

ARTICLE

Love, Betrayal, and Death: Reading East-West Crossings in Men's Cross-Dressing Performances of Tragic Heroines

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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between art and life, theater, and history? Two contemporary works, David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* and Chen Kaige's film *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*), raise this question through men's cross-dressing performances of tragic heroines, which complicate different theatrical aesthetics and intertwine theater with fictionalized reality based on historical events. By presenting the twists of characters' real-life relationships entwined with Euro-American and Chinese operatic fantasies, Hwang and Chen complicate the 19th-century European romantic opera cliché of "tragic women dying for love" and classical Chinese theatrical aesthetics of presentational performances. The intertwining of art and life in theatrical performances contextualized in 20th-century history reveals situations of irony in the lives of ordinary people caught in historical movements. This paper examines how male characters perform tragic female roles to mediate their relationships to others and respond to given realities. Whereas previous discussions focused on gender politics, I approach the East-West tension by comparing aesthetic traditions and histories in performances. Read through the lens of the ways in which these works cross traditions, they redefine the dichotomy of East versus West as a relationship of mutual inclusion and reveal the West's underestimation of the East. Their ability to replace reality with theater enables us, at the end of both works, to read operatic suicide as salvation and survival, ironically, as a tragedy.

KEY WORDS: theatrical traditions, cross-dressing, tragic heroines, *Farewell my Concubine*, *M. Butterfly*

Introduction¹

As Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (33). Theater mediates imagination and reality, as actors and spectators wittingly or unwittingly turn fictionalized stories into real-life performances. Chinese director Chen Kaige's (陳凱歌, b. 1952) 1993 film, *Farewell My Concubine*, and American playwright, David Henry Hwang's (b. 1957), 1988 play, *M. Butterfly*, stage the intertwining and crossing of Eastern and Western theatrical traditions, cultures, and histories. Both works feature men's cross-dressing performances of tragic female characters, manipulating the aesthetic traditions of Peking opera and 19th-century European romantic opera and reflecting thereby on their relationships to others in life. The layered entanglement of art and life, contextualized in the turbulence of 20th-century history, reveals situations of irony in the lives of ordinary people caught at the turning points of history.

1. Editor's Note: This article was edited by Stephen Boyanton, who has since left LMC to pursue other projects. We wish him well.

Adapted from the 1988 novel by Li Bihua (李碧華, b. 1959), Chen's *Farewell* narrates the life of two Chinese Peking opera artists, Cheng Dieyi (程蝶衣) and Duan Xiaolou (段小樓), from their boyhood in the 1920s to their old age in the 1970s. In accordance with the practice of only using male performers in the tradition of Peking opera until the early 1920s, Cheng was trained to play the female role of *dan* (旦) and Duan was trained in the male role of *sheng* (生). Known for their exquisite performance of the historical play, *Farewell My Concubine* (to avoid confusion I will hereafter refer to the play—as opposed to the modern film—by its Chinese title, *Bawang bieji*), Cheng performs the tragic role of the concubine Yu (*Yu Ji* 虞姬) while his partner Duan, acts as the King of Chu (*Chu bawang* 楚霸王).² Although the workings of classical Chinese music drama emphasize that theater is “not to be confused with normal reality” because “what they enact and behold is consciously made” (Yan 67), Chen's film complicates this tradition by displaying two artists' lives filtered through and mediated by theatrical performances. Over decades, Cheng repeats aspects of the relationship between Yu and Chu onstage in his relationship to Duan offstage. Whereas Cheng, the infatuated aesthete, indulges in the theatrical illusion mingled with his clandestine affection for Duan, the latter is a realistic materialist whose decisions repetitively disappoint Cheng by conforming to the pressures of reality. The film plots these betrayals against the course of twentieth-century Chinese history, amplifying the significance of individual tensions as characters resist or yield to collective interests.

Entwined with Giacomo Puccini's oriental-themed opera, *Madama Butterfly*, the American playwright, David Henry Hwang's, *M. Butterfly* also embeds a play within a play.³ Cio-Cio-San's tragic suicide for love repeats a pattern in 19th-century European romantic opera, in which, according to a noted critic, “on the stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing” and “from the moment these women leave their familiar and ornamental function, they end up punished—fallen, abandoned, or dead” (Clément 5-7). Hwang's play, however, aims not to revive Puccini's orientalist fantasy of Western men's dominance over Asian women, but rather to explore the underestimated potential of the East to manipulate, deceive, and even destroy the West by telling the story of the French diplomat René Gallimard, who falls in love with a female Chinese opera singer, Song Liling, who turns out to be a male spy sent by the Chinese government. Song's fraudulent performance as a powerless Chinese woman beguiles Gallimard, persuading him that she is his

2. The play tells the love-tragedy between Xiang Yu (the King of Chu) and his concubine Yu Ji. At the end of the Warring States Period, the King of Chu was besieged by the forces of his rival Liu Bang, the Han dynasty's eventual founder, and was on the verge of total defeat. Before the end, Concubine Yu upheld her fidelity towards her master by committing suicide with his sword.

3. The Italian opera *Madama Butterfly* has been an enduring tale celebrating a woman's unrequited love. In the opera, the Japanese woman Cio-Cio-San falls in love with the white American naval officer Pinkerton. At the expense of betraying her family and religion, she marries him and bears him a son. However, after returning to the U.S., Pinkerton marries an American wife and decides to take his Japanese son back with him. His betrayal drives Cio-Cio-San to despair and leads to her ultimate suicide.

fragile, harmless “Butterfly,” though Song’s real purpose is to steal military intelligence on the Vietnam War. Song masterfully moves between different theatrical aesthetics and takes advantage of Western preconceptions regarding the East to disarm Gallimard, who naively underestimates the East. Shaken by the truth, Gallimard transforms into the tragic Butterfly by committing his own operatic suicide at the end of the play.

