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From *Madame Butterfly* to *M. Butterfly*:
Changing Narratives of Oriental Womanhood in the 20th Century

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Throughout its performance history, *Madame Butterfly* (1904) by Giacomo Puccini has attracted significant intrigue and controversies. Through its protagonist Cio-Cio San, the opera depicts Asian femininity as weak-willed, servile and ultimately powerless in the face of Western forces. In doing so, it upholds Orientalist values that perceive the West as masculine and more powerful, and the East as feminine and submissive. This narrative strips Asian women from any individual subjectivity; their personal identity is subsumed under the identity of the nation. In this paper, I will examine the trajectory of this narrative of Orientalism through *Madame Butterfly* and its two modern adaptations, *Miss Saigon* (1989) and *M. Butterfly* (1993). I will focus particularly on the reception of these works through an analysis of both informal and formal sources, including editorials, newspaper reviews, forum posts, advertisements and scholarly works. Through this analysis, I aim to show how Orientalist womanhood is first accepted and embraced by the native audiences of *Madame Butterfly*, is rejected by the audiences of *Miss Saigon* and finally subverted in *M. Butterfly*. Orientalism, once accepted as an appropriate framework for viewing Asian women, became obsolete and repudiated over time.

The transformations in critical receptions of the three works alongside changing historical and political contexts reflect a gradual evolution in society's views of East-West power relations, national identity, and the constructs of femininity and gender.

Madama Butterfly and the Acceptance of Orientalism

In *Madama Butterfly* (1904), Giacomo Puccini uses a significant amount of Orientalist narratives and tropes in his portrayal of the main character, Cio-Cio San, a Japanese geisha who fell in love with Lieutenant Pinkerton, an American navy officer. Throughout the opera, Cio-Cio San is the typical archetype of the Oriental woman—weak-willed, feeble and devoid of any subjectivity. Her identity is entirely reliant on the nation and on the people around her. Being madly in love with Lieutenant Pinkerton, She is willing to forsake her Japanese identity and her personal sense of self to embrace him. However, when she is rejected, she commits suicide in the most “Oriental” way possible—stabbing herself with a seppuku knife. Torn between her Japanese identity and her desire to reconstitute herself as American, at her demise, she is unable to “overcome her Japanese womanhood” and dies as neither Japanese or American.¹ The moral weaknesses and ultimate demise of Cio-Cio San represents the inferiority of Japan and Japanese nationalism in contrast to superior Western forces, represented by the Lieutenant. In this way, Puccini enforces the familiar “narrative conventions” of “West wins over East, Man over Woman, White Man over Asian Woman.”² Through the image of Cio-Cio San, he constructs a

¹ Dorinne K. Kondo, "M. Butterfly": Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique*, no. 16 (1990): 10.

² Kondo, 11.

linear, Orientalist notion of identity that tethers the Asian woman's personhood to nationalism and a binary, asymmetric power dynamic between the East and the West.

The libretto (storyline) of *Madama Butterfly* is based on Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), an autobiographical account of Loti's affair with a Japanese woman. As a naval officer, Loti frequents the ports of Nagasaki, where he meets and enters into a romantic relationship with a local woman. After a while, however, he finds the relationship to be too tedious and resents the idea of marrying an Asian woman; in fact, he sees the woman as "a product that has been sold to him on false pretenses."³ Just like Lieutenant Pinkerton, he decides to leave her after only being "married" to her for a few months. This story is not uncommon during late-19th century Japan, especially amongst the geishas in Japanese port towns. Upon the first arrival of American naval squadrons in Japan, the Shogunate was eager to please the incoming naval officers, and offered up the women of the town as a tool for diplomacy. In the treaty negotiations between the two countries, the Shogunate claimed that the Americans could have "plenty of Japanese wives," pointing to the geishas as a reward of sorts for a successful negotiation; this was the beginning of the American impression that Japan was a "sexually loose" society.⁴ However, the Shogunate quickly retracted this initial position. By the 1870s, they begin cracking down on geishas by promoting a national agenda that prostitution, especially between foreigners and Japanese women, is shameful and abhorrent. This corresponds with a period of anti-Western sentiment that swept through Japan, initiated by the *shishi*, an anti-Shogunate activist group.⁵ The government passed a series of legislations that made all

