THE AMERICAN BUTTERFLY: REFLECTIONS ON THE OTHER AND SELF IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF "MADAME BUTTERFLY"

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ABSTRACT

The "Madame Butterfly" narrative has been adapted repeatedly across media, including several early Hollywood adaptations: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). Through a cross analysis of the Orientalist discourse in these films, contextualized by historical U.S.-Asia Pacific relations, this project examines how the Butterfly narrative evolves, and how it in turn reflects the evolution of U.S. culture. It pays particular attention to the evolving technology of these films, which spans the industry's evolution from monochrome to color, silent to sound. How did such altered technology affect the reception of the "Madame Butterfly" narrative? Contemporary newspapers, journals, and magazines shed light on this query, revealing audiences' pre-occupation with notions of "authenticity." Each technological advancement (whether color, sound, etc.) heightened the audience's belief in the films' representations of a racialized Asia. Importantly, these adaptations presented an increasingly sympathetic portrait of the U.S., and in conflating myth and reality, they camouflaged U.S. intentions in the Pacific. The noble images put forth on screen justified imperialist tendencies, reinforced the "benevolent" in benevolent assimilation, and reinscribed American moral dominion and authority.
Keywords: Hollywood; Orientalism; Film.

INTRODUCTION

A young woman stands in an open field, arms outstretched, cheeks damp with tears, beckoning for her lover's return. In her floor-length petticoat, tapered jacket, fur stole, and matching cap, she is a model of Victorian fashion. But with Asian features, she is a peculiar, discomfiting sight—a clash of cultural images.

The young woman is Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, and the image hails from *Toll of the Sea*, a 1922 cinematic adaptation of the "Madame Butterfly" narrative. Wong portrays Lotus Blossom, a young Chinese woman in love with an American naval officer. In this particular scene, the officer informs her that he will be returning to America, and in her naïveté, she believes he is inviting her along. She quickly and proudly dons an American outfit, but one nearly 50 years out of fashion.

Crushed upon learning that he will be traveling alone, Lotus Blossom raises her arms upward in supplication, entreating his return.

The image of Lotus Blossom in Victorian-era garb simultaneously evokes conflicting sentiments. It is sweet, evidence of Lotus Blossom's love for her "husband." It is humorous, evidence of her ignorance of American cultural objects. It is tragic, evidence of her unassimilability and subsequent death. Filmmakers position Lotus Blossom as a site of sympathy and condescension; audiences lament her position, but support her estrangement. This juxtaposition portrays the binary opposition of Orient and Occident, as first proposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. The "Madame Butterfly" narrative influenced orientalist discourse from its very origin. This image is but one instance of Hollywood's use of the Butterfly tradition to construct Asian people as *other*.

This paper engages several early Hollywood adaptations of the Butterfly tradition: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). The 1915 and 1932 adaptations are set in Japan, while the 1922 adaptation takes place in China. Despite this discrepancy, the orientalist discourse remains uniform, thus this geographic specificity plays an important role in signaling US ignorance of Asia and its nations. Through a cross analysis of the orientalist discourse in these films, contextualized by historical US-Asia Pacific relations, I examine how the Butterfly narrative evolved, and how it, in turn, reflected the evolution of US culture. The intention is not simply to examine US projections of the Orient, but how these projections reflect the American self.

To accomplish this task, I examine the ways in which these three films construct and project the Orient. I do so by historic and narrative contextualization as well as a close-analysis of the films' visuals, specifically their *mise-en-scene*. I also pay particular attention to the narrative evolution of the American husband, ultimately suggesting that his sympathetic progression reflects US perception of its own innocence on the global stage. Next, I complicate the discourse of authenticity surrounding these films, specifically with regard to their evolving technology. By "discourse of authenticity," I refer to the various ways in which the popular press framed the portrayal of Asia in these films as natural. To support these arguments, the press emphasized cinema's advancing

technology, suggesting that technological progression (e.g. color film) authenticated the Butterfly's settings. Film's constructed nature impedes any such notion of the real, but that did not stymie popular belief. Ultimately, I posit that the representation of a sympathetic, surviving American figure, coupled with a discourse of authenticity, confirms American audience's perception of their intellectual and moral dominance over East Asian nations.