Chen and Hwang display cultural and historical crossings that reflect the tensions between their characters’ personal and national interests and recontextualize their cross-dressing performances. In resistance or conformity to collective pressures, these ordinary people resonate with operatic heroines and their tragedies in culturally and historically significant ways that reveal the irony of their lives brought about by their entanglement in historical events beyond their control. In *Farewell*, the plot traces regime changes from the Republic of China to the post-Mao era. Cheng, like Yu, refuses to conform to the “new king”—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—with its ideological promotion of a patriotic, socialist-realist theater and its defamation of traditional Peking opera. He is therefore persecuted and assaulted during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, whereas Duan, the “disgraced king,” yields to the Party at the expense of betraying Cheng and Peking opera. In *M. Butterfly*, the final twist of Gallimard’s transformation implies not merely a reversal of East-West power dynamic, but also how his misperception of the “Oriental” leads to his downfall. On the historical level allegorized by the play, Gallimard’s misreading of Song parallels the West’s underestimation of the East during the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, Song’s complex situation as a puppet of national politics also casts doubt on his seeming victory—isn’t he also a tragic victim depersonalized by governmental authority and therefore lacking agency in his own life?

Theatrical Crossings in Men’s Cross-dressing Performances of Tragic Heroines

In *Farewell My Concubine*, Cheng plays with the tragic role of the virtuous woman (*lienü* 烈女), embodied by Yu in the historical play of the same name.⁴ In *M. Butterfly*, on the other hand, Song plays the European operatic heroine, rendered Asian in the form of Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*, refracted through the practices of Peking opera. In both works, the twists of the male characters’ real-life relationships are entwined with Euro-American and Chinese operatic motifs as a cause but also as an effect of the crossing of theatrical traditions, revealing personal illusions that contradict reality. In the film, Cheng’s obsession with Yu’s figure and his unchanged loyalty to Peking opera allow him to cling to the illusion of Duan’s love, which remains

4. The notion of the “virtuous woman (*lienü*)” traditionally refers to a Chinese woman who dies in defense of her honor, chastity, or virginity. Initially framed in a patriarchal context, this term has developed into multiple meanings that evoke Confucian ethics and other social expectations placed on women throughout the course of Chinese history. In general, “fidelity” is the key. For instance, it can be a woman who serves the country and dies honorably on the battlefield, or a widow who refuses to remarry another man, etc.

absent from his real life. In Hwang's play Song's misleading yet successful performance of an inferior Asian Butterfly enables him to accomplish the goals assigned to him by his country. In both works, the crossdressing male actors manipulate theatrical female roles to mediate their relationships and achieve their goals.

The techniques, aesthetics, and modes of expression in Chinese and Euro-American theatrical traditions vary dramatically. Widely known for its highly stylized singing, dancing, and martial arts, the classical Chinese music theater also "privilege[s] stylized modes of expression over psychological realism," thus having "little reference to individual subjective well-being or the inner emotive state" (Lee 2). Modern film or drama in the West "striv[es] for natural representation," but Peking opera operates according to the "premodern presentational mode [in which] emotion is communicated sartorially, gesturally and vocally according to prescribed and shared codes" (4). Although the presentational and over-exaggerated performing style of Peking opera is not realist, Cheng and Hwang's works manifest how it operates with "prescribed and shared codes" that obtain both on-stage and off-stage in men's crossdressing performances to manipulate given realities. In light of this, Peking opera may still retain the power to shape actors' and audiences' behavior, communication, and even lives based on how they recognize, interpret, and register these codes. For instance, in terms of individuals' relationships in imperial China, such older codes would refer to the Confucian five relationships (*wulun* 五伦), based on the core values of fidelity and patriarchy—relationships of ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, friend and friend. However, as China confronted modernization and reformation in the Republican period (1912-1949) and the PRC era (1949 onwards), these codes, once valued by Chinese culture and society, were discarded.

Set in a long historical timeline, the film *Farewell* takes the complex figure of Cheng and his Peking opera performances as a device to illumine the gap between imperial and modern China. Both Cheng's life and art suffer from sociopolitical factors during the 20th-century modernization of China, which had as a goal the eradication of the prescribed and shared codes of traditional Chinese culture, theatrical aesthetics, and political ideology. During this process, Cheng becomes an ambiguous embodiment of conservatism and subversiveness. On the one hand, he manifests his conservatism by remaining loyal to Duan and Peking opera throughout his life, paying homage to Yu's fidelity to King Chu in the play. On the other hand, he is a subversive figure who challenges and complicates the framework of the five traditional relationships by mingling three of them. Growing up together as "fellow apprentices (*shi xiongdì* 师兄弟)," Cheng is Duan's younger apprentice-brother (*shidi* 师弟). When acting as the tragic heroine, Yu, on stage, he serves as

the wife of King Chu as well as his subject. In reality, he is a close friend of Duan but also wishes to be his wife. This disordered intertwining of various relationships demonstrates his composite aching for Duan's love, which is the source of his suffering. As Cheng preserves and articulates older shared and prescribed codes to resist sociocultural assaults and collective pressures, his figure embodies China in its transition to the modern era.

