

論 文

## Transformations of Butterfly Figure: From a Greek Myth of Psyche to *M. Butterfly* (2)

バタフライ像の変遷：プシケの神話から『M. バタフライ』まで (2)

Reito Adachi

### Introduction

In "The Transformations of Butterfly Figure: From a Greek Myth of Psyche to *M. Butterfly* (1)," I considered the Butterfly image of Cho-Cho-San in the Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904) and pointed out that it had a close affinity to an ancient Greek myth of Psyche.<sup>(1)</sup>

Cho-Cho-San as an Asian variant of Psyche might well have been just a relic of the past if two stage productions of modern Butterfly had not been born into the world. The shadow of *Madame Butterfly* is cast over *Miss Saigon* (1989) and *M. Butterfly* (1988). Both of them have made so great a commercial success and achieved so high level of critical acclaim that much ink has been spent on them.

It is true that messages from these two stages seem to present a sharp contrast to each other: while *Miss Saigon* is for *Madame Butterfly*, *M. Butterfly* is against it. According to me, however, while there can be no doubt that *M. Butterfly* is intended to cast reproach on the stereotyped view of Asian woman which is accepted, exhibited and enlarged by *Madame Butterfly*, there must be considerable doubt as to Hwang's criticism functions properly in *M.*

*Butterfly*. What seems to be lacking is to explore how *M. Butterfly*, which is derived from the same roots as *Miss Saigon*, restores the spectacle of the Orient by insisting upon the repetition of *Madame Butterfly*. The key to an understanding the matter is offered by throwing the light of criticism upon the transformations of Butterfly figure, mainly in *M. Butterfly*.

The purpose of this present paper is, therefore, to explore two thematic dichotomies which run throughout the Asian versions of Butterfly: East and West, and man and woman. The former is the most obvious of the two, but despite blatant references to this theme in the plot and dialogue, it is subsumed by a more subtle but powerful theme of man and woman, namely male superiority.

### A Prototype of Asian Variants

Before going on to the main task, it might be helpful to outline here briefly the image of Butterfly represented by both Psyche and Cho-Cho-an. Four points seem to be desirable in attempting to sketch out common factors. To begin with, the protagonists are both females. Next, the image of Butterfly brings the two

heroines together: Psyche is a beautiful young woman with butterfly wings, and Cho-Cho is a Japanese word for butterfly. Furthermore, to both women, love is equivalent to life: Psyche falls in love with Cupid even at the risk of her life, and Cho-Cho-San sacrifices her life for an American sailor, Pinkerton, whose love she desires. Finally not only Psyche but Cho-Cho-San is an embodiment of eternal love. As a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly, so Psyche is elevated to immortal godhood and wins the everlasting affection of the god of love. Though Cho-Cho-San kills herself for the American sailor, her tragic death keeps her chaste love unabated by time and human weakness as well.

At the same time, we should not overlook the differences between the ancient Greek myth of Psyche and Puccini's opera of Cho-Cho-San. It is true that, as mentioned just now, they are similar to each other in narrative framework, but radically different in relationship between man and woman. According to me, one of the most striking differences underlying all these similarities is that Psyche devotes herself to a divine being, while Cho-Cho-San to a human being. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Greek heroine is to the Greek god what the Asian geisha girl is to the American sailor. At this point Cho-Cho-San as an Oriental variant of Psyche is confronted with not only a sexual problem between man and woman but racial one between East and West. There is a noticeable transformation of Butterfly image from a Western portrayal of immortality into an Eastern figure of death, or preferably a mystified figure worthy of death.

*Madame Butterfly* develops a tendency to fix

the death image of Orientality in the popular text of Caucasian consciousness as a traditional stereotype. It follows from what has been said that *Madame Butterfly* inherits a sexist attitude from the Greek mythology and, more importantly, adds a racist theme of Orientalism<sup>(2)</sup> to it.

### Representations of Race and Gender<sup>(3)</sup>

As new variants of *Madame Butterfly* theme, *Miss Saigon* and *M. Butterfly* have recently made a big box-office success. As seen in the previous chapter, the term of Butterfly image can be defined as an ideal womanhood with elegance, self-devotion and self-effacement when she finds herself in the way. Seen from this angle, *Miss Saigon* and *M. Butterfly* seem to be diametrically opposite to each other: *Miss Saigon* is, as the producers admit,<sup>(4)</sup> merely an updating, and an exact counterpoint, of *Madame Butterfly*, while, according to David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* shows how from within Western stereotypes of race and gender it is perfectly conceivable that a Western man could love an Asian man as a woman and never know the difference.<sup>(5)</sup> The point I would like to make from now on is, however, that *M. Butterfly* as a parody of the archetypal East and West romance is a deconstructive adaptation from *Madame Butterfly*, only to consolidate the Western imperialist consciousness and desire by which geopolitical territory is sexualized and gendered, because the work as well as *Miss Saigon* pays no attention to how Orientalist fantasy operates. In this sense, it may safely be said that *M. Butterfly* is an accomplice with *Miss Saigon*.

