly, Song takes advantage of Gallimard's cultural ignorance, but I would argue their sexual encounters reveal and acknowledge the inherent anxiety and ambiguity of intimate relations across borders and cultures. When I asked Hwang about this he agreed, and observed, travelers often not only rely on their first cultural informant, but, "allow them to create your generalizations because that is all you have to go on."³²

M. Butterfly was one of the first Broadway plays to stage a sexual relationship between males, yet in my opinion, because of the terms in which it is presented, it is clearly not a gay play in the same sense that other contemporary works, such as *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* or *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, are overtly queer-themed. Critics have argued that Gallimard's actions are a result of denying his homosexuality or his gender confusion. Andrew Shin suggests that "the French diplomat's fantasy of the perfect Oriental woman mediates homosexual desire in the face of pervasive homophobia, masking the wish to be the woman with the more acceptable desire for possession."³³ This reading interprets his suicide as motivated by

an inability to accept his homosexuality, or perhaps his gender identification as exposed by the trial and his forced final encounter with Song's naked body.

I disagree and would argue the play resists such a simple interpretation.

Gallimard's obsession with his Geisha fantasy is, in fact, primary; the sex is arguably incidental. When he is confronted by Song's naked body, Gallimard's disappointment is palpable as he realizes that the object of his obsession is "just a man" (88). Indeed, Hwang has said that the play never "goes quite so far as say they were in a gay relationship or a straight relationship, and doesn't define it that way."³⁴ Despite Song's insistence that, "It's the same skin you've worshipped for years" (89), Gallimard has lost all interest. He now feels no passion, and is not aroused. For Hwang, "Gallimard is in love with a Butterfly, he's not in love with this Asian man."³⁵

As in the case of *The Sound of a Voice*, it is the inability to sustain the fantasy which destroys the relationship. As Rossini observes, "the dominant Western male is left to self-destruction in the delusory space of his own constructed fantasy."³⁶

Gallimard is "a man who loved a woman created by a man"; for him, "everything else—simply falls short" (90). His sexuality is inextricably linked to his ego. He is only virile when feeling powerful and dominant. The result is that the objects of his desire are oddly inconsequential in any real or personal sense. They only exist to reinforce his ego. As Andrew Shin points out, "Gallimard's virile display depends on exaggerating gender stereotypes; hence he assumes a masterful role" (185). Song reveals during the courtroom scene, "(Song) did all the work. He just laid back" (82).

At the same time, we learn little of Song's true nature, history or motivations. While the play centers on their relationship, the dominance of Gallimard's perspective,

and the limitations of his narration and memory, deny the audience the ability to know Song in any real sense. She or he is portrayed in a series of interactions, but never truly allowed to expose or share a self, beyond contempt for the West and pride in a sustained performance. If Song has a yearning to be accepted and desired as an individual, the denial is not only by Gallimard but, in a sense, by the play itself.

Hwang never explicitly reveals Song's sexuality or her/his feelings for Gallimard. With the passage of time, he suspects that in a context in which gay identity is much more open, and transgender identities become a new focus, there is a possibility that, as he remarked in 2015, "the play will play differently." He confesses that it has been suggested to him that *M. Butterfly* "was prophetic" and "anticipated transgender as an identity."³⁷

Song emerges as an arrogant drag queen, a diva, but, given his position in Chinese society, his choices were undeniably limited. To assume he is gay because he performs in the Beijing Opera, though, is to default to the same flawed and culturally ignorant logic Gallimard employs, and the fact remains that while the couple's eventual co-dependence is a result of shared lies and denials, only Gallimard can be assumed to have willingly chosen the relationship.

Perhaps ironically, given Hwang's gender, race and view, the most persistent criticism of *M. Butterfly* has been in regard to his representation of the Asian male. When I asked him about this, he admitted that the accusation "of disempowering Asian men" is still the one he finds most upsetting. It rankles because it is the stereotype he recognizes as a problem in American culture. Asian American critics, most notably James Moy, have suggested that the play "reinscribed the very images he [Hwang]

sought to bring down.”³⁸ Other contemporary Asian American playwrights writing at the time, including Frank Chin and Philip Kan Gotanda, were actively attempting to create Asian American male characters to address, confront, and subvert stereotypes, the strong, masculine, Asian leading-man being notably absent in the dramatic cannon. Hwang had done so himself in his previous plays such as *FOB* and *The Dance and the Railroad*.

Hwang does not disagree with his critics. Indeed, he can see where “one could make the argument that *M. Butterfly*, rather than exploring Asian emasculation reinforces it...I understand that argument.” He suggests that while he does give the audience credit for understanding some of the subtle points he makes, the possibility always exists that “they are attaching to and finding affection in the more Orientalist and traditional tropes of the play and the subversion goes over their heads.”³⁹ The play’s potential to reinforce stereotypes was, and is, understandably problematic for scholars and activists involved in the Asian American movement, though Hwang points out that that danger was arguably much greater in 1989 when the play was first produced. At the same time, he has said that “the counterargument to the counterargument is there will be people who will not understand what the play is trying to do, which is true of any play”; He feels his role as a playwright is simply “to try to nudge people a little bit.”⁴⁰

Hwang’s questions about, and commentary on, race, gender, and culture depend upon a recognition of the Orientalist fantasies he challenges and deconstructs. *M. Butterfly* exposes cultures within cultures, meta-narratives, fault-lines in the relationship between sign and signifier, author and subject, actor and audience. I would argue that

discussions of the play and reviews have often foundered on a failure to understand the nature of the cultural game he is playing.

In her essay, “The Critic and the Butterfly: Sociocultural Contexts and the Reception of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*,” Angela Pao suggests, “The identification of metaphor and paradigm as the key figures in *M. Butterfly* is critical to making sense of the play. If these figures are not recognized as the structures bearing meaning, the production of meaning is aborted.”⁴¹ Pao asserts that, “the meaning of the play, particularly on the most controversial points of interpretation, is determined at the moment of reception by various levels of contextualization.”⁴² She goes on to interrogate the relationship between the audience, critical reception, and content for multiple productions of *M. Butterfly*.

Certainly interpretations of the play will be disproportionately impacted by cultural and contextual elements. Asian Americans, the gay community, expatriates, women, might all respond differently, bringing, as they do, radically different perspectives, context, and experiences to bear. Familiarity with Asian culture is a factor, as is knowledge of drag and gender performance. Comprehension of the concept of “pulling a Butterfly” is helpful, as is familiarity with gay clichés and derivatives relating to specific attraction to Asian males, such as “rice queen” (Caucasian male attracted to Asian males) or “sticky rice” (Asians attracted to other Asians).

Pao sees reviews that suggest the play does not “make sense”, as reflecting “the critic’s inability to recognize a legitimate and coherent cultural narrative in Hwang’s work.”⁴³ She suggests that scholarly reception of *M. Butterfly* is highly influenced by personal context, and often by familiarity with Hwang’s previous, more celebratory Asian

American works, as well as by the dynamics of Asian American discourse. For some previously supportive Asian American scholars and critics, *M. Butterfly* felt like a betrayal of sorts by the wunderkind of Asian American theatre.

Pao's observation is illuminating and accounts, to some degree, for the extreme and often negative reactions by critics who were disturbed by the image of the Asian male as potentially, if not actually, gay. Most of the criticism with respect to Asian male feminization came, it should be noted, from straight Asian American male critics. In my opinion, however, such criticisms deny the validity of a gay Chinese perspective. Readings that lament the absence of a strong Asian male risk focusing on traditional power binaries from a racial, cultural, and gender perspective to an extent that ignores or denies the potential for the equally underrepresented perspective of the gay Asian male.

On the other hand, queer readings of the play have obsessively explored Gallimard's sexuality to a degree that reinforces the dominance of the Western male perspective, while questions regarding Song's sexuality reveal a multitude of assumptions ultimately reinforcing the centrality of the white man's story.

Hwang also remains somewhat ambivalent on the question of "knowing" the Asian woman. She is oddly absent, apart from the Maoist caricature, Comrade Chin, and while Song's courtroom speech attacks the feminization of the East by the West, it is still delivered by a man. This is, it should be noted, problematic in a play in part concerned with issues of gender. Song may be an authority on the performance and behavior of feminine norms, but he is not a woman.

Much criticism of *M. Butterfly*, does, in fact, focus on the “play’s allegedly confused presentation of gender.”⁴⁴ While it may be true that “the agonized debate between the East and the West is carried on exclusively between two male actors impersonating men who alternate in wearing feminine costumes,”⁴⁵ I find it even more problematic that both characters equally deny the importance of race or culture in the equation.

Song insists that “only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (63) and Gallimard asserts that he is “a man who loved a woman created by a man. Everything else—simply falls short” (90). Both statements, often quoted as the most important in the text, ignore the significance of race or culture in the relationship, even as Song underscores its role in creating the West’s “international rape mentality towards the East” (82), along with the assumption that “being an Oriental, (he) could never be completely a man” (82).

Song’s confidence in his ability to perform a gender ideal ignores the fact that his success is equally based on Gallimard’s cultural stereotypes and confusion. Much of what Song regards as gender performance Gallimard sees as reinforcement of Chinese cultural norms. It is, perhaps, less gender than “the proper performance of culturally prescribed and anticipated behavior.”⁴⁶

While the critical focus seems to have settled on the idea that “Gallimard and Song both perform multiple genders independent of their biological sexes ...to emphasize the performative nature of gender,”⁴⁷ the same can be said of the performance of race. Kondo argues that, “the assumption that one can privilege gender, in advance, ...is itself an Orientalist move.”⁴⁸

M. Butterfly is less about gender than it is about gendering Orientalism, or perhaps Orientalizing gender. Ironically, the performance of the Asian female identity is consistently associated with power in the relationship. However, as Saal points out, “even though the protagonists switch gender and cultural roles, the binary distribution of power and gender are, nevertheless, once more and still intact.”⁴⁹ The fact that gender identities are not resolved reinforces the degree to which other identities are equally unresolved.

Many critics also point out the threatening and caricatured nature of the females portrayed: Renee the “man-eater,” Helga the detached expatriate wife, and Comrade Chin, the abusive Chinese communist. However, given the dominance of Gallimard’s perspective within the narration, their characterization is clearly influenced, and, in fact constructed, by his opinions. While the lack of feminine perspective may disturb some critics, it is, perhaps, more useful to allow that Hwang denies *any* essentialism, East, West, male, female.

As in previous plays, Hwang challenges conventions of realism, particularly in terms of narration and subjectivity, perhaps as part of his attempt to question the most basic assumptions of performance. Gallimard immediately begins a dialogue with the audience through use of direct address, in so doing, establishing a relationship and intimacy. The audience enters into the private space of his prison cell as a “confidante.” He admits that the story consists of memories, and is therefore seen from his perspective, exposing the slippage and unreliability of the “truth” of the story: “Alone in this cell,” he remarks, “I sit night after night, watching our story play through my head, always searching for a new ending” (4). As Christopher Irmischer points out, “Gallimard

not only tries to be Pinkerton, but also wants to be Puccini: he insists that he is not just a character in the play but also the author of the text.”⁵⁰

Intrusions ensue. His school friend Marc disrupts the action and flirts with audience members. He later appears in a dream, stating “I’ve come across space and time to congratulate you” (24). In Act II, as comrade Chin is about to enter and expose Song’s role as a spy, Gallimard protests, “No! Why does she have to come in?” (47). Later, he pleads with Song: “please...don’t change,” to which Song responds: “You know I have to. You know I will” (78). He responds by insisting, “You have to do what I say! I’m conjuring you up in *my* mind” (emphasis in original, 78).

Ultimately, he fails to “control” the story, his own subconscious interrupting at every turn. As Esther Kim Lee remarks, “What had been Gallimard’s story of love and fantasy turns into a nightmare of betrayal and reality.”⁵¹ As a result, his authority as narrator is undermined, as is the authority of his perspective, while the role of memory in constructing relationships and reality is called into question.

The convention of the theatrical “fourth wall” between actor and audience has already been broken, but, with the intrusions of Marc and Song, Hwang proceeds to break a second interior wall, that between narrator and memory. Blind confidence in Gallimard’s narrative authority is, again, undermined, and in questioning Gallimard’s authority, Hwang simultaneously challenges the authority of the dominant Western perspective to determine the story of the East.

Gallimard informs the audience that they themselves are of his invention: “I imagine you—my ideal audience—who come to understand and even perhaps just a little, to envy me” (9). This implication is that the audience will be Western, and

therefore subject to the same cultural assumptions as Gallimard, while the reference to envy implies a level of Orientalist fantasy, and perhaps masculinity, on the part of the audience. Finally, he assumes an inherent level of empathy, no matter how “guilty” of ignorance or hubris he may be, because, as Westerners, the audience will share the same latent attitudes toward the East and be persuaded to accept his perspective, the colonial gaze of the Western male.

Script cuts to *M. Butterfly* reveal that Hwang moved further toward ambivalence and ambiguity as he rewrote. Much of what was cut included intimate and realistic discussions between Song and Gallimard. A section removed from Act 2, scene 7 includes a discussion of their child in which Gallimard insists that “You loved that child” only to have Song respond: “How do you know I didn’t dump him in the chimney ashes?” Multiple versions of their final confrontation are longer and feature extended dialogue about the nature of their relationship, including Song’s claim that he would “hit (him), mock (him), knock (him) down and (he’d) come bouncing back with an even greater love.”⁵²

His script changes increasingly shift the focus from the reality and nature of their actual relationship to Gallimard’s fantasy. In earlier versions, Gallimard’s final monologue is more lucid and specific to Song. In one version, he confesses that he always stumbles as Song disrobes because:

(He) would see him starting to undress, but no, my mind would block out the images, and I would imagine him instead, putting on these robes and returning to my arms. But, of course, it was never really *Butterfly*—only this old skull, playing its tricks on me.⁵³

In the final version, Gallimard does not engage in any reflection of this sort, but instead approaches his “solution” with relief and euphoria: “Tonight I realize my search

is over. That I've looked all along in the wrong place" (91). Early versions also include a brief return on Song's part to the courtroom. By removing this, Hwang reinforces Gallimard's narcissism, as he finally assumes control of the story, dramatically dragging Song off the stage and taking his kimono.

Gallimard has told the audience early on that he replays this story "night after night" (4), but that he has now reached the finale. Song, whether man or woman, becomes redundant, dismissed as no more than "a cad, a bounder" (92). Gallimard's naïve, delusional love renders all other aspects of the fantasy incidental.

As noted, productions of *M. Butterfly* have varied in the extent to which they make Song's biological gender obvious. For his part, Hwang states that when he conceived the play, he always intended Song to fool the audience, so they would share Gallimard's experience. He goes so far as to say that audience members who know the story in advance "even better replicate Gallimard's experience because they know, but choose not to know."⁵⁴

Song's performance is multifaceted and complex, involving, as it does, mimicry and masquerade. I would argue that question of subjectivity in *M. Butterfly* is, however, never adequately addressed since Song's performance cannot be assumed to derive from personal expression or identity. The lead role in the Peking Opera is played by a man, but is not ironic or designed to explore the performance of gender in the same way as drag, which is, after all, what we are witnessing here. The nature of the performance, and the motivations of the performer we see, have a critically different cultural context.

As Gallimard pursues Song, so the need to reinforce the performance of an Oriental identity intensifies. Their second meeting comes after he views Song's

performance at the Beijing Opera. Again, Hwang suggests the power and influence of spectacle in reinforcing the stereotype. The most extreme example of the imposition of the fantasy comes as their relationship is consummated for the first time. As Gallimard asks for Song's commitment, it is not in terms of her own identity, but rather in the form of the question: "Are you my Butterfly?" (39). Gallimard's request is indicative of his wish for Song to commit to the performance of the Butterfly fantasy. Clearly, Hwang relates the Western or white cultural desire for performance of the stereotype to a need for dominance. What Gallimard requires of Song is complicity in performance rather than commitment to a relationship.

Song's role as a spy acting on behalf of the Chinese authorities further complicates any assumptions about her performance with respect to Gallimard. When visited by Comrade Chin, Song is still costumed as a woman and, in fact, Comrade Chin notes that every time she visits, she is wearing a dress. Allowing for the fact that we are still seeing through the lens of Gallimard's memory, the costume choices for the scenes between Song and Comrade Chin do suggest a life conducted in feminine clothing, a fact which has provoked criticism.

James Moy has suggested that Song "finally comes across as little more than a disfigured transvestite version of the infamous Chinese 'dragon lady' prostitute stereotype,"⁵⁵ but it is Moy himself who collapses the different, and potentially conflicting, cultural stereotypes of dragon lady and prostitute. Both are, anyway, caricatures associated with the Asian female, and not the male. To be sure, Hwang has blurred the distinctions between gender and culture, but not with the intent of making

any essentialist comments about either. Still, for many critics, Hwang's obvious resistance to a stable Asian identity proves unsatisfactory rather than liberating.

Andrew Shin suggests that Song, "associates womanliness with the freedom of imagination, performativity, and non-referentiality,"⁵⁶ but this ignores the reality that Song's performances and drag are viewed through Gallimard's memory and, therefore, unreliable. Given his obsession with the Butterfly identity, Song's remembered costumes and performance are highly susceptible to the excess of Gallimard's imagination and therefore are not trustworthy.

Karen Shimikawa suggests a similar possibility. She suggests that Song performs within the limited pre-existing possibilities for the Asian American body, and "steps into an established (although admittedly complex) cultural matrix of abject stereotypes," while "her admission into the world of the play is premised on her adherence to that preexisting 'script.'"⁵⁷

Sections of dialogue offer limited insights, however Song remains largely one-dimensional, bordering on caricature. Even in moments such as the scene in the commune, where he is free from the constraint of his butterfly role, the repressive political atmosphere forces his subjection. Song's exclamation: "I shamed China by allowing myself to be corrupted by a foreigner" (70), is inconsistent with the pride he later takes in his performance. He is, of necessity, required to "perform," in this case for his survival.

Despite the criticism of what is taken to be Hwang's use of stereotype in his characterization of Song, his refusal to make his "Butterfly" overly sympathetic is, notably, subversive in its own way. *Madame Butterfly* relies on sympathy for the used

and abandoned lotus blossom as crucial to acknowledging the plight of the powerless subjugated “other.” Song’s power and deception in this dynamic resists sympathy.

In the French courtroom, Song speaks eloquently of the relationship between the East and the West. He also admits that his knowledge has come from his mother, and is not even his own: “I borrowed her knowledge. In service to my country” (82), thereby implying a lack of agency. However, costumed as he is in a western suit, Karen Shimakawa suggests that we have to “consider the possibility that *this too* is a performance.”⁵⁸

In Homi Bhabha’s essay, “Of Mimicry and Man,” he defines colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*.”⁵⁹ Hwang’s audience is seduced by the performance, but is forced to see its construction.

Bhabha goes on to define the discourse of mimicry as being “constructed around ambivalence, suggesting that in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference,”⁶⁰ and surely Hwang’s use of blatantly stereotypical Oriental images can be recognized as intentionally ambivalent and excessive. He “conceals, reveals, and then calls into question so-called ‘true’ identity.”⁶¹ As Josephine Lee points out, even the play’s basis in a series of literary and operatic “copies” with only a tenuous relationship to any original, is consistent with the ambivalence of representation employed in mimicry.⁶²

Ultimately, Hwang never reveals what identity Song would choose, given autonomy. Shin suggests that “in the tragedy’s gay context, playing the woman does not prove liberatory, and the masquerade’s capacity for contestation is paralyzed.”⁶³

When Song attempts to escape and reject the restrictions of costuming, completely disrobing, he is tragically spurned and laughed at by Gallimard.

Feminist and post-colonial theorists argue that the agency to perform an identity is not necessarily the same as power. This is particularly relevant in the case of Song, as the performance is not recognized as performance, and is thereby denied a subversive force. Song may feel he is reappropriating the Asian female body, but his lack of authority as a woman, and Gallimard's refusal to recognize the masquerade, suggests that the performance is more emblematic of mimicry than an empowering drag performance.

Hwang's appropriation of both recognizable oriental images and the performative aspects of culture is apparent in the costuming of Song, who exploits the power of her Oriental costumes in both cultural and gender performance to fulfill Gallimard's imperialist sexual fantasy. Song's costumes include that of the traditional Peking Opera, the Geisha kimono used in performing *Madame Butterfly*, and a Chinese cheongsam (the traditional Chinese one-piece dress). While these costumes are all authentic in their own contexts, Hwang chooses to employ them as deliberate elements in a masquerade, a conscious re-appropriation. The costumes are tools of attraction, suggesting that, "the sexuality of Asians is inescapably intertwined with notions of fantasy."⁶⁴ They emphasize the allure of Oriental costuming and imagery because the audience is conscious of the drag performance, indeed the costumes disrupt their own authenticity and "become interventions—contestatory and/or problematic—in circulating Orientalist discourses."⁶⁵

When it is revealed that the lead performer of the Peking Opera is always a man in drag, Gallimard is not likely to be the only Westerner ignorant of this fact, so that the exposure of the operatic cross-dressing, which is the norm in the specific cultural context, further confuses the question of the authority of the performances and costumes with which the audience is confronted.

Hwang also specifically employs a dress associated with American-Chinese film actress Anna May Wong, a 1920s-style American dress, with “Oriental” details and influences. It is the costume Song wears when “acting” out her/his inner conflict involving Western versus Eastern values and behaviors. Song comments on being “strapped inside this Western dress” and claims to not even “know if it looks right on [her]” (30).

This costume places the story in the American identity context Hwang seeks, underscoring the role of film in creating or endorsing Asian stereotypes. Song’s discomfort at wearing a “Western” dress disrupts its authenticity, being equally inauthentic in both the East and the West. It is, in fact, a Western construction of the East, existing purely as an ambiguous representation.

Even when he is not playing the Butterfly role, Song’s clothing remains oddly representative and over-determined. In the scene in the commune, he appears in a Mao suit, the ultimate costume of communist China. Finally, during the courtroom and final scenes, he wears “Armani,” appearing, as Gallimard suggests, “the type that prowls around discos with a gold medallion” (84), refusing any Asian essence. It is important for the American audience to recognize Song’s ability “to give a correspondingly stereotypical performance of Western masculinity: cocky, crass, in Western dress.”⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the Oriental costumes disguise gender and culture truths, confusing the relationship between the sign and signifier.

By allowing the audience to observe Song's transformation from female to male between Acts Two and Three, Hwang exposes the artifice of gender as, "the body is exposed as the ultimate prop."⁶⁷ He places Song, quite intentionally, in a liminal space between the confines of the play and the interval. Reviews of various productions detail this process, with most urging theatregoers to forgo the intermission, and instead to stay and observe the transition. Hwang's incorporation of, and in fact invitation to, the deconstruction of the Butterfly performance challenges the assumptions of drag. Drag relies on the preservation of the myth and masquerade,⁶⁸ yet here the audience are acknowledged as voyeurs and invited to watch a reverse transformation of sorts.

The fact that Song is "a Chinese man playing a Japanese woman is a 'truth' we may know from an early stage,"⁶⁹ yet the most provocative moment of costuming and drag in *M. Butterfly* is, arguably, in the final scene. As Gallimard simultaneously assumes the performative elements of the butterfly — kimono, makeup, and wig — he enters into and reenacts his own fantasy. He applies the "white face" makeup used by Geishas, a manifestation of the privileging of Western beauty ideals, to his own white face, and in so doing becomes a mimic man himself. In his desperate attempt to preserve and reinforce the fantasy, as well as retain his authority, he wholly assumes and performs the fantasy Oriental female identity.

Perhaps because of the amount of discussion and disagreement Song's character has generated, I asked Hwang specifically if Song has an authentic self or if performance has, in fact, become his identity. Hwang agreed that, in his opinion, "he

has lost his essential self.” He added that he “has often felt that Song’s tragedy is that he attempts to discover his authentic self by believing he can take off his costume and still be loved.”⁷⁰ He feels that when he strips his clothes in Act 3, scene 2, “he tries to free himself from the performative aspects of the relationship and is looking for something more truthful.”⁷¹ Song’s revelation of his true self is, he asserts, what destroys the relationship.

If Song is a composite Asian mimic-man, it must be acknowledged that Gallimard is an equally composite character. He becomes not only representative of the West and Western men, but also the exaggerated product of the influence of Orientalist aesthetics, art, and imagery.

His performance of seppuku, or ritual suicide, resists simple interpretation. Once again, Hwang’s ambivalence allows, and, in fact, forces, multiple and contradictory meanings. Scholars such as Andrew Shin have insisted that the suicide represents Gallimard’s inability to reconcile himself with his gay identity.⁷² He is crippled by his denial and public shame. This particular interpretation has resulted in accusations that Hwang is reinforcing homophobia and legitimizing the shame associated with homosexual relationships, though this is, surely, a simplistic interpretation, denying, as it does, the gender and cultural implications of his costume.