This research is informed by the work of American Studies scholars Amy Kaplan and David Brody, specifically in the way that US cultural production and consumption reflect popular values. Amy Kaplan addresses the ways in which the US's imperialist projects abroad have, in turn, influenced cultural creation on the home front. "Madame Butterfly" showcases US geographic mobility and suggests a cultural, if not military, domination. David Brody similarly suggests that circulated imagery of Asia not only supported the purportedly just cause of colonial expansion, but also created a space for American citizens to discuss globalization in a context previously unavailable to them (Brody 2014, 3). The visual, therefore, generated American perceptions of entire foreign nations and, through juxtaposition, forced audiences to consider their own place in relation, a place of perceived moral and intellectual superiority. US perception of oriental spaces, facilitated through the dissemination of films such as *Madame Butterfly,* reinforced assumptions of their own cultural dominance.

ORIGIN OF THE BUTTERFLY

Despite its global popularity across a range of media including literature, theater, and film, the narrative of "Madame Butterfly" originated in the United States. Popularized in the age of American imperialism, the narrative highlighted the perceived insurmountable cultural divide between "East" and "West," the "Orient" and the "Occident." Philadelphia lawyer John Luther published his short story "Madame Butterfly" in 1898, at the crest of expansionist rhetoric. Inspired by missionary experiences in Japan, the fictional story describes the relationship between an American naval officer, Colonel B.F. Pinkerton, and a Japanese maiden named Cho-Cho-San. Pinkerton "marries" Cho-Cho-San with the understanding that such arrangements are

temporary, but the young woman believes it to be real. He returns to America, and during his time away she gives birth to a son. Pinkerton eventually returns, with an American wife, and they suggest adopting the child. At the thought of losing her beloved husband and child, Cho-Cho-San attempts suicide with her father's ceremonial sword but survives, eventually fleeing her home with her child and maidservant.

Long's narrative is the foundation of the Butterfly tradition. Most adaptations follow this plot closely, even directly borrowing the names of the characters. Long therefore introduced America to the Butterfly archetype—an Asian woman who is faithful, docile, and ultimately tragic. It persists in modern media. This is remarkable in that popular culture's repeated use of the Butterfly—among other Asian stereotypes, including its inverse the Dragon Lady—established an identity for Asian Americans, one against which they now must fight. Asian American scholars, including Lisa Lowe and Renee Tajima-Peña, focus on identifying these stereotypes, as they have become normalized even within the Asian American community. Still, despite Long's problematic portrayal of Cho-Cho-San, there is something uniquely heroic, even anti-imperialist, about his heroine; it is something absent in future adaptations. Ultimately, she rewrites her story, choosing her country, her child, and her life. Long's Butterfly reclaims her narrative, which had previously been constructed by Pinkerton. Subsequent adaptations have the heroine committing suicide, stripping away this agency.

Long eventually granted adaptation rights to stage producer David Belasco who by the turn of the century had earned a positive reputation for penning and producing successful plays. With Long's input, Belasco wrote a one-act play titled *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan,* which premiered in New York in 1900. The narrative mostly adheres to Long's short story, with one significant alteration. In Belasco's telling, Cho-Cho-San kills herself with her father's blade. With this production, the Butterfly's death became a narrative tradition, which then continued with Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Inspired by Belasco's staging, Puccini premiered the now-famous iteration of the opera in May of 1904. The narrative mirrors its predecessors,

although the opera presents a more sympathetic Pinkerton through his care for Cho-Cho-San,.[1] Still, at the opera's close, the Butterfly dies.

The successes of the short story, stage play, and opera drew the interest of the fledgling film industry. As of this date, "Madame Butterfly" inspired at least ten films. However, I will examine Hollywood's three earliest film adaptations: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). These films premiered in a pivotal and rapidly evolving period of US-Asia Pacific relations, thus their evolutions trace similar international political progressions. Additionally, they showcase the industry's technological evolution from monochrome to technicolor, silence to sound. Through a close analysis of the films, as well as viewer responses, I argue these three films reified oriental "otherness," influencing Americans' perception of Asia, and troubling Asian Americans' path to assimilation and citizenship.