The story of *Madame Butterfly* repeats itself in the musical theater whose setting is laid in and around Saigon (Ho Chi Minh) during the Vietnam war. A Vietnamese prostitute, Kim, gets married to an American soldier and gives birth to a baby. After the war situation forces the American soldier to leave his wife and his child for home, they wait for him to return for years. And Kim kills herself at the end of the drama when she knows that he revisits Vietnam with his American wife in order to bring his GI baby back to the US.

*Miss Saigon* is constructed from two main narratives. The first strand is that of *Madame Butterfly*. The operatic tragedy comes over the Vietnamese heroine whose overwhelming arias and libretti provide the intersection between the two stage performances. The second narrative is given by the "Engineer" who is not only the lead role but also the narrator of the drama. He is allowed to speak directly to the other dramatis personae and the audience, too.<sup>(6)</sup> His ambivalent position in the theater<sup>(7)</sup> makes it possible to transmute the sordid melodrama into the lived reality of the audience. Because the narrator is a passionate adorer of the masculinity and superiority of America, the message of *Miss Saigon* is simple, solid and consistent. It is structured around the distinct and strong images of the ideal woman and the ideal Orient whose desire is concentrated upon the Occidental masculinity. They are intrinsically conclusive, firm and destined to survive any new social formations, including the Vietnam war. Thus, all-encompassing narrative of *Miss Saigon* is monolithic.

On the other hand, that of *M. Butterfly* is hybrid. In an interview with John L.

DiGaetani, Hwang described his play, *M. Butterfly*, as being "about the nature of seduction--in the sense that we seduce ourselves."<sup>(8)</sup> *M. Butterfly* plays self-consciously with the problem of seduction and deception in a layered set of narratives. According to me, the drama consists of four main strands. The first of these is the story of *Madame Butterfly*. The operatic tragedy is recounted by a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, and enlivened by music from the actual score. The second level is an actual enactment of *Madame Butterfly* projected in and by Gallimard's imagination. Here, Gallimard plays the part of Pinkerton and a Chinese opera singer, Song Liling, plays that of Cho Cho-San. This second play is within the first play, with the result being a ludicrous soap opera. From these emerges the third strand, which is Gallimard's imagining of his own affair with Song, who is a male transvestite opera star, conducted in the image of Puccini's opera. Gallimard makes an effort to perform alchemy by transmuting the drama into his own lived reality. His heroic masculinity stands in painful and ironic contrast to the fourth story which is the objective reality. In this context the male French diplomat believed his Chinese transvestite lover to have been a woman during their clandestine relationship which lasted for about twenty years, which led both into conviction for espionage.

Unveiling the structure of narratives suggests that, unlike *Miss Saigon*, *M. Butterfly* is written with the assumption that gender roles are culturally constructed, unstable and open to negotiation in response to new social

formations.<sup>(9)</sup> Taking gender as a phenomenon of group interaction, this stage production examines the construction and realignment of masculinity. *M. Butterfly* illustrates the patterns of domination and submissiveness which are culturally coded as masculine and feminine in contemporary American culture.

### A Pitfall of *M. Butterfly*

And yet, according to me, *M. Butterfly* remains unaware of the ways in which Orientalism functions. The opposition between genders provides the fundamental pivot of theatrical meaning. The point is that, in *M. Butterfly*, the object which is desired is always feminine, not only sexually but culturally. It provides a good example that Gallimard can not accept the seduction from the voluptuous White beauty who "wasn't afraid to be seen completely naked"<sup>(10)</sup> because he feels her to be "too masculine" (p. 54).

Such a treatment of gender constitutes the basis of a radically unequal relationship between the viewer and the viewed. This leads the drama to place its audience as a masculine side to that desire. The empowered position, or masculine one, is that of the desiring subject, while that of the disempowered object, or feminine one, is that of the person who wants to be desired by the other. *M. Butterfly* re-enacts the narrative of heroic masculinity. Central to this issue is the definition of the "we" for whom this stage production takes place. The stage is constructed as the space of Gallimard's imagination, a bourgeois Western, heterosexual male consciousness. For him, the other is a heterosexual, Oriental woman.

In the opening scene, for instance, Gallimard envisions his ideal audience, saying "I imagine you--my ideal audience--who come to understand and even, just a little, to envy me" (p. 4). He addresses the audience as "you," and thereby indicates the Western imperial self as masculine. Immediately after, in the play, Gallimard's school friend, Marc, addresses the existence of female audience. But here the women in the audience are not addressed. They are discussed and even included within the field of Marc's desirous vision. Marc actually says that "there're a lotta great babes out there. They're probably lookin' at me and thinking, 'What a dangerous guy'" (p. 9), and stage directions have him leer at the women not on the stage. Although the intent here is to make a mock at Marc's immature libido, the scene effectively excludes the female audience from the role of active viewer and corroborates what Gallimard has already implied: that is to say, the ideal audience is always male. Just as the ideal object of its vision is always feminine.

As a further example of Hwang's anemic and unsatisfactory criticism to Orientalist fallacy, let us consider the Song's undressing in front of Gallimard. Hwang brings the drama to a close by revealing Song's maleness to Gallimard. This exposure is noteworthy especially from the viewpoint of inversion. Here, Song, the transvestite, becomes a gay man, and Gallimard, the straight man, a transvestite. The East reclaims its masculinity and the West is now degraded into feminine place. In the case of *M. Butterfly*, deficiency is embedded in the use of inversion as the primary critical stratagem. Ironically enough, the femininity is

not authorized here until it is unrobed to disclose a masculine essence. In the end, the undressing of Song merely proves that what is called the ideal woman divulges the androcentricity of *M. Butterfly* itself rather than the Orientalist misconception.

Hwang's attempt is frustrated by the fact that his main critical tactic is an upset of positional power relations in terms of race and gender, not a rejection of the structure.<sup>(11)</sup> Thus, the opposition between male and female, or Occident and Orient, is never finally demolished.

### Conclusion

In the final scene of *M. Butterfly*, where Gallimard dresses himself in Japanese kimono and draws his knife to his breast, he realizes that he has become the tragic female protagonist of the Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, and this realization allows him to transcend Song, who only impersonated the ideal womanhood and who could not, in the end, perform the suicidal deed that would have made him perfect. But Gallimard becomes the inviolate dream even to this extent in terms of both gender and race. He transforms himself into Butterfly, the very reflection of his own desire. Unlike Kim in *Miss Saigon*, Gallimard as Butterfly knows that it is his desire to be desired, and accordingly to be confined within the logic of Orientalist narrative, that submits him. And Gallimard experiences what Song said in the early part of the drama, that only a man can be a perfect woman, because she is, by definition, his own creation.

Hwang's critique of the Orientalist fancy, as

elegant, clever and theatrically resourceful as it is, seems to be rather enervated in the end. A simple compression would be something like this: the East is neither female nor weak, and it cannot be dominated and will not be obedient; it is powerful, self-confident, self-possessed and, therefore, male. This is why Song undressed in front of Gallimard, that is to say, to show his maleness. Hwang's strategy betrays the androcentric structure embedded in *M. Butterfly* and also the preceding Butterfly dramas where the ideal object of the audience's vision is supposed to be feminine.

Judging from the above, Butterfly figures, including Gallimard, represent the ideal objects which link imperialism, sexism and racism. Being dependent upon the predominant structures of meaning and power, Butterflies has been depicted in the binary oppositions, such as male/female, rich/poor, colored/white, master/servant, East/West and so on. As closing remark, it may not be too far from the truth to pin down Butterfly as follows: it is a negative projection of the dominant power to tame the other by labelling it as absolute difference.

### Notes

1. Reito Adachi, "Transformations of Butterfly Figure: From a Greek Myth of Psyche to *M. Butterfly* (1)," *Bulletin of Mimasaka Women's College and Mimasaka Junior College*, 40 (1995): 29-35.
2. I will use the term "Orientalism" to refer to the notion that the East is mysterious,

enigmatic, and therefore ultimately inferior.

3. Obviously, the problem of how race and gender are related in history is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, these complex webs of social power are in some important sense the objects of the David Henry Hwang's play. This is especially true of the Orient/Occident divide. And we should not neglect questions about how gender is itself mutually defined by race and ethnicity. It is on these grounds that Hwang writes *M. Butterfly*.

4. James S. Moy, "The Death of Asia on the American Field of Representation," *Reading the Literature of Asian America*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple U.P., 1992), p. 356.

5. David Henry Hwang, Afterword, *M. Butterfly* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 94-100.

6. For a further discussion of functions of theatrical speech, see Kenichi Sasaki, *Structure of Dramatic Dialogue* (Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 1985).

佐々木健一, 『せりふの構造』, 東京: 筑摩書房, 1985年.

7. This is true of his racial background. As a French Vietnamese, Engineer is placed on the ambivalent boundary between East and West.

8. Hwang, "An Interview with John L. Digaetani," *A Search for a Postmodern Theater: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), p. 162.

9. As is now generally accepted, gender and sex must be distinguished from each other.

Although sex and the biological body itself are, in some senses, discursive constructions, I am concerned here only with the historical constructions of gender as a social identity that encompasses but is not reducible to sexuality.

10. Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, p. 54. Subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers are included parenthetically in the text as (p. -).

11. Hwang describes the drama as "a deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*." See Hwang, Afterword, *M. Butterfly*, p. 95. And Hwang as a parodist is argued in Adachi, "Parodying the Stereotypes: David Henry Hwang's Dramatic Strategy," *Bulletin of Mimasaka Women's College and Mimasaka Junior College*, 39 (1994): 31-42.

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