³ Kawaguchi Yoko. "Madame Butterfly's Antecedents: The Women of the Ports and Japanese 'Wives'," in *Butterfly's Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture* (Yale University Press, 2010), 119.

⁴ Kawaguchi, 123.

⁵ Ibid., 125

marriages or sexual liaisons between Japanese geishas and foreign nationals. Despite the change in political landscape, prostitution and clandestine marriages between foreigners and Japanese port women were still commonplace. However, these women are now berated and abused by their local communities for inflicting shame upon the nation. Women who entered into liaison with foreigners were also mistreated by the brothels and the foreigners themselves; even in marriage they “showed their Western masters such pathetic gratitude that one would think they were freed slaves.”⁶ These geishas of the Japanese port towns were thus placed in precarious social positions: on the one hand, they were not able to occupy any social or political space in Japan, while on the other hand, they were never able to reconstitute themselves as Westerners. Puccini’s *Cio-Cio San* was modeled after these women. Marrying Lieutenant Pinkerton with the hope of being able to escape the dishonorable and shameful life of a geisha, she would rather commit suicide than returning to such a life. Puccini uses the image of Japanese port women, which he co-opted from the narratives of Western men in Japan such as Loti, to form a broad representation of Oriental women as oppressed, devoid of subjectivity, and desperately in need of Western salvation.

When *Madame Butterfly* was first introduced in Japan in 1914, the reception of the opera corresponded directly with this narrative of national shame surrounding geishas. This reception came despite the Imperial Theater’s attempt to bring more native Japanese elements into the opera, replacing some of Puccini’s music with a medley of Japanese folk songs in the hope of repressing some critics’ fears of the “rapid Westernization...encroaching on traditional cultural values” in Japanese opera houses.⁷ In the *Asahi Shimbun* publication on January 5, 1914. A

⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁷ Arthur Groos, "Return of the Native: Japan in "Madama Butterfly/Madama Butterfly" in Japan," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (1989): 117.

critic expresses his concern that the opera, being “shamelessly performed with singing and dancing... on the stage of the Imperial of all places,” casts a “contemptuous glance at the customs and habits of loose women in such places as Yokohama.” However, he remarks that since the opera shows “the image of Japanese women held by Westerners, this opera could be of some use... [in showing how Westerners think about Japan.”⁸ Perhaps due to the unfavorable critical responses, the opera did not receive a significant amount of public attention at its release in 1914. The *Japan Times*, Japan’s most prominent English-speaking publication at the time, only featured the opera in one advertisement on its advertisement section on January 16.⁹

However, *Madame Butterfly* began gaining significant traction in Japan with the rise to stardom of opera singer Tamaki Miura. The increase in public attention over Miura and over *Madame Butterfly* is reflected in the changes in the way in which *The Japan Times* featured the opera in advertisements and articles over the course of the decade. From 1914 to 1920, this newspaper tracked Miura’s career as she travelled all over Europe to perform in the Puccini opera. Headlines such as “Japanese Prima Donna a Success in ‘Madame Butterfly’,” “Puccini meets Miura” demonstrates the increase in public interest over the opera and a sense of national pride over the Miura’s success in it.^{10 11} The national shame over “loose women” before had now been replaced by total support for the opera with Miura as its star. The Japanese public’s embrace of the opera heightened to its peak as Miura made her return to Japan. In the June 9,

⁸ Groos, 179.

⁹ *The Japan Times*, 5 January 1914. There’s no further mention of *Madama Butterfly* in any other edition of *The Japan Times* in the year 1914, and also no critical review of the opera.

¹⁰ *The Japan Times*, December 1917. Most mentions of *Madama Butterfly* in the newspaper from 1915 - 1920 are in relation to Tamaki Miura’s career, with the occasional exception of an advertisement for a recital that features one or two arias from the opera.

¹¹ *The Japan Times*, February 1919.

1922 edition of *The Japan Times*, an article about Miura's performance in Tokyo describes the audiences as "more and more swayed by the power and charm of [Miura]'s voice until it came to a climax of deafening applause when she presented the famous aria from 'Madame Butterfly'."

¹² This demonstrates not just the Japanese people's pride in Miura but also their perception of her as an embodiment of the role of Cio-Cio San. Miura was perceived in Japan, just as she was in the West, to be the perfect Oriental woman. In an article in *The Japan Times* in December 22, 1915 entitled "The Japanese 'Madame Butterfly'," the author writes about Miura as a "very appealing little person, this tiny soprano, eager, almost bird-like in her movements... she looks you over sidewise, shyly but humorously." ¹³ She exhibits all the traits of the archetypical Oriental womanhood—elusive, delicate and sensual. As the Japanese public accepted and embraced Miura as Cio-Cio San, they also internalized and accepted the Western views of Oriental femininity as representative of the Japanese womanhood.

Miss Saigon and the Rejection of Orientalism

Miss Saigon (1989) by Claude-Michel Schonberg, as a modern adaptation of *Madama Butterfly*, shares many of the opera's Orientalist tropes, while also presenting a different perspective of the Oriental womanhood. The musical brings back many of the same Oriental archetypes as used by Puccini in the depiction of its lead female character, Kim. While Kim's character development is more complex than that of Cio-Cio San, she still exhibits the same feebleness and lack of subjectivity. As a prostitute, Kim is also hypersexualized; the musical

¹² *The Japan Times*, June 1922.

¹³ *The Japan Times*, December 1915.

portrays prostitution as deeply immoral, and Kim as the innocent woman who desperately needs to be rescued from it.¹⁴ Being set in the context of the Vietnam War, the musical reflects the history of Vietnamese bar girls, who served in a similar role as the women of the ports in Japan during the 19th-century. These bar girls were placated by the South Vietnam government as a tool of diplomacy to strengthen relations with America during the war. However, they faced constant abuse and mistreatment from the American soldiers. Americans perceived Vietnamese bar girls not only as merely immoral and subservient, but also as “untrustworthy and outright dangerous.”¹⁵ The American soldiers feared that these girls would be Northern spies who use their sordid sexuality to deceive them into exposing state secrets. In an article published in Maclean’s Magazine on February 1, 1968, the author, Goffredo Parise, describes Saigon bar girls as participating in a sort of “sexual warfare.”¹⁶ He describes the nights in Saigon as a time during which “tens of thousands of Vietnamese girls begin their fraudulent, parasitic work, clinging to the body of a GI like smiling and very delicate little spiders.”¹⁷ He contrasts the image of Asian women in “conventional Technicolor picture” as “gentle, extremely feminine, tender-hearted creatures who fall in love with a foreigner” with the “grasping, cunning and avaricious” women of reality.¹⁸ This image of the fraudulent and dangerous bar girls is reflected in the other prostitutes in the Dragon Ladies brothel in *Miss Saigon*. This evolution in Western views of the Oriental womanhood, now encompassing a tension between sexual naivete and

¹⁴ Celine Parreñas, Shimizu, "The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Hypersexuality in 'Miss Saigon'," *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 2 (2005): 251.

¹⁵ Sabine Lee, "Bui Doi: The Children of the Vietnam War." In *Children Born of War in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 117.

¹⁶ Goffredo Parise, "The Sexual Warfare of Saigon's Bar Girls," *MacClean's*. February 1, 1968, 24.

¹⁷ Parise, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

debauchery, reflects the changing social contexts of the 1960s and 1970s, as more explorations of sexuality become a part of societal discourse. It also reflects a more complex East/West power structure that is no longer purely asymmetric between the Western oppressor and Oriental oppressed. The Vietnam War contributes to genuine Western fear and antipathy against the Orient, and challenges the narrative of Asian weakness. The identity of the Oriental woman is still tied to nationalism, yet the characteristics that define the Oriental femininity experienced transformations along with the shifting power dynamic between the East and the West.

Unlike the Japanese audience, which embraced *Madama Butterfly*, the Vietnamese audiences of *Miss Saigon* were immediately cognizant and critical of the Orientalist elements in the musical. The musical faced significant pushback from the Vietnamese community both domestically and overseas. In an interview, Viet Thanh Nguyen, a famous author of the Vietnamese diaspora, denounced *Miss Saigon* as “terrible, fulfilling every Orientalist trope that [he] had studied and was opposed to,” as it demonstrates “the way that Americans, and Europeans, have imagined the Vietnam War as a racial and sexual fantasy that negates the war’s political significance and Vietnamese subjectivity and agency.”¹⁹ In a later editorial in the New York Times, he called for Broadway to “close the theaters” on the musical, arguing that entertainment should not “come from a deep-seated well of derogatory images of Asians and Asian women.”²⁰ This call for Broadway to shut down productions of the musical inspires the establishment of a movement called “Don’t Buy Miss Saigon.” Using the hashtag #missedsaigon, the organization continually stages protests at performances of the musical and

¹⁹ Diep Tran, “I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It,” *American Theater*, last modified April 11, 2018, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/04/13/i-am-miss-saigon-and-i-hate-it/>.

²⁰ Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Closing the Curtains on Miss Saigon,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/opinion/miss-saigon-play.html>.

has a long-running petition on their website and social media platforms.²¹ The front page of their website features a quote by Stephen B. Young, a Harvard professor, who criticizes *Miss Saigon* for its “corrupting Orientalism that is no longer culturally permissible... that cruelly stereotyped Vietnamese nationalists as moral midgets.”²² The organization also features a “Truth Project” that showcases Asian women’s reactions to the musical. The project, being displayed on Tumblr, features photos of women holding up the sign “Miss Saigon lies about Asian women” along with their personal stories of how they have been affected by and have transcended Oriental stereotypes.²³ An individual writes “I was born in Vietnam during the war, adopted by an American soldier and brought to the US in 1970. I was raised by a white family in a majority white town where Rambo was believable and Asian women were either oppressed wives or prostitutes... It has taken me years to purge my psyche of those popularized lies and develop a strong sense of identity. Missed Saigon is NOT my story.”²⁴ Audiences of *Miss Saigon* recognized Kim as representing a Vietnamese national identity that is based solely on Western perception and construct. In a passionate editorial in *Việt Báo*, a Vietnamese publication on American affairs, the author remarks that “Kim was pushed to center stage as a sacrificial pawn in a transnational chess match.”²⁵ He claims that even though the Vietnam War had been over for decades, Vietnamese people are still “cultural and political casualties” to Western

²¹ “About #MissedSaigon,” *Don’t Buy Miss Saigon*, 2013. <http://www.dontbuymiss-saigon.com/about/>.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Don’t Buy Miss Saigon: Our Truth Project,” *Tumblr*, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/>.

²⁴ Don’t Buy Miss Saigon: Our Truth Project. *Tumblr*, “I am a Vietnamese American, woman of color and transracial adoptee...” September 21, 2013. <https://dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/post/61818683511/i-am-a-vietnamese-american-woman-of-color-and>

²⁵ Tây Trung Nguyễn, “Miss Saigon: Phận Việt Nam,” *Việt Báo*. April 30, 2010. <https://vvn.vietbao.com/a164934/miss-saigon-phan-viet-nam>

hegemonies. Finally, he laments, “Please God, let my daughter be Miss Sydney, Miss Washington, Miss Paris, but never Miss Saigon!”²⁶

Miss Saigon’s Orientalist themes were also recognized by Western and global audiences since the musical’s first premiere. In a review in the Los Angeles Times, a critic remarks that the musical “dances on a sliver of a line between exploitation and the show-biz equivalent of passionate commentary about exploitation”; ultimately, however, its overwhelmingly problematic trivialization of South East Asia causes it to be “pathetic” and “dehumanizing.”²⁷ A critic in The New York Times echoes a similar problem, criticizing *Miss Saigon* for saying “merely that the North Vietnamese were villains and the Americans were misguided, bungling do-gooders” and “generalizing” the experiences of Vietnamese people during the war “into meaninglessness.”²⁸ Not only critics, but casual audiences also voiced their problems with the musical on online forum discussion boards. On a discussion thread on BroadwayWorld entitled “Miss Saigon + racism,” the thread members compare the Orientalist elements of *Miss Saigon* with *Madame Butterfly* in weighing whether the musical should still be performed.²⁹ User GavestonPS comments that although banning *Madame Butterfly* “would derive us from some of the greatest music ever written,” and the opera could be excused because it is “a product of its time,” he doesn’t see *Miss Saigon* to be “in the same class.”³⁰ User Diep Tran adds their own

²⁶ Nguyễn. “Miss Saigon: Phận Việt Nam.”

²⁷ Linda Winer, “STAGE REVIEW : 'Miss Saigon' Finally Lands on Broadway.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-04-12-ca-258-story.html>.

²⁸ Frank Rich, “Review/Theater; 'Miss Saigon' Arrives, From the Old School.” *The New York Times*, April 12, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/12/theater/review-theater-miss-saigon-arrives-from-the-old-school.html>.

²⁹ “Miss Saigon + Racism,” *BroadwayWorld*, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?thread=1102732>.

³⁰ “Miss Saigon + Racism,” *BroadwayWorld*

perspective, “Orientalist bullshit like Miss Saigon, The King and I, the Mikado, it’s not for Asian people. We are just there as raw material to make white people money... they don’t give a shit about our pain, our trauma, our stories.”.³¹ This sentiment is echoed by other discussion members; even though some argue that the musical should still be performed, most recognize its Orientalism and racism. While *Miss Saigon* is still performed today, its audiences, unlike audiences of *Madama Butterfly*, are aware and critical of its portrayal of the Oriental womanhood, and see it as unfit for modern society. This reaction demonstrates a systematic rejection of Orientalism post-Vietnam War, as conventional Orientalist narratives become dismantled along with the deconstruction of Western hegemonic structures.

M. Butterfly and the Subversion of Orientalism

M. Butterfly (1991) by David Henry Hwang, later adapted for the cinema by David Cronenberg, serves as a direct response to *Madama Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. The play centers around a love affair between a Chinese opera crossdresser, Song Li Ling, and a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard. Gallimard falls in love with Song without knowing that Song was actually a man cross-dressing as a woman; it was also later revealed that Song had been a spy for the Chinese government, infiltrating into the French government through Gallimard. *M. Butterfly* is a direct subversion of the portrayal of the Oriental womanhood in Puccini’s opera. *M. Butterfly* inverts the notions of East/West asymmetric power dynamic, as the “victim” in this story is actually from the West, and also presents a fluidity in gender roles and conventions that challenges the binary assumptions of *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. Feminine identity,

³¹ Ibid.

here, has transcended the archetypal portrayals of womanhood, and presented as a “location in the shifting field of power relations.”³² Gallimard perceives Song Liling as the perfect Oriental woman, who “completely surrenders to and admires his European masculinity”; throughout the play, “Song performs and Gallimard perceives the stereotypical Oriental woman.”³³ Gallimard’s preconceived notions of the submissive and sensual Oriental woman led to his reckoning and eventual demise. *M. Butterfly*, then, serves a modern challenge to the antiquated notions of gender, sexuality and national identity in both the aforementioned opera and musical.

M. Butterfly is based on the true story of the sexual affair between diplomat Bernard Boursicot and opera singer/spy Shi Pei Pu. Boursicot and Shi Pei Pu’s liaison lasted 20 years, during which time Boursicot was completely oblivious to Pei Pu’s real gender identity. This obliviousness is situated in a landscape of shifting narratives on gender and womanhood in 1960s China. When he arrived in China to serve as a diplomat, Boursicot was instantly fascinated by what he observed to be the new gender norms and behaviors, such as women dressing in “Mao suits” and having short hair.³⁴ These gender norms were a part of the Mao-era notion of “genderlessness,” which had been promoted as a revolution for “sexual equality” in the Cultural Revolution.³⁵ Chinese women were now considered equal to their male counterparts, and began to participate in traditionally masculine, manual labor industries. The CCP promoted slogans such as “women hold up half the sky” and Mao Zhedong himself declared that “the times have

³² Kondo, 20.

³³ Ilka Saal, "Performance and Perception: Gender, Sexuality, and Culture in David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly"." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 43, no. 4 (1998): 634.

³⁴ Francky Knapp, “Loving Monsieur Butterfly: A Tale of Espionage, Romance and the Transgender Soprano,” July 4, 2019, <https://www.messynessychic.com/2019/07/04/loving-monsieur-butterfly-a-tale-of-espionage-romance-and-the-transgender-soprano/>.

³⁵ Yang Wenqi, and Fei Yan. “The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao’s China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution.” *China Information* 31, no. 1 (March 2017): 63.

changed, men and women are the same.”³⁶ The CCP erases all traditional definitions of femininity; feminine behaviors and qualities no longer had a place in the newly-constructed genderless society, and became explicitly discouraged. While the alleged goal of this movement was gender equality, it was also an instrument of oppression. Mao used the “utopian image” of an ungendered society to sidestep “any discussion of women’s liberation”; gender thus became a secondary concern to politics.³⁷ Femininity, regarded as an antiquated notion, means that women are now evaluated based on the standards of men, and the female identity was thus tethered to masculinity. Despite these significant issues, Mao’s genderless policies still ushered in a new era of gender fluidity that challenges the previous assumptions of female subordination at the core of Orientalist views on femininity. Women in China, being tied to the Maoist national identity, could no longer be viewed as submissive victims, and did not follow the feminine archetypes of the traditional Oriental woman. Shi Pei Pu, as Song Li Ling, used these archetypes to create a delusion of femininity which Boursicot never once questioned. Boursicot fell victim to Pei Pu due to his preconceived notions of the Asian womanhood, informed by Orientalist Western portrayals, and his ignorance of the changing constructs of gender within the 1960s Chinese society.

The play by David Henry Hwang premiered to rousing success, and is widely-acknowledged as an artful response to *Madama Butterfly*; however, interestingly, the movie version by David Cronenberg debuted in 1993 to much more mixed critiques. A major critique shared by both casual moviegoers and critics was that the movie did not go far enough in challenging and subverting the Oriental archetypes, especially in its portrayal of Song Li Ling

³⁶ Yang Wenqi, and Fei Yan, 67.

³⁷ Ibid.

through the actor John Lone. In a review published in *Variety*, a critic remarks that the movie was “icy, surprisingly conventional, and never truly convincing.”³⁸ This is partly because John Lone looks like a “man in drag” and not the Oriental woman that David Henry Hwang envisioned. Thus, “disbelief is never suspended” and the two characters “get all dressed up in fancy threads” only to disappoint.³⁹ Another critic for the magazine *Empire* also shares the same comment regarding John Lone, saying that Lone’s otherwise “marvellous performance” is “let down by his face, almost always suggesting in drag rather than suggesting true androgyny.”⁴⁰ This makes the subversions of Orientalism in the movie much less convincing. This criticism of John Lone is echoed by audiences on movie rating websites Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB. A reviewer on Rotten Tomatoes by username Nick Davis calls the movie a “rare misstep for director Cronenberg, neutering a challenging play with a bizarrely conservative filming approach.”⁴¹ User Alisson M shares this sentiment, saying that the movie only addresses the subject matter in the most “oblique and unsatisfactory manner.”⁴² Clive-Silas points out that *M. Butterfly* is so unconvincing and “ordinary” because it fails to demonstrate the extent of Gallimard’s self-delusion.⁴³ Other reviewers similarly express their disappointment with the movie’s failure to convincingly convey Song Li Ling’s gender fluidity, and Gallimard’s

³⁸ Todd McCarthy, “M. Butterfly,” *Variety*, September 10, 1993, <https://variety.com/1993/film/reviews/m-butterfly-3-1200433421/>.

³⁹ Todd McCarthy, “M. Butterfly,” *Variety*.

⁴⁰ Kim Newman, “M. Butterfly Review,” *Empire*, January 1, 2000, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/m-butterfly-review/>.

⁴¹ Nick Davis. “A rare mis-step for director Cronenberg,” *Rotten Tomatoes*, January 5, 2004. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/m_butterfly/reviews?type=user.

⁴² Allison S, “The main problem with M. Butterfly,” *Rotten Tomatoes*, November 7, 2018. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/m_butterfly/reviews?type=user.

⁴³ Clive-Silas, “Cronenberg, Hwang and Irons Miss Some Opportunities,” IMDB, June 10, 2003, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107468/reviews?ref=tt_urv.

preconceived Orientalist beliefs. The audience reception of *M. Butterfly* serves as a case study on how audiences have not only thoroughly rejected Orientalist notions of femininity, but have also developed an understanding of gender expression and identity as fluid and not essentialist. This shows that reductive frameworks of viewing gender such as Oriental femininity no longer have a place within modern society.

The differences in audiences' reception of *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon* and *M. Butterfly* reflect changing historical contexts that no longer place the Orient in an inferior power dynamic to the West, and the Oriental woman as the submissive victim. These differences also reflect gradually more complex understandings of gender and sexuality that upend narrative conventions of Oriental femininity. Despite the modern audiences' explicit rejection of Orientalism, Orientalist views towards Asian women still pervades in cinema, theater and popular culture. Asian women in Hollywood movies are still stereotyped as feeble and desperately needing Western saviorism (*Memoirs of a Geisha*), and as hypersexualized beings with no agency (*Shanghai Noon*, *X Men*). *Miss Saigon*, despite eliciting such significant controversies, continued to be revived and performed on Broadway and London stages. While Orientalist works like these will always exist, we, as audiences, need to be more proactive in our responses to them. Through analysis of audience receptions, it is apparent that most are able to recognize the problematic nature of Orientalist media, yet movements like "Do Not Buy Miss Saigon" receive very little attention and are often sidelined. These movements need to receive greater and more coordinated support from the Asian and global community. There needs to be a push for people to think more critically and reflectively about works such as *Madama Butterfly*, and whether there is a way in which its Orientalism could be separated from its undeniable

artistic value. Most importantly, however, it is imperative that there is greater recognition for media directed, composed, or produced by Asian women. The most powerful way of counteracting Orientalist narratives is by giving Asian women a platform to tell their stories.

About the author

Nam Do is a rising junior and QuestBridge Scholar at Pomona College in Claremont, CA. He is pursuing a double major in Classical Languages and Literature and Music. He is passionate about examining the historical, political and cultural legacies of imperialism and colonialism, especially in East and Southeast Asia. He enjoys singing, playing piano or violin, and learning new languages in his free time.

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