US-ASIA PACIFIC RELATIONS

Before examining the films, however, let us place them in historical context. When *Madame Butterfly*, the earliest film adaptation of the Butterfly tradition, premiered in 1915, the US had a fraught relationship with many Asian nations. This paper examines US relations with China and Japan, as these are the two nations referenced in the three selected "Madame Butterfly" film adaptations. Despite its superficial national specificity, however, the films ultimately portray an imaginary Orient, an amalgam of Asian appearances, customs, and mannerisms.

While Asian immigrants did not arrive in substantial numbers until the nineteenth century, images and descriptions of the Orient preceded them, and museums and cultural displays presented them as curiosities. Exhibitions of living Asian specimens, such as Afong Moy and the Bunkers, also known as Barnum's famed Siamese Twins, traveled the country in the mid-nineteenth century (Moon 2006, 60). Boston

[1] Although himself Italian, Puccini did not alter the nationality of Long's characters. Pinkerton remains a US naval officer, and the narrative thus remains firmly aligned with US tradition.

even opened a dedicated "Chinese museum" to satisfy the curiosity of American visitors (Peters 1845). Traveling naval officers visited distant shores,[2] and returned with oddities to share with eager US audiences. It is in an environment of such sentiments that the first major wave of Asian immigrants arrived in California. Americans perceived the stark differences between Chinese culture—in dress, customs, and the overall ignorance of Victorian codes of conduct—and their own. Cultural displays, including popular songs, minstrelsy performances, and political cartoons, presented Chinese immigrants as pollutants of both US culture and its environment. Relatedly, the American Medical Association began exploring germ theory in relation to Chinese immigrants, believing they "carried distinct germs to which they were immune, but from which whites would die if exposed" (Luibhéid 2002, 37). Additionally, upon completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad, these laborers (mostly Chinese) had trouble finding job opportunities, resulting in a large population of laborers vying for limited employment, particularly in the West. Immigrants, specifically Asian immigrants, received the blame for this downturn in the economy. Popular discourse then coded the earliest Asian immigrants as coolies,[3] laborers who undercut wages and therefore stalled the American dream.

By the 1870s, public sentiment vilified Chinese immigrants as harbingers of vice and dereliction. Organized anti-Chinese movements gained traction, as groups such as the Anti-Chinese Union and the Supreme Order of the Caucasians formed with the sole purpose to push Asian immigrants out of the United States. As more immigrants moved to the US, violence broke out in larger cities including Seattle and Los Angeles. As a result, Congress began formulating a federal response, resulting in the Naturalization Act of 1870 that barred naturalized citizenship to members of Asian descent. Eventually, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned entry to all Chinese immigrants. It was not fully repealed until December of 1943.

[2] The "Great White Fleet" made several stops in Asia on its global tour. This tour was a cornerstone of Roosevelt's imperialist policies, which emphasized naval strength.
[3] *Coolie* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a person who works for hire, typically for menial labor. This image of Asian immigrants blossomed in the 1870s, specifically during the building of the Transcontinental Railroad.

The history of Japanese immigration to the US, which likewise began in the mid-nineteenth century, varies only slightly. They faced similar discriminatory social and economic practices. However, in 1905, Japan's success in the Russo-Japanese War earned the respect of the US government, but it also prompted fear and suspicion. Jack London's prejudiced war coverage of the Russo-Japanese War perhaps best expresses this anxiety:

> The menace to the Western world lies, not in the little brown man, but in the four hundred millions of yellow men should the little brown man undertake their management…four hundred million indefatigable workers (deft, intelligent, and unafraid to die), aroused and rejuvenescent, managed and guided by forty-five million additional human beings who are splendid fighting animals, scientific and modern, constitute that menace to the Western world which has been well named the "Yellow Peril." (Tchen and Yeats 2014, 177)

Ultimately, in response to yellow peril anxiety, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned immigration from all Asian countries, including Japan. International tensions steadily escalated up to the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

Early Hollywood reflected popular sentiment towards Asia. Akin to the ways in which legislature physically excluded Asian bodies from American soil, Hollywood forcefully excluded Asian presence on screen. Hollywood films often hired white actors in yellowface to portray Asian characters. Typical features of yellowface include "slanted" eyes, an overbite, and "mustard-yellow" skin (ibid., 2). The Motion Picture Production Code, constructed by studio heads to satisfy contemporary outcry for film censorship, necessitated the use of yellowface.

The Code's anti-miscegenation clause banned "Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races)" (MPPDA 1927). This often translated into a ban of all interracial relationships involving a white partner. While this clause limited the writing of interracial romances into scripts, it also prohibited the hiring of interracial romantic leads regardless of the race presented on screen. For example, Anna May Wong desired the role of the Chinese wife in *The Good Earth* (1937), but since white actor Paul Muni had already been hired to play the Chinese husband, the censorship board nixed the hiring of an Asian actress for his love interest. Additionally, the

Production Code also incorporated a clause concerning "National Feelings." This clause prohibited "willful offense to any nation, race, or creed," which facilitated the rejection of any material that would be perceived as offensive to foreign nations (ibid.). The three films examined here are "pre-Code" films, meaning that they were produced prior to the Code's strict enforcement in 1934, and therefore escaped the scrutiny of both the anti-miscegenation and the "National Feelings" clauses. The Butterfly narrative incorporates both an interracial romance, as well as a generally unflattering portrayal of Asian countries and people. For this reason, Butterfly adaptations cease throughout the enforcement of the Code.

THE ADAPTATIONS

Adolph Zukor and his Famous Players Film Company (later to be christened Paramount Pictures) took advantage of the hype surrounding *Madama Butterfly*, and produced, in their own words, "An exquisite picturization of John Luther Long's Beloved Classic 'Madame Butterfly'" (Olcott 1915, 00:01). Directed by Sydney Olcott and starring Hollywood sweetheart Mary Pickford, the silent film adaptation *Madame Butterfly* (1915) found an eager and accepting audience. Olcott's *Butterfly* closely mirrors the opera that preceded it. The only alteration is the way in which the Butterfly commits suicide; rather than stabbing herself with her father's sword, her own rendition of an "honor killing," Cho-Cho-San drowns herself.

As previously mentioned, the narrative of the film—and subsequent Butterfly adaptations—discursively positions Japan in the inferior position. Similarly, the rendering of Cho-Cho-San, whose name is a transliteration of the Japanese word for butterfly, embodies the orientalist trope of the Asian woman as "Butterfly" or "Lotus Blossom"—a woman who is docile, compliant, and eager for the attention of the white male that sexually exploits her. This trope has been thoroughly explored by scholars such as Eugene Franklin Wong, Gina Marchetti, and Robert G. Lee. Marchetti perhaps best summarizes the position: "The Butterfly serves not only as a rationalization of American attitudes toward Japan; in her various guises, she also represents the

necessary sacrifice of all people of color to assure Western domination" (Marchetti 1993, 79).

With regard to orientalist positioning, Mary Pickford's use of yellowface is a literal performance of the Orient, not simply through a Western lens, but through a Western body. Pickford took great pains to portray an "authentic" Japanese woman. According to producer Adolph Zukor, Pickford:

> [was] made up (she applied her own make-up in those days) to seem more like a Japanese than the director desired . . . she fastened the skin of the outer corners of each eye back and achieved the long and slant eyes of the Oriental. The director finally got her to agree to a make-up somewhere nearer the Caucasian. (Ibid., 191)

Why did Olcott insist that Pickford tone down her oriental look? In the film, Pickford wears little makeup and relies on her clothing, wig, and mannerisms to portray the minute geisha. Critics noticed this choice, with the *New York Times* even commenting "she looked more Occidental than Oriental" (Mantell 1915). *Madame Butterfly* relied on the audience's infatuation with the Orient, but Zukor's comment hints at the negotiated balance between the exotic and the non-threatening. The audience perceives Japanese culture, but simultaneously views American attitudes and bodies. Rather than repeating arguments of representation, however, this paper examines how the film visually constructs the Orient through other methods, such as its use of *mise-en-scene*.

In *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier,* Homay King takes a similar approach to her examination of Orientalism in Hollywood film. Rather than exploring the stereotyped portrayals of Asian characters, King centers on the foreign landscapes and objects, which she suggests have the "potential to reveal some of the most haunting projections that have structured Western fantasies about East Asia" (Kind 2010, 2). She examines these landscapes through the theory of the "enigmatic signifier" as theorized by Jean Laplanche (ibid., 11). The enigmatic signifier is a gesture, symbol, word, etc., that resists decoding, and King suggests that oriental objects are positioned as the enigmatic signifier, withholding meaning from audiences. This inscrutable contact further suggests "that our interior lives are set in motion by an

encounter with the unknown and unintelligible" (ibid., 3). King's strategy proves useful for rethinking the importance of the setting in film. Additionally, like Kaplan and Brody, King suggests a reflexivity in the orientalist construction of films. Oriental objects signal as much about US interiority as they do about perceptions of East Asia.

A close analysis of one of the film's most agonizing scenes, Cho-Cho-San's sleepless night, proves a useful case study for exploring King's use of enigmatic signifiers. After years of hoping for her husband's return, Cho-Cho-San finally spots Pinkerton's ship in the harbor, at which point the intertitle informs the audience that "Cho Cho San's heart made glad" (Olcott 1915, 46:48). Cut to Cho-Cho-San staring out of her window with her faithful maid, Suzuki (played by Olive West in yellowface), standing behind her, carrying Cho-Cho-San's son. The women are wearing kimonos and black wigs, and they are accompanied by an Asian child. Cho-Cho-San holds up binoculars and the scene cuts to a point-of-view shot, through which the audience sees a ship on the horizon. Here, the audience's gaze aligns with the Butterfly; in her night of agony, the viewer waits alongside her.

To signify oriental landscape, the film emphasizes foreign objects. The following intertitle reads, "Hurry Suzuki, get out all the lanterns. Pick plenty flowers. Make place nice for the honorable Pinkerton." Olcott litters his film with blossoms and lanterns, both within the Butterfly's house and throughout the Japanese countryside. In the subsequent shot, Cho-Cho-San shuffles through the house with a massive armful of flowers; as she stands before the window, arms flush with blossoms, the wallpaper behind her bears its own blossom pattern (Fig. 1). It is through these objects, particularly the flowers, where Olcott demarcates Japan. Blossoms have a storied presence in the visual culture of Japan, and with Japanese artwork predating the arrival of Japanese people in the US, due to merchant travel, Americans would be familiar with this visual association. By saturating the setting with blossoms, Olcott draws on this association to present "Japan" to American audiences.

This particular intertitle, written in pidgin English, further demarcates the Butterfly's foreignness. Language (in this case, written) is wielded as the tool of civilization; the Butterfly's broken English simultaneously signifies her unassimilability

and supports US colonization efforts. The pidgin English expressed through Cho-Cho-San's intertitles are yet another important example of orientalist projection. Cho-Cho-San never fully succeeds in her assimilation to American culture, despite her best efforts. Her use of broken English codes her childlike, in need of protection.

The subsequent sequence of images succinctly expresses her anxiety, punctuated by intertitles to temporally ground the viewer. The first marker reads "Sundown: Waiting for her husband." What follows is a lingering shot of the Butterfly staring out the window, nearly engulfed by the flowers framing the shot. Then "night falls" and the Butterfly remains near the window; "midnight" and the Butterfly sits dejected, sighing. The camera cuts to the sleeping baby. Nearby, Suzuki wakes and crawls close to her mistress. Finally, "morning's cold dawn" and Cho-Cho-San battles sleep. She glances at the window and starts, aiming her binoculars at the harbor. As before, the viewer is placed in the subjective position of the Butterfly, but this time the horizon is empty; the ship departed overnight. Frantic, she screams for Suzuki, and dejectedly approaches the blossoms, which have wilted.

This scene is unique for the position in which it places the viewers. Olcott litters the scene with signifiers of the Orient, exoticizing the setting and Cho-Cho-San. Simultaneously, this scene cross-cuts with one of Pinkerton in conversation with the American Consul in Japan, wherein he rejects responsibility for the child and returns to his ship. The viewer watches this play out, concurrently with the Butterfly's desperate hope for his arrival. We subsequently identify with the protagonist as we share her point of view. In this one scene, viewers both distance themselves from the orientalized Cho-Cