

East is East and West is West - a literary and historical view from the perspective of *Madame Butterfly*

Although Kipling's famous poem in fact suggests that all men are the same on the battlefield, whatever their racial or cultural background, the opening line 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet' (1889) has become a cliché in describing the relationship between Eastern and Western cultures. But their fundamental differences and consequent misunderstandings, as well as mutual exploitations, has been the stuff of many a work of fiction. In this paper I will look at how one of these – the story immortalised, though not created by Giacomo Puccini in his 1904 opera *Madama Butterfly* – is driven by that misunderstanding, and at the same time was prompted by cross-cultural commercial interests - a developing commercial and cultural relationship between Asia, specifically Japan, and the West.

My PhD by practice is centred on the writing of a contemporary, gay, screen adaptation of this story, set in Bangkok. I am investigating where the story came from, as well as how it has been adapted, used, and indeed abused over the 120 years of its existence. In particular I am looking at how 'queering' the story - making the relationship homosexual – has driven quite specific and far-reaching changes.

During the second half of the 19th century, and at the beginning of the 20th, Europe was becoming fascinated with all things Japanese – art, culture, ceramics. This was a result of the ending of the Edo period identified by van Rij (2001). In his *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West*, Lambourne says 'The catalyst for the phenomenon of Japonisme was the opening up of Japan to international trade in 1858.' (2005:7). This followed more than 200 years during which Japan 'embraced a policy known as *sakoku* – 'the secluded country' (2005:7).

The Japanese artefacts which were being transported west in ever-increasing quantities quickly became much sought-after novelties. As its name implies, the fashion began in France – Lambourne reports the term's first use in 1872 by French author and collector Philippe Burty – but it spread throughout Europe as well as to America and 'was at its height in the 1880s' (2005:7). Lambourne also relates how the quote from Alexandre Dumas, fils' play *Le Francillon* 'everything is Japanese

nowadays' (1887) 'rapidly became a widely-used catchphrase' (2005:131), how the fashion was lampooned in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), and how: 'It was at first within the covers of a successful novel that the artistic cross-pollination of Japan and Europe, first on the page and later on the stage, effectively took place.' (2005:135)

That novel was *Madame Chrysanthème*, written by the French author Pierre Loti in 1887. Loti was the pen name of French naval officer Julien Viaud, and the novella is largely autobiographical, telling the story of his marriage, arranged by a broker, to a Japanese girl in Nagasaki. This was a temporary arrangement, for the duration of Viaud's posting in the harbour, and for which the girl was paid. It was a perhaps less salubrious aspect of Japonisme, which Burke-Gaffney describes: 'By..1868..The practice of keeping Japanese women as temporary wives had gained such a reputation that it was known widely by the nickname 'Japanese marriage' among sailors and travellers' (2004:28). This was clearly a way of offering a veneer of respectability to what was, in effect, prostitution, and could be described as an early example of what we would now call sex tourism.

As Lambourne (2005) makes clear, Loti's novella was a popular work, but it prompted moral outrage from a number of his contemporaries, including Félix Régamey, who wrote the satirical '*Le Cahier Rose de Madame Chrysanthème (The Pink Notebook of Madame Chrysanthème)*' (1893) which told the story from the girl's perspective, demonstrating an opinion of her husband rather lower than the man's of himself: 'My friends finally called him the Perfumed Rhinoceros' (1893 – quoted Reed, 2010:77). But it was American author, John Luther Long, who, in 1898, published another novella entitled *Madame Butterfly* in which a 'Japanese Marriage' is seen to have serious consequences. He was apparently prompted both by Loti and by the apparently true story told him by his sister, Jennie Correll, who lived in Nagasaki, of a 'tea-house girl' who had married and been impregnated, but then abandoned by an American sailor. Long's story is disarmingly simple. An American naval officer, Pinkerton, while stationed in Nagasaki, makes a temporary marriage to a 15-year-old Japanese Geisha girl, Cho Cho San (known as 'Butterfly'), before returning to the US leaving her pregnant with his son, and promising to return 'when the robins nest'. She is completely in love with him, rejects her family and an alternative suitor, Yamadori, and remains faithful to Pinkerton, waiting patiently, and

in penury, for three years until he finally returns, accompanied by his American wife. Despairing, and driven by her father's Samurai code of honour, Butterfly threatens to kill herself with her father's sword, but is saved by her maid Suzuki, and returns to her life as a Geisha, accompanied by her son.

Unquestionably written in the light of Loti's story - there are many similarities and common details - this was the primary ancestor of the Puccini opera, via American impresario David Belasco's crude 1900 theatrical adaptation. This latter was clearly commercially prompted by a thirst for Japonisme, and it is interesting to note how a change he made purely for theatrical purposes changed the story forever. In Long's version the girl, Cho Cho San, does not go through with her suicide, but instead goes back to her life as a Geisha along with her son. Belasco evidently did not feel this would make a strong enough final curtain, so had the girl go through with the suicide and die in Pinkerton's arms. Puccini, in London for the opening of his *Tosca*, saw this production and, despite not speaking a word of English, was so taken with the image of a mother sacrificing herself for her child, went backstage immediately after the show to acquire the rights to adapt the story, and the rest is history. *Madame Butterfly* has become forever the story of a mother who sacrifices herself for her child.

Prompted by the commercial value in the West of anything Japanese, this story is driven by misunderstanding between the two cultures. Pinkerton's understanding of Japanese law is that while he has taken a 999-year lease on the marital house, he can end it with one month's notice, and that he can end his marriage simply by walking out. Cho Cho San, on the other hand, has learned that American marriage is legally binding, permanent and very hard to dissolve. Each therefore operates on a misperception of the other's culture – wilful on one side, wishful on the other. Concomitant with this cultural misperception is the heteronormative paradigm of the older, dominant man and the younger, submissive woman which matches the macrocosm of the context, where the West is perceived as dominant – commercially and politically – and the East submissive. Lambourne describes 'the axiomatic assumption of Western superiority that falling in love with a white man entailed' (2005:134).

In more than a century since the *Madame Butterfly* story was first written it has been adapted, reworked and subverted in many ways, but my investigations suggest that

the overriding perception of the dominant West and submissive East has always governed it – perhaps not surprisingly, given that the story originated as a Western perception of the East and the vast majority of subsequent adaptations have looked in a similar direction, although there are some important exceptions, as I will discuss. In the early part of the 20th century various film versions of the story were made, most notably the silent 1915 version, directed by Sidney Olcott, with Mary Pickford in the eponymous role, and another made in 1932 starring Cary Grant and Sylvia Sydney, directed by Marion Gering. Both of these versions were capitalising on the story's fame following the Puccini opera, even though neither makes much reference to that, beyond some musical quotations in the latter. But there is no real attempt to offer a true picture of Japan or Japanese culture. The presentation is condescending, almost caricature, and the suggestion is always that it is intrinsically inferior to American culture. Although Long's original story was a clear moral comment on the Loti story which preceded it, with implicit criticism of a Western man's exploitative behaviour, and the Puccini opera similarly presents Pinkerton as a callous user (which caused some issues for him when the opera was presented to American audiences), there is little such criticism here. In these films the Pinkerton characters are seen as far less guilty – simply young men doing what young men do. The films are made by Westerners, mainly Americans, and totally aimed at Western audiences. American culture is perceived as supreme, and, like Loti before them, these Westerners are not perceived as to blame for amusing themselves with Eastern women.

It is important to remember the East/West political context at the time these films were made. Japonisme had given way to deteriorating trade relations and the sense of mutual threat, which would culminate in the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, the war in the Pacific and the 1945 atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his 2012 novel *The Heat of the Sun*, David Rain capitalizes on the chronology of that developing conflict's parallels with what might have happened to Pinkerton and Cho Cho San's son, Trouble. Here is a mixed-race young man who feels acutely divided loyalties as the US – Japanese conflict develops, and his father becomes an increasingly powerful American politician. The climax is, of course, the atomic bomb which destroys Trouble's birthplace.

It took playwright David Hwang, American-born to Chinese parents, to challenge the implicit racism and political chauvinism of the *Madame Butterfly* story. He was prompted by the apparently true story of a French diplomat who had had a 20-year relationship with a Chinese opera singer without realising that his lover was a man masquerading as a woman, and who had been passing secrets through his lover to the Chinese government. Although he knew the *Madame Butterfly* story only by reputation, Hwang immediately saw the parallels: 'I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype; speaking of an Asian woman, we would say. "She's pulling a Butterfly" which meant playing the submissive oriental number' (1989:95). And when Hwang listened to the opera he found few surprises: 'Sure enough, when I purchased the record, I discovered it contained a wealth of sexist and racist clichés, reaffirming my faith in Western culture.' (1989:95)

In *M. Butterfly* (1989) he ridicules and subverts both the microcosm of the Pinkerton/Butterfly relationship and the macrocosm of the dominant West/submissive East cultural context:

'what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage to a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah – you find it beautiful.' (1989:17)

Although this play is about a relationship which is, even if on one side unwittingly, homosexual, what it actually addresses is male fantasies about women, particularly male Western fantasies about Eastern women: 'I have often heard it said that "Oriental women make the best wives" (rarely is this heard from the mouths of Asian men, incidentally)' (1989:95). Inverting the *Madame Butterfly* story, here is Gallimard (the Pinkerton character) being exploited by a man pretending to be a woman whose spymaster is an utterly unfeminine Chinese woman who perceives Western men as weak because homosexual. Gallimard is the exploited one, so it is he who dons Butterfly's costume and commits ritual suicide.

Hwang was not the only adapter of this story to subvert that West/East perception. Boubllil and Schonberg were inspired, as Puccini had been before them, by the image of a mother giving up her child for a better life – in their case in Vietnam – to adapt the *Madame Butterfly* story into a musical, *Miss Saigon*. The ‘American Dream’, with its assumption of American superiority, is at the heart of this story. The idealistic concept of the USA as the perfect capitalist society where anyone can achieve anything is in evidence throughout the show. The Vietnamese prostitutes dream of it – *The Movie in my Mind*. Chris (their exonerated ‘Pinkerton’) sings to Kim (Butterfly): ‘On the other side of the earth, There’s a place where life still has worth’ (1991:Act 1). But his plaintive: ‘Christ, I’m an American. How could I fail to do good?’ (1991:Act 2) is heavily ironic in the macrocosmic context of the Vietnam war – perhaps America’s most disastrous military adventure. And there is equally crushing irony in Kim’s sacrifice of her life as the only way to ensure that her son can live in America just after the Engineer’s final production number ‘*The American Dream*’ has mercilessly mocked the whole concept. By the late 20th century, and certainly post-Vietnam, any assumption of Western cultural superiority was no longer acceptable, at least in terms of dramatic representations.

In 2011 the Japanese television company NHK made a two-part TV version of the *Madame Butterfly* story, entitled *Cho Cho* - a rare, and possibly unique example of an Eastern take on the story – and the different nuances are clear to see. The story is bookended at a performance of *Madama Butterfly*, with a member of the audience, who holds a copy of Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, explaining to a fellow member how it really happened – and it is a clear attempt by an Eastern film to redress the intrinsic Western chauvinism of the original story. Butterfly is motivated by a fervent desire to go to America, but she is no kind of prostitute. The lovers are of a similar age and the relationship is based on mutual love – Franklin (as the Pinkerton character is called) is ‘not interested in Nagasaki marriage’ (2011). The outcome of Butterfly’s suicide remains, still inspired by her Samurai father, but it is presented as the honourable act of a woman who has failed in her ambition. Unlike her literary forebears, she is not the victim of inevitable male, and Western dominance. Whether the context this film depicts is more or less historically accurate than what the original versions offered might be a matter for debate, but what is important is

that for a contemporary, Eastern audience the cultural balance has been redressed, with the East re-empowered.

For my 21st century gay adaptation of this story I have chosen Bangkok as a location, because it is known as a sex tourism destination for all sexualities. And I have discovered an interesting parallel between the rebalancing of East/West dominance/submission assumptions required by the contemporary setting and a similar rebalancing which must be made in the microcosm of the love affair when both participants are male. In the original story there is no question that the strong, rich, male, Western Pinkerton is exploiting the weak, poor, female, Eastern Cho Cho San. But for two males in contemporary Bangkok the situation is very different. As long ago as 1989, Peter Tatchell heard from Lek, a Bangkok bar boy:

"Are the bar boys exploited?" asks Lek. Answering his own question, he replies: "Foreign tourists come here, fall in love and leave broken-hearted. The boys earn a standard of living they could never otherwise enjoy. So who's exploiting who?" (1989)

It could be argued, of course, that any prostitution is intrinsically exploitative of those who sell sex, be they male or female, and that the Bangkok sex industry is set up to service Western sexual needs because there is money to be made out of that. Again as Tatchell points out:

The principle reason for working in the sex industry is poverty. "There's a lot of unemployment and jobs usually pay very little," says Lop, a 20 year old bar boy. "It's a good job and much better than going hungry." (1989)

But once that system is established, the boys and girls can use it to exploit their Western clients' weaknesses and wealth. Bishop and Robinson point out 'the customers indeed believe they are often the ones being taken advantage of' (1998:137), but describe this as the 'the myth of reciprocity' (ibid:188). However, there is an ambivalence in terms of the exploitation, as Tatchell suggests, though it might better be defined as the microcosm of personal exploitation within the macrocosm of a system generated by a stronger economy exploiting a weaker one. Another factor in this ambivalence is undoubtedly the greater access each culture has to information about the other through global communications – the internet and social media. A young man or woman in Asia today is, at least to an extent, more

empowered because far better able to know about Western culture, and therefore to find ways to exploit it, than Cho Cho San would have been a century ago. The reverse is also true.

There is a clear difference in the 21st century between the tourist, who wishes only to look at another country or culture, and the traveller, who wishes to engage with, experience and understand it. The former option was, of course, not available in the 19th century, though, as Viaud (who wrote *Madame Chrysanthème* under the name of Pierre Loti) demonstrated, it was still not uncommon to fail to take any genuine interest in a visited culture. And such an attitude is at the heart of the *Madame Butterfly* story. But the paradoxical question is whether a modern visitor will take advantage of the opportunity they now have fully to research the culture they will visit. Or will they prefer merely to exploit the ready availability of global flights to pay it a visit for a week or two – to be a tourist and look at the sights, and possibly take sexual advantage of the people, without exploring anything beyond that. In the 19th century Viaud, if only because of the greater challenge which travelling to the Far East presented, at least spent some weeks living in his ‘Japanese Marriage’ and observed the culture at first hand, even if only with detached amusement. His fictional descendant, Pinkerton, does the same.

So in my 21st century gay *Bangkok Butterfly*, there is the opportunity for my Cho Cho San (called Chai), in his contemporary context, to exploit, at least to an extent, as well as be exploited, and to be active, unlike his literary ancestor, who must in her context, as a woman, and as an Asian, always be passive. While Cho Cho San is at the mercy of the marriage-broker and then of her husband, Chai can seek out the man who, he hopes, will offer him what he wants – a ticket out of Bangkok. When Pinkerton leaves Cho Cho San she can only wait and hope, while Chai can travel to the UK in search of his departed lover, Ben.

But Chai’s power remains illusory. While he has youth, native wit and good looks, and can convert the latter into money - at least temporarily - he lacks the education and the citizenship which will give him the power which Ben enjoys, quite simply because of the country of his birth. He is temporarily empowered in the microcosm, but the macrocosm is still loaded against him.

The global communication and quick, inexpensive travel available in the 21st century offer ready and affordable opportunities to explore and to communicate with other

cultures. But all too often we do no more than observe each other in a very superficial way. When it took weeks to get to Asia, it felt genuinely exotic, and 'other'. Now that it takes just a few hours it feels perhaps too familiar, with the exotic otherness too easily hidden beneath a veneer of homogeneity. If that otherness is still there we do not need truly to discover or experience it, because we can fly home in a few hours. Paradoxically it is our wealth which permits that, which permits us to enjoy the sights of another culture from the comfortably familiar environment of a hotel or cruise liner. It is those who lack the wealth – the travelling youngsters and students on a gap year - who are obliged by that lack genuinely to experience and to engage with the culture - to be travellers rather than tourists.

The contemporary, gay context for my *Madame Butterfly* adaptation differs dramatically from that of its literary ancestors in so many ways. But the behaviour of the characters within my story feels authentic in being little changed.

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