Lee argues that in contradistinction to Peking opera's presentational performance, modern Western theater aims to produce performances "under the imperatives of realism and authenticity" (6), favoring more naturalized and realistic performances to genuinely reflect character's psychological interiority. But the rising ascendancy of representational performance risks stunting the audience's "ability to respond to the emotional suggestiveness of traditional theater," which leads to the loss of a self-conscious sense of theatricality (8). Moreover, Lee follows Seligman et al.'s argument that the over-emphasis on sincerity "can dangerously undermine our capacity for imaginatively negotiating the inescapable boundaries of our social existence and leads us on a utopian quest for purity (...) whereby boundaries (and social differences) either harden so as to be impermeable or are willfully denied out of existence" (13). Therefore, a modern Western spectator's expectation of realistic acting can be misleadingly fatal when encountering the exaggeration and abstractness of classical Chinese music drama. Peking opera's acting depends on "how skillfully the actor animates [shared cultural] codes to reach the audience effectively" and is not the "exteriorization of the actor's psychological or emotional state" (4). The quality of "suppositionality" is essential since both actors and audiences recognize "what they enact and behold is consciously made" and is "not to be confused with normal reality" (Yan 67). In *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard's inability to recognize the Chinese cultural codes in Song's cross-dressing performance, as refracted through Peking opera aesthetics, prefigures the Western audience's similar failure. His ignorance thus ironically co-authors Song's performance. These codes are "felt, imagined, and inhabited by both performers and audiences" for disparate ends—Song utilizes them to fabricate lies whereas Gallimard mistakes them as truths (86).

With men's cross-dressing performances filtered and mediated by estranged operatic motifs, both *Farewell* and *M. Butterfly*, by complicating and intertwining different theatrical aesthetics, reveal how these male actor-characters take advantage of theater to reconfigure their positions in relationships vis-à-vis others and their given realities. Moving from on-stage to off-stage acting, from theatrical roles to real-life identities, the entanglement of theater and life produces a space for illusory love, self-indulgence, and deception to fulfill characters' public duties and private needs. While both actors' flexible acting intertwines theatrical traditions and aesthetics, certain formulations are *de facto* preserved by their audience's reaction—either belief in or disillusion with operatic fantasies—which co-authors and completes the performances.

Farewell centers on depicting the characters' various performances of theater and social relationships, while demonstrating their essential entanglement. On a personal level, Western realistic depiction of Cheng's psychic space complements the lack of authenticity in stylistically exaggerated Peking opera performances. This hybridity becomes an embodiment of the East-West theatrical crossing. On a theatrical level, the film utilizes the theatrical tragedy of Concubine Yu and King Chu as a lens filtering the complex relationship of Cheng and Duan. However, Concubine Yu's double roles—as concubine and subject to the King—enrich and differentiate her from a stereotypical, fragile female figure enclosed by the domestic sphere. Having participated in and witnessed warfare, she is capable of fighting in the battlefield and offering military advice to her master. Her final suicide aims to preserve her loyalty and fidelity to King Chu and complicates the play by moving it beyond the category of sheer tragic romance. Likewise, it is inadequate to generalize Cheng's affection for Duan as homosexual love. Rather, his relationship with Duan mingles with three of the Confucian five relationships. Moreover, the play's parallels to and mismatches with historical reality imbricate Cheng's attachment to Duan with the twists and ironies of twentieth-century Chinese history.

For example, Duan's engagement to the prostitute Ju Xian marks his betrayal of Cheng, creating a satirical mismatch to the original play and revealing the ethical lessons they learned from operatic librettos that shaped their values. Mackerras states that "Peking Opera[s] were a, or even the, major way that ordinary Chinese learned about the past of their own country" (21). Given that the fictionalized plots oftentimes highlight moral ideologies valued by traditional Chinese society, it is not surprising that theater has traditionally served to educate the illiterate public. The first lesson, according to their teacher, Master Guan (*Guan Shifu* 關師傅), is that "Each person is responsible for his or her own fate" (30:10-30:15). The second is that Yu's fidelity pays homage to the Chinese cultural value of remaining faithful to one's spouse unto death. Whereas the infatuated Cheng upholds these beliefs by preserving his fidelity to Duan throughout his life, his partner never takes them seriously, as he admits to Cheng: "I'm a fake king, but you're the real concubine" (1:07:16-1:07:21). His pragmatic take on Peking opera as a mere tool for making a living and his decision to marry Ju Xian—the phony concubine—dismantles the dramatic illusions in his bond to Cheng, foredooming the latter's tragedy as the real Yu. Enraged and disappointed, Cheng nonetheless keeps a prior promise and visits Mr. Yuan, a declined aristocrat known for his expertise in Peking opera. Yuan intends to patronize Cheng after being moved by his exquisite performance. Accidentally, among the treasures in Yuan's collection, Cheng finds a sword he and Duan once saw as adolescents in the Qing imperial eunuch Zhang's mansion. The sword immediately reminds him of the childish promises they made to each other when encountering it for the first time:

Duan: King Chu would have won with this sword to kill Liu Bang. If I were the new emperor, you'd be the queen.

Cheng: Someday, I'll definitely give it to you as a present.

The Proprietor of the Pear Garden: Be careful, my little lords. It is a real sword! (36:39-36:55)⁵

段：“霸王要是這把劍，早就把劉邦給宰了，當上了皇上，你就是正宮娘娘了。”

程：“師弟，我準送你這把劍。”

戲園老板：“哎喲，當心點，我的小爺兒，這可是把真傢伙。”

Their casual comments on the sword are, in fact, promises made to be shattered by the insurmountable gap between a theatrical paradise and a materialistic world. Whereas Duan playfully promises to make Cheng his queen if he obtains the sword, Cheng takes it as a prophetic truth and in return promises to give him the sword as a gift one day to actualize the promise. This actualization would guarantee a satisfying end for the theatrical couple by substituting a happy ending for their tragic deaths and also fulfill Cheng's wish to make his bond with Duan eternal. Even in his early adolescence, the power of theater has already permeated Cheng's life and mode of thinking. The proprietor's emphasis on the sword's reality reminds us of its substantiality and capacity to inflict real harm on people, emphasizing that this sword will never be a prop on stage and denying it entry into the theatrical world. Cheng, however, sees the sword only in its role as an emblem of Duan's promise. He sees only its theatricality. His point of view, in contrast with that of the proprietor, reveals the discrepancy between theater and life and foreshadows the failure of Duan's promise.

When Cheng re-encounters the sword in his adulthood, the promised future has already been destroyed by Duan's marriage. Cheng performs Yu's famous suicide scene in Yuan's backyard. Dressed in ordinary clothing, he sings the aria casually: "Since the King has lost his spirit, why should his humble concubine value her life?" (1:10:19-1:11:00) No doubt, Yu's rhetorical question echoes his current misery and mocks the King-Concubine analogy twisted by Duan's marriage. In the play, when Chu is on the verge of total defeat by Liu's forces, he commands Yu to leave, for he cherishes her too much to witness her dying, but Duan's lack of King Chu's dignity, responsibility, and noble demeanor highlights that he is only a "fake king" and leads to Cheng's real tragedy.

When Cheng pulls out the sword to perform Yu's suicide, Yuan's considerate interruption—"Don't! It's a real sword!" (1:11:04-1:11:11)—once again reminds Cheng of the failure of Duan's promise. Once the symbol of a promising future, the sword now penetrates Cheng's theatrical fantasy and illusory hope—even with this sword, they cannot retrieve their past.

5. All English translations in this paper are my own.

Although the sword does not do substantial harm to Cheng, it does shatter the promise sustaining his life by revealing the truth that theater is not to be confused with reality. The moment Cheng drops the sword detaches him from the operatic illusion and sends him back to his real life. Just as King Chu vanished with Duan's betrayal, so too the faithful concubine Yu dies when the split between reality and theater can no longer be denied.

Earlier in the film, Duan had wondered whether Cheng's morbid obsession with theater would eventually ruin his life: "It is true that theatrical performance needs actors' passionate devotion. But if we carry that over into our everyday life, how can we live as ordinary people?" (59:26-59:38). However, it is precisely because Cheng lives his theatrical role into his everyday life that his performance is uniquely exquisite. By inscribing personal tragedy into his theatrical performances, Cheng enriches not only his tragic female roles but also the depth of his own artistic life.

In *M. Butterfly*, as in *Farewell*, the crossing of theatrical traditions and of theater with reality, is demonstrated through a cross-dressing performance—in this case that of the female-impersonator Song—that blends Chinese and Euro-American theatrical aesthetics to delude and manipulate the French diplomat Gallimard. Song's deceptive acting as a powerless Chinese woman fulfills Gallimard's Orientalist fantasy and fabricates an illusion of his triumph over the East. Gallimard wishes to parallel Pinkerton in his "conquest" of Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's opera, and Song's deception could not have succeeded without Gallimard co-authoring it through his misreading of the Chinese theatrical aesthetics registered in Song's acting. Unable to decipher Chinese cultural codes, Gallimard misinterprets Song's over-exaggerated acting, especially her overly dramatized, unnatural reactions, as Orientalist truth. The Chinese actor makes strategic use of his French audience's assumption of the realistic and naturalized acting used in modern European theater to deceive him with a Chinese counterfeit. In the process, the once underestimated Asian heroine is revived to prevail over her Western male rival and subvert the assumed power dynamics between East and West.

When Gallimard pays his first visit to Song's apartment, the opera singer intentionally "reveals" her feminine, conservative interiority to convince him that she is—like the Western stereotype of a desirable Asian woman—shy, modest, and meek. To show a division between her audacious behavior (body) and conservative thought (mind), Song pretends to struggle with the irreconcilable tension between her Chinese interiority rooted in Chinese culture and ethics and the Western shell obtained from her operatic performance and exotic outfit. The self-contradiction revealed by the "accidental" display of her Chinese psyche is pre-planned to enhance her credibility.

Song begins by admitting her concern to Gallimard, saying, "I don't even know why I invited you up (...) There is an element of danger to your pres-

ence” (Hwang 29). Her doubt demonstrates that her bold invitation conflicts with her conservative ideals. Inviting a white man to her house is courageous, but her uncertainty and fear regarding her Western guest still linger. Since Chinese society prohibits unmarried women from dating men alone, Song acts as if she were anxious with Gallimard—as if deep inside her still lives a “traditional” Chinese woman forever incompatible with a “modern” Westerner. When Gallimard excitedly presses Song to admit her love for him, saying, “We both know why I’m here,” she replies, “I am slightly afraid of scandal” (29). Song’s concern for the potential damage to her public reputation implies that her thinking is still fundamentally dominated by the restrictions placed on women that make her internally Chinese. When pouring tea for Gallimard, she comments that “France is a country living in the modern era” whereas “China is a nation whose soul is firmly rooted (...) in the past” (30). By contrasting the ancient, underdeveloped China with the modern, advanced France, she purposefully highlights the East’s inferiority, in parallel to her mismatched actions and thoughts.

Song’s notably unnatural performance overemphasizes the flaws of Asian women “sartorially, gesturally and vocally” by degrading herself to Gallimard to enact the West’s superiority over the East. Dating back to the first night when Gallimard watches Song performing Butterfly’s operatic suicide in the German ambassador’s house, he comments on her feeble voice: “here was a Butterfly with little or no voice (...) [but] I believe her suffering. I wanted to take her in my arms—so delicate, even I could protect her” (15-16). While Song’s voice is unqualified compared to a Western soprano, Gallimard values it as the manifestation of Asian femininity and delicacy that makes her a more authentic Butterfly compared to those “huge [Western] women in bad make-up” (16). By contrast, the sexually aggressive French girl Isabelle—Gallimard’s first sexual partner—used to take the masculine lead during their sexual intercourse. He recollects how, during sex, “she was on [him]” and “[his] arms were pinned to the dirt” (33). Song’s fragility enables the womanish Frenchman to regain his virile confidence by convincing him that “even [he] could protect her.”

Besides exposing her backward Chinese mentality to set off the West’s superiority, Song further develops her fraud as she compares herself in a Western dress to the prettier European women, reaffirming her own inferiority.

Song: Even my own heart, strapped inside this Western dress (...)

Gallimard: This is a beautiful dress.

Song: Don’t.

Gallimard: What?

Song: I don’t even know if it looks right on me.

Gallimard: Believe me—

Song: You are from France. You see so many beautiful women

Gallimard: France? Since when are the European women—? (30)

What is “strapped inside this Western dress” is Song’s unchanged Chinese-ness. Her rhetorical question—“if it looks right on [her]”—reveals that to an Asian woman, wearing a Western dress would not necessarily Westernize her interiority, where there still lives a timid, modest Chinese woman. Feeling inadequate and diffident, Song denies Gallimard’s compliment and instead praises French women whose beauty undoubtedly exceeds hers. The Chinese actor’s parody reaches its climax, empowering Gallimard by simulating the tragic Asian heroine’s inescapable fate of being defeated by the superior West. At the same time, Song deliberately acknowledges the insurmountable gap between an Asian butterfly and a Western woman: “Hard as I try to be modern, to speak like a man, to hold a Western woman’s strong face up to my own (...) in the end, I fail (...) I’m a Chinese girl” (31). By confessing her failure—a parodic imitation of Western women—Song reassures Gallimard of the modern West’s triumph over the ancient East. Only through this fabricated victory can Gallimard reattain his masculinity and realize his illusory dominance over women, a dominance which differentiates Song from the undesirable Western females and encourages him to trust her more. When the empowered Frenchman refuses to leave her apartment, Song pretends to be irritated, exclaiming, “You are a cad” (31). But Gallimard’s spontaneous response—“What do you expect? I’m a foreign devil” (31)—effectively transforms him into the womanizing Pinkerton, capable of pinning his Butterfly down with his Oriental fantasy fulfilled by prevailing over the East. Now able to regard himself as a “foreign devil,” Gallimard is fully convinced by Song’s exquisite performance. Beguiled by the false belief that “she feels inferior to ‘Western women’—and to me,” (31) he fails to realize that the actual victory goes to the Chinese actor and his counterfeit Butterfly.

Cultural and Historical Crossings in Individuals’ Real-life and Theatrical Tragedies

In the context of both Chinese history and the history of East-West relations in the 20th century, the male actor-characters’ cross-dressing performances reveal how individuals, as puppets of domestic and international politics, empathize with operatic heroines and their tragedies in culturally and historically significant ways. By revealing ironies in individuals’ responses to personal and national politics, their stories of suspected betrayals and deaths involve cultural translation and embody historical allegories. The cultural critic Rey Chow argues in her book, *Primitive Passions*, that contemporary Chinese cinema is not just “a kind of postmodern self-writing or autoethnography” but “a form of intercultural translation in the postcolonial age” (11). It neither enacts the presentational authenticity of classical Chinese drama nor simply caters to Western taste through self-exoticization. Rather, it is “a culture-collecting” (26) during which female characters serve as “the brilliant arcade, through which ‘China’ travels across cultures to unfamiliar audiences” (202). Chow’s concept of “culture-collecting” is realized as cultural and

historical crossings in Chen's Chinese film and Hwang's Western play. Such crossings are not applicable only to China—or "the East"—but also to France and America—"the West." While ordinary individuals caught in the sweep of historical moments are used as puppets by national interests, they also try to resist such external forces. By performing distinct types of operatic heroines, individuals like Cheng and Gallimard preserve their subjective desires while confronting collective pressures within domestic and global politics. The cultural connotations of tragic female roles, allegorized by personal and national history, serve as a device to channel East and West, facilitating the cultural traffic evoked by the male actor-characters' suspected betrayals and deaths.

As the virtuous woman in classical Chinese theater, Yu's figure is distinctively complex compared to her counterpart in the Italian opera. Unlike Butterfly, who transgresses social norms for her personal desires, Yu fulfills her duties as a wife and subject of King Chu, even to the point of sacrificing herself in the hope that her death can empower her master to turn the tables on his enemies. Although the historical play, *Bawang bieji*, is mostly known as a love tragedy, its theme lies in the Confucian fidelity valued by the five relationships—specifically, Yu's fidelity towards her master and husband. Yu's ability to multi-task—demanded by her roles as Chu's wife, subject, and friend—endows her with greater responsibilities. Fearing that it is worse than death to be captured and humiliated by Liu's forces, which would dishonor her King, Yu commits suicide to preserve her fidelity and dignity. But it is owing to the emphasis on her virtuous suicide that the play's tragic nature falls into relative public neglect. Audiences tend to ignore, on the political level, Yu's resistance to the new regime and attempt to halt the march of history through her own death.

Unlike the humble, altruistic Yu, Butterfly is selfish and egoistic, which eventually brings about her self-destruction. The French philosopher Catherine Clément refers to tragic female roles as decorative jewels of the 19th-century European romantic opera; they are doomed to be punished or to die for their "transgression of familial rules, political rules, the things at stake in sexual and authoritarian power" (10). Likewise, in Puccini's opera, Butterfly's love for Pinkerton ultimately costs her life. Alluding to the operatic love cliché, *Madama Butterfly* aestheticizes Orientalism by deliberately feminizing the East to cater to the taste of Western audiences. Cio-Cio-San's marriage to a white American and conversion to Christianity at the expense of betraying her family are examples of robust initiative and self-Westernization, though seen as transgressive and disparaged by her own society. While her failure is foredoomed, she nonetheless attempts to prioritize her personal interests and resists collective pressures from racism, sexism, and traditional Japanese society.

Although Chinese and European tragic heroines differ in their priorities, their resistance to collective demands and (inter)national histories is their

common ground. This resistance is empowered by individualistic love and subjective desires. Therefore, their figures serve as parallels to men like Cheng and Gallimard, who are manipulated by higher authorities but still resist in order to preserve their dignity. A close reading of Cheng's compelled performance for the Japanese to save Duan, and Gallimard's final transformation into Butterfly reveals cultural and historical crossings that highlight the inevitable tension between individuals and collectives, with theater and life unreconciled.

In *Farewell*, Cheng is convicted of treason for singing Peking opera for the Japanese during WWII. His performance, considered a betrayal of China, receives no clemency for its intention of saving Duan's life. In *M. Butterfly*, by removing his feminine disguise and betraying Gallimard's Orientalist vision during the trial in Paris, Song reveals the hidden political intention behind his successful parody. Despite the political purposes driving their performances, both Cheng and Song are also personally attached to their cross-dressing roles. Cheng would not have sung for the invaders if not for his unrequited yet faithful love for Duan. Likewise, Song considers Gallimard his "greatest acting challenge," one that has enriched his own artistic career (Hwang 63). To some degree, these men's self-sacrifice is not just for their essential "other" but also for self-fulfillment. Attempting to find a compromise between subjective desires and collective interests, the theatrical betrayals and deaths reshaped by the men's real-life experience function as a site of intercultural translation that addresses the tension between individuals and nations as well as the abstract "East" and "West," making both *Farewell* and *M. Butterfly* transcultural works.

Film as an artistic form of documentation gives space for creativity and flexibility to render and aestheticize history. The fifth-generation Chinese director Chen Kaige is noted for his use of semiotics and allegories in films to aid in his personal retrospection and interrogation of the new national and cultural identities that have been formed by modern Chinese history, art, and politics, yet remain irreconcilable with China's past.⁶ In *Farewell*, he projects national chaos onto Cheng's progressive performances of disparate Chinese heroines to translate the multilevel tension within traditional Chinese culture in its transition to the modern era. When Cheng and his operatic heroines sacrifice themselves to cope with personal and national crises, they embody the ambivalent figure of a China that struggles to understand itself throughout the tumultuous course of modern Chinese history.

The most controversial betrayal in *Farewell* is Cheng's performance for the Japanese during WWII. When the Japanese army invades the theater

6. The term "fifth-generation Chinese directors" refers to those who resumed their film studies at the Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s after experiencing the historical turmoil of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Members of this generation of directors were exposed to Western philosophy and novel cinematic techniques in college. Hence, they often struggled to balance old and new aesthetics in their films that constantly retraced, re-examined, and critiqued modern Chinese history and politics.

house, Duan witnesses a Chinese man attempting to put opera costumes on a Japanese general. Irritated by this treacherous act, Duan furiously attacks the Chinese man he perceives as a traitor and is therefore arrested by the Japanese.⁷ To save his life, Cheng performs for the Japanese soldiers, but after his release, Duan condemns Cheng for betraying China and refuses to acknowledge Cheng's efforts on his behalf.

While Duan is fighting with the Japanese backstage, Cheng, onstage, performs the role of Lady Yang (*Yang guifei* 楊貴妃, 719-756)⁸—the favored concubine of Tang Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756)⁹—from the historical play “The Drunken Concubine.” The theatrical parallel is evident. Cheng shares with the character of Lady Yang a personal tension with national interests. Lady Yang and Emperor Xuanzong are fleeing a rebellion in the capital when they are captured by rebels. The rebels demand that Yang be executed because they see her as a dangerous beauty who has captivated the emperor and led him to neglect his duties and endanger the empire.¹⁰ While the rebels appear to claim victory by forcing the emperor to execute Lady Yang, it is precisely her death that saves the nation from collapse. Similarly, Cheng's “treacherous” singing not only rescues his endangered partner but also the character King Chu, whose fall in the play *Bawang bieji* parallels the invasion China during WWII. Shocked by Duan's condemnation, Cheng nonetheless refuses to confess to treason for his erstwhile performance for the Japanese when he is later interrogated by the Communist Party. Like Lady Yang—the scapegoat of men's politics—Cheng also becomes a victim of the Chinese government's condemnation of feudal China and its old aesthetics. Lady Yang's sacrifice also involves her private love for the emperor, and so does Cheng's “treason.” But unlike their Western counterparts dying for their self-assertive “transgressions,” Chinese heroines like Lady Yang and Yu die to resolve national conflicts. Their so-called wrongdoings are contextualized in macro-histories and politics in ways that paradoxically depersonalize but also transcend them. By blending Eastern and Western heroines' motifs to balance varied interests, Cheng's understandable yet self-destructive performance constitutes the cultural crossings in *Farewell* as a process of remaking China's figure in modern history.

7. The term “Chinese traitor (*hanjian* 汉奸)” specifically refers to the Chinese who worked for the Japanese army and betrayed the interests of Chinese people, state, and nation during WWII.

8. In the Tang Dynasty, Lady Yang was the favorite concubine of the emperor Xuanzong of Tang. The emperor's excessive infatuation with her ultimately caused many revolts against his rule. In 755, a court official named An Lushan (安祿山, 703-757) launched a rebellion against his rule and soon took over the capital city of Chang'an. Meanwhile, Emperor Xuanzong and Yang fled the palace to Sichuan. When the rebel army caught up with them, they demanded to kill Yang in exchange for restoring the emperor's rule. Fearing for his life, the scared emperor was forced in humiliation to consent to Yang's death. She then bade him farewell and hung herself.

9. *The Drunken Concubine* is a famous Peking opera piece inspired by the tragedy of the emperor Xuanzong and his concubine Lady Yang. One night, Lady Yang arranges a banquet in the imperial garden, waiting for the emperor to come, but he never turns up. Later, she realizes that he has chosen to stay in the palace of Concubine Mei (*Mei fei* 梅妃) instead of hers. Feeling humiliated, furious, and depressed, Yang drinks alone in the garden and ultimately gets drunk.

10. An analogous English translation to the Chinese phrase “dangerous beauty” would be “Helen of Troy” as it refers to people attributing the fall of countries to beautiful women by whom kings or emperors are captivated.

In the afterword of *M. Butterfly*, the Asian-American playwright, Henry David Hwang, addresses the public's misinterpretation of the play's intent: "M. Butterfly has sometimes been regarded as an anti-American play, a diatribe against the stereotyping of the East by the West, of women by men" (100). Disagreeing with such a problematic generalization, Hwang views his play as "a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings" (100). *M. Butterfly* is, after all, an American play, but it meticulously showcases the flexibility and richness of Chinese culture that is unfamiliar to most American audiences, offering a novel reimagination of East-West relations. With unexpected twists such as Song's return as a man at the trial and Gallimard's transformation into Butterfly in the jail, Hwang neither intends to simply reverse the gendered power dynamics of East versus West nor to aggravate these dichotomies. Rather, it is only through such betrayal and death that East and West finally converse and exchange roles with each other.

The cultural translation in *M. Butterfly* is achieved by the characters' transformations from one role to another at the end of the play. Although Song's performance does cater to Western realist expectations, as represented by Gallimard, it also manifests the communal and patriotic spirit cherished by Confucian ethics. Recognition of this fact makes way for greater interpretive freedom in understanding Song's role as a cultural translator. Taking Song's double roles as a spy and an actor into account, his cross-dressing performance may have sacrificed his artistic goals for political purposes. Having lived with Gallimard for twenty years, has Song ever truly loved him? As the playwright purposefully keeps Song's private life out of the audience's reach, we are left pondering. We feel we have analyzed Song's figure, yet we still know so little of him as a person. It is certain, however, that Song saw his sacrifice as contributing to the collective good—of China and perhaps of the "East" as a whole in the Vietnam War. When Song shows up at the trial as a man wearing an Armani suit, Gallimard—unable to accept the brutal truth—turns to the theater to seek comfort from his Butterfly fantasy.

Song's betrayal and Gallimard's suicide both confirm and confound the tragedy of Euro-American operatic heroines. Song's parodic Butterfly vanishes when the actor reveals his real sex, but Gallimard's death in the role of Butterfly reaffirms Clément's notion of "tragic women dying for their transgressions." Throughout the play, the Frenchman attempts to transform his timid, shy, unpopular, white-woman-fearing self into the devil-like Pinkerton capable of pinning down his Asian Butterfly. However, like Puccini's Butterfly, Gallimard is fated to fail, be betrayed by a heartless man (Song, revealed as a man), and face a punitive death. Throughout the play, he is and has always been the real tragic heroine. In addition, the functions of Butterfly vary

among the two male characters. Given that Song ceases to perform once his mission is over, the absence of the necessity to act ironically amplifies the materialistic utility of Butterfly that determines her value. Like Lady Yang, Song's Butterfly is executed when she is no longer useful to men's politics, but by having Song transform into his male self, Hwang offers us a glance at the afterlife of a tragic heroine. Perhaps by becoming a man, the Asian woman can finally escape her pre-written tragedy in the European opera librettos, with the East subverting the West to regain its cultural and political agency in the postcolonial era. However, although Song appears to prevail in this East-West rivalry, he is nonetheless a puppet of the CCP forced to play the "Song Liling" character in order to survive. Otherwise, he would have faced persecution during the Cultural Revolution similar to that which Duan and Cheng encounter in *Farewell*.

Despite the East-West cultural crossing, both works also unravel historical allegories mirrored by the tensions between the actor-characters and their real-life ironies. Given its unprecedented success and popularity in the West, Chen's *Farewell* has received wide attention for its merciless depiction of modern Chinese history. Critiques within China primarily attack the film's intentional amplification of the negative aspects of old China, accusing Chen of tarnishing the national image as a way to enter the global film market. Indeed, *Farewell's* dazzling colors, Hollywood-like cinematic style, and popularity among foreign audiences have opened it to criticism as a deliberate parody of "Orientalist aesthetics" through "self-exoticizing and commodifying Chinese identity" (Chiang 110). Although *Farewell* receives a lower valuation from Chinese audiences, many Euro-American critics regard it as an accurate "portrait of China in transition" given its brutal yet authentic depiction of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Mcdougall 43-44). Finding the film's "presentation of modern Chinese history and society a large part of its appeal," many Western audiences tend to extract the film's political messages and neglect the cultural and aesthetic aspects that appeal to Chinese audiences (44). *Farewell* is not a historical documentary, but it generates historical allegories through the micro-lens of the artists' theatrical performances, which serve as responses to the changing of regimes and the reshuffling of power throughout their lives.

Documenting the rise and fall of political regimes in China from the late 1920s to the 1970s, the film is renowned for its sarcastic depiction of the PRC under Mao's rule. After the Communist Party rose to power in 1949, it launched a series of political movements destroying old Chinese aesthetics, culture, and ideology in the name of eliminating feudal corruption. The attack on traditional Chinese opera during the Chinese Cultural Revolution accelerated the demise of old China on both material and spiritual levels. The Chinese government considered traditional operas to be "ghost plays" and "demanded their removal from stage." Artists "who had excelled in the

traditional opera” were “humiliated, physically harmed, [or] persecuted by exuberant Red Guards” (Mackerras 19). In the film, actors like Duan and Cheng are forced to dress up in their dazzling costumes with full make-up and kneel before the zealous Red Guards to receive public denunciation. At such a moment, when theater and history overlap, it is as if they were not just humiliated artists but the defeated King Chu and Concubine Yu. To spare himself further interrogation, Duan publicly discloses Cheng’s “crime” of singing Peking opera for the Japanese and Nationalist forces, denouncing him as a traitor, and burns his costumes and props to demonstrate his loyalty to the Party and his determination to distance himself from the corrupt tradition of opera. Duan’s conformity to national politics is a spiritual betrayal of the figure of King Chu, as noted by Cheng’s revelation, “I have been despicable for a long time, but now even King Chu is on his knees begging for mercy, can Peking opera survive?” (2:33:57 – 2:34:08) Whereas the King upholds his dignity by refusing to give in till the last moment of life, Duan submissively yields to the Party, shattering Cheng’s idealization of him. The collapse of theatrical fantasy is fatal to Cheng, for Peking opera constitutes his life by providing him with a partner, lover, and artistic pursuit. Playing the role of Yu brings him not only fame but the illusory love and a momentary satisfaction that empower him to live on. However, even this fraudulent happiness is inevitably crushed by personal and national history.

The historical nature of the play, *Bawang bieji*, prevents its audiences from seeking any hope amid its tragedy. The “future” of the story depicted—the Han Dynasty—is itself a historical fact well-known to the audience. In light of this, Cheng’s insistence on Duan’s promise turns out to be the greatest irony in the film. The movie’s title, *Farewell My Concubine*, prefigures its plot. It is Duan who bids farewell to Cheng by embracing the PRC future, in which time flies, life continues, and the play ends. On the contrary, Cheng forever lingers in the world of theater to avoid the course of history that will actualize their pre-written tragedy. In *Farewell’s* final scene, Duan’s impatient correction of Cheng’s mis-recitation of operatic arias signals the collapse of his theatrical harbor. To make fun of Cheng, Duan purposefully misleads him by starting with the wrong line, reciting, “I am by nature a boy.” As Cheng spontaneously follows, “(...) not a girl,” Duan immediately interrupts him, “You got that wrong again!” (2:40:08-2:40:14) Cheng’s unconscious mistake reveals that he is, after all, a man who does not deserve the eternal, transcending love of King Chu that overcomes death. But if reviving Yu’s death can at least endow Cheng with a moment of solace to indulge in his fantasy, then even just one transient instant would be enough to eternalize his love for Duan.

Similarly, at the end of *M. Butterfly*, the desperate Gallimard also turns to the theater to restore his Orientalist fantasy. If Song’s parodic Butterfly makes

the diplomat relax his vigilance, then his later transformation into Madame Butterfly—as a Western parody of the East—allegorically mirrors the East-West power-reshuffling of his defeat by Song and the West’s unexpected loss in the Vietnam War. It is important to note that such transformation does not reshape Gallimard’s perception of Asian women but only consolidates his Orientalist fantasy. He continues to believe that Asian women “are born and raised to be the perfect women,” making them the perfect prey for “unworthy foreign devils” to love, cheat, and discard (91).

To restore his dignity and “prove that [his] love was not in vain,” Gallimard chooses to “return to the world of fantasy where [he] first met [Song]” (91). This time, he will act as Butterfly, though his appearance—a tall, slender, white man in a Butterfly wig and kimono with exaggerated makeup on his face—implies that this is mere self-deception. When Gallimard reclaims his identity, saying, “My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly,” the purposeful juxtaposition of his original name and “Butterfly” internalizes the Orientalist vision within himself to commemorate the operatic fantasy that Song initiates but never completes (93). During their first encounter in the play, Gallimard is the infatuated audience attracted to Song’s performance of Butterfly on stage. She starts “from the point where Butterfly uncovers the hara-kiri knife” but “proceeds to play out an abbreviated death scene,” leaving the opera’s end incomplete (15). Two decades later, history rewinds but is reversed. It is Song “who stands as a man, staring at the dead Gallimard” (93). Gallimard’s operatic suicide in jail in Paris completes the tragedy of Butterfly. Puccini’s Orientalist opera becomes an emblematic miniature of Gallimard’s life. He, like Butterfly, blindly falls in love with a man—Song—who deceives, betrays, and ultimately destroys him. By explaining to his audiences that “in imagination shall I remain” (91), Gallimard wishes for his operatic suicide to elevate him from the ocean of misery, unaware that fantasy and reality always co-exist. Finally, Song asks the air—“Butterfly? Butterfly?” (93)—after witnessing Gallimard’s suicide. Here, his wonder seems to be indecipherable for we have no clues whether he refers to Puccini’s Butterfly, his secret mission, or Gallimard’s death. Given that men’s cross-dressing performances always involve manipulation and fraudulence, can they ever be genuine? Compared to those who die in their theatrical fantasies, how do we understand the end of the survivors? We hardly know anything about Song outside of his Butterfly role. What kind of future waits for a spy who is bailed out of a foreign prison and sent back to his homeland by the national government? In opera, the Oriental is an illusion for the West. But even in fictionalized reality, we rarely know about the East. Song and his unpredictable destiny are filled with possible pathos. It is possible that Song’s survival is the greatest tragedy in the play because it fails to grant him even the slightest sense of control over his own life, and to live without freedom is worse than death.

Conclusion

Both *Farewell* and *M. Butterfly* reimagine the power of theater to mediate given realities by, on the one hand, having characters live false lives in which they perform acts of betrayal, but on the other, refracting their actions through operatic fantasies, acts of fidelity that lead to more authentic lives. Reading through the lens of the crossings of Chinese and Euro-American theatrical traditions, cultures, and historical allegories enables us to notice previously ignored nuances and the potential genuineness of male crossdressers' performances. Whether it is the infatuated Cheng, the deceptive Song, or the beguiled Gallimard, their renderings of Chinese or Euro-American tragic heroines manifest the overlapping of theater and life. Although Cheng is not born as a woman, his marriage-bond to Duan, epitomized by the King-Concubine analogy, is total. Song fakes a stereotypical Butterfly role to cater to Western tastes, but by doing so he unintentionally pushes Gallimard to learn the truth and limitations of his Orientalist fantasies of conquering a feminine East that is not willing to be dominated. With characters' betrayals and deaths providing moments of epiphany and illuminating the falsity of the superficial illusions, the real conditions under which people live are revealed. Moreover, reading by the light of these crossings allows us to reread the dichotomous East-West tension as, in fact, a relationship of mutual inclusion.

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