The suicide can be read as a self-induced rapture, his ecstatic glorification of the idea of the ultimate sacrifice for love. Other theorists such as David Eng suggest that the scene depicts a “tropic spell” or “yellow fever,”⁷³ madness such as Conrad depicts in *The Heart of Darkness*, and which is associated with the Westerner who attempts to go native. The volume of the music and the trance-like state with which he approaches the

act develops a mood of heightened frenzy. To prove his love and devotion to his Butterfly, he performs the Japanese ritual of honor.

Alternatively, the suicide can signify acceptance of the loss of his butterfly, a recognition of the noble act required. As he prepares for the seppuku, he declares that “Death with honor is better than life...life with dishonor” (92). This interpretation is closest to the actual storyline of *Madame Butterfly*. In his final line, he announces his identity, stating “My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly” (93), acknowledging that he must act out the story as prescribed.

The question of the meaning, is, in my opinion, best answered by acknowledging Hwang’s dogged commitment to retelling *Madame Butterfly*. The narrative arc requires a suicide, and both Gallimard and Hwang insist on the presence and performance of the Butterfly for their finale. The sacrifice and death is inevitable and anticipated. Hwang’s act of subversion, however, comes not from the incorporation of the trope but from his resistance to the sacrifice being that of the Oriental character. Instead, he costumes the Western male in a kimono, wig, and makeup, the consummate wardrobe of the sacrificial butterfly, seemingly required in performing the Asian female.

After Gallimard stabs himself, a spot illuminates Song standing over his corpse. His final line, and, in fact, the final line of the play, is the twice repeated word, “Butterfly? Butterfly?” (93), the question mark suggesting an unresolved ambiguity. Who is the butterfly? The lover manipulated and abandoned, or the subject of the obsession? As Rossini points out, “By placing Song in the position of the feminizing male, the one who has pulled the strings, Hwang pulls apart the Orientalist project that the play initially appears to embrace.”⁷⁴

For his part, Hwang has maintained that all of these are viable possibilities. He is not so much concerned with answering the questions he raises as exploring their implications.

Puccini's role, as an Italian, in portraying a relationship between an American soldier and a Japanese Geisha is often called into question. The same questions can be asked of Hwang. As a Chinese American, does he possess insight into local Chinese culture? As a straight Asian man does he have the right to write from the perspective of either the white Western man or a Chinese cross dresser? The catch 22 for Hwang is, in my opinion less to do with any claims he makes to authority, than with the authority projected on him as an Asian American playwright.

Hwang has never claimed any authority when it comes to native Chinese "authenticity," and had never been to China when he wrote this play. I would argue that if anything, *M. Butterfly* reveals his ability to identify with the Western perspective, limited in its capacity to make meaning of cross-cultural contexts. In the introduction to a collection of his early works written in 1989, he points out that "acquaintances may assume I possess a knowledge of Chinese where they would never presume the natural language proficiency of an American of, say, Swedish descent."⁷⁵

Josephine Lee observes, "when the Asian performer takes over the performance of the Oriental stereotype, a much more uneasy dynamic emerges."⁷⁶ The same can be said of Hwang's position as playwright. While his authority is, to a degree, privileged by his race and culture, at times he seems much more able to represent the dominant Western male than the Asian characters. Rather than perceiving this as a weakness, this is, in fact, a point of pride for Hwang. He credits his experience writing his earlier

play, *Rich Relations* (1986), which features an all-white cast of characters, as being liberating. He has said that writing white characters for that story helped “point the way toward the non-Asian characters that were to follow in such works as *M. Butterfly*.”⁷⁷

While his central themes are overwhelmingly critical of the patriarchal and patronizing Western perspective, it should be noted that it is this perspective that remains the dominant, and at times more sympathetic, viewpoint in the work. After all, he is an American, educated, straight male. At the very moment he takes agency as an Asian-American artist, the influence of class and gender seem to, at times, disrupt his racial perspective. Ultimately, it is the recognition of this tension that is perhaps most useful in approaching his work. In other words, a resistance to privileging his Asian American identity results in a different reading.

Esther Lee Kim suggests that, “*M. Butterfly* is a quintessentially American play of the 1980s, one that captures the socio-political and cultural climate of its time. It deals with race, gender, sexuality, Orientalism, and the Vietnam War while questioning a range of assumptions made about those topics.”⁷⁸ The ambiguity portrayed by Hwang becomes, in my opinion, oddly authentic and reflective of the American experience. The nature of representation and perception of culture, gender, and sexuality in postmodern American society is complicated, resisting simple models. Hwang’s play consciously reflects this confusion. bell hooks argues that, “postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.”⁷⁹ In so far as this is true, it suggests that new forms and modalities will emerge and Hwang’s play reflects that.

Some Asian American critics express concern that the singular Asian American work to have established itself so firmly in the literary canon is one problematic to so many in their community. Josephine Lee observes that “with such an emphasis on validation by mainstream theatrical institutions, it is not surprising that any claim that theatrical production can make for having value for a specific local community is discounted when plays are repackaged as “dramatic literature.”⁸⁰ Perhaps the converse is true. The validation of a single work that has enjoyed mainstream success, repackaged as dramatic literature, can have long and lasting impact and pose necessary questions.

During my interview with Rick Shiomi, he reflected on attending the opening night on Broadway of *M. Butterfly*, and being emotionally overwhelmed at seeing a fellow Asian American playwright, and in this case a friend, breaking that critical barrier, recognizing it as the beginning of a necessary conversation about Asian stereotypes in America.⁸¹

Hwang, for his part, feels that “to try to get people to ask questions they hadn’t asked before is a pretty good accomplishment.”⁸² *M. Butterfly* forces us to consider the performative nature of ethnicity, and how cultural and gender stereotypes effect our perceptions. Just as Gallimard is unwilling to accept the “authentic” Song he is ultimately offered, so the audience or critic can choose to ignore or deny the complexity of the themes Hwang presents, but in doing so will miss the essence of his play.

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63. Shin, "Projected Bodies," 179.

64. Rossini, "From *M. Butterfly* to *Bondage*," 49.

65. Kondo, *About Face*, 5.

66. Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 256.

67. Zamora, *Nation, Race & History*, 36.

68. For further reading on drag performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Carole-Anne Tyler, *Female Impersonation*.

69. Kondo, *About Face*, 41.

70. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

71. Ibid.

72. Shin, "Projected Bodies," 179.

73. David L. Eng, "In the Shadows of a Diva: Committing Homosexuality in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*," in *Asian Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 140.

74. Rossini, "From *M. Butterfly* to *Bondage*," 59.

75. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

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76. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 96.
77. Hwang, introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, xiii.
78. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 65.
79. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 425.
80. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 23.
81. Rick Shiomi, interviewed by the author, December 4, 2016.
82. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

Chapter IV: Exploring Face

The question of racial identity has become increasingly complicated in American society. According to the United States Census Bureau's estimate for 2012, 50.4% of the American children under the age of 1 belonged to groups classified, for Census purposes, as minorities, including Black or African American, Native American and Alaska Native, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino. Those who identify as Asian American currently make up about 6% of the population. In the 2010 census, 2.9% of the population identified as multiracial.¹

Demographers suggest that multiracial is, in fact, the fastest growing demographic in the US.² Multiracial individuals often identify with one culture because of their family's identification, traditions, or religion. However, physical traits related to race are factors that cannot be ignored. Multiracial individuals may "look" African American, Asian, or Hispanic to varying degrees and choose to pass, or, conversely, to strongly identify with a culture they do not obviously look genetically associated with.

There are additional circumstances that complicate individual cultural identity. The US is the largest receiving country for international adoptions,³ and domestic interracial adoptions are increasingly common. Adoptees often identify with their family's heritage and culture to a high degree, rather than that of their birth parent.

The Asian American experience, and the evolution of the idea of a shared Asian American identity, came of age during Hwang's own formative years. The number of Asian immigrants and American-born Asians also rose dramatically during this time. As discussed in Chapter 1, the struggle of the Asian American artistic community to find its own voice and represent itself was still relatively in its infancy when Hwang became a

high-profile success. His post-Tony award fame coincided with a high profile controversy in which he, himself, became involved. It is yet another example of Hwang's life eerily imitating art. In fact, the controversy later became the source for two of his plays, *Face Value* and *Yellow Face*.

In 1990, British producer Cameron Macintosh announced that the lead for the Broadway production of his London hit show *Miss Saigon* would be played by British actor Jonathan Pryce. Pryce, a Caucasian, had won an Olivier award for his role as "The Engineer," a Eurasian character, in the London West End production. The casting choice for Broadway angered and offended members of the Asian American theatre community. At their urging, Hwang and *M. Butterfly* actor B.D. Wong both wrote letters of protest to the Actors' Equity union, in part in their role representing the union's standing Committee for Racial Equality. Hwang's letter was leaked to the press, and he soon found himself at the center of the ensuing public argument over race, casting in the American theatre, and identity politics in general. At the time, Macintosh accused Hwang of leaking the letter himself. Hwang denied it, but in an editorial in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2014, Hwang admits to having done so.⁴

Actor's Equity decided to deny Pryce permission to perform the role, largely in response to the advocacy efforts Hwang was a part of. Macintosh cancelled the US production in protest. Hwang was by no means alone in voicing concerns about the casting choice, but, as the highest profile Asian American involved, he became the target of much of the backlash. The arguments on both sides were impassioned.

The producers suggested it was reverse racism and, therefore, counter to a true equity agenda. The lack of such a response in the UK, where Pryce had gone so far as

to wear yellow face prosthetics and tape his eyes for part of the run, was cited as proof of American culture's excessive political correctness. Recent high-profile race-blind casting choices were held up as proof that there was no issue.

It was repeatedly pointed out that while one role would go to a Caucasian, the opportunity for employment for 34 Asian American actors would also be lost. Given the record-breaking \$25 million dollars in advance ticket sales, the highest amount in US theatre history, the financial stakes were high.

Various members of the theatre and film communities came out in support of the decision. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of those vocal in their support were of color, female, and/or gay.⁵ Many suggested that the issue was not about this single casting choice, but the industry's continued inability to employ Equal Opportunity strategies to address inherent inequities.

Eventually, the Actor's Equity reversed the decision and the play opened on Broadway on April 11, 1991. It ran until January 28, 2001, becoming the thirteenth longest running show in Broadway history.⁶

The controversy was not without casualties. When the many articles and editorials written at the time are reviewed in totality, Hwang and Wong in particular seem to have borne the brunt of vilification. It was suggested that Wong was only motivated by a desire to play the role of The Engineer himself, and while Hwang was quiet after his initial letter, it became the document most referenced in articles and editorials.

Hwang had questioned Macintosh's insistence that an 18-month global search had failed to identify a single appropriate Asian actor who could sing and act. The

validity of Macintosh's claim was rarely referenced in later commentaries, and, in fact, was later admitted by Macintosh to be untrue. Director Nicholas Hynter actually admitted it had not happened in a shared taxi ride with Hwang during the controversy. Hwang's archives include a letter from Hynter giving permission to include a staging of the taxi ride in *Yellow Face*, although Hwang did not choose to incorporate it. A global casting tour had taken place, but had exclusively focused on the lead female role of Kim, and not that of The Engineer.

Despite the decision eventually being reversed, there continues to be broad agreement that it was key moment in the debate on identity casting in modern American theatre. Hwang's role in the protest was largely peripheral, beyond the initial letter, and yet his name continues to be associated with the story. This is, perhaps, in part because *Miss Saigon* and *M. Butterfly* are both adaptations of *Madame Butterfly*, making the ironies multilayered. It is also due to his profile and continued default role as the spokesperson for Asian American theatre.

Hwang's ability to use an incident that was personally difficult and made him the subject of public criticism as a source of inspiration demonstrates his fascination with the possibilities inherent in the questions of identity in the US.

Face Value is primarily about issues of performing race and identity in American culture, and was inspired by the *Miss Saigon* events.

His 1992 one act, *Bondage*, explores the role of identity and race in attraction and desire. *Trying to Find Chinatown* also reflects this interest in racial assumptions, and was written after the failure of *Face Value*. These plays provide insight into his own

exploration of questions of the physical dimensions of race and feature two characters engaged in a debate, perhaps reflecting Hwang's own continued internal dialogue.

These three works, written over a 15-year period, expose the performative nature of American identity, and, in the process, challenge assumptions about the construction of race, and the problems posed by its performance.

Bondage

The 1992 one-act *Bondage* is, perhaps, best understood as Hwang's final work on staging the dangers of intimacy. While it might seem counterintuitive, given its location in an S & M parlor, this play is, in fact, a love story.

Bondage was written for the Humana Festival of New American plays, in Louisville, Kentucky, and premiered on March 1, 1992. It starred Hwang's long-time friend and frequent leading man, B.D. Wong. His costar was actress Kathryn Layng, who was dating Hwang at the time, and whom he would wed in 1992. It was the first Hwang play to premiere after he was publicly embroiled in the *Miss Saigon* controversy, and issues of multiculturalism in the US were in the forefront of his mind.

There is an overwhelmingly autobiographical aspect to the text, and, perhaps for that reason, Hwang diplomatically refuses to discuss the work in interviews, calling it "too personal."⁷ Despite its adult content and staging challenges, it continues to be produced with relative frequency. It has proven popular for small venue and alternative staging. Given its slightly illicit content, this is not surprising. It was adapted into a film in 2015, although it has never been released.

The premise is simple. Terri is a dominatrix, and Mark a submissive who has paid for her time. Both appear in full body suits, so as to completely mask their racial identities. Over the course of the session, the audience learns that he is a regular, their liaisons consisting of a series of racial and cultural pairings that ultimately inform the game and associated power dynamics between them. As the session unfolds, she assigns them a series of specific racial identities, and they enter into a complicated dialogue about the implications of the various couplings, from both a racial and gender perspective. Power is negotiated, as fantasies and stereotypes are explored. Terri's goal, it seems, is to induce Mark to proclaim his love. She teases and punishes him, forcing postures on him, as he encourages and resists, both unwittingly revealing insecurities as a consequence.

It becomes clear that, despite the non-traditional nature of their courtship, the two have, in fact, fallen in love. By the end of the play, Terri admits that she plans to stop working as a dominatrix, and suggests that, despite their fears, it is time to remove their respective masks. They both do so, revealing their racial identities, as well as, perhaps more importantly, their real selves.

The play takes place in "1990s. An S&M parlor in the San Fernando Valley, California" (251),⁸ plainly a time and a place significant to Hwang, as is the role of race in the 1990s, which is referenced throughout the play. This is not long after violent race riots took place in Los Angeles in the aftermath of a primarily white jury finding several police officers "not guilty," despite a videotape documenting their involvement in the beating of a black man by the name of Rodney King.⁹ Clearly, Hwang wants to locate the play in the context of the heated conversations around race and multiculturalism that

were taking place in the US at the time, the San Fernando Valley being a short drive from where he grew up, as well as the capital of the US pornography industry.

The set is spare but features chains attached to a wall and a variety of instruments of domination, including a whip and shackles. The two main characters are Terri and Mark. Their casting should be very specific, as their racial identities provide the critical plot twist. She is a white, blonde woman, and he an Asian American man. Many productions choose not to list the names of the actors in the program, so as not to spoil the surprise, particularly if their names are ethnic to the degree that their race will be revealed.

The title of the play refers to the bondage parlor and plainly also to the action, but it is not without relevance to the bondage implied in racial and gender identities. It is, in other words, a metaphor for imposed stereotypes.

There is also a metatheatrical dimension to a work in which role playing and acting are central. Once again, he is interested in staging performance and assigning a voyeuristic role to his audience who thereby become confederate in an erotic drama which borders on the pornographic. The intimate space in which the action unfolds is equally the intimate space afforded by theatre in which those who watch become complicit in the transgressions they witness. The sudden revelation of the racial identities of the actors perform prompts a retrospective re-evaluation of their responses. What they witness is a series of changing identities, in itself subversive of assumption about the nature of identity, a fundamental concern of all his work.

Bondage was Hwang's first foray into staging intimacy in a wholly American or contemporary setting. *The Sound of a Voice*, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, and *M.*

Butterfly all explore intimacy, sexuality, and trust in interpersonal relationships to varying degrees, but not in a familiar or American setting.

Bondage unfolds in one long, uninterrupted scene, as the two spar, tease, and seduce. It can evidently prove an uncomfortable experience. Certainly in a highly complimentary review of a 2013 production, *Washington Post* critic Nelson Pressley nonetheless admits that “an hour of it is enough” and “you won’t beg for more,”¹⁰ suggesting this is not easy theatre to watch.

Audience discomfort derives in part from the action and in part from the fact that the figures they watch are in disguise. The actor always has a double identity, a supposedly true self and the role he or she performs, but here there is another level, as there was in *M. Butterfly*, and that, of course, is precisely Hwang’s strategy as he sets out to disturb assumptions about the social performance of identity. Even in the most intimate of circumstances, he suggests, we remain performers, aware that we play a role. We exist in and through others and hence are in part what those other roles make us, either rejecting or complying with their version of ourselves.

Hwang is not only concerned with the ambiguities associated with his Chinese American background. More fundamentally, he is concerned with how identity is constituted in American culture. Jon D. Rossini suggests that the exposure of their racial identity at the end reinforces “the maintained cultural significance of these visual signifiers.”¹¹ Yet surely the opposite is true as the audience is forced into a re-evaluation of their assumptions. An hour has passed in which race was either irrelevant or erroneously assigned. When race is suddenly revealed it surely becomes difficult for it to assume the status and meaning it might have had but for what has proceeded the

revelation. The play offers a lesson in the plasticity of identity, in the possibility of misreading, and the danger of essentialist assumptions. It is a play which questions cultural norms. What are the preconceived notions that inform our perceptions of the opposite sex when race and culture enter the mix? Are the rules for *who* dates *who* changing?

Mark confesses, “I’m — Chinese. It’s not so easy to know whether it’s OK for me to love you” (253), only for his partner, Terri, to respond, “C’mon, this is the 1990s!” only to admit, “It’s not real likely I’m gonna love you...I’m not a figment of the past. But I’m also not some crusading figure from the future. It’s only 199— you know. I’m a normal girl. With regular ideas. Regular for a blonde, of course” (254). This becomes all the more poignant when it is finally revealed that Mark is, in fact, a Chinese American man in love with a blonde.

Desire, it turns out, is more culturally prescribed than is acknowledged. When Terri suggests that Asian men are sexist, Mark asks if the same is not true of Latino or Italian men. She replies by making the distinction that they are “macho,” admitting that “Macho is...sexier” (268).

A scenario involving a “Mexican man” and an “Indonesian—whatever” is not pursued, and encounters between a black woman and white man expose African fantasies. A scenario in which they are both Asian reveals the potential relief which follows from shared experiences and commonalities, only to be followed by a rejection. A shared artificial Asian American identity, is, it is suggested, insufficient. The Asian male/Caucasian female binary is, prophetically, the one that keeps re-emerging.

Ultimately, the tension between the various pairings becomes exhausting and futile, with any initial sexual tension based on conflict proving unsatisfying and unsustainable. Terri admits to having become obsessed with research in preparation for their sessions. Clipping from newspapers, magazines, and ethnic journals has made her “a collector of all the rejection and rage in this world” (276). All pairings are, it seems, susceptible to a reduction of a partner to sexualizing the “other.”

Identity is malleable in the confines of the S & M parlor, ironically a safe space for exploration. Indeed, Mark makes a critical distinction between the public and private spaces at play:

The rules here...protect me from harm. Out there—I walk around with my face exposed. In here, when I’m rejected, beaten down, humiliated—it’s not me. I have no identifying features, and so...I’m no longer human. (271)

As William C. Boles suggests, “there is, in other words, a comfort to be found in these fictionalized rejections precisely because they are not real and not based on his true ethnic identity and self.”¹² Shortly after delivering this line, Mark places his own wrists in shackles, as if illustrating his desperation.

The space is, in fact, liberatory in its own way. As Boles goes on to point out, “like *M. Butterfly*, *Bondage* offers a relationship that relies upon fantasy in order to exist.”¹³ The key difference, however, is that both participants are consciously engaged in fantasy and role playing, as opposed to the element of deception ever-present in *M Butterfly*. Performance becomes a vehicle to explore identity rather than to mask it.

Bondage is a work of its time. The Chinese male, for instance, works in an engineering lab and is good at physics, even as Hwang identifies the stereotypes available from pop-culture. Mark complains about “those pathetic imitations of B-movie

delinquents, that cheap Hong Kong swagger,” and asks, “Would you find me sexy if I was Bruce Lee?” (258). Ironically, Lee was denied leading roles in Hollywood because of concerns that an Asian leading-man would not be accepted by American audiences, a subject Hwang later writes about in his 2014 play *Kung Fu*.

The Vietnam war offers another point of reference as it is suggested that the Asian male identity must be “just delinquent enough to be sexy without also being responsible for the death of a few hundred thousand U.S. servicemen” (259).

Terri proposes a scenario where she would be a black woman only to have Mark correct her, pointing out that, “The Reverend Jesse Jackson...he thinks African American is the proper...” (261) before she cuts him off. In that particular scenario, he recalls having seen the Spike Lee film *Jungle Fever* (1991), one of the first American films to explore interracial sexual relationships.

The first draft of the play included several specific references to white iconic Americans such as James Dean, but Hwang chose to remove them and focus on non-white references. He also removed a more thorough discussion of Bruce Lee.¹⁴

It is a play, though, in which racial tensions are referenced as Mark refers to “Blacks against Jews in Crown Heights...the rise of neo-Nazism in Marseilles and Orange County...the mass murderer in Canada who said ‘The feminists made me do it’” (276). The specific references may now seem dated, but the questions they pose for American society remain relevant. Mark reflects, “I worry when I think about the coming millennium. Because it feels like all labels have to be rewritten, all assumptions reexamined, all associations redefined....And there is a struggle brewing over the shape of these changing words” (277). It is interesting to consider why he was worried in so far

as he has tended to be concerned about over-determined identities, aware of the arbitrariness of distinctions and the personal, social, and political implications.

The performance of these identities is a constant and tense negotiation. The play opens with Mark asking “What am I today?” to which Terri responds, “you’re a man. A Chinese man. But don’t bother with that accent crap. I find it demeaning” (253). They play with stereotypes, stage clichés. In the opening scenario, she proclaims she is “Tiffany Walker” and that she has seen him looking at her “from behind the windows of (his) engineering laboratory. Behind his horn-rimmed glasses” (253), while he claims to have a “D- grade average” and to hang “out with a very dangerous element,” smoking “in spite of the surgeon general’s warning” (258). He claims to own a motorcycle and switchblade. She responds by substituting one cliché for another, suggesting he must be either Chinese Mafia or Viet Cong.¹⁵

In another scenario he is a white man and she a black woman. When he flatters her by suggesting that she looks intelligent, she accuses him of being a “white liberal who (does his) hunting a little off the beaten track” and secretly wants her to “oil up her body and dance like James Brown” (262).¹⁶ Terri brags that her lips are “full and round—without the aid of collagen” and that she moves around the room “like a panther...sleek and sassy...prowling” (263), speaking of “drums beating in the distance, pounding, pounding,” only to accuse him of forgetting his “liberal handbook” (264). Below this level is a sexual attraction which may shift with the parts they play in the scenarios they devise, but which is a constant, the base line of all the pairings.

Jon D Rossini suggests “Mark and Terri’s characters explode liberal fantasies, exposing them as always potentially libidinal”.¹⁷ They go on to explore a scenario in

which both are white and Mark, now as “Mark Walker,” explores the fears of the white man in the 1990’s navigating a changing society:

I’m a white man! Why wouldn’t I have problems? The world is changing so fast around me—you can’t even tell whose country it is anymore. I can’t hardly open my mouth without wondering if I’m offending, if I’m secretly revealing to everyone but myself...some hatred, some hidden desire to strike back...breeding within my body. If only there were some certainty—whatever it might be—OK, let the feminists rule the place! We’ll call it the United States of Amazonia! Or the Japanese! Or the gays! If I could only figure out who’s in charge then I’d know where I stand. (273)

The assumption of white privilege is, to a degree challenged, and exposed as a performed identity, even if its anxiety stems from privilege.

They, themselves, switch effortlessly from one identity to another. They are Protean like George and Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* (1962). They admire one another’s performances and that is, of course, another play in part about performance, George and Martha staging drama for their guests and also for themselves. Terri admits that “after all these months, [she] wouldn’t even care to guess” his racial identity and that “when [he says [he’s] Egyptian, Italian, Spanish, Mayan...[he] seems to be the real thing” (274). As she confesses, “I found it so interesting, so different, your fantasy...so I started to try and understand all the races I never thought of as my own” (276).

Gender, too, is interrogated as a performance. Mark suggests that perhaps Terri became a dominatrix as a reaction to her experiences of life as a woman. She admits that that during her time working in the parlor, “[she] learned what it feels like to be a man. To labor breathlessly accumulating power while all the time it’s dawning how tiring, what a burden, how utterly numbing—it actually is to possess” (275).

Rossini expresses a concern with the final revelation. He suggests that because she is a woman and he is Asian, both are “already in a masochistic position,” and therefore no power structure has, in fact, been disrupted.¹⁸ I would argue that their final act of disrobing is, in fact, the critical act of subversion. By breaking the “rules” of S & M, they challenge a power dynamic.

If Hwang’s intention was to explore the possibility of a space where race was neutralized, stripping the histories and stereotypes associated with the body of their power, then he has found an ideal vehicle. The broader implication is that cultural and racial stereotypes inform our assumptions and subconsciously influence our most basic instincts and predilections.

As mentioned earlier, *Bondage* is, by far, Hwang’s most personal work. While *Yellow Face* is more obviously autobiographical, *Bondage*, in my opinion, provides the greatest insight into his genuine fears and vulnerabilities. It is raw and provocative, simultaneously a compelling love story and a staging of verbal and borderline-physical abuse.

Mark, it must be remembered, is the client who has requested this role-playing. Rossini suggests that his goal is “to play through the fantasy in order to expose cultural modes of construction and, ideally, explode them”.¹⁹

Hwang considers the different identities he, and other Asian Americans, have been offered, accepted, and resisted. At the same time, this offers Mark the opportunity to explore other possibilities, almost as if by abandoning each in turn it might be possible to arrive at an alternative self even as authenticity has been once again revealed as problematic. At the same time, the mask may represent a protective armor

against intrusion, a mask worn by women in their negotiation with men, and vice versa, or it may be a mask willingly assumed in order to gain power, as was the case of Song in *M. Butterfly*.

Given the play's location, it is possible that Terri is herself an actress in a world in which appearance is everything. Mark suggests that "rejection hung in the air all around you—in the workplace, in movies, in the casual joking of the populations" (275). In an early draft of the play Terri observes that "everyone knows, blondes are the most highly desired of the species,"²⁰ although Hwang cut that line from the final script.

In either case, the essence of the play is that identity, real or otherwise, is inextricably linked to broader cultural and societal notions, and in turn one dependent on constructions of beauty and desire.

The ending is, as suggested earlier, the most hopeful in Hwang's relationship and intimacy plays; no betrayal, no suicide. For Esther Kim Lee it is "his most optimistic and least ambiguous play,"²¹ though that is somewhat curious in so far as it is a play which exposes the ambiguity of identity on an almost scary level, even as the ending seems to suggest that there may be a plane on which that may be resolved as Terri and Mark enact the most vulnerable scenario of all as themselves. She commands Mark to remove her hood, but in his last act of resistance to her in the dominatrix role, he removes his own instead. When she removes hers and they "see" each other for the first time, he admits, "I was afraid. I was an Asian man", to which she responds "And I was a woman, of any description" (278). The fact that they both use the past tense, suggests that something has been transcended. As Esther Kim Lee observes, "Hwang

dramatizes a couple that accomplishes what his previous characters could not by shedding all pretense and honestly falling in love.”²²

Given the racial dance we see performed in *Bondage*, it is worth recalling that interracial marriage was not fully legal in all 50 United States until a Supreme Court decision in 1967 required it. That is only 25 years before this play was written, and within Hwang’s lifetime. Hwang ends the play by having Terri observe “Anything is possible. This is the 1990s” (279). In the most unlikely of places, Mark and Terri, and perhaps David and Kathryn, find love, trust, hope for a new millennium.

Face Value

Hwang’s 1993 farce *Face Value* is somewhat infamous. In the wake of his success with *M. Butterfly*, he had established a high profile as an influential Asian American artist. The pressure on him to produce a follow up hit, however, was considerable, and perhaps because the plot and story of *Face Value* were born out of the acrimonious public aftermath of Hwang’s involvement in the protests at Jonathan Pryce’s casting in *Miss Saigon* on Broadway as previously discussed, the level of scrutiny this play attracted was substantial.

The play opened to poor reviews in Boston. Despite desperate attempts at re-writes, Hwang admits “after that, panic set in and the rewrites got worse.”²³ It ran for only eight preview performances on Broadway before closing. It lost over two million dollars.

Face Value was conceived as a farce and Hwang sought to model it after works such as Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* (1982), and Joe Orton’s *What the Butler Saw*

(1969).²⁴ One scene is a direct echo of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921).

Face Value tells the backstage story of the opening night of the fictional musical *The Real Manchu*, a reference to the literary villain Fu Manchu. Jewish actor Bernard Sugarman has been cast in the lead role. Chinese American actress, Linda, talks her friend Randall, who is secretly in love with her, into sneaking into the audience in white-face in order to disrupt the performance and protest Sugarman's casting. While Linda and Randall are preparing their plan, white supremacists Pastor and Glenn plot to kidnap Bernard, believing him to actually be Asian. The situation is further complicated when dumb-blond chorus girl Jessica, with whom Bernard has been having an affair, develops an attraction to white-faced Randall. Interestingly, the role of Jessica was played by actress Jane Krakowski, who appears as a character in *Yellow Face*, and will go on to play a very similar role in the hit sitcom *30 Rock*. Throughout the action the African American, Chinese-speaking, stage manager, Marci, attempts to keep control, while the pompous British producer Andrew wanders in and out.

The protest goes awry and the white supremacists hold Sugarman and Linda hostage. In their collective efforts to save the two, the various characters appear in a multitude of racial disguises and costumes. As a result of changing costumes, the general confusion, and a theatre blackout, the characters end up in an array of multiracial romantic pairings.

The story has all the tropes of a traditional farce, with doors opening and closing, characters hiding in closets, costume changes and mistaken identities. The multiple characters and convoluted subplots, however, result in a storyline that is too

complicated. The necessary lightness of tone is not sustained, and the play vacillates between satire and overly earnest protestations about racial stereotypes.

Hwang interrupts the action early in the second act when the characters stop and question the stereotypes they are performing:

LINDA: Ladies and gentlemen I just can't go on with this play. I've been feeling for some time now...this is such a negative portrayal of an Asian woman...

We don't all hate Asian men—I mean, many of us want to date them, even do...from time to time.

This is supposed to be a play about stereotypes, right? But I have real problems with the portrayal of women and minorities—some of the things my fellow actors are being asked to condone, here.

Well? Don't you all agree? With what I'm saying?

PASTOR: Wow, this is totally...Pirandellian. I mean, the audience, they probably can't even tell right now whether we're really ad-libbing, or reciting actual lines.

GLENN: Trust me, they can tell. (51)²⁵

While farce can subvert what is simultaneously offered as a serious comment on race and its theatrical and social representation, Hwang's direct confrontation of identity performance in fact undermines the farcical elements, while the inclusion of white supremacists and African Americans arguably over-complicates the initial interrogation of yellow-face casting.

The play sets out to ask relevant questions with regard to performing stereotypes, both Asian and Caucasian, but, as Josephine Lee suggests, "When the Asian performer takes over the performance of the Oriental stereotype, a much more uneasy dynamic emerges. The traditional seduction of the stereotype for the white spectator in its degradation of the threatening Oriental may in fact be to a great extent preserved."²⁶ In other words, by having his characters of color resist stereotype, Hwang

is at risk of unintentional reinforcement. Brenden Jacobs-Jenkins 2010 play *Neighbors*, which featured a black characters performing in black-face, evoked a similarly strong response.

In *Face Value*, not only do Hwang's Asian characters perform Asian stereotypes, they perform white-face as well. This had the potential to be particularly subversive, since, as Josephine Lee points out, "the passing of Asian Americans into white society remains relatively unexplored."²⁷

Some elements of *Face Value* are successful. Hwang is at his best when identifying and using iconic orientalist stories and representations to expose their influence on cultural perceptions of Asians. In particular, his satirical treatment of Fu Manchu, created by British writer Sax Rohmer, in 1913, works. As Tchen and Yeats explain in their book *Yellow Peril*, Rohmer, in creating Fu Manchu, had taken "this bundle of anxieties, investments, and archetypes and combined them with the urban legends of vice, crime, and opium addiction in the London slums to fabricate the fantastic world of Fu Manchu."²⁸ The character was later transported to the US for a series of films in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The character "uses his Western intellect and Eastern cunning to try to destroy Western civilization and beat it at its own game of world conquest."²⁹ Fu Manchu personified the prevalent cultural anxiety and fear associated with the so-called "Yellow Peril," the belief that Asians of various descents presented a specific threat to Western society. His character is the ideal over-determined and distorted Oriental villain.

Some of *Face Value*'s best moments satirize the fictional staging of a Fu Manchu story as a musical. One of the principal characters is Broadway producer Andrew

Simpson, an obvious caricature of British producer Cameron Macintosh. When Andrew's Caucasian leading man, Bernard, asks if they are "doing anything racist,"

Andrew responds:

Rac——racist? People get these knee-jerk reaction based on absolutely no information. They hear, "A Musical About Fu Manchu" ——they just assume it's going to be a negative portrayal of a Chinaman! We take an extremely enlightened approach to the subject... 'Born to a poor peasant family in Canton, China——young Fu learned to hide his hatred deep within his heart. Growing through adolescence, he came to despise the foreigners that were destroying his country, and forcing him into a beggar's life. What else could he do as an adult, then, but slaughter white men with his Death Ray, scheme for dominion over the planet, and imprison a harem of nubile beauties in his dungeon. (5)

The production of *The Real Fu Manchu* includes Jessica and the chorus girls singing the lyrics:

DON'T GET SENTIMENTAL
HE'S A CRAFTY ORIENTAL
HE'S INSCRUTABLE

YOU KNOW HIS CONSCIENCE IS GONE
HE'S INSCRUTABLE

'CUZ HE COMES FROM CANTON
HE'S INSCRUTABLE

YOU KNOW HE STEALS FROM THE WHITES
HE'S INSCRUTABLE

AND HATES WOMEN'S RIGHTS
CRUEL YET TRANSCENDENTAL
HE'S A CRAFTY ORIENTAL
HE'S INSCRUTABLE (44)

The sets and costumes, along with Bernard's overdone yellow-face makeup, are, in fact, reminiscent of the "Springtime for Hitler" production number from the satirical musical *The Producers*. Given Fu Manchu's legacy and role in creating Orientalist stereotypes in film, satirizing a contemporary version of him has endless potential.

Many of the reviews and much of the discussion of *Face Value* have concentrated on its implied critique of the casting of Pryce, but that is, in my opinion, just a distraction. Its true focus is on interrogating the implications of staging cultural and racial stereotypes in mainstream theatre.

Hwang seems less successful in representing his non-Asian American characters, who, at times, feel flat. His humor is more acerbic when addressing the specific stereotypes of Asians, and his satire is more confident. Linda's refusal to date Asian men and Randall's hyper-masculine identity in white-face simultaneously challenge and reinforce racial roles and clichés. As Esther Lee Kim points out, "Randall and Linda are parodies of those who take a few classes in Asian American studies and then blame white racism for everything that is wrong in their lives."³⁰ Nevertheless, their characters' reaction to the liberation of being white and "passing" is compelling and provocative. The potential to interrogate Asian white-face is not maximized.

His intention was to move beyond the Asian/Caucasian dynamic he had previously explored, and to interrogate the implications of performing stereotypes and race in the US in general. His desire was to complicate the question of essentialist casting, but the result feels oddly ambivalent. Hwang often tends towards ambivalence in his work, and while the potential for multiple interpretations is often a strength, it is not so here. As Kevin Kelly noted in his review for the *Boston Globe*, "Hwang waffles pro and con about political correctitude,"³¹ and at the end of the day his desire to be "fair" prevents him from taking a stand. Esther Kim Lee suggests, he "does not have a neat solution for the confusion he has created."³²

Critics found the work everything from preachy to uneven. It has never been revived, but Hwang remained committed to engaging with the questions raised by that play, and with the problematics involved in performing racialized and stereotypical characters. He later returned to the Pryce controversy in the more successful *Yellow Face*, but *Face Value* represents his first attempt to satirize the complexities involved in addressing race in contemporary American theatre, and society in general.

Trying To Find Chinatown

The 1996 one-act *Trying to Find Chinatown* was written for the 20th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Kentucky. In it, a young “blonde haired and blue eyed” male, Benjamin, comes upon an Asian American busker name Ronnie, playing the electric violin at a subway station in New York City, and asks him for directions. Benjamin is looking for a specific address, which, as it turns out, is in Chinatown. Ronnie is offended, and suggests he only asked him because he is Asian. Benjamin goes to say he “can relate” to his anger, and expands on the experience of the Asian American:

To be marginalized, as we are, by a white racist patriarchy, to the point where the accomplishments of our people are obliterated from the history books, this is cultural genocide of the first order, leading to the fact that you must do battle with all of Euro-America’s emasculating and brutal stereotypes of Asians—the opium den, the sexual objectification of the Asian female, the exoticized image of a tourist’s Chinatown which ignores the exploitation of workers, the failure to unionize, the high rate of mental illness and tuberculosis—against these each day, you rage, no not as a victim, but as a survivor, yes, brother, a glorious warrior survivor! (288)³³

Ronnie is taken aback, and asks where Benjamin learned his information. Benjamin explains that he had focused on Asian American Studies in college, and confesses that

he was adopted by Chinese American parents at birth, introducing himself as Benjamin Wong.

The two engage in a debate about the politics and nature of heritage and identity. Benjamin, while biologically Caucasian, strongly identifies with his Chinese American family and suggests that Ronnie “can’t judge (his) race by my genetic heritage alone,” observing that he “forgets that a society wedded to racial constructs constantly forces me to explain my very existence” (290). Their dialogue exposes Ronnie’s limited knowledge of aspects of Chinese culture that Benjamin assumes he will know, such as the god of warriors Gwan Gung. It becomes clear that Benjamin is better versed in Asian American history, culture, and politics than Ronnie.

Ronnie is offended by the suggestion that he is ignorant about his heritage, or that knowledge of a culture is exclusively constituted by facts and history. “If you wanna call Chinatown *your* community” he says, “OK, knock yourself out, learn to use chopsticks, big deal. Go ahead, try and find your roots in some dim sum parlor with headless ducks hanging in the window. Those places don’t tell you a thing about who *I* am” (290). For his part, Benjamin suggests that Ronnie is “one of those self-hating assimilated Chinese Americans” (291).

The play ends with two monologues. The first, by Ronnie, is addressed to Benjamin. In it, he delivers an eloquent diatribe on the history and birth of jazz and American blues, its role as inspiration for emancipation, asking “could any legacy be more rich, more coded with mythology and heroes to inspire pride?” (292). The world of jazz and African American music is, clearly, where Ronnie has found his identity. He ends his speech, stating: “What can I say if the banging of a gong or the clinking of a

pickax on the Transcontinental Railroad fails to move me even as much as one note...Does it have to sound like Chinese opera before people like you decide I know who I am?" (292). Benjamin gives Ronnie what we can assume is one of his few dollars, and moves along as Ronnie continues to play.

In contrast, Benjamin's final monologue is directly addressed to the audience, although Ronnie remains on stage playing music that "slowly begins to reflect the influence of Chinese music" (293). Benjamin shares his account of having found the address he sought, the birthplace, it turns out, of his recently deceased father. He describes the sights, sounds, and smells of Chinatown, and his sense of spiritual homecoming. He ends the play by confessing that "I felt an ache in my heart for all those lost souls denied this most important of revelations: to know who they truly are" (293).

This is the play in which Hwang addresses the question of identity formation most directly. His characters discover their own route to own roots, but the primacy of the biological is challenged.

Ronnie is an Asian American musician, who identifies with music born of slavery and the discrimination suffered by the African American community, refusing to recognize his mirror image in the white member of a Chinese American family, who takes pride in and finds his sense of self in New York's Chinatown. In turn, Benjamin, as a white Chinese American man, cannot understand his counterpart's lack of interest in their "shared" heritage. The two personify a cultural binary of sorts.

The dialogue reflects the anxiety which lies at the heart of identity politics in a country navigating the realities of pluralism. Does Benjamin have the right to claim a

Chinese American identity? Is it problematic that Ronnie has limited knowledge of his heritage? Is it appropriate for him to assume an identity based on his love of jazz and The Blues? Hwang is, as usual, more interested in posing these questions than providing easy answers.

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1. "2012 National Population Projections," United States Census Bureau, n.d., <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2012/demo/popproj/2012-summary-tables.html>. .
 2. "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012," United States Census Bureau, August, 2011, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2011/compendia/statab/131ed.html>.
 3. "Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions Narrative," Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 2016, <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/aa/pdfs/AnnualReportonIntercountryAdoptions6.8.17.pdf>.
 4. See David Henry Hwang, "Racial Casting Has Evolved-And So Have My Opinions," *The Guardian*, last modified May 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/may/12/david-henry-hwang-miss-saigon-yellow-face-racial-casting>.
 5. Multiple actors and artists voiced support for the refusal to allow Jonathan Pryce to play The Engineer in *Miss Saigon*, including Ellen Holly, Victor Barber, and Terrance McNally.
 6. For a further reading on the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre*, especially 177-200.
 7. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
 8. David Henry Hwang, *Bondage*, in *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays*, 249-280 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition and cited in-text.
 9. For more on this incident, see "Rodney King Verdict Sparks Looting and Violence in L.A.," *New York Daily News*, last modified April 28, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/riots-cops-acquitted-rodney-king-case-1992-article-1.2201741>.

10. Nelson Pressley, "'Bondage' and Its Bodysuits Make Us Ponder Race, Relationships and the Rituals of Power," *Washington Post*, last modified November, 13, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/bondage-and-its-bodysuits-make-us-ponder-race-relationships-and-the-rituals-of-power/2013/11/13/5d0e8988-4c83-11e3-bf60-c1ca136ae14a_story.html?utm_term=.d9894a5db11e.

11. Rossini, "From *M. Butterfly* to *Bondage*," 75.

12. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, 73.

13. Ibid., 71.

14. "Bondage," first draft, unpublished play script, Microsoft Word file.

15. The Viet Cong, also known as the National Liberation Front, was a political organization with its own army — People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam (PLAF) — in South Vietnam and Cambodia, that fought the United States and South Vietnamese governments, eventually emerging on the winning side of the Vietnam War.

16. James Brown was an American singer, songwriter, record producer, dancer, and bandleader. He was a major figure of twentieth century popular music and dance, and is often referred to as the "Godfather of Soul."

17. Rossini, "From *M. Butterfly* to *Bondage*," 69.

18. Ibid., 75.

19. Ibid., 68.

20. Ibid., 75.

21. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 77.

22. Ibid., 81.

23. Hwang, email to the author July 10, 2014.

24. Ibid.

25. David Henry Hwang, "Face Value," unpublished play script, Cort Theatre, 1993, Microsoft Word file. All subsequent citations will be cited in-text.

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26. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 97.
27. Ibid., 191.
28. John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (London: Verso, 2014), 4.
29. Ibid., 5.
30. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 87.
31. Kevin Kelly, "Producers struggle to save 'Face'" *Boston Globe* (City Edition), March 5, 1993.
32. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 88.
33. David Henry Hwang, *Trying to Find Chinatown*, in *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays*, 281-294 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition and cited in-text.

Chapter V: Re-claiming and Subverting Asian American Identity

In the wake of his public forays into issues of race in US society, Hwang returned to his own family history for inspiration and continued to question the nature of authenticity and identity.

While Hwang's previous efforts to stage a Chinese American narrative had primarily been contemporary, his 1998 play *Golden Child* rewinds the diaspora even further, and tells a story of Western influence on a Chinese family pre-emigration.

The one-act play *Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet* challenges notions of artistic authority and authenticity, exposing their arbitrary nature and the challenges in imposing institutionalized essentialism while in his 2007 play *Yellow Face*, he reclaims pride in his heritage by exploring and satirizing the absurdities, hypocrisies, and complexities of race in contemporary American society.

Golden Child

Golden Child reflects Hwang's interest in staging Chinese history for American audiences, but it is also a very personal story, as it is the story of Hwang's maternal grandmother's Chinese ancestors. In his forward to the 1998 published edition of *Golden Child*, Hwang observes that:

Each play defines its own journey toward completion. Some emerge relatively complete, needing only a few nips and tucks before going out to face the world. Some are problem children who, despite all efforts, never seem to find themselves. The Broadway opening of my most recent show, *Golden Child*, represents the culmination of an unusual voyage, one which began germinating thirty years ago in the mind of a ten-year old child.¹

The play's roots precede any of his other works, indicating his early interest in stories of family and heritage. In 1967, at the age of 10, he asked to be allowed to travel to Cebu, in the Philippines, by himself, to spend the summer with his aging grandmother. As he explains:

When I was 10 years old, she fell ill, and we believed she was going to die. My "Ama" was the family historian. I felt that if she passed away, we would suffer a double loss: not only my grandmother, but all her stories from our past. A Chinese American kid living in Los Angeles, I asked my parents if I could spend the summer visiting her in the Philippines. I took what we would now call oral histories, recording her stories onto cassette tapes, before returning home to California and compiling them into a 90-page nonfiction "novel" about the history of my family.²

He titled his book *Only Three Generations*, which refers to a Chinese proverb suggesting that the wealth of a family only lasts three generations.

The play provides a history and context to his ultra-Christian upbringing, an aspect of Hwang's identity that has been a source of conflict for the playwright. His relationship with Christianity and the Evangelical doctrine he was raised with formed the basis for his first acts of rebellion in college. He has been openly critical of organized religion, but his upbringing in a devout Christian family is as essential to his identity as is his Chinese heritage, if not more so. It is the basis for his play *Family Devotions* (1981).³ So it is not surprising that he would want to explore the story of how his family came to choose Christian beliefs, so culturally different from Taoism, that would define their identity for several generations.

Golden Child tells the story of his great grandfather's conversion to Christianity by a Protestant Minister, and the impact on his three Chinese wives and family. While the earlier play, *Family Devotions*, explores the role of Christianity in a modern Chinese

family in LA, *Golden Child* considers the impact of missionary conversion on the traditional Chinese family and the broader local community.

Once again using one of his signature metatheatrical devices, the play is “bookended” by scenes depicting contemporary Chinese American characters. The characters, and the nature of these scenes, have changed over time and in various versions of the text. In the earliest drafts, contemporary monologues were interspersed throughout the action, but Hwang found them too disruptive to the primary storyline.⁴ For the version that ultimately ran on Broadway, and for most of the subsequent productions, the opening and closing scenes portray middle-aged American Chinese writer Andrew Kwong. When we meet him, he is experiencing a “crisis of faith,” questioning both religion and filial piety. He is woken in the night by the ghost of his grandmother, Ahn, who urges him to honor his ancestors and Christian heritage by allowing his wife to give birth to their child. It is implied that the pregnancy is unexpected and, at least for Andrew, unwelcome.

The story moves to 1918 China, and the household of Tieng-Bin, a successful Chinese merchant returning to his home after a three-year stint in the Philippines. His household dynamics are complex, as his three wives negotiate and vie for favor and power. Siu-Yong (First Wife) has ultimate authority over the household. She also has an opium addiction and an aversion to change. Luan (Second Wife) is the most conniving. Eling (Third Wife) is the youngest, and while hers is the most precarious place in the household, she is beautiful and the wife with whom Tieng-bin is in love. Finally, we are introduced to Ahn, daughter of Siu-Yong, the “golden child.”

While in the Philippines, Tieng-Bin has been exposed to Christianity and “modernization.” He has met an English missionary, Reverend Baines, who becomes a frequent visitor. Eventually, Tieng- Ben commits to converting and choosing one wife. He goes to Eling, who is now pregnant, and proposes they convert and she go with him to the Philippines to start a new life.

The play’s climax features a split scene. On one side of the set Reverend Baines is baptizing Tieng-Bin, Luan, and Eling in turn. On the other side of the stage Siu-Yong is overdosing on opium, while imploring Ahn to convert to Christianity as a means of self-preservation, but to keep worshipping her ancestors in secret. Later, as Eling attempts her “new” prayers to a crucifix, she is visited by the ghost of First Wife, who accuses her of treachery, disloyalty, and shaming her parents. She also suggests that Eling will not succeed in the “modern world,” and convinces Eling to give up her life as she goes into childbirth.

Tieng-Bin finds Eling and is devastated. He begins burning offerings on the altar out of desperation, and the pavilion ultimately catches fire. He denounces God and strikes Ahn as she tries to save him with persuasive Bible quotes. She succeeds in drawing him out, as he curses the ultimate ramifications and consequences of his quest for modernization.

The play closes with a return to the contemporary world, with Andrew and the ghost of Ahn reconciling themselves some of what has been revealed. Given the responsibility involved in his impending fatherhood and family legacy, Andrew makes peace.

Golden Child was written at a difficult time in Hwang's career. After the high profile failure of *Face Value* in 1993, and the criticism he received from Asian American scholars for *M. Butterfly*, he decided to return to his roots. *Golden Child* is a departure from his usual subjects and themes in several ways. It is a history play, but makes little attempt to depict Chinese history realistically. Perhaps most significantly, it is Hwang's only major play that focuses on the life of women and features a plot, or in this case perhaps subplots, driven by female characters. The result is a speculative consideration of the impact of change from the viewpoint of women who apparently possess no ability to determine their own fate in the face of significant personal upheaval.

Golden Child eventually made its way Broadway, but its journey was circuitous. It was originally commissioned by the South Coast Repertory theater in Costa Mesa, California, where it was read for the first time in 1995. After hearing it read, Hwang determined that "the text was too wordy", and that the structure "felt awkward and unwieldy."⁵ He went on to workshop it in the summer of 1996, in Vermont and with the Providence-based Trinity Repertory Company, with whom he was Artist-in-Residence. South Coast Repertory subsequently agreed to co-produce the work with Joseph Papp's Public Theater. Hwang characterizes the reviews of the production at the Public as "mixed to favorable."⁶

He continued to work on it, adding the critical scene dramatizing the decision to unbind his grandmother's feet in the revised version that went on to the Kennedy Center. For this version, he added more comedic elements and lines, but now feels that the resulting script that was "too glib and shallow."⁷

Before heading to Broadway, however, *Golden Child* was produced in Singapore. Hwang was enthusiastic about this because several of his plays had already been successfully produced there. Singapore's English-speaking audience-base constitutes one of the largest in Asia. On the other hand, he had trepidations about presenting a play which engaged with Chinese history, confessing that "I questioned whether I, an American, could authentically recreate the world of Old China."⁸ As it turned out, the *Golden Child* run in Singapore was highly successful and sold out, its story of change and diaspora resonating with Singaporeans, many of whom were themselves immigrants.

The play had one more stop, at the American Conservatory in San Francisco, before heading to Broadway, and Hwang continued to refine the work. *Golden Child* finally opened on Broadway, once again receiving mixed reviews and ultimately only ran for 69 performances. It did, though, receive three Tony award nominations, including one for best play. It also received the 1997 OBIE award for best play.

In 2012, the Signature Theatre Company in New York performed it as part of an all-Hwang season. He did, though, once again change the "bookends" which have tended to reflect where he is in his personal life with each revision. This production prompted the most enthusiastic reviews, and he feels that he had finally got the bookends right.

The staging is realistic, despite the action moving through time, and while the location and context for the opening and closing scenes have changed multiple times, every version has opened and closed with a conversation in an intimate, domestic space in a contemporary setting. This has included a taxi in New York City, a bedroom

in New York city, and an interior in the elderly Ahn's home in the Philippines. In all cases, though, the action quickly transitions to 1918 China and the home of Tieng-Bin.

The set features a representation of a traditional Chinese compound for a wealthy family. There is a central "Main Hall," surrounded in a semi-circle by three pavilions, each belonging to one wife. This allows the intimate spaces to work on multiple levels. While the Main Hall represents a domestic space, the polygamous relationships complicate Western notions of marital intimacy. The addition of the three wives' pavilions allows us to see each wife in her private space. While life and dialogue in the common space maintains an appearance of harmony, the jealousies, intrigue, and betrayals are exposed in the pavilions.

This is consistent with Hwang's use of intimate spaces in many of his works, as well as the conventions of a classic family play, but unlike most traditional American relationship or family dramas, the dynamics of the traditional "marriage plot" are multiplied by three. The set allows for this complexity without compromising on the suggestion of intimacy.

Hwang situates altars for ancestor-worship in each pavilion, as well as in the Main Hall. The incorporation of these altars, in their respective spaces, is critical, as their relationship to family and ancestor worship is a central theme of the play, and the staging is heavily reliant on spot lighting to locate the various scenes.

Hwang does not specify the nature of the various spaces, and no direction is given other than the incorporation of the communal space and three pavilions. The structure allows the play to function as a memory play of sorts, or at the very least resists the notion that it is happening in "real time."

If this play is considered as part of the Asian American project it will not escape the scrutiny of critics of orientalist representation. Most images available from various productions feature the use of amalgamated Chinese and Oriental motifs in the staging, potentially reinforcing stereotypes. While the use of color, furniture, and objects to suggest and evoke the Chinese context is arguably necessary, it does have the potential to exotify the intimate spaces being staged.

The characters invite a similar criticism, particularly with respect to the three wives. In order to drive his plot and create dramatic tension, he immediately establishes their roles in the house. They are literally First Wife, Second Wife, and Third Wife, in order of marriage and power.

During the celebratory “welcome home” dinner for Tieng-Bin the wives humorously try to “out-compliment” each other and to demonstrate their humility and piety, despite the barbs imbedded in each compliment. Tieng-Bin ends the meal by presenting his wives with their respective gifts: a cuckoo clock for Siu-Yong, a waffle iron for Luan, and a phonograph for Eling. These gifts clearly indicate his varied affections and relationships with his wives.

The three wives are, perhaps, as well developed as possible, given that the focus usually given to one character is, in this case, shared by three, but rather than being complex, each serves a symbolic function for Hwang’s theme of change.

Sui-Yong, or First Wife, desires to maintain the peace and is resistant to change. She refuses to participate in the discussions with Reverend Baines and believes traditional Chinese culture will be dominant. She declares, “Foreigners have been invading our country for centuries. We always change them more than they change us”

(20).⁹ She serves as a dramatic prophet, suggesting what will be lost and the realities for women. She gives voice to a healthy distrust of the assumption that change is inherently good, observing that “The fact that something is new simply means it has not had time to disappoint us” (10).

When Tieng-Bin insists that Ahn’s foot bindings be removed she asks him, pointedly, “Tell me, Husband—would *you* marry a woman with unbound feet?” (29). She represents the greater cultural resistance to change, and her suicide by opium can be read as the inevitable outcome for those who resist change.

Second Wife serves several functions. Luan is immediately shown to be the most domineering and conniving wife in the trio. Since so much of the play’s humor is derived from the dynamics between the wives, this makes her role as a caricature critical and effective. Hwang gives her many of the best lines in the text: “Thank the heavens for inventing money—without it what would we use to measure love?” (15).

Later, Siu-Yong and Luan argue about the common threat that both Christianity and Eling’s favor with Tieng-Bin pose to their current positions and the status quo. It is clear the Siu-Yong will resist change, and that Luan will embrace it as a strategy to gain a better position.

As part of her plan to position herself as the most modern of his wives, Luan exaggerates Siu-Yong’s resistance to change, citing foot binding as an example. Luan, however, also reinforces many stereotypes about Chinese women and mothers. She prays to her parents, imploring “Papa, I forgive you for losing all our money, and even for selling me to be a Second Wife. All I ask in return is that Husband sees myself and my son as we are: selfless, humble, and modest. And reward us with absolute power”

(11). This is consistent with the “Tiger mother” image or stereotype that has emerged in US society, and while Hwang is not suggesting that these traits are necessarily inherent in the Chinese female, she does fit a pre-existing stereotype.

Luan’s embrace of Christianity, Western dress, and “modernization” is not necessarily a simplistic opposite to Sui-Yong’s resistance. It is clearly and admittedly motivated only by her desire to become his only wife and acquire the most power in the household. So while her character is aligned with change, her motivations undermine her character’s ability to represent the spirit of modernity with any truth.

Eling’s character borders dangerously on the lotus blossom trope. She lacks the guile of the other two, but unwittingly and ironically drives the story. She only converts when it is ultimately revealed that the baptism is Tieng-Bin’s attempt to begin a new life with her as his only wife.

Hwang suggests of the characters he creates that they “are often clinging for security to a certain identity based on a stereotype or literary archetype and simultaneously trying to go past them to something that is more personal and individual.”¹⁰ He sees his work as creating the space for the characters to reinforce and resist their own stereotypes.

Hwang’s grandmother, who passed away in 2007, saw the Costa Mesa production. He admits that she does not necessarily like or agree with his characterization, insisting that “her mother was much sweeter than he portrayed her and was only taking opium because she had tuberculosis.”¹¹ She did not feel her father loved his third wife more, and believes “he got everything completely wrong”. Hwang, however, sees them as falling into the family structure of “the matriarch, the middle

child, and the beloved,” imposing the dynamics of birth order on the hierarchy of polygamy.

The title, *Golden Child*, refers to a nickname given Ahn by her nanny’s husband. She proved a lucky talisman in his gambling. She embraces the identity because she wants to bring luck to Tiang Bin. The events in China end with the child-Ahn foretelling the future, believing she can know such things because she is a “Golden Child.”

The inspiration for the title comes from a story in Hwang’s original family history novella in which a child brings luck to a gambler. The notion of a “lucky child” seems to have resonated enough for Hwang to map it onto the play as a critical element.¹² Ahn embodies both a Christian identity and an ancestral wisdom prescribed by her mother. If that is the case, then Hwang’s bearing witness to, and staging, the story makes him a part of that legacy and perhaps a “Golden Child” in his own right.

Golden Child adheres to realistic conventions, perhaps more so than in any of Hwang’s other plays, but he struggled with how to contextualize the action in China. Aside from *Yellow Face*, this is probably his most revised work. As he has said, “those bookends have been redone more than just about anything I have ever done” while he admits “it is really hard to do works that bounce between the past and present,” even as he believes that “the past is more dramatic than the present.”¹³

The initial bookends included a rather complicated plot that ultimately detracted from the primary storyline. He himself has characterized them as “bulky and rather contrived.”¹⁴ In the first version (unpublished), a young playwright on a taxi ride home from the Public Theatre is joined by the ghost of his grandmother. In the second, the spectral visit is in the playwright’s bedroom. He credits his trusted collaborator, and the

director of the Signature production, Leigh Silverman, with helping him address what was not working. Silverman finally pointed out to Hwang that:

You are trying to tell a very complicated story in the body of the play, and then you are trying to tell a simplistic, reductive story in the bookends, to the extent you try to make those bookends hold a lot of dramatic progression.¹⁵

In the most recent production at the Signature Theatre in 2014, the bookends feature a 60 year-old Chinese woman talking with her 14 year-old grandson. He wants to record her stories on a cassette player, saying “I want to hear about our family. Like, your father and grandfather. Like, when you were a little girl. That kind of stuff” (4).

She attempts to tell an educative bible story, ignoring the request for family history, only for the Grandson to respond:

All right, tell me: if all people who aren't Christians go to hell, what about the ones who never heard about Jesus? Is it fair that God sends them to hell? And if He doesn't, then aren't missionaries who tell people about Jesus making more people go to hell, not less? And why does Uncle Eddie say dancing is a sin, when people in the Bible danced all the time? And if the Bible is so perfect, why does it say slavery is a good thing? In both the Old and New Testaments? (4)

It is only after he voices his questions that she concedes, agreeing “Ok. I make everyone happy. Tell you family story -- about Jesus. About how our family come to be chosen by God” (5).

As in previous versions, both characters are played by the actors who will later become the young Ahn and Tieng Bin. The humor is more apparent in this version, as well as the intimacy between the grandmother and the boy. In this version's closing, the two replay the tape, insisting that their respective voices still do not sound like themselves. The play ends with them listening to the recording together.

It is, perhaps, ironic that the solution to the element of the play he found the most challenging, was, in fact, a simple “true” telling of how he came to know the story

himself. By presenting the action as a memory, a “story,” more than history, however, he is absolved of a responsibility towards truth itself, as if that were recoverable since this is both young David’s interpretation of Ahn’s story, and the story as told by Ahn, who was a child when the events took place. The most recent version also allows Hwang to approach the play with a better incorporation of the innocence and naiveté of his initial project.

On one level, *Golden Child* operates as a history play, staging the story of the conversion of Hwang’s ancestors. Its relationship to his personal history is obviously of central significance, but what he does is to use the skeleton of his family history, along with actual events, to interrogate the cultural conflicts inherent in the Western, Christian conversion project. He is unapologetic about the reinterpretation involved in staging history, and has stated that, “We can only try to interpret the past through the filter of our current perspective.”¹⁶

In the climactic scene that ends the first act, Tieng-Bin orders the bindings removed from Ahn’s feet. This particular scene seems to resonate with audiences, invoking, as it does, an element of Chinese culture that is fascinating but surely incomprehensible to Westerners. Again, there is the danger of exotifying the practice through staging it, but in this case it seems an apt analogy for the modernization Tieng-Bin desires. He denounces the practice as “an outdated, barbaric custom,” but ends the scene with a plea to his parents to forgive him.

In her book *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (2016), journalist Helen Zia tells a story about attending a performance of *Golden Child* in San Francisco. The evening featured a conversation with the cast after the

performance. Zia observes that an interesting dynamic emerged. The questions from Asian American audience members tended to focus on the actors' experiences and the staging of Asian American works. The non-Asian audience members seemed oddly obsessed with foot-binding and their related questions dominated the majority of the discussion. Not surprisingly, the Asian American actors did not know much about the history of foot-binding, particularly as they were not all of Chinese heritage. But as Zia points out the focus on what is ultimately only one element of the play was disproportionate.¹⁷

This seems to underscore the predicament Hwang continuously finds himself in. He has identified an aspect of Chinese culture of interest to non-Asian audiences, but risks reinforcing stereotypes in doing so. In this case, it an undeniable part of China's history and culture, albeit one difficult for Western cultures to understand.

The play plainly stages a life and religious tradition completely different from the dominant American Judeo-Christian culture, but it poses important questions about the nature of modernization, while not hostile to alternative cultures or religions. Hwang has explained that his goal was to consider, "as someone who had personally spent many years alienated from Christianity, the ways in which Christianity was a socially progressive force."¹⁸

Is it problematic that the supposed narrative of progress is ultimately exposed as a complex, yet simple, love story? Hwang does not think so, and suggests that the political is always personal and visa versa. He observes that in his experience: "Anything political gets bound up with what the personal story is too. Yes, he wanted to marry his third wife or just be with Eling. And that is sort of a personal motivation that

either undergirds or is the expression of a more general desire for progressive change.”¹⁹

And yet, it should be noted that the appearance of the First Wife as a ghost, and her final influence on Eling’s passing to the afterlife, undermines the suggested inevitability of progress, and implies that the ancestors still maintain power. As Esther Kim Lee points out, “Hwang gives validity to both traditional Chinese ancestor worship and Christianity by allowing the possibility of both belief systems exerting real power in people’s lives.”²⁰

Eling’s new crucifix, though does not save her from the ghost of the sister/wife she betrayed and it is unclear if the ghost is meant to be accepted as “real” or as a product of Eling’s guilt and imagination. When I asked Hwang about this potentially problematic ambivalence, He agreed and admitted that “he wants to have his cake and eat it too.”²¹ He is writing “psychological realism but wants to allow for the possibility of the supernatural.” While he describes himself as an empiricist, he does “believe in supernatural forces”, insisting that “supernatural forces are not that supernatural, they are generated by something psychological at their root.”

He grew up surrounded by a belief in charismatic mysticism, but, as he has explained, “interwoven with Chinese folk superstition,” as a child you can’t discern “what is from what,” so the result is an inevitable amalgamation of belief systems.

Hwang cites Brian Friel’s play *Dancing at Lughnasa*(1990) and Chekov’s *Three Sisters* (1900) as major influences on this work. He has jokingly referred to it as “Three Wives,” as, like Chekov, he wanted to focus on the minute details of daily life. He was intrigued by Friel’s employment of a character who is simultaneously the child and the

narrator, but unlike *Lughnasa*, in which the narrator tells the story from his own memory and is not an active participant in the action, he wanted his character to participate in a memory that is not his own. As he puts it, he was interested in the idea of “a memory play about your ancestors as opposed to your own memory.”

I would argue this suggests a Chinese influence beyond Hwang’s own conscious recognition in so far as time is perceived with greater fluidity in many Asian cultures and religions. The idea of participating in a collective history and acknowledging its influence in your life is comprehensible.

Hwang was also influenced by the production aspects of Merchant and Ivory films such as *A Room With a View* (1985). He liked the idea of staging a Chinese version of a period costume drama, or what he now classifies as a “Chinese Downton Abbey,”²² and the play does indeed seem to imply nostalgia for a fictional and romanticized notion of China untainted by the West.

The primary reference point for *Golden Child*, however, is Hwang’s own novella *Only Three Generations*, which is perhaps closer to historical fiction, as the young David liberally adds narrative perspective and dialogue to his recounting of significant events in his family’s history. It is a surprisingly detailed account of the family’s circumstances and diaspora, focusing in large part on the development of the family business, Yutivo, which is still a successful conglomerate in the Philippines.²³ Hwang’s tale begins with his 16 year old great grandfather Yu striking out from China to make his fortune in the Philippines, and ends with the corporation’s board of directors election in 1969.

Despite his early age, the writing is surprisingly mature and offers glimpses of the playwright he will become. Each generation has a dedicated chapter as he focuses on the building and evolution of the business.

There are elements of fantasy and fate which he clearly embellishes in the stories he chooses to retell. In one scene, the family's compound in China is attacked by another local village. Hwang recounts the events from the perspective of a watchman viewing from a tower:

He looked down from his perch, and what met his eyes cannot be described in words. There was a group of some fifty or more barbaric-looking savages, all screaming. And...they were inside the gates! And...they were headed towards the larger Yu house. This was one thing that met his eyes, the other, an outgrowth of this, was not something which can be adequately told. All those strangers...looking like hideous hungry, rabid dogs. Rabid dogs....fifty, let loose in their village. They screamed, and yelled, and bit, and chewed, and hit and killed, and robbed, and...the man was too dazed to move. His mind collected all the sights and sounds through those ears and glassy eyes. The mind collected, but...was it real or was this just a dream? (27).²⁴

This merging of the real and the fantastic, the questioning of perspective and memory, will later become signature marks of his work.

The novella features a relatively high proportion of dialogue. Entire pages detail conversations between characters. It certainly suggests a predisposition for the spoken word even as his detailed descriptions of locations suggest someone already conscious of the potential for staging. The ship his great grandfather takes to the Philippines is described as follows:

The wood had rotted in some places. In other it could come apart in a single blow from that sea. There were only three cabins below deck: a bunk room, about 8' by 10', a combination cooking and eating room, about the same size as the former, and the storeroom, a little larger than the other two. Above deck, there was only the captain's piloting room and his quarters. (5)

Hwang no longer remembers why he described it in such detail, but what is most remarkable about the novella is the clear establishment of style and thematic elements that would become signature aspects of his playwriting.

As mentioned, a review of images from various productions reveals the liberal use of Orientalist motifs: red and gold colors, silks, etc. Once again, there is a risk cliché Orientalist representation or exploitation. Hwang, though sees it differently. When I asked if this is a concern, he cited the success of a recent Chinese exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, which came under similar criticism, pointing out the tension between celebrating culture and reinforcing orientalist stereotypes.²⁵ He goes on to admit that “there is something about the opulence of some of the productions”²⁶ that he likes. Indeed, he sees one of the goals of the play as an intentional romanitization of historical China, similar to that employed in British period dramas, seeing the design as more nostalgic celebration than problematic exotification. His idea was “to take a traditional culture you don’t normally think of in those more exalted Western terms and put it in that other context...in that respect the opulence is useful in drawing the parallel.”²⁷

He also plays with the performance of language. While the play is in standard English, he writes much of Reverend Baines dialogue as broken and fragmented. The script includes the direction that “Baines speaks brokenly with an English accent” (31), reversing expectations since this is, as Dan Balcazo points out, how Asian characters are often represented in American popular culture” (147). Here it is the white Westerner who becomes the “other” and struggles with language, resorting to simple and childish

phrases: “Oh, oh—very good. Mmmm. Yummy. England, we cannot drink such very good tea” (32).

In one review of the most recent New York production, the critic remarks that the dialogue “evoked a sense of watching a foreign language play done with a fresh, modern translation.”²⁸ Conversely, the vernacular of the Chinese characters is, as so often with Hwang’s plays, purely American, so the Chinese story becomes American.

Golden Child is an ancestral autobiography and is, perhaps, best read as Hwang’s attempt to reconcile himself with his Christian Chinese identity. He does so by interrogating the religion’s relation to his family’s history.

The character in the ever-evolving bookends is always some version of himself, reflecting concerns in his life at the time each was written, revealing Hwang’s complicated relationship to his family, religion, and their inescapable influence on him.

Hwang seems to make peace with the story when he chooses to represent himself as the boy looking to honor and understand his “Ama.” In the Signature production in 2014, the voiceover for the recording was actually that of Hwang’s son Noah, adding yet another layer to his family homage.

This version also allows him to locate these scenes in the Philippines. Hwang has maintained a love for the Philippines, and admits that he has “a sentimental attachment to the Philippines that (he) does not have to China.”²⁹ Indeed, he has recently been commissioned to write a play about the American colonization of the Philippines, but he does point out that his mother’s family was “of a generation when all the Chinese merchants behaved like British colonists, who just stayed with each other.”³⁰ She did not learn the language.

At one point Tieng-Bin expresses the complexity of family in Chinese culture, and in doing so perhaps gives voice to Hwang's dilemma:

...how can I put this? It's not that I want to forget my family, quite the opposite. But to be Chinese—means to feel a whole web of obligation — obligation? — dating back 5,000 years. I am afraid of dishonoring my ancestors, even the ones dead for centuries. All the time, I feel ghosts—sitting on my back, whispering in my ear—keeping me from living life as I see fit. (34)

Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet

The unpublished one-act play *Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet* was staged as part of *The Square*, a set of plays conceived and developed for production in November 2000 at the Public Theatre in New York City. It opens with Beth Williams, editor for Amazon.com Publishing, practicing Chinese language with the use of earphones on a park bench. She is joined by Mei-Li Kwok, a “Caucasian in her mid-30's, black hair in pig tails, dressed in a cheong sam,”³¹ who has written an impressive memoir Beth is considering for publication. As Mei-Li tries to convince Beth of her “mixed-race heritage,” their surreal dance questions the value and arbitrary nature of the implied cultural obsession with authenticity. Unable to produce a photo ID other than her health club card, but insistent that her grandmother is, in fact, the character in the memoir, Mei-Li eventually admits she is using her “Chinese name,” and that she is also known as Ashley.

Beth discloses the fact that “A-Dot-C” has instituted a requirement to meet all multicultural authors face-to face because, “This happens about twice a month.” She gives examples of high profile authors and artists exposed as frauds. Mei-Li agrees, observing that “when I read a work by an Asian American author, I expect it to be

authentic,” while insisting that she is 100% Chinese. Beth suggests they could never put her on a cover, eventually removing Mei-Li’s wig and exposing her blonde hair.

To prove the legitimacy of her claim, Mei-Li consumes a preserved salted plum because “Non-Asian people can't stand the taste of it. It's the true test of whether someone is authentically Chinese.” Beth tries but is unable to eat the plum, and starts to believe that Mei-Li’s claim is possible. She produces a syringe and a vial and the play ends with her taking Mei-Li’s blood sample, and sharing “A-Dot-C’s one eighth requirement.” In the final lines of the play, Mei-Li asks “What does “authentic” mean? For instance — let's just say — what if we weren't real people, what if we were fictional characters. Would we be authentic?” Beth responds: “Not if we were written by a man.”

Clearly, Hwang is satirizing the politics of authenticity and authority with yet another “what if” scenario. While the plot seems preposterous, Hwang explained to me that he was, in fact, inspired by a few high-profile scandals in the literary and art worlds. In 1991, Araki Yasusada, a supposed survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, gained literary prominence with his spare poetry about his life and the impact of the bombing. When a book was offered, publishers found that Kent Johnson, a middle-aged white poet from Illinois, had written the poems.³² Hwang also read about several cases in Australia of white artists painting in the traditional Aboriginal “dot art” style, while claiming that Aboriginal artists had painted them. Authenticity clearly has a commercial value, and Hwang was interested in the commodification of art and literature.³³

It is an issue, after all, which has affected Asian American theatre. Who owns an experience? Who has the right to speak? How do you establish the bona fides of a writer, performer, or director? Here he satirizes those misrepresenting themselves as

authentic, but also those who patrol the border of identity trying to identify those with a legitimated claim to authorship, the blood test with its random “one eighth” requirement echoing the historical legal classification of African Americans.

Yellow Face

Yellow Face is Hwang’s most deliberate and direct interrogation of the topic of race in US society. Because of his inclusion of both himself and his father as characters, it is also deeply personal.

Hwang has never shied away from using his own experience as inspiration for plot or character. Plays discussed earlier, such as *FOB*, *Family Devotions* and *The Golden Child*, have autobiographical elements and draw heavily on his family and its ancestry. *Yellow Face*, however, is the most nakedly autobiographical. The main character is DHH, or David Henry Hwang, while one of the other principal characters is his father, Henry Hwang. Most of the other characters are also based on real people, and the plot itself has a factual basis. The resulting work is inevitably one in which we learn a good deal about David Henry Hwang himself.

Hwang categorizes *Yellow Face* as a “mockudrama.”³⁴ In recent years, the docudrama has emerged as a popular theatrical form in the United States, particularly for works with political or social agendas. In such texts, dialogue is derived directly from interviews which relate to particular events or issues. The success of works such as Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), the Tectonic Theatre Project’s *The Laramie Project* (2000), and Anna Deveare Smith’s *Fires In the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1994), has reinforced the power of verbatim dialogue, while prompting positive

popular and critical responses. In part because of their documentary basis, they seem to have the power to circumvent accusations of racial or gender bias. The author seemingly has the objectivity of a reporter, even if we know that the material has been edited and shaped to serve dramatic, and indeed, political and social, purposes.

Hwang again demonstrates his love of subverting genre by writing what he has classified as a “mock” stage documentary, or a “mockumentary.” He references the film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) as representative of the genre, although his version does not completely abandon fact. When asked what other works influenced *Yellow Face*, he has identified the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, as well as the work of Anna Deveare Smith, *I Am My Own Wife* (2004), and Greg Pak’s short film *Asian Pride Porn*,³⁵ with *Asian Pride Porn* being particularly instrumental.³⁶

This short film is a mock-commercial for a fictional collection of pornographic films, featuring ultra-masculine male Asian characters and empowered Asian women. It humorously subverts the fetishization of the orient by challenging the associated stereotypes. The film opens with Hwang, appearing as himself, with the title “Literary Genius” under his name. He goes on to muse: “When I’m feeling lonely and bored, I don’t need guilt over the sexual oppression of women of color and anger about the absence-slash-emasculatation of the Asian male in American media to add to my shame of masturbation and societally induced self-loathing.”³⁷ The chance to satirize his own persona turned out to be particularly empowering.

Asian Pride Porn inspired him to use himself as a comical protagonist in a play. He has said, “I’d been wanting to fix my play *Face Value* for the past 17 years, but I couldn’t figure out how to do it. Then I started thinking about the stage documentary

form—making it a mock stage documentary that would poke fun at some of the absurdities of the multicultural movement.”³⁸

Yellow Face premiered in Los Angeles, in a production by the East West Players in May 2007, and was later produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York City in December 2007. It was critically well received, won the 2007 Obie Award for playwriting, and was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. It continues to have a healthy life in US repertory and collegiate theatre. In 2014, it was produced by the National Theatre in London, and is the first of his plays to be produced there.

Hwang anchors the play in several seminal events that illustrate the complexities of race and culture in American society. The first is the controversy surrounding the casting of Jonathan Pryce as The Engineer in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* discussed previously. The second is the failure of his play *Face Value*. The third is the investigation of his banker father in the late 1990s by the US Senate Banking Affairs Committee. These three events seem on the surface to have little in common, other than the involvement of, and connection to, Hwang, but he presents them in the context of a broader consideration of the situation of Asian and Chinese Americans in contemporary US society, as well as his own position and experience.

Yellow Face is a traditionally constructed play in two acts. Act One primarily focuses on issues specific to DHH’s career. The plot is driven by the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy. DHH is initially vocal in his protests and later returns to the subject matter in his ill-fated farce, *Face Value*. In particular, Hwang foregrounds DHH’s miscasting of a Caucasian actor, Marcus G. Dahlman, as an Asian American character

in that play. The result is a desperate attempt at a cover up, even as the play proves a commercial failure.

Act Two shifts focus to a series of investigations into the financial and personal activities of high profile Asian Americans in the late 1990s. The investigation of DHH's successful banker father, here represented by his initials HYH, scientist Wen Ho Lee, and ultimately DHH himself, serves to explore contemporary perceptions of Asian Americans. In the meantime, Marcus G. Dahlman has reinvented himself as "Marcus Gee" and embraces his supposed Asian identity through stage roles and activism. The death of HYH, and DHH's reconciliation with his own identity, conclude the text.

With the exception of those playing DHH and Marcus, Hwang chooses to have the actors portray multiple characters. The script does not dictate casting choices, the actors being both Asian and non-Asian, while some portray both genders. This gender and racial-blind casting is designed to disrupt the perceived boundaries of identity performance and "is another way to theatricalize the themes of the play."³⁹ When I asked whether such casting was essential, however, he responded that he would "be open to seeing a different approach."⁴⁰ The casting of Marcus, though, is critical. He must have features and coloring that make his racial and ethnic heritage hard to identify. He has to be ambiguously ethnic, and also played by an actor who does not assume any other roles.

The set is minimal and designed to resist realism. His stage directions state: "Lights come up on the actors, who remain seated onstage when not playing their parts" (7).⁴¹ They use props, simple costume modifications, such as glasses or scarves, to

alert the audience to a change in character. The play has been performed both on proscenium stages and in the round, and works well in a more intimate space.

As in many of his works, Hwang uses sounds, such as telephones, typewriters, and music, as primary theatrical elements, even in this, more minimalist, play. The song “Shall We Dance,” from the musical *The King and I* (1951), closes Act One and opens Act Two. The song relates to Marcus’s casting in the musical, but also underscores the evolving dance between Hwang’s two alter egos. The most dramatic sound element is his use of the songs of the Dong people, an indigenous ethnic minority in Southern China. The Dong are famous for their polyphonic singing. Their songs are about nature and narratives of their history. Hwang uses the Dong songs to both open and close the play, while the Dong village is the place to which he sends Marcus at the end, specifically to hear and take part in the songs.

When I asked why he chose the Dong music, Hwang replied: “I heard Joanna Lee & Ken Smith’s recordings of the Dong songs before I wrote the play, and was struck that, being polyphonic, it didn’t conform to Western notions of Chinese music, and also seemed to retain its Silk Road antecedents. So when I began writing *Yellow Face*, Dong music seemed like a great sonic metaphor for cultural fusion.”⁴² The bookending of exotic singing, that is both beautiful and eerie, underscores the nostalgic and reflective elements of the text.

The work’s title, *Yellow Face*, refers to the practice, in the Western theatrical tradition, of white actors portraying Asian characters in films and plays. These were either comedic figures or villains, and depended on stereotypes defined by work and dress. They were often less distinctively Chinese than “Asian,” an ambiguous composite

of various pan-Asian elements. While any of these elements might be authentic in their own context, they tend to become blurred and generalized in the performative context. Yellowish-toned makeup was often used in the same way as charcoal was for the performance of “black face.” Actors were given slanted eyes and excessively long and thin mustaches.⁴³

Beyond this obvious reference to the tradition of performing Asian characters, the title also has other implications. In particular, it alludes to Hwang’s own struggle to perform an imposed identity. In the years after his initial phenomenal success he became at times a reluctant spokesperson for Asian American drama and arts, explaining that, “I didn’t set out to be a political spokesperson or a figure representing an ethnic group. I set out wanting to be a playwright. All this other stuff has come about as a consequence, I suppose, of whatever success I’ve been able to have as a writer”.⁴⁴ He was, and to some degree still is, the “face” of Chinese and Asian American actors, playwrights, and directors. But the pressure to play this role was particularly intense when the multicultural movements of the 1980s, and 90s were at their height. As *Yellow Face* suggests, he was also expected to act as “yellow face” of a different kind, to perform as a political figurehead.

The title, however, can also be read as a reference to the Chinese concept of “face” or *guanxi*.⁴⁵ Guanxi does not literally translate to English, but refers to an individual’s relationship, network, and reputation. Preserving and saving “face” is an important concept in Chinese culture. Considerable value is placed on ensuring the integrity of a person’s guanxi, but an equal importance is placed on respecting and preserving the reputation of those in your family, your friends, and those with whom you

do business. The two acts of the play portray the struggle of both Hwang and his father to maintain their *guanxi*. DHH's humorous attempts to hide his accidental casting of Marcus are juxtaposed with the serious investigation of his father and the questioning of his behavior and patriotism. Both story threads portray the two Hwangs' reactions to a threat to their reputations.

Ironically, the concept of *guanxi* is introduced by Marcus, who asks DHH if *he* is familiar with the Chinese concept of "face." He suggests it is "the face we choose to show the world" that "reveals who we really are" (43). Later, in the scene in which DHH suggests that he and Marcus admit to their deception, it is DHH who returns to *guanxi*:

DHH: Marcus, do you remember the Chinese concept of "face"?

MARCUS: Yeah, but why are you—?

DHH: I'm willing to go out there and lose my face. How 'bout you? (66).

Reputation and identity seemingly become allied even as face implies a mask, a concealment, and potentially a betrayal.

The time span covered in *Yellow Face* is relatively long. The earliest event referenced portrays Lily Tomlin awarding Hwang the Tony for *M. Butterfly* at the 1988 Tony Awards ceremony, while the last is Marcus's final message from China in October 2006. While that e-mail is fictional, it still provides a useful timeframe.

As well as employing elements of the "mockumentary," this is also a memory play. Hwang himself has referred to it as an "unreliable memoir," and he actively undermines the assumptions of the memory as he did in *M. Butterfly*. The events, including those based on fact, are experienced and annotated by DHH, with Hwang adding dialogue for events for which there are no primary sources. The result is a contemplative and complicated treatment of his developing identity, told with the benefit

of hindsight and reflection. However, given that he interweaves fact and fiction, *Yellow Face* cannot be read as an unproblematic account of Hwang's life.

In one sense the play is a classic "coming of age" story, in which Hwang depicts his development from a young Asian American wunderkind, to an older, wiser self, less prone to judgment. He interrogates his failures in both his professional and personal life over the arc of the years. Through his maturation, successes and, particularly, his failures, we see DHH develop emotionally. His relationship with his father is particularly crucial. It is through the loss of his father, and reflection on their relationship, that we see DHH grow.

Yellow Face is a metatheatrical work drawing attention to its status as a play. The text references another work in the same way, for example, that Bruce Norris's *Clyborne Park* (2010) responds to Lorraine Hansbury's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In Hwang's case, *Yellow Face* responds to *Face Value*, which in turn responded to the casting controversies which accompanied the American production of *Miss Saigon*, which in turn was an updated version of *Madam Butterfly*, equally a point of reference for *M. Butterfly*. This is almost a theatrical equivalent of a Babushka doll, each layer revealing another. Nonetheless, at the heart of *Yellow Face* is the figure of DHH, almost an avatar of Hwang himself, allowing him simultaneously to enter his own story and distance himself from it.

His becomes a performed life, both trustworthy and suspect, as DHH anchors the story and guides the narration. He is clearly the protagonist and center of the story. He is human, and therefore flawed. Indeed, Hwang is merciless in his portrayal of DHH's vulnerabilities, including bouts of hubris and narcissism, an utter lack of self-awareness,

and a penchant for porn and Internet chat-hookups. This unabashed self-deprecation serves Hwang well, and allows him to humanize his own identity. As he has said, “I found that by creating a character that I actually gave my name to, in a strange way it liberated me to make him a character.”⁴⁶

As in the case of *Asian Pride Porn*, by re-appropriating his own portrayal, Hwang frees himself from the burden of his public persona, bringing some levity to the discussion of broader issues. As he has explained, “A wise friend once said that, in order to have a conversation about race with a member of a different race, you have to be willing to make a fool of yourself. With *Yellow Face* I inadvertently stumbled on a way to apply this principle dramaturgically. DHH is the most foolish character in the show, giving audiences permission to laugh at controversies over race and culture.”⁴⁷

However these admissions do not acknowledge the possible role of the character of Marcus Gee as Hwang’s alter ego. While Hwang’s use of himself as the DHH character in *Yellow Face* is widely referenced and discussed in reviews and scholarship, little has been written about the many autobiographical elements of Hwang to be found in Marcus. Indeed, I would suggest that it is in this reading of Marcus that we see elements and glimpses of the idealist Hwang once was, and perhaps secretly still is.

In Marcus, Hwang portrays the pride in an Asian American identity that has become too complex and burdensome for DHH. Marcus responds to the activism of the 1990s with a clear commitment to his community that can be read as Hwang’s lost and regretted opportunities. At one point he challenges DHH: “I’m just saying some things that need to be said. Doing things that need to be done. I mean, *someone’s* gotta step

up” (42). Marcus represents the notion of racial identity by choice that Hwang will never be afforded, but also embraces that role with the enthusiasm of an individual finding community in identity.

While operating on multiple levels, *Yellow Face* also moves quickly through almost 20 years of Hwang’s life, in the process providing an ideal case study of the plight and situation of Asian Americans and Chinese Americans during those years. There are few Americans whose personal life better illustrates the complexities of race and identity. As William Boles suggests, “For a playwright who has throughout his career been fascinated with the subject of identity in its many facets (Asian, Chinese, American, Asian American, Chinese American, male, female, religious, and familial), in *Yellow Face* Hwang explores for the first time the concept of identity as it relates to what he knows best—himself.”⁴⁸ His personal life has the unusual distinction of being very public, but the investigation of his father extended that scrutiny to his family. Indeed, given the circumstances of the investigation of the Far East National Bank, it is the situation of Asian Americans in both the arts and commerce that is explored.

Early in the play, DHH provides the audience with several familiar examples of “yellow face” in mainstream popular culture: “From Mickey Rooney playing Japanese in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* to Bruce Lee being passed over in favor of David Carradine for a TV series called *Kung Fu*, Asians have consistently been caricatured, denied the right even to play ourselves” (8).

As discussed earlier, the many references to *Miss Saigon* are particularly complicated, the issue being not the actual musical but the casting of Jonathan Pryce and the controversy that followed, and articles from *The New York Times*, *Washington*

Post, *New York Post*, and *The Daily News* are quoted in *Yellow Face*, while Hwang recounts meetings in which Cameron Mackintosh refers to the protest as “a tempest in an Oriental teapot” (10), suggesting that *M. Butterfly*’s lead actor BD Wong is behind it.

Despite having received permission, he chose not to use some additional damning conversations, including a shared taxi ride with *Miss Saigon*’s director Nicholas Hytner, in which Hytner admitted that the supposed global search for an Asian actor did not take place,⁴⁹ though he does include a scene in which such actors lament exclusion from his own play, *Face Value*:

RODNEY (*Reading as Randall*): He stole my job!

LINDA (*reading*): He stole all our jobs

RODNEY: (*Reading as Randall*): I really know I could’ve brought some truth to that role.

LINDA (*Reading*): In this day and age—a Caucasian—playing a Chinese! And in that horrible musical! It’s racist, sexist, imperialist, misogynist—

RODNEY (*Reading as Randall*): And I didn’t even get an audition.

LINDA (*Reading*): Neither did I. Damn them! (17)

Media and political personalities of the time, from *New York Times* drama critic Frank Rich, to former New York mayor Ed Koch, and Dick Cavett, and even the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, are invoked. The controversy surrounding casting of the musical arguably overshadowed the actual story of the musical, and *Yellow Face* recounts every detail. This “real life” story creates the context for Hwang’s fictional interrogation of the politics and realities of race and culture in casting.

As noted, *Miss Saigon* was written and produced after *M. Butterfly*. It was not specifically one of the works Hwang was initially responding to in that play. He did so more overtly in *Face Value*, but *Yellow Face* finally gave him the opportunity to address the musical’s role in reinforcing the myth of the Asian “butterfly” when DHH refers to it as “*Madame Butterfly* set in Vietnam” (15). His father, however, defends the musical:

HYH: I'll tell you the thing about *Miss Saigon*. You wanna know why it's such a big hit?

DHH: Not really.

HYH: Because it's real.

DHH: A Vietnamese prostitute falls in love with some white soldier and kills herself so her baby can come to America?

HYH: Things like that happen all the time.

DHH: How can you say—?

HYH: You don't know how much people want to come to America. I see that girl, and I think—she's like me.

DHH: You killed yourself?

HYH: No, but I would've. That's how much I wanted to come here. (16)

Beyond the question of race, which Hwang has insisted lay at the heart of *M. Butterfly*, he is concerned with gender, more specifically masculinity, in the performance and characterization of Asian men. The issue in *M. Butterfly* had been the feminization of the East by the West. As Song suggests, ““being an Oriental, (he) could never be completely a man” (82). After the audition scene in *Yellow Face*, the casting team laments the challenge of finding their leading man in *Face Value*. The question is posed, rather differently, but to the same effect:

STUART: How about BD?

DHH: I just don't—I don't see BD in this one. This is our chance. To make some fresh Asian face into a Broadway star. For *M. Butterfly* we were looking for a Chinese transvestite who could sing and dance! And we found lots of them!

STUART: Yes we did.

DHH: So why is this so much harder? All we're looking for is a straight, masculine, Asian leading man.

STUART: I'll tell Miles to keep looking.

DHH: Tell him—there are hundreds of masculine Asian leading men out there. Dozens! (18)

Here, he addresses the practical challenges in casting with a racial agenda. DHH and the producers are engaging in what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak terms “strategic essentialism,”⁵⁰ or casting with a bias for Asian American actors, even as DHH's

humorous, but telling, adjustment from “hundreds” to “dozens” exposes his recognition of the practical complexities of an essentialist casting commitment.

As the team continues its search for a masculine Asian American male lead actor, reference is made to a play called *Go For Broke* here described as “an Asian American play with a cast of two” (19). Hwang incorporates a scene from that play into *Yellow Face*, with his fictional characters Marcus and Rodney in the two roles. *Go For Broke* was actually a 1951 film dramatizing the real-life story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The 442nd was composed of Nisei (second-generation Americans born of Japanese parents) soldiers. The unit was highly decorated and the film one of the few of its era to offer a positive portrayal of Asian Americans.

In fact the film has never been adapted for the stage. Hwang chose the source because:

There was an actual incident in which a Caucasian actor (Victor Talmadge) was mistakenly cast as Asian. The casting agent saw a review in VARIETY for a two-person show involving the 442nd (*The Gate of Heaven*), assumed the white actor was Asian, called him in for an audition, and he got the part. So I wanted to invent a fictional show that would've also been about the 442nd, and settled on the idea of a stage adaptation of *Go For Broke*.⁵¹

As it happens, *Go For Broke* works well in *Yellow Face*, as its depiction of Asian American males highlights the very characteristics DHH has suggested are rarely represented. Beyond that, in Hwang's fictionalized scene from *Go For Broke* he manages to blend social comment with what amounts to a parody of Hollywood's familiar tactic of denying difference in the name of patriotic unity:

MARCUS: Listen up Sergeant Watanabe. Do it for your country.
 RODNEY: America? Where I'll always be a foreigner? Even before the war, people would ask me, “Where are you from?” And I'd tell'em, “Stockton, California.” Then they'd say, “No. Where are you *really* from?” And now, to them—I'm just another enemy Jap.

MARCUS: All right, then—do it for your family.

RODNEY: My family? Rounded up by the U.S. government and thrown behind barbed wire?

MARCUS: Sergeant, let's talk turkey. When headquarters first assigned me to an all-Japanese American battalion, I was a typical Texan—thinkin' all you boys were the enemy. But now—I've never met a finer group of Americans.

RODNEY: You're right, this is the best chance we're ever gonna get to show the world we're loyal Americans. My parent's generation—the Isseie—they have a saying: "Shikata ga nai." It means, "Can't be helped." "Nothing to be done"

MARCUS: Well then, "Shikata ga nai" to you too. So—ready, boys? Charge!

RODNEY: Go for broke! (19)

A major aspect of *Yellow Face*, however, relates to Hwang's father and the investigations of Chinese Americans in the mid-1990s. It is this which takes the play beyond a consideration or representation. Henry Hwang was a highly successful businessman and president of the Far East National Bank, the first federally chartered Asian American bank in the United States⁵². In *Yellow Face*, he appoints his son to the board of directors during his "down and out" time. When HYH suggests he join the board, DHH responds: "And what's my title going to be? 'Director of Nepotism'?" (36). Hwang did serve on it from 1985 to 1996. At the end of the first act, the bank is about to become the first American bank to do business in the People's Republic of China.

As Act Two progresses, the political dimension of the play becomes significant, as multiple political figures from the 1990s are referenced. One such is John Huang, a fundraiser for the Democratic National Committee who ultimately served time for violating campaign finance laws.⁵³ The investigations surrounding Chinese American political contributions focused on Huang. Actual statements from the hearings are incorporated into Hwang's play:

THE ANNOUNCER: Committee chair Fred Thompson, Republican of Tennessee—

FRED THOMPSON: High-level Chinese government officials crafted a plan to increase China's influence over the U.S. political process. Our investigation suggests the plan continues today.

THE ANNOUNCER: Senator Bob Bennett, Republican of Utah:

SENATOR BENNETT: In my opinion, [these] activities are classic activities on the part of an Asian who comes out of that culture.

THE ANNOUNCER: Senator Sam Brownback, Republican of Kansas:

SENATOR BROWNBACK: Two Huangs don't make a right.

THE ANNOUNCER: Senator Richard Shelby, Republican of Alabama:

SENATOR SHELBY: We've got to remember the Chinese are everywhere... They're real. They're here. And probably very crafty people.

THE ANNOUNCER: Representative Tom DeLay, Republican of Texas:

REPRESENTATIVE DELAY: There's a high probability this money from foreign[ers] ...if you're friends with a guy named Johnny Huang [or Marcus Gee]...and you have friend[s] by the name of Arief and Soray, and I cannot even pronounce [these] name[s]...Cheong Am, Yogesh Gandhi, Lap Seng Ng—(*tries different pronunciations*) Ng?...Ng?

THE ANNOUNCER: Representative Jack Kingston, Republican of Georgia:

REPRESENTATIVE KINGSTON: Illegal campaign contributions are just the tip of the egg roll.

THE ANNOUNCER: Senator Brownback:

SENATOR BROWNBACK: John Huang brought in so much money for the Democrats because under his salary agreement no raise money, no get bonus.
(51)

These verbatim quotes need no embellishment, and while some have been taken out of context, all demonstrate the level of paranoia and racism still present in American society, even at the highest levels of government.

As the investigation continues, Hwang references the case of Wen Ho Lee, a Chinese American scientist working at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Lee was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury in 1999, and accused of stealing secrets for the People's Republic of China.⁵⁴ His name was leaked to the media before charges were filed. He was imprisoned and held in solitary confinement. Lee was ultimately found guilty on only one of the 59 original indictments (improper handling of restricted data), and received a \$1.6 million dollar settlement from the federal government and five media organizations.

Hwang incorporates Lee's case into his story, including parts of the transcript from Wen Ho Lee's interrogation by the FBI in March of 1999, a transcript which includes the FBI agent's reference to the infamous 1960s Rosenberg trial:

The Rosenbergs are the only people that never cooperated with the federal government in an espionage case. You know what happened to them? They electrocuted them, Wen Ho (53).

The Wen Ho Lee story does not relate to Hwang directly, except that the same reporters who ultimately wrote insinuating articles about Hwang's father also wrote the initial inflammatory articles about Wen Ho Lee. Hwang confirms that he has never met or interacted with Wen Ho Lee.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the case is the highest profile example of the distrust of Chinese Americans Hwang suggests to still be pervasive. Lee's investigation and treatment went far beyond that of Caucasian scientists.

The fictional character Marcus urges DHH to join the protest over Lee's imprisonment. He fails to do so. By choosing to have DHH remain apathetic to Lee's plight, Hwang confesses to ambivalence on his own part. Marcus's contrasting activism, and Hwang's incorporation of Lee's story in *Yellow Face*, indicate both his insistence on the significance of the event, and perhaps his own regret at failing to participate.

As HYH is enthusiastically preparing for his subpoena, Hwang introduces the ominously named character "Name Withheld on Advice of Counsel" (NWOAOC). The climactic scene of Act Two depicts a meeting between DHH and NWOAOC, where NWOAOC offers DHH "the chance to prove you had nothing to do with this" (56) in an "off the record" conversation. As a matter of public record, the initial stories referenced appeared in the *New York Times* as written by James Risen and Jeff Gerth. The

resulting dialogue is consistent with other scenes Hwang explores in the nether space between fiction and fact.

Whether embellished or accurate, the resulting interview gives Hwang his best chance to defend his family and to demonstrate the complex situation he suggests Asian Americans find themselves in. The interview allows him to, as Samuel Park suggests, “demonstrate how racism operates in a supposedly progressive, liberal environment, one in which face to face antagonism is replaced with subtler yet equally damaging, xenophobic master narratives in which minorities often are cast as aliens, spies, or foreigners with divided allegiances.”⁵⁶

In the interview, DHH discusses the importance of “filial piety” in Chinese culture and his own attempts to “dig deep into the American psyche, dispelling stereotypes, creating positive images” (58). As DHH asserts his goals for Chinese Americans, NWOAOC conflates the agenda with a Chinese desire to gain influence:

NWOAOC: And so, from your position as a board member, you sought to use Far East’s resources to gain influence—

DHH: Yes.

NWOAOC: For China

DHH: No! I didn’t say that.

NWOAOC: I’m sorry, I thought you did.

DHH: No, I was talking about gaining influence for Chinese Americans.

NWOAOC: Right.

DHH: Not China. There’s a difference. (59)

As their interview continues, NWOAOC’s racist assumptions display the distrust and misunderstanding of Chinese Americans then apparent in an age of increasing anti-Chinese sentiment. In particular, NWOAOC does not make a distinction between Chinese heritage and Chinese citizenship:

NWOAOC: Mr. Hwang, your father is a Chinese Banker.

DHH: Chinese American.

NWOAOC: Exactly.

DHH: There's a difference.

NWOAOC: And it's that difference that interests me. If I were investigating Israeli espionage, I would look to the Jewish community—it's just logical. Does your father see himself as more American, or more Chinese?

DHH: That question makes no sense.

NWOAOC: On the contrary, I think it's quite relevant.

DHH: How about you? Do you see yourself as more American or more white?

NWOAOC: That's not the same thing.

DHH: No?

NWOAOC: Not in the least.

DHH: Why not?

NWOAOC: Because there's no conflict between being white and being American.

DHH: Did you really just say that? There's a conflict—between being Chinese and being American? (61)

DHH concludes his defense of his father's activities by stating; "You know, you could 've accused my dad of a half dozen other things and I would've gone, 'Okay, well, maybe.' But disloyalty to America? A country he loves, that's been his home for the last fifty years?" (62).

Early in the interview, NWOAOC states: "I think it's only fair to tell you I've already gotten everything I need for my story" (59). As Hwang depicts DHH's anger at the deluge of accusations, perhaps the most important insight is into his unshakeable belief in his father's patriotism. Hwang concludes the interview in his characteristically symmetrical style, as DHH informs NWOAOC: "I feel it's only fair to warn you—I already have everything I need to write my play" (62).

Hwang still refuses to either confirm or deny a meeting with either reporter. An extensive review of the script was performed by Hwang's legal counsel before *Yellow Face* was produced.⁵⁷ Clearly, he anticipated that some of the conversations portrayed and quotes used would be controversial. The document reveals that by Hwang's own admission multiple quotes, such as playwright Frank Chin's pronouncement that "David

Henry Hwang is a white racist asshole!” (8), are taken out of context. All quotes in the text are, however, accurately ascribed to whoever said them, but the context has, in many cases, been changed for the purposes of the structure and dramatic effect.

Whether based on a conversation he had, or a conversation he dreamed of having, this confrontation provides DHH with his “coming of age” moment, and allows him to find his voice. He goes so far as to thank NWOAOC for “giving (him) something to say again” (63).

As Act Two concludes, two short but devastating events occur. The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency denies HYH’s application for a new federal bank, and HYH’s doctor informs DHH that his father has aggressive cancer. These two developments, paired in swift succession, suggest that Hwang sees them as connected and of equal import in contributing to his father’s death. In the final scene between HYH and DHH, HYH poignantly admits that he has lost his previously unshakeable belief in the American dream, because “the system doesn’t play fair” (64).

In earlier drafts of the play Hwang is more specific in suggesting that his father’s illness and death were accelerated by the investigation.⁵⁸ In the final version he does not dwell on his final business failure and illness, and avoids over-sentimentalizing, but it is also clear that he blames his father’s loss of spirit on his disillusionment with critical aspects of the country he loved and in which he believed. When asked if his father knew that he was going to be a character in *Yellow Face*, Hwang responds: “I did start writing it before my Dad passed away, and he even read an early draft. Of course, in that version, HYH did not die. My Father liked the way he was portrayed, which I think goes to show that he was quite similar to the character!”⁵⁹

Hwang's hybrid form and liberal inclusion of extra-textual sources results in a more compelling story, but his blurring of fact and fiction does not come without the price of controversy. Plays that merge fact and fiction generate a particular sort of criticism. Luis Valdez's play *Zoot Suit* (1979) was widely criticized for integrating fictional elements into an historical context. In her article, "Documentary Theatre and *Zoot Suit*," Jacqueline O'Connor suggests that many critics "hint at the same ominous likelihood—that we are to be at the mercy of an author who makes works mean whatever he needs them to mean, and therefore never to know whether our sympathies are being engaged by something that actually happened or are being manipulated."⁶⁰

While it may be easy to dismiss this as an irrelevance, much of the play's power does come from its factual elements which become suspect or problematic once invaded by fiction. This has the potential to invalidate the points he is making, and I would argue that Hwang's use of his own life mitigates this to a degree, as his authority for the autobiographical elements is unquestionable. The ultimate revelation that Marcus is a fictional character is potentially destabilizing, except that once again what interests Hwang is the extent to which reality, let alone identity, is infused with performance, in which a shift in perspective has a consequential effect.

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang explores the performative aspects of race and culture, and portrays characters performing a version of "cultural" drag-similar to gender drag. In her book *About Face* (1997), Dorinne Kondo suggests that Asian American theatre can become an "intervention—contestatory and/or problematic—in circulating Orientalist discourses."⁶¹ As the character of Marcus continues to "pass" as an Asian American, the question of what constitutes race becomes increasingly more problematic for DHH,

who ironically sets the stage for Marcus during the casting scene. When it is suggested that he does not “look Asian,” DHH angrily responds: “Asian faces come in a variety of shapes and sizes—just like any other human being. Which we are, you know,” (21) even as he goes on to proclaim: “I can tell an Asian when I see one” (22). This question of authenticity is increasingly contested, particularly as multicultural heritages become more pervasive in American society. When Rodney expresses his anger at Marcus’s casting, DHH argues; “The demographics of this country are changing so fast—and sometimes we think it’s only white people who got to adjust. But we’ve gotta start thinking differently, too” (27).

In *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (1998), David Leiwei Li points out that, “Race is both appearance and performance, or rather an appearance-generated performance.”⁶² Marcus is increasingly convincing in his cultural drag because he learns to perform an Asian American identity. His performance is an ironic subversion of the colonial “mimic man,” who learns to pass in the dominant group through performance.⁶³ This sort of a cultural performance is historically associated with the colonized or objectified group, but Hwang challenges the traditional binary by creating a character from the dominant group—a straight, Caucasian, male—who seeks an alternative identity in the minority.

The suggestion of identity, particularly gender identity, as a performed construct, has been explored in depth in literary and cultural studies scholarship, but this has primarily focused on gender tropes and femininity from a white, Western, and bourgeois perspective.⁶⁴ What Hwang suggests, in *Yellow Face*, is that race is no less a construction than gender. There is, however, a critical distinction between masquerade

and mimicry. While masquerade seeks to enhance or signify difference with an assumption of an underlying essentialism, mimicry denounces essentialism and focuses on fetish and culturally constructed elements of identity.

A female-female impersonator does not have the ability to deny subjectivity, or to ensure that performance will be recognized as production. In the case of a male impersonating a female the opposite is true. Mimicry can only succeed as a subversion technique through recognition. It is this forced recognition of the constructed nature of gender that makes female impersonation by males such a powerful theatrical tool. In *Yellow Face*, the use of mimicry is effective because the audience is aware of the impersonation, and recognizes the performance as a performance. Hwang employed the same technique successfully in *M. Butterfly*.

Because he is not Asian, Marcus can ultimately deny subjectivity and end his cultural drag performance. His cultural drag exposes the performative nature of race in a way that DHH cannot, because it is ultimately a choice for him. Hwang makes this distinction clear in one of the scenes between DHH and Marcus:

DHH: You come in here with that, that face of yours. Call yourself Asian. Everyone falls at your feet. But you don't have to live as an Asian—everyday of your life. No, you can just skim the cream, you, you, you ethnic tourist!
 MARCUS: You're right. I don't *have* to live Asian everyday of my life. I am *choosing* to do so.
 DHH: Funny thing about race. You don't get to choose. If you'd been born a minority, you'd know that. (43, emphases in original)

There is poignancy to Marcus's desire for an Asian identity, and his embracing of his role as an advocate. Hwang recognizes the power of community in America's increasingly "hyphenated identity" culture.⁶⁵ At his initial meeting with students at a university campus-based "Asian American Resource Center," Marcus is seduced by the

fellowship he experiences. As a Caucasian American, he has not encountered a support system explicitly based on shared racial or cultural identity and remarks: “God, this is amazing, you guys don’t even know me—and to welcome me like this into your club—...community. I feel like I’ve finally found—a home” (32).

Female impersonation has arguably entered mainstream culture and is not generally perceived as offensive to women (again, generally). The same cannot be said of performing race or culture. There are numerous recent occasions where pop performers or comedians have performed in, or dressed in, black or “yellow” face, that were met with widespread criticism and repudiation. In 2015 an NCAA (National Coalition of African Americans) activist by the name of Rachel Dalziel, who identified and led her life as an African American, was exposed to be Caucasian. She was publicly disgraced and reviled because she had not lived the African American identity throughout her life. Racial identity, it was argued, was not a matter of choice. Her interviews sounded eerily reminiscent of Marcus Gee’s protestations.

This is not surprising given US history and the complexities of race in American society, but the unintended residual effect of this is that, beyond gender, the performative nature of aspects of identity have not been as explored to the same extent. This is the essence of the discourse Hwang engages with in *Yellow Face*.

By passing, Marcus is allowed engagement with a community he would not have access to without the ability to perform the culture. He gets to choose and perform his American identity. Ironically, the actor Victor Talmadge, whose mistaken Asian American identity inspired the character of Marcus Gee, went on to perform the role of the King in a national touring production of *The King and I* in 1997. The dozens of

reviews of the production never mention the fact that he is not Asian,⁶⁶ and one from the *Montreal Gazette* goes so far as to laud the production's "ethnic-authentic casting and convincing South Asian look," calling it a "post-Miss Saigon, post-Show Boat, culturally sensitive Rodgers and Hammerstein."⁶⁷ When interviewed, during the tour, Talmadge recounts being asked to audition based on his performance in *The Gate of Heaven*, the play Hwang's fictional production of *Go For Broke* is based on, but omits mention of race completely.⁶⁸ Hwang has always found this ironic.

In his forward to the 2009 edition of *Yellow Face*, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich asks: "Might Marcus's perverse self-invention be a vindication of HYH's American Dream after all?"⁶⁹ In his final exchange with Marcus, DHH admits that his goal was to "take words like 'Asian' and 'American', like 'race' and 'nation,' mess them up so bad no one has any idea what they even mean anymore. Cuz that was Dad's dream: a world where he could be Jimmy Stewart. And a white guy—can even be an Asian" (69). Clearly this is Hwang's goal as well, but as he has stated, "I also think that a somewhat skeptical play like *Yellow Face* has something necessary about it—it's about the need to grasp two somewhat contradictory ideas: One is the notion of a post-racial society, and the other is the idea that racist things still happen, and you have to deal with it when they do."⁷⁰

As Rich notes in his foreword, "*Yellow Face* is a particularly remarkable achievement, a Pirandellian comedy built out of a trio of sour real life events...You'd think these circumstances would propel David Henry Hwang to write an angry, bitter, play. But *Yellow Face* is all the more powerful for grasping the absurdity of the real-life events and refracting them through this writer's piquant comic vision."⁷¹ The reference

to Pirandello is apt. While *Yellow Face* does not draw as heavily on elements of Pirandello's play *Six Characters In Search of an Author* as *Face Value*, his development of Marcus, and the final confrontation between DHH and Marcus, is clearly influenced by that work. However, the autobiographical nature of *Yellow Face* yields a very different dynamic and outcome.

Early drafts of *Yellow Face* do not include the revelatory confrontation between DHH and Marcus, in which Marcus insists they reveal that he is fictional. The first draft integrates more correspondence from Marcus's travels in China throughout and ends with him exposing his racial identity.⁷² In these versions, Marcus's character escapes to China, but does not disrupt the performance or confront his alter ego. Hwang confesses that he rewrote the ending many times and credits director Leigh Silverman with the suggestion to have Marcus "out" DHH.⁷³ The revelation has greater impact because of the final confrontation between the two characters.

Ultimately, the play's hybridity is multifaceted. It is historical fact, farcical fiction, and autobiographical fantasy. As O'Connor suggests in her discussion of *Zoot Suit*, in *Yellow Face* "notions of formal hybridity and notions of identity formations are intertwined...documentary and dramatic element help bring to light issues of individual and cultural identity."⁷⁴

As noted previously, I feel that Marcus is best understood as a character if read as an alter ego to DHH. He represents Hwang's personal experimentation with performing cultural drag, without the burden of being the subject. When Hwang considers an Asian American identity as a choice rather than a genetic predetermination, he is able to see the positive dimensions, just as Marcus does.

Hwang has repeatedly stated in interviews that because of his Christian upbringing in the suburbs of Los Angeles, with few Chinese or Asian American friends, he did not feel particularly Asian until he got to college. Throughout his career, Hwang's more vocal critics have often suggested that his experience does not represent "authentic" Asian American culture, because of his affluence and limited immersion in his Chinese culture and heritage and Hwang has himself said: "We were raised pretty much as white European Americans in terms of the things we celebrated. There's an odd confluence in my family between a father who decided to turn away from things Chinese and a mother whose family had been converted to Christianity in China several generations back. Consequently between the two of them there was no particular desire for us to speak Chinese or celebrate Chinese holidays at all."⁷⁵

Marcus's initial response to the Asian American identity group at the fictional "Asian American Resource Center" on a college campus mirrors Hwang's experience during his years at Stanford, as he explored and embraced his Asian identity for the first time: "Do you know how special this is? Out there—in the rest of America—everyone's on their own, fighting to stay afloat. But you—you've got each other. No, we've got each other (Hwang's emphasis)" (32).

In my opinion, Marcus's anxiety about exposing his deception hints at Hwang's own fears. He does not have the responsibility DHH uniquely has as a recognized and successful individual in a minority identity group, and is therefore additionally able to define his Asian American identity without the pressure and criticism DHH inevitably invites and cannot avoid. As Kondo observes, "For him (Hwang), face as skin color literally masks a more genuine and vulnerable self."⁷⁶ DHH admits: "my face became

my mask. And I became just another actor —running around in yellow face” (69). This is consistent with the concept of masquerade, as it applies to the subject who cannot avoid or deny subjectivity.

As Hwang tends to write in binaries, it is worth noting that Marcus’s activism is paired consistently with DHH’s more selfish moments. The press conference protesting the investigation is followed immediately by DHH pursuing work as an advisor on the set of Margaret Cho’s quickly cancelled network television show, *All American Girl* (1994). Later, the Wen Ho Lee protest is followed by DHH corresponding with the character of “Yellowgurl8.” Hwang seems to intentionally juxtapose his more noble aspirations with his least noble actions, perhaps to reflect these dual aspects of his identity in conflict with each other.

He as much as admits to Marcus’s autobiographical nature when he finally exposes him as a fictional character. When Marcus asks DHH why he created him, he responds, “I’m a writer. And, in the end, everything is always about me” (68). When I asked Hwang if Marcus was consciously autobiographical or if he agrees he can be read as an alter ego, he responded, “It was not a conscious choice, but I think yours is a fair interpretation. I was conscious of having Marcus express the zeal and sense of freedom one feels when discovering one’s ethnic identity, similar to my experience at Stanford and in my early-20s.”⁷⁷

As DHH (and by inference Hwang) makes peace with the complexities of identity, he no longer needs Marcus. Both of Hwang’s identities agree to expose themselves as fake. But the inclusion of Dong music, and Marcus’s quest in rural China, are also, perhaps, reflective of Hwang’s innate desire for something authentic.

Marcus asks DHH for a happy ending, and Hwang chooses to send him to China. As Marcus writes to DHH, “I came to China, hoping to find—something real, true?” (7). While this might provide the “happy ending” Marcus seeks, it also reinforces the overall notion that there is such a thing as “real and true.” And why China? Presumably, Marcus will experience the same racial othering in China that DHH does in the US. In *Face Value*, Randall (in white-face) comments, “Thank god I went and got a new face so I could discover my true identity” (15). If Marcus is read as DHH’s alter-ego, then perhaps it is China’s potential for anonymity that appeals to Hwang, the possibility of a place where he, too, could racially pass and escape the responsibility of his “face.”

1. David Henry Hwang, introduction to *Golden Child* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), v.

2. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

3. Hwang’s 1981 play *Family Devotions* features an Evangelical Christian Chinese American family, including an autobiographical character named Chester.

4. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

5. Hwang, introduction to *Golden Child*, vi.

6. Ibid., vii.

7. Ibid., viii.

8. Ibid.

9. Hwang, *Golden Child* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998). All subsequent citations are from this version (unless otherwise noted) and cited in-text.

10. Bonnie Lyons, "Making His Muscles Work For Himself: An Interview with David Henry Hwang," *Literary Review* 42, no. 2 (1999): 236.

11. Ibid.

12. The concept of a "Gold Child" who brings luck appears in the novella Hwang wrote as a boy entitled, *Every Third Generation*.

13. Ibid.

14. David Henry Hwang, "Revisiting a Beloved *Child*: Playwright David Henry Hwang on the Off-Broadway Journey of *Golden Child*," Broadway.com, last modified November 20, 2012, <http://www.broadway.com/buzz/165665/revisiting-a-beloved-child-playwright-david-henry-hwang-on-the-off-broadway-journey-of-golden-child/>.

15. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

16. Lyons, "Making His Muscles," 236.

17. Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 254.

18. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

19. Ibid.

20. Esther Kim Lee, *Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, 100.

21. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015. The quotations in the following three paragraphs are taken from this interview.

22. Ibid.

23. Yutivo Corporation Web Site. <http://www.yutivo.com/>.

24. Hwang, *Only Three Generations*, unpublished novella, 1968, loaned to the author by Hwang. Subsequent citations will be cited in-text.

25. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 7 – September 7, 2015, <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-glass>.

26. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

27. Ibid.

28. Elyse Sommer, "Golden Child - 1996, 1998, 2012" Curtain Up, last modified November 9, 2012, <http://www.curtainup.com/golden.html>.

29. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

30. Ibid.

31. David Henry Hwang, "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet," unpublished play script, 2000, provided to the author by Hwang. No page numbers to be cited.

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Chapter VI: Beyond Asian America

In recent years, Hwang has shifted his interest from the multicultural to the international or transnational, as reflected in his 2011 bilingual play, *Chinglish*. The play uses super-titles and farcical elements to explore the challenges inherent in cross cultural communication and translation, portraying an American businessman's attempt to win a large contract for signs in a Chinese cultural center in central China, and includes Chinese, American, and British characters.

His 2014 play *Kung Fu* explores the life of film star Bruce Lee, in particular the discrimination he suffered in Hollywood despite his popularity. While the majority of *Kung Fu* takes place in the US, it is an immigrant's story, rather than that of the Asian Americans he had focused on in the past.

Both plays feature experimentation with form. *Chinglish*'s use of Chinese language challenges conventions of monolingual dialogue. In *Kung Fu*, Asian-influenced dance and movement is the basis for what Hwang sees as a new genre, the "dansical."

Chinglish

American playwrights love salesmen, in part, surely, because salesmen are actors. The stories are told in different locales and contexts but, for generations of playwrights, the iconic American businessman is a human manifestation of capitalism, reflecting and responding to societal change and anxiety.

The debut of David Henry Hwang's 2011 play *Chinglish* marked a subtle but noteworthy shift for the playwright. His previous works consistently focused on family,

culture, personal identity and multiculturalism. While not completely abandoning these subjects, *Chinglish* shifts from a concern with the construction of identity, to assumptions about, and the communication of, identity on a cultural level. Hwang seeks to expose the nuances and contextual dimensions of language, and, more broadly, is interested in the inherent challenges involved in cross-cultural communication. The play is set in China, like *M. Butterfly*, but here his is interested in an “East meets West” in business binary. In *Chinglish*, the specific experience of the American seeking to do business in China exposes disparate cultural practices and juxtaposes values for comedic effect. As William C Boles points out in *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, “*Chinglish* was his first focused foray into the world of internationalism.”¹

Hwang was interested to see if a play of this nature, specifically concerned with the challenges of a Midwestern company, would be of interest to a middle-American audience. For that reason, he chose to have the world premiere of the play at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, in June 2011. The production was a commercial and critical success, and its run was extended. The producers moved it to Broadway, making it Hwang’s fourth Broadway play, where it opened on October 27, 2011. The critical response was not as enthusiastic as it had been in Chicago. Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* described it as, “sporadically funny,” suggesting that the play was “too solidly grounded for its own good,”² although he did praise actress Jennifer Lim’s performance. The play ran for a disappointing 109 performances, and, despite praise for Lim’s performance, did not receive any Tony nominations, although it was nominated for three Drama Desk awards, including best play, and best actress. The play was optioned for a feature film with Hwang slated to write the adaptation, and has proved popular in

regional repertory theatre productions, as well as in successful productions in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Chinglish responds to, and, to a degree, is modeled on, David Mamet's 1983 play *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Both plays seek to expose individual anxieties during specific times of economic crisis in the US, and to confront changing paradigms in the way business is done. As Patrick Healy pointed out in his review of *Chinglish* on Broadway, "Americans and Chinese are united in capitalist greed but divided by their cultural sensibilities."³

In *Chinglish*, a naive American ex-Enron executive travels to China, in a "last ditch effort" to secure a large contract that will save his almost bankrupt, third generation, family-owned company in Cleveland. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, fast-talking, hardworking, salesman chase down "leads," in an environment of increasingly disconnected management and brutal sales competition. Both plays focus on language, power, and communication, and use dialogue simultaneously to conceal and expose competing agendas and desires. While Mamet's salesmen over-talk, argue, distract, badger, bluster and boast, Hwang's struggle with literal language barriers, cultural codes, basic word meanings and nuances of translation.

The protagonist is American businessman Daniel Cavanaugh. The play opens with him speaking to the Commerce League of Ohio, sharing his experiences in China. As he did in *FOB* and *Golden Child*, Hwang chooses to both open and close, or "bookend," the story with Daniel's speech providing the context at the beginning, and the summary at the end.

The action quickly moves to China, three years earlier, where Daniel has travelled to pitch the contract for signage in a new cultural center being built in the city of Guinyang. He employs British expatriate Peter Timms to assist him. Peter calls himself a “consultant,” speaks flawless Chinese, and promises to arrange introductions to help Daniel secure the contract.

They meet with Minister of Culture Cai, and Vice Minister, Xi. Despite a series of translation challenges, as well as Daniel’s unintentionally offending of Vice minister, Cai appears amenable to the bid, and agrees to meet for dinner to continue the conversation. Instead, the minister sends Xi to the dinner meeting. She admits to understanding and speaking more English than previously indicated, and attempts to educate Daniel in the complex dynamics at play in the negotiation. She reveals that Peter is a high school teacher attempting to become a consultant, and that Minister Cai owes Peter a favor for securing a place at a British University for his son. She explains that they will not get the contract, because the Minister has already promised it to his sister-in-law, but adds that she will, in fact, get him the deal. Xi arranges another disastrous meeting with the Minister for Daniel and Peter, and later meets Daniel in his hotel bar. They begin an affair.

Minister Cai, Xi, Daniel, and Peter meet, and the Minister admits that he will not award Daniel the contract and Peter loses his temper. Xi and Daniel meet again and she learns both that Daniel’s “company” is on the verge of bankruptcy, and that he worked for the notorious company Enron.

In Act Two, Peter learns of their affair and threatens to expose them. Xi arranges a meeting for Daniel with a local judge and prosecutor. Daniel once again gives his

pitch, but Xi interrupts to reveal his connection with Enron. Instead of his past being the liability he expected, his association with the scandal results in minor celebrity status, and they suggest that the Minister of Culture's outright rejection of Daniel's proposal merits an investigation into possible corruption.

Xi and Daniel continue their affair, but when he suggests they could leave their respective spouses and be together, she abruptly ends it. Minister Cai is arrested just as Peter visits him to make amends, and both lament the changes in modern China. The play ends with the judge, who is, it turns out, Xi's husband, accepting an appointment as Mayor of Guiyang, with Xi by his side. Finally, in a speech back in Ohio, Daniel shares what he sees as the reasons for his success in business in China.

The staging of the play is realistic and features relatively traditional and mundane settings, props, and institutional spaces. Because of the constant use of supertitles, an upstage screen is prominent throughout. The text also requires the use of the screen for contextual notes, like "(Three Years Earlier. Guiyang, China)" (9),⁴ and for examples of humorous signs featuring translations from Chinese to English. The use of the supertitles serves a dual purpose. The first is simply functional, in that they translate in both directions (Chinese to English and English to Chinese). Beyond that, Hwang has said that his idea was, "to write a play where the Chinese characters would have the dignity of their own language, where the characters who would speak Mandarin do speak Mandarin."⁵

This desire to force a linguistic confrontation resulted in the title *Chinglish*, the usually derogatory slang term for English influenced by Chinese language, often

ungrammatical or nonsensical. The title denies dominance to either language, but also indicates the confusion and hybrid communication that is at the heart of the play.

Chinglish features three Asian and two Caucasian males (one American and one British), along with three Asian females. Consistent with his views on essentialist casting, Hwang does not specify that the Chinese characters should be played by Chinese actors, though they are required to speak sufficient Chinese to perform the dialogue.

The play features a series of archetypes as well as many of Hwang's signature binaries, or contrasting characters. Despite the ensemble nature of the cast, the story is deeply rooted in Daniel's experience, and his perspective is the one the audience is assigned from the beginning. He is a middle-aged, post-financial crisis, American businessman, inexperienced and anxious about doing business in China, an outsider by virtue of his lack of language skills and cultural knowledge. He is, at times, reminiscent of Hwang's character Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*.

His family business is on the verge of failure, and his marriage in crisis. His association with Enron⁶ suggests that his fragile position is the result of egregious American greed. However, Hwang goes some way to absolve Daniel of any real guilt. His ethics are, undoubtedly questionable, but his apparent motivation, to save a family business, aligns with American values, so the audience is likely to forgive his indiscretions. He is a mild-mannered, earnest, dupe of sorts, more pawn than power broker.

Peter Timms is the archetypal, or perhaps stereotypical, Sinophile expat who has attempted to "go native." His Chinese is so perfect, "he could teach Chinese to a

dog!” (19). He loves the ancient Chinese operas and laments the loss of Westerner’s privilege:

Back in the old days, a Westerner who could speak Chinese like a native—employers fought to give me jobs. And the women? I could walk down any street—they’d point and giggle—whispering how tall I was. (88)

For him, the loss of his privileged status as a Westerner is a personal affront. He arrived in China at a time when educated foreigners with a command of Chinese held a revered position in society. He now lives in the “new” China, where business acumen is replacing education and intellect as the principal currency, and finds himself struggling to evolve. He is trying to pass himself off as a consultant, but even his understanding of “Guanxi,” or “face,” proves to be outdated and he is no longer immune to the competing priorities of his best contacts. He represents the Westerner who has attempted to assimilate, but finds he cannot adjust to the changing nature of China.

Peter has proved to be the most difficult character to cast in most productions, including the premiere on Broadway. Hwang confessed that “a white guy in his twenties who speaks fluent Mandarin is actually not that hard to find nowadays, but a white guy in his forties is pretty tough,... it was the worst pool of actors I’d ever auditioned.”⁷

Minister Cai is the Chinese mirror image of Peter. Hwang highlights this duality in their final scene together. Cai is the classic stereotype of a communist party civil servant. He operates by the old rules of “Guanxi,” but is overwhelmed by the realities of the new China. His wife accuses him of being a “bad provider,” because he is reluctant to engage in nepotism. As he points out, “This, from a woman who spends more than half my monthly salary at Louis Vuitton in Shanghai” (53). Cai clearly misses the simplicity of life during the Cultural Revolution and cannot find his place in this new

Chinese order, a perspective offering a challenge to assumptions that progress is a universal, or in this case Chinese, value.

In juxtaposition to Minister Cai, Judge Geming is “the most ambitious politician in the province” (53). He represents the new China and is both impressed by, and enthused about, Daniel’s association with Enron. His query as to whether or not Lou Long Pai (of Enron)⁸ actually married a stripper serves to undercut his integrity, but simultaneously makes him more approachable, and certainly more humorous. His questions demonstrate the New China’s cultural engagement with the outside business world; they may be in Guinyang, but they have the Internet.

A series of tragic English to Chinese translators are employed for comedic effect. Three different translators interpret business-meeting dialogue, and all are inaccurate to varying degrees, lacking a true command of the nuances and idioms of the English language. Meaning, it turns out, no more translates easily than does words.

Xi emerges as the most complex character in the play. She initially seems to be an uptight public servant, defensive in the face of Daniel’s examples of poor translations. Subsequently, though, she exhibits a depth of intelligence and passion. Her inability to talk to Daniel in either English or Chinese affords her a freedom of expression she clearly craves, and there is a sense that she is liberated by their relationship and affair. Ultimately, she proves to be the most clever and manipulative of the characters, orchestrating the outcome of the business deal to the advantage of her family.

Xi feels slightly less of a stock character than some of the others, and she is certainly the least predictable. Her very presence in the “deal” challenges the

masculinized world of the salesman. She represents the strong Chinese woman emerging from a communist system, raised with gender equality, but with a sense of humor and vulnerability that transcends stereotype. Hwang seems to position her somewhere between stereotypical “butterfly” and “dragon lady.”

As is the case with Gallimard, Hwang suggests that his Western characters’ motivations are clearer, at least to a Western audience, perhaps thereby less manipulative than their Chinese paramours, reinforcing the stereotype of the inscrutable Asian. Xi, like Song in *M. Butterfly*, proves to be duplicitous and untrustworthy. The intersectionality of gender and culture continues to be a notable space of anxiety for Hwang.

Chinglish’s action is set in a series of public and private spaces. Two early scenes take place in restaurants and are particularly reminiscent of Mamet’s *Glengarry Glenn Ross*. When asked what elements of *Chinglish* are most inspired by *Glengarry*, Hwang responded that he “started out being influenced by Mamet’s pace and style, which is reflected in *Chinglish*’s first scene, which like *Glengarry*, is also a two-hander set in a Chinese restaurant.”⁹

In contrast to Mamet’s Chinese restaurant, or the one he featured in *FOB*, Hwang’s restaurant is *in* China. While *Glengarry*’s use of a specifically Chinese restaurant is not particularly significant, the juxtaposition of the two plays is instructive. In *Glengarry*, the “real” business takes place in the restaurant. In *Chinglish*, Daniel develops his closest local relationships and is indoctrinated into the complexities of Chinese culture, in the restaurant. Both *Glengarry* and *Chinglish* use their respective Chinese restaurants as neutral, public, yet oddly more intimate spaces, to locate the

negotiations, manipulations, and “off the record” conversations. The restaurants serve as a heterotopia of sorts, or a liminal space.

Chinglish has two acts with thirteen scenes. It opens with the principal character, American businessman Daniel Cavanaugh, directly addressing the audience. As he had done in other plays, most notably *M. Butterfly*, Hwang assigns the audience a specific identity, in this case as members of the Commerce League of Ohio. We take on the identity of business people, perhaps looking to venture into China. The story is presented in retrospect. As an invited speaker, it is implied that Daniel has achieved some level of success. Given his admitted initial ignorance—he “knew nothing more about China than the difference between Moo Shu Pork and General TSO’s Chicken” (8)—the focus and interest in *Chinglish* is not on *if* he succeeded, but *how*.

Daniel’s opening remarks serve multiple purposes. His images and examples draw attention to Hwang’s desire to focus on language, as the “power point” presentation format provides a visual transition to the later use of the supertitles. Hwang literally tells the audience, The Commerce League of Ohio, what to focus on: “if you take nothing else from our talk today remember this. Write it down. When doing business in China, always bring your own translator” (8). This, it seems, is to be Daniel’s story.

Hwang uses public and private spaces throughout *Chinglish* to explore the dichotomies between the public and the personal. As the relationship between Daniel and Xi evolves, they move to increasingly more intimate spaces. Their first private meeting is in the restaurant, the second, in Daniel’s hotel bar, while the rest of their

scenes take place in his hotel room. As their conversations move to increasingly private locations, so their relationship becomes more intimate, and they begin their affair.

The very presence of a female in the business dynamic undermines traditional power structures, while the sexual liaison adds a level of complexity. Sex and business become inseparable, as lines between the personal and the professional are crossed and the gender dynamic changes. As Hwang has said “in today’s China, unlike that of *M. Butterfly*, a Western man involved with an Asian woman might well end up as the submissive partner.”¹⁰

Hwang chooses to stage Peter’s final meeting with Minister Cai, in which he seeks forgiveness for insulting him, in Cai’s home, another private space. It is here that both men reveal their fears, vulnerabilities, and nostalgia for the Chinese culture they see rapidly changing. Cai embraces his Chinese identity. He puts on his military uniform and the two reminisce and sing Chinese arias, only to be interrupted by police sirens and a pounding on the door, their personal space violently invaded. Hwang had originally intended to locate the scene in a jail or prison cell, but discovered that no Westerner would be able to visit such a space. As he wanted a private location for the interaction, he settled on Cai’s apartment.¹¹

All plays, by definition, are written to be performed, but some make performance and, indeed, language, central subjects. *Chinglish* is uniquely reliant on performance to demonstrate the problematics of cross-cultural communication. The interplay between Chinese and English creates a dissonance, an ongoing illustration of what can happen when language fails to carry meaning. Neither language is dominant, although only one quarter of the dialogue is in Mandarin, but the script requires several actors to be

capable of delivering lines in both languages, while the supertitles demonstrate the limitations of literal translation, words without context proven misleading and even disastrous.

Hwang deploys supertitles to underscore the farcical elements of the play, with the mistranslations serving as a comedic device. As he has said,

If you look at traditional comedy, particularly out of the farce tradition, it comes from the idea that the audience knows more than the characters do. So we know that the mistress is hiding in the closet, but the characters don't all know that. Then our pleasure derives from the fact that we're in on something that the characters aren't. In some sense, the formal device of the surtitles serves the same function in this play, for the audience to be more omniscient than the characters.¹²

Throughout the relevant scenes, only the audience is aware of the translations and the level or their inaccuracy.

Hwang credits his experience writing for opera for his decision to experiment with supertitles. His work as a librettist led to his interest in the visual impact of words displayed during performance. *Chinglish* was the first bilingual play to appear on Broadway. Reviews suggest that the technique has been well received in all productions to date, and that the supertitles do, in fact, provide much of the humor.

For example, in the initial meeting with the Minister of Culture for Guinyang, Daniel's crucial "sales pitch" is translated by the first of a series of truly disastrous translators. "We're a small family firm" becomes "his company is tiny and insignificant" (12), and "here is why we are worth the money" translates to "He will explain why he spends money so recklessly" (20). His product is, in fact, translated signs, and the danger of poor translations, including examples from venues in China, is at the heart of his pitch. The constant interruptions, and mistranslations keep Daniel's initial pitch from

gaining any real verbal momentum, and his inability to effectively communicate the value of accurate translation becomes ironic.

Cross-cultural humor, indeed, both intentional and unintentional, is key to the relationship between Xi and Daniel. When Peter asks what has happened to the disastrous first translator Xi responds, “We sent her away to re-education camp” (37). As “re-education camp” refers to the oppression of dissidents during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the remark is offered as black humor. By contrast, other statements are inadvertent mistakes.

If *Glengarry* focuses on the use of language to persuade and manipulate, perhaps *Chinglish* is best understood as a study of the impotence of persuasion in the absence of a common language, lexicon, and, perhaps most importantly, culture. American salesmen, from Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), to Henry Hill in the musical *The Music Man* (1957), and the *Glengarry* sales force, live and die by their words. Hwang, conversely, denies his salesman the most basic tool Mamet’s characters, and generations of salesmen on stage wield, explaining that “just as the English supertitles allow Western audiences to understand what would otherwise remain mysterious, I wanted the story to illuminate differences between Chinese and American cultural assumptions.”¹³

For theatregoers used to hearing dialogue exclusively in English, the constant need to read the translations can be slightly disruptive, the supertitles contributing to a disruption of the fourth wall as the audience is required to engage with both the screen and the action simultaneously, sharing the characters’ frustration and desire to comprehend what is happening (lines in bold appear as supertitles):

XI: You believing, Cai. Your deal has friendly. No. Cai disassemble.

DANIEL: "Disassemble"?

XI: Qí mǎ yīng yǔ tīng dé dōngba!

At least keep up with the English!

DANIEL: Disassembling. He's lying?

XI: Yes! Lie! But. Cannot tell to the Teacher.

DANIEL: Who's the Teacher?

XI: Āi yā, zhēn yào mìng!

Oh for crying out loud!

English, the Teacher! Teacher Peter!

DANIEL: Peter, my consultant?

XI: Teacher Peter!

DANIEL: He used to teach, I think. But not he is. A consultant.

XI: Consultant, consultant. Everyone name. But nothing doing.

DANIEL: He's not a consultant?

XI: Nothing. Now, what explanation, you cannot say.

DANIEL: OK...

XI: "Use at your own risk."

(Xi leans in, whispers to Daniel) English-writing

Firm. Currently enter. Through the back door. Cai wife sister. Open door. So will not close

(pause)

Now you know.

DANIEL: Could you repeat that?

XI: "Repeat"?

Jiù píng gāng cái zhè xiē huànm dōu gòu wō qiāng bì de le!

For what I just told you, I could be shot!

Nī hái yào wō zài shuō yī biàn?

You want me to say that again?

Jiù pà àn yī yǒu rén méi tīng qīng shì ba?

In case anyone else in the room missed it?

DANIEL: I understand. That what you're telling me is huge—use at your own risk.

XI: Yes! Use at your own risk

DANIEL: But I—<have no idea—>

XI: OK, OK...

(leans in again)

English-writing firm...

DANIEL: The company making English signs...

XI: In present...

DANIEL: Um, presently?

XI: Enter through the back door. Of Minister wife sister.

(Silence)

Wō kuài bèi nī qì fēng le.

I'm going to shoot myself. (44)

Here is language being played against itself. Meaning is an approximation, always open to misunderstanding. If it can be generative of humor, it can equally be the source of anxiety. Communication always offers this potential. What Hwang does is to stage a conversation in which language is not fully transitive. There are some things, it seems, that resist language, some secrets best not fully decoded.

When Daniel and Xi begin an affair, we see two people trying to communicate across a linguistic barrier, suddenly led to the plasticity of language, its specificities and evasions. In an early conversation, he finally comprehends her treasonous revelations, including a humorous reference to using the minister's wife's back door, the two sharing a celebratory "high five." Daniel admits that the conversation "was exhausting" to which Xi responds, "I am sleeping with you," rather than the intended "I am tiring of you." The limitations are both liberating and frustrating. Xi admits, "This is exactly what I need right now...to forget everything" (103), but only in Chinese. We, in turn, are made voyeurs to their most intimate dialogue, hearing confessions incomprehensible to the other.

Hwang enhances the farcical elements of the characters' machinations, satirizing the absurdities of the postmodern global business landscape. He shifts his focus to the new frontier: China. He suggests that business ethics in China are questionable, or at the very least relative, but there is a critical difference in the tone. When reflecting on Mamet's influence, Hwang suggests *Chinglish* "owes a debt to his plotting and sense of business as power and manipulation,"¹⁴ but he uses satire to make his point. These are not state or nuclear secrets being mistranslated, they are signs for toilets and roads.

Hwang maps the anxieties and moral questions the Chinese context creates, but he sees the humor and humanity as well. Daniel is told at his first meeting with his

British consultant that while China has no justice system, it does have “predictable outcomes” (9). Hwang has written that the “recession-battered Westerner seeking a foothold in booming China must assimilate to its customs and ways of doing business.”¹⁵ As the story evolves, the complex dynamics influencing the contract are slowly revealed, including undisclosed favors owed, rampant nepotism, and “Quingi,” the Chinese concept of face.

As was the case in *Yellow Face*, an understanding of, and appreciation of, quingi becomes critical to Daniel's success in China. It will take most of the story for the facets of quingi at play to be revealed, or for Daniel to comprehend them, but Hwang provides a clue to the machinations that will unfold by providing the audience with some insight into the rules during the initial meeting between Daniel and Peter.

When Xi attempts to call the Ohio Signage company phone number, Daniel's cell phone rings and it is disclosed that Daniel's business is little more than a website and cell phone. Clearly, no one navigates the deal without some level of misrepresentation, evasion, or dishonesty.

The competing agendas are revealed incrementally as characters betray and mislead each other. Hwang seems to embrace the possible validity of the Chinese system; corrupt, amoral, and disorganized on the surface, but with its own code of honor and rules. He suggests that ethics and morality may be culturally relative, as demonstrated both in business dealings and interpersonal relationships. Daniel's history as an Enron executive makes him a pariah in the US, but a celebrity in China. Xi ends their relationship when she fears it will damage her unhappy marriage, and admits she

began the affair to help her husband advance in politics. Hwang's characters are flawed but sympathetic.

Chinglish is set in the city of Guíyáng, the capital of the Guizhou province of Southwest China. The city has a population of approximately 4.3 million. When I asked why he chose Guíyáng, Hwang responded:

I chose Guiyang because it's sort of a third-tier Chinese city, in the country's poorest province. My Chinese advisors Joanna Lee and Ken Smith sometimes describe it as the West Virginia of China. Yet, even there, change was coming rapidly, particularly because the previous leader, Hu Jintao, had been the provincial party secretary there before ascending to national power. In the major cities nowadays, like Shanghai and Beijing, it's easy to find good translators, and Chinglish is less common. But Guiyang represents a city still in the throes of change.¹⁶

The city is real, and the context contemporary. The specific project of the “world class arts center,” however, is fictional, though the development of cultural and arts facilities, as manifestations of Chinese national and regional prosperity, is a real trend.

Hwang chooses to base the Cavanaugh family business in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland's economy has suffered in the wake of global shifts in manufacturing and production. He chose it because he “wanted a struggling industrial Midwestern city.”¹⁷ For American audiences, the Cleveland setting suggests the company's impending failure. Cleveland's relative lack of an international reputation becomes the basis of humor. It is described in the initial meeting, through translation, as “a small farming village”... not a major city, but “a significant manufacturing center....or it was, back when the US still manufactured things” (14). Both Guiyang and Cleveland are in geographical regions in the center of their respective countries, and both cities grew out of rural economies to become industrialized.

The Pudong Grand Theatre named in the play is actually the Oriental Arts Center in Shanghai, the name being changed “to save the actual theatre embarrassment.”¹⁸ This is where Hwang encountered the now infamous “deformed man’s toilet” sign during its Grand Opening.

In his initial meeting with Daniel, Minister Cai proclaims his desire to have Guiyang “showcase the traditional Chinese arts” (26). He specifically mentions having the local Beijing Opera troupe perform *Presenting Pearl on Hongqiao Bridge*. This opera, also sometimes called *Presenting A Pearl On the Rainbow Bridge*, is a well-known, older, opera. It originates in a fairy tale. In the story, a fairy maiden admires a young scholar for his talents. One day they unexpectedly meet on the Rainbow Bridge, and fall in love at first sight. She sends him a pearl symbolizing their eternal love. This is against the rules of Heaven, so heavenly soldiers are sent to capture her, but she leads the water goblins into battle, is victorious, and marries the scholar. “Teacher” Peter’s love of the opera is particularly ironic, as the hero is a scholar. Indeed, it satisfies both his academic and Orientalist fantasies simultaneously.

The opera represents the classical Chinese art and culture that Minister Cai wants to preserve, and for which Peter is nostalgic. Hwang used it because, “We wanted something that would feel precious and twee to Western sensibilities. We worked it out in rehearsal, and it’s possible that Larry Zhang, the actor playing Minister Cai, came up with the actual opera.”¹⁹ In this scene, Hwang uses his young translators to demonstrate the shifts in Chinese culture. Qian translates Cai’s desire to “showcase the traditional Chinese arts” as “The minister enjoys the art which is old and unpopular” (26), and needs Cai to repeat the name of the opera because she has never heard of it.

In response to Daniel citing examples of awkward Chinese to English translations, Xi brings up an infamous incident of mistranslation. This relates to an actual 2008 publication by a prestigious German scientific institution, the Max Planck Institute, featuring text from a handbill for a Macau strip club on the cover of its periodical. The editors had meant to use an image of a Chinese poem, but ended up running text that translated as “Hot housewives in action!” and “We can also supply you the elixir of Viagra.”²⁰ As Xi implies, embarrassing mistranslations happen in both directions.

Daniel has been an executive in, and sold securities for, the now notorious Enron, an energy, commodities, and services company based in Houston, Texas, revealed to have engaged in high risk and illegal accounting practices, ultimately resulting in the largest filing of bankruptcy in US history. Enron, perhaps more than any other company in the US, or for that matter abroad, symbolizes greed and corruption.

During the meeting with Judge Geming and Prosecutor Li which follows, Daniel is asked about his relationships with a series of now infamous Enron executives, including Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, and Andrew Fastow. They are thrilled when he suggests of Fastow, that he was “Maybe the smartest guy I ever met. Very guarded. He could’ve been Chinese” (96), taking pride in the involvement of Bai Lou Long, a native of Nanjing, in the scandal. One culture’s villain is, it seems, another’s hero.

One criticism of *Chinglish*, most often expressed by Chinese nationals, was that while an affair between an American businessman and the wife of a Communist Party official made for a good plot, it could never actually happen. Yet not long after the play’s run on Broadway, a Chinese scandal with eerie similarities erupted. The governor of

Liaoning province, Bo Xilai, was found guilty of corruption and imprisoned in the wake of the murder of a British businessman Neil Heywood, who, it has been suggested, had conducted an affair with Bo's wife, Gu Kailai.²¹

In an essay for *Newsweek* magazine, appropriately titled "Stranger Than Fiction," Hwang recounted the story, suggesting that "the Bo story has taken similarities between art and life to a whole new level."²² The nature of the relationship between Heywood and Bo's wife have never been made public, but it was revealed that Heywood did assist Bo's son in securing a place in England's prestigious Harrow School, oddly mirroring Hwang's plot line of "teacher Peter" having helped Minister Cai's son get into a British university. Hwang's premise, it appears, is not so unlikely as it might have seemed.

The costumes are contemporary and somewhat mundane. There is, however, one significant example of cultural performance through costuming. As Minister Cai and Peter meet for the final time and await Cai's arrest, Hwang specifically directs that Cai put on his uniform from the People's Liberation Army. He sings the aria from the previously referenced "*Presenting Pearl...*" and "performs" his former role and identity from the Communist era. Hwang is particularly attuned to the power of clothing in performing identity, and Cai's uniform is the play's most palpable suggestion that, while the "New China" is moving quickly forward, the past is an ever-present specter and influence.

There is also a sense that Hwang is staging Chinese cultural performance with a nuanced appreciation for contemporary China. These are not Chinese stereotypes or caricatures, but worthy adversaries in the game of business and capitalism. Hwang was

interested in staging not only the New China, but also the changing nature of the West's perception of, and attitude toward, China. In an interview before the opening of the inaugural production of *Chinglish* at the Goodman, he commented, "over the course of just my little lifetime, the image of China in this country has gone 180 degrees. I remember when Chinese people were sort of seen as poor, uneducated menial laborers: cooks, waiters, laundrymen. And now Chinese are seen as having too much money, too much power and raise the curve in your math class."²³

The dynamic between modern American and Chinese cultures might be expected to be obvious territory for Hwang, when, in fact, it is actually complicated and new, Hwang being Chinese-American, rather than Chinese. This distinction is key in approaching *Chinglish*. While his personal experience and upbringing have clear influences from his Chinese immigrant parents, his first-hand knowledge of Chinese cultural dynamics, particularly in contemporary China, was and is, limited. His personal experience of China came later in life. His first trip was at the age of 36, in 1993, on a family "heritage" trip. In recent years, however, he has travelled to China frequently, and learned something of its business practices.

He has also pointed out that for most of his life, America was either at war or economically at odds with an Asian country or countries. "I was born," he explained, "right after Korea, then there was the Cold War, fear of China, then there was Vietnam. We were always at war with some East Asian nation. Then in the eighties, it's hard to believe now, we were all worried about Japan taking over the world."²⁴ His introduction to Asia was ultimately the result of his work rather than his family.

As he explains, in the mid-2000s the Chinese began to develop an interest in Broadway productions and musicals. He was, as he puts it, “the only even-nominally Chinese person who has ever written a Broadway show,”²⁵ so he accepted some offers to act as a consultant himself. He credits this experience, being there in a business capacity, as shaping his impressions of contemporary China. “Like any monolingual American,” he confesses, “I needed an interpreter for my Chinese meetings.”²⁶

He began to note and track issues having to do with translation and communication. He notes one experience mentioned earlier, in particular, as being influential:

I visited a new cultural center in Shanghai in 2005 that was pretty much perfect, gorgeous Brazilian wood, Italian marble, state-of-the-art Japanese sound systems, except for the really badly translated Chinglish signs: a handicapped restroom that said “Deformed Man’s Toilet,” that kind of thing. And I began thinking of using the signs as a jumping-off point to write a play that would deal with doing business in China but would also tackle the issue of language, which I’d never seen any play or movie attempt to do.²⁷

Hwang has written that “*Chinglish* uses power struggles, plot twists and translated supertitles to make transparent what is normally hidden to outsiders. In the real China, though truth may be as strange as fiction, it is almost always less transparent.” *Chinglish* was his “attempt to begin exploring how (he) feels about the rise of China, and US-China relations.”²⁸ Unlike *M. Butterfly*, in which the Western man is unable to accept the reality of China, *Chinglish* provides a new man for the new millennium. While Daniel begins the play every bit as ignorant as Gallimard, he is willing to learn and change to the extent that he succeeds, at least from a business perspective.

The play can be read as a neoliberal cautionary tale of the dangers of trust across cultures, in my opinion it is best seen as a celebration of mutually beneficial cross-cultural collaboration in the new global economy.

Kung Fu

In 2013-2014, the Off-Broadway Signature Theatre company in New York City chose to focus its season on Hwang's work. Signature has a stated mission to "make a commitment to a playwright's body of work,"²⁹ and was the first New York City-based regional theatre to be recognized with a Tony Award in 2014. Their artist-in-residence model, Residency One, supports an in-depth exploration of a single playwright's work. Given his large body of work, Hwang consulted closely with artistic director Eric Schaeffer to consider which of his plays to stage. They chose *The Dance and the Railroad*, as its elaborate dance and fight choreography has resulted in fewer productions, and *Golden Child* because Hwang wanted to make a few changes to the script and offer it as a celebration of his heritage.³⁰ He determined this would also be the right venue to premiere a project he had been working on for a long time, the play ultimately titled *Kung Fu*.

Kung Fu is the biographical story of the early life of martial arts pioneer and actor Bruce Lee. Lee came to fame in the early 1970's with a series of hit action movies set in Hong Kong, which he helped develop and in which he and starred, featuring Kung Fu style fighting and action sequences, including *Fist of Fury* (1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Tragically, he died at the age of 32 from a reaction to painkillers, and his early death was considered a great loss to the emerging Asian filmmaking industry. Lee is

somewhat of a hero of Hwang's, although he was not introduced to his films until his college years. I asked him if he remembered the first Bruce Lee film he had seen, and why it made an impression. He replied;

The first one I saw was *Enter the Dragon*, but not until college. Not being good at sports, I had no interest in Bruce Lee as a high school student, until I finally saw this movie and couldn't help but find myself entranced by his artistry, grace, and a vision of Asian masculinity I'd never seen before.³¹

Lee is referred to in many of Hwang's previous works, including *Bondage* and *Yellow Face*. His exclusion from Hollywood and leading roles appears to resonate with Hwang, as does his fame as a masculine, martial arts icon challenging feminized perceptions of the Asian male. Hwang has explained that:

I first started wanting to write a show about Bruce Lee in the early nineties. Even then it was starting to become clear that the power balance between China and the West was shifting....Bruce Lee became the first pop cultural manifestation of a new China. So that was my original motivation to get into Bruce Lee.³²

Hwang got to know Bruce's widow, Linda Lee, and her daughter Sharon. Many of the play's scenes are based on actual events and conversations, as told through their recollections. Hwang initially envisioned the work as a musical. It was announced in 2008 as *Bruce Lee: Journey to the West*, with songs by David Yazbek and direction by Bartlett Sher, but that version never got beyond a 2009 reading starring B.D. Wong. Hwang struggled with the notion of Lee singing, both from a character and accent perspective. He settled on a form he has termed a "dansical," or a play featuring elaborate dance and, in this case, stage fighting sequences set to music but not featuring singing.³³

The show premiered on February 24th, 2014. Cole Horibe, an Olympic taekwondo medalist and finalist on the popular US TV contest *So You Think You Can*

Dance, played the role of Lee. The production was directed by Hwang's long-time collaborator Leigh Silverman, and choreographed by Sonya Tayeh. The reviews were mixed. Many critics lauded the choreography, dance, and fight sequences, with one critic remarking, "choreographer Sonya Tayeh has invented some astonishing moves for a (mostly) male ensemble of dazzling dancer-athletes. So long as Horibe and the guys are airborne, they have our rapt attention."³⁴ Most felt, however, that the story and narration were over-shadowed by the dancing, and that Hwang struggled to coalesce the story, characters, and choreography in a way that was coherent or successful. Critic Jesse Green went so far as to suggest, "Its many crises feel artificially constructed, even if they are biographically accurate, and it never achieves a recognizably human, in-the-moment texture."³⁵ For his part, Hwang has told me that he is "still re-writing."³⁶

The story centers on Lee's life before to his film fame. It is explained, through flashbacks, that he was sent to the US because he injured the son of a "crime boss" during a street fight in his native Kowloon. He transitions from Chinese restaurant busboy to respected instructor with his own studio. His philosophy of "the art of fighting without fighting"³⁷ was established, both a metaphor for life and a mantra in Kung Fu.

Bruce and his wife Linda eventually move to Los Angeles, where he continues to teach. William Dozier, producer of the TV show *Batman*, approaches him and convinces him to accept the role of Kato, the chauffeur, on the TV program *The Green Hornet*. TV executives are reluctant to hire an "Oriental," but ultimately, he is hired with the codicil that he will wear a mask for most of his screen time.

While *The Green Hornet* is not as big a hit as was hoped, Kato proves to be the most popular character in the show. Bruce then pitches his idea for a TV show to

Dozier. It is to be called *The Warrior*, featuring a Chinese leading man, a mysterious Kung Fu fighter.

He turns down other roles depicting Chinese servants or similar caricatures. Meanwhile his Kung Fu studio thrives, and has a roster of famous students, including actor James Coburn. Lee suggests an idea for a film in which he would star with Coburn, which, surprisingly, is “green lit” with the requirement that they shoot it in India.

Coburn and Bruce travel to India to scout locations, but the trip is a disaster. Shortly after, he damages his sacral nerve and is debilitated. He is forced to stop training and teaching, and told he will never be able to practice Kung Fu again. As he begins to recover, he is given the news that while *The Warrior* has been green lit, the studio has decided to hire a Caucasian actor named David Carradine to play the lead, and they have changed the title to *Kung Fu*.

The final scene of the play takes place in Hong Kong, with his family at his father’s grave. Bruce informs them that he has been contacted by a local film producer, *The Green Hornet* having become a huge hit in Hong Kong, where it is called *The Kato Show*.

They decide to stay in Hong Kong, and he suggests that by combining what he learned from his father with what he has learned in Hollywood, he can change how Hong Kong movies are made. The play ends in a choreographed dance sequence, anticipating the moves that will make him famous.

The set is simple and flexible, the only suggestion being that it should “feel like a martial arts studio” (1).³⁸ The rest of the locations are to be suggested by set pieces including chairs and tables, props, and lighting.

Bruce, Hoi-Chuen, and Linda's characters are all played by actors who exclusively play these roles, while a boy-actor plays both Jun Fan (Bruce as a boy) and Brandon Lee. An ensemble cast shares the rest of the roles.

As he did in *Yellow Face*, Hwang encourages a degree of color and gender-blind casting with respect to the ensemble players. The role of actor James Coburn was played by a black actor in the Signature production, clearly confusing several critics, and indeed, given the text's subject matter, casting choices could clearly risk distraction.

The title refers to the specific type of martial arts Lee developed, and was famous for, called "Gung Fu," but also represents a reappropriation of the title of the TV series. Given that Lee's stolen TV show concept was ultimately entitled *Kung Fu*, Hwang's use of it serves simultaneously to reclaim it, and to establish it as Lee's story.

Hwang focuses primarily on a few key themes in *Kung Fu*. One is the experience of Asian immigrants looking to assimilate into American culture. In Lee's case, this includes the complication of his desire to be accepted in the notoriously white, conservative, and race-conscious world of Hollywood. His story underscores the discrimination and marginalization rampant in the television and film industries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At one point, he angrily tells producer Dozier, "every time I see—the bowing, scraping Chinaman—with the long pigtail—I want to smash the TV" (42). That the part of a Kung Fu master and monk would be played by a Caucasian seems evidence, if that were needed, of the problems facing Asian actors.

Hwang implies that Lee's experience reflects the broader experience of Asian immigrants. In the opening scene, he is told by a Japanese American college student, "Over here, Chinese guys wait tables and do laundry. Better get used to it" (6). His

reception echoes that of Steve in Hwang's first play, *FOB*. In a later scene, James Coburn remarks, clearly Hollywood "doesn't know what to do with him" (64).

Lee's situation is complicated by his Hong Kong origins. He spoke English fluently from the time he arrived, but with an accent, and Hwang reflects this in the script. Lee was born in San Francisco in 1940 while his father was on tour in the US. He had American citizenship, but was not raised in the US. Is he Chinese or Chinese American? It was a distinction that seemed to matter to the Asian American community, who, in the late 1960s, disassociated themselves from new immigrants. Hwang stages this tension in *FOB*, and feels it is still a dynamic in the Asian American community today.

Lee's eventual popularity in Hollywood became something of a double edged sword, in that his success may have served to reinforce stereotypes of a different sort, even as he sought to change perceptions. His fame for Kung Fu training and martial arts established a different set of Orientalist associations, without disrupting the assumptions and stereotypes they rely on. His accent reinforced perceptions about Asians' linguistic limitations and tendencies, so that even as he became an Asian American icon, his fame was not without its own ambiguity.³⁹

Hwang is clearly interested in the father/son relationships in Lee's life, and their influence on him. Hoi-Chuen appears throughout the play, sometimes to assist with staging moments from Lee's childhood and history, but most often to vocalize Lee's greatest fears and insecurities, pointing out his weaknesses and shortcomings. His father was a famous character actor in Cantonese opera and film, often appearing as a clown, and Lee had been a well-known child actor.

His father's subservience to British institutions and willingness literally to "play the clown" in his work and life is a source of shame for the young and angry Lee. Hoi-Chuen later appears as he is about to send Lee to America with \$15 dollars, commanding "make something of yourself! Then come back—for my funeral" (29). In fact, Lee will actually never see him in person again, and does, in fact, only return to Hong Kong for his funeral.

Later, after Lee has been injured and is feeling increasingly emasculated, Hoi-Chuen is depicted in a flashback smoking an opium pipe, while the young Jun Fan (Bruce) attempts to take it away. He wants to take Gung Fu lessons to learn to defend himself against bullies. When his father refuses, Jun Fan breaks the pipe and insists that, "you love your pipe more than you love me" (79). The scene transitions to Lee on the floor at his home in Hollywood, unable to move, as his son Brandon asks to train with him, and plies him with endless questions. Hwang suggests that Lee wants a different relationship with his son.

In their final meeting, back at his father's gravesite in Hong Kong, Hoi-Chuen, appearing as a ghost or spirit, tells the still stubborn Lee, "that's always been your problem. You think you can do the impossible. Instead of facing the facts as they are" (94). Lee responds, "You always submit. Never even try. Why? Because you are so afraid" (95). The two begin to spar, but Lee breaks off, suggesting they learn from each other instead of fighting. His reconciliation with his father marks a moment of catharsis, as in effect he also reconciles himself with the things he can't fight or control.

Hwang ends the play at the point in Lee's life when his fame and best-known work is just beginning. His story is, perhaps, best viewed as one of the first examples of

an intercultural, or transnational, film success. He suggests, “if I take some stuff I learned from my father—add to what I now know from Hollywood...” As Linda remarks, “Take whatever’s useful” (98). It is what Bruce Lee did, and it is, in fact, what Hwang does.

Lee’s wife, Linda Lee Caldwell, plays a central role and was a primary source for Hwang. As depicted in the play, she first saw Lee in a Kung Fu demonstration as a high school student at Garfield High School in Seattle. She studied with him later while at the University of Washington pursuing a teaching degree. They later married when she became pregnant with their first child.

His mother, Grace Ho, appears as a character, although she is portrayed as less of a force in his life than his father. She was of Eurasian descent, and came from one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Hong Kong.

In the opening scene, Lee interrupts a dance student who references groundbreaking dancer and choreographer Martha Graham as her idol. Graham was an iconic artist who revolutionized dance, and her techniques formed the basis for what is now established as Modern dance. Her influence in her genre is, perhaps, an apt comparison to what Lee will go on to do for martial arts. In this scene, Lee also references cha cha dancing, and leads the female student in several steps. He was, in fact, a competitive cha cha dance champion in Hong Kong.

He studied philosophy at the University of Washington and was conversant with various schools of philosophy. Hwang integrates references to and quotations from some of his favorites, including the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, Confucius, Plato, and the poet Rumi.

The television program *The Green Hornet*, which did co-star Bruce Lee as Kato, ran for one season in 1966 and 1967. *Kung Fu* aired from 1972 to 1975 starring David Carradine. The character William Dozier was a television producer and is most famous for producing and providing the voice over-for the highly popular 1960s *Batman* program starring Adam West.

American film actor James Coburn was, in fact, a pupil and friend of Lee. He was famous for his laconic smile and tough demeanor, and came to prominence in films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Great Escape* (1963). Lee was popular with and befriended by several high profile young Hollywood stars, including Coburn and Steve McQueen, both of whom served as pall-bearers at his funeral. The trip to India portrayed did, in fact, happen, and was, indeed, by all accounts, disastrous.⁴⁰

Bruce's plotline regarding the concept for *The Warrior*, apparently stolen and rewritten as the TV program *Kung Fu*, was also based on fact. Warner Brothers Studio never credited or compensated Lee in any way, and denied that *Kung Fu* was related to, or inspired by, the show he had pitched. Ultimately, sufficient evidence came to light, and the studio was forced to confirm that discussions had, indeed, been held with Lee. Those involved admitted that he was passed over because of his ethnicity and accent. This event, presented by Hwang as seminal, is an accurate reflection of the disillusionment he felt over the incident.

Esther Kim Lee suggests that the value of the play's innovation does not necessarily lie in its story, but rather in its form. *Kung Fu* features a hybrid style of Asian and Kung Fu-influenced dance that is, arguably, a new style in itself. This is not new territory for Hwang, who had incorporated Chinese dance and opera movement in

works as early as the 1980's, most notably in *FOB* and *The Dance and the Railroad*, but Lee observes that, "choreographing Bruce Lee's story allowed Hwang to showcase the most polished version of the Chinese American form of theatre he began to experiment with thirty-five years ago" (127). The play features extended Kung Fu-used dance sequences and, like *The Dance and the Railroad*, is somewhat difficult to access as a text. Nevertheless, these sequences are clearly critical to the celebration of and performance of this uniquely Asian form of athleticism.

Most of the costumes and performance element of *Kung Fu* are realistic. Several reviews did, however, remark on a sequence that featured a chorus of male dancers in "Kato-inspired" costumes, a classic example of an orientalist amalgamation, with faux Asian elements and the ubiquitous mask.

Lee's struggles and experiences, particularly in the entertainment world where Asians were, and still are, so grossly underrepresented mirror Hwang's and clearly resonated. Both share the burden of being an Asian icon, albeit in very different ways. Hwang admires the masculinity Bruce Lee exuded, challenging Asian stereotypes. Both married Caucasian women and fathered bi-racial children.

Bruce Lee's life is, in fact, a story of hybrid identity and contradiction. He struggled to find his place in either America or Hong Kong. He was a cha cha dance champion who brought a dance sensibility to Kung Fu street fighting. He drew from different philosophies and fighting styles to create something new. The style he developed would revolutionize action films, and establish Asian films as a viable global influence and source of revenue

Kung Fu further reflects Hwang's shift in focus from multiculturalism to internationalism because Lee never chose to assimilate into the US. Instead, his was an alternative to the traditional American immigrant story. This is a play which reflects Hwang's increased interest in the growing diaspora of artistic production and the cultural influences between Asia and Asian America. Lee was not a success in the traditional sense of the "American Dream." His dreams were fulfilled by bringing his American experiences back to Hong Kong. In the final lines of the play, Linda asks "Who needs Hollywood? Who needs America?," to which Lee responds "it's time to come home" (98). In this case, home is Hong Kong.

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 17. Ibid.
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 20. See Clifford Coonan, "Chinese Classical Poem Was Brothel Ad," *The Independent*, last modified December 9, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/chinese-classical-poem-was-brothel-ad-1058031.html>.
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 23. Polkow, "Chinglish Lessons."
 24. Ibid.
 25. Wetmore, "A Conversation with David Henry Hwang," 11.
 26. Hwang, "Stranger Than Fiction," *Newsweek*.

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27. Wetmore, "A Conversation with David Henry Hwang," 12.
28. Polkow, "Chinglish Lessons."
29. "About Us," Signature Theatre, <http://www.sigtheatre.org/about/>, accessed August 10, 2016.
30. Hwang, email to the author August 5, 2016.
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32. Wetmore, "A Conversation with David Henry Hwang," 16.
33. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
34. Marilyn Stasio, "Off Broadway Review: Bruce Lee Bio-drama *Kung Fu*," *Variety*, last modified February 24, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/legit/reviews/off-broadway-review-bruce-lee-bio-drama-kung-fu-1201116963/>.
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36. Hwang, email to author August 5, 2016.
37. David Henry Hwang, *Kung Fu*, unpublished play script, Signature Theater, 2014.
38. David Henry Hwang, "Kung Fu," unpublished play script, Signature Theatre, opening night script, February 24, 2014. Provided to the author by Hwang. All subsequent citations taken from this script.
39. For more information on Bruce Lee, see <https://www.brucelee.com/>.
40. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.

Conclusion

An analysis of Hwang's work in 2017 would be remiss in not addressing the other significant residual benefit his work is yielding. His plays have proved phenomenally successful in English-speaking Asia; Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines in particular. His popularity in Asia suggests a potential roadmap for reimagining the possibilities of Asian American drama in general, as issues of globalization, diaspora, and transnationalism are explored and staged. This is, in my opinion, an important aspect to his overall contribution to American drama.

The new frontier for Asian American theatre, it seems, may not be in America at all. Plays such as *The Golden Child*, *Chinglish* and *Kung Fu* portray diaspora with different flow, more transient and less rooted in the notion of immigration in either direction being permanent. These concerns have implications beyond the Asian American community.

David Henry Hwang is a playwright of far-reaching influence, and while he is hardly the first American playwright to have a global impact and cross-cultural appeal, his Asian identity and hybridity have the potential to subvert Orientalist patterns of dominance. His plays inherently disrupt colonialist discourses, and simultaneously challenge stereotypical white or traditional perceptions of a monolithic American identity. Indeed, they still inspire the resonance of universalism, but with new heroes defying old tropes.

America is not the same place it was thirty-five years ago. The changes in demographics from a racial and multicultural perspective have resulted in a society still struggling to incorporate its diversity into the broader cultural identity. The very idea of

what constitutes a shared American identity becomes increasingly contested and complicated. Mu Performing Arts co-founder Martha B. Johnson suggest that “There is now a sophistication about race that we didn’t have.”¹ Indeed, the scholarship around identity performance in general is growing and is increasingly nuanced and specific.

The role of prominent artists in creating and contesting racial conversations is critical. In his book *Latin Numbers*, Herrera contests the “performance makers—or those whose creative choices compose performances—choices also compose or prompt performances of raciality.”² While it is simplistic and potentially dangerous to suggest or even advocate for a post-identity agenda, there seems to be a growing sense that “identity-based struggles are politically limited, and that a different type of grounded, collective action is in order.”³

In 1981, *New York Times* theatre critic Frank Rich wrote of Hwang: He knows America — its vernacular, its social landscape, its theatrical traditions. He knows the same about China. In his plays, he manages to mix both of these conflicting cultures until he arrives at a style that is wholly his own. Mr. Hwang's works have the verve of well-made American comedies and yet, with little warning, they can bubble over into the mystical rituals of Oriental stagecraft. By at once bringing West and East into conflict and unity, this playwright has found the perfect means to dramatize both the pain and humor of the immigrant experience.⁴

Hwang’s development as a playwright, from assimilation, to nationalism, to multiculturalism, and currently to internationalism mirrors the national identity trajectory of his time. Simplistic notions of heritage, race, and culture are proving inadequate constructions, even as hyphenated identities seem increasingly problematic or contentious.

The Asian American identity will, surely, continue to evolve, as will the theatrical movements and structures created to tell the community’s stories. What is different now

from when he wrote *FOB*, is, in his opinion, that “Chineseness was held in contempt”⁵ in the early 1980’s, but is no longer so.

In 1990, Hwang wrote the following:

Isolationism runs the risk of reinforcing a dangerous prejudice of the larger society: namely, that minorities are defined first and foremost by race. If we are all equally American, then we should be equally able to write about many different types of characters. In tracing the history of ideas, it is interesting to observe how a notion which is progressive in one era calcifies and becomes reactionary in another. The idea that people of color, women, gays should define their own identities was radical and important in the 1950’s. Going into the 1990’s, however, we see how Hollywood, for example, has turned this into a kind of literary segregation; as illustration, Black writers are rarely hired except for projects involving Black topics. I am quick to stress here that the freedom to write on *any* subject must certainly extend as well to those who *choose* to address only, say, Asian Americans.⁶

I recently asked him if having multi-racial children has changed his views on race in society and Asian American culture. He replied:

My kids are much more conscious of racial and gender discrimination, as well as white male privilege, than I was at their age. How a multiracial child is regarded in US society, however, remains largely based on his or her appearance. I happen to have a son who does not look particularly Asian, and a daughter who does. Therefore, though they both self-identify as Asian, he doesn't experience stereotyping or microaggressions based on race, whereas my daughter does. For instance, when my daughter was an infant, a stranger who saw her with my wife remarked, "She's going to speak such good English!"⁷

American culture and society have changed dramatically over the course of the years during which he has been writing. He, himself, has changed his perspective along the way, though he still suggests that theatre is “about using art to find a notion of self and community.”⁸

I chose to title this thesis “Performing American Identity” deliberately because it is his American identity that ultimately defines David Henry Hwang as a playwright. It is also the identity with which non-Asian Americans can identify, and feel included in the

necessary conversation about race in US society. His brilliance lies in his ability to write Asian American stories which non-Asian Americans identify with. His willingness to use the perspective of his own multiple identities — Chinese American, Asian American, male, straight, educated, socio-economically privileged — to interrogate the broader questions of American identity is a key to his continued success. His plays speak to the heart of the American project, yet are unafraid to expose its inherent flaws and contradictions. Resisting some of the default assumptions that can make scholarship of identity playwrights problematic, opens up a broader understanding of his work.

Hwang is preparing for the first Broadway revival of *M. Butterfly* since its 1989 ground-breaking production. High-profile director Julie Taymor is committed to direct and the opening is scheduled for October 2017. He told me that he does intend to make what he described as “significant” changes to the script.

It is likely that at some point in the not too distant future the name David Henry Hwang will not be synonymous with the staging of Asian America, and that, in his opinion, will be a welcome evolution. Perhaps the most important contribution Hwang and other identity playwrights of his generation have made is precisely to complicate the staging of identity in America, or at least to allow that that identity may include multiple races, genders, and identities. In the meantime, he will continue to explore, consider, question, subvert, and, most importantly, stage what it means to be American.

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1. Rick Shiomi and Martha B. Johnson interviewed by author, December 4, 2016.
 2. Herrera, *Latin Numbers*, 14.

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3. Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh, *Performance, Identity, and the Neopolitical Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.
 4. Rich, "Stage: 'Dance and the Railroad'".
 5. Hwang, interviewed by the author, August 11, 2015.
 6. Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays*. New York: Plume, 1990. xiii.
 7. Hwang, email to the author, June 17, 2016.
 8. Wetmore, "A Conversation with David Henry Hwang," 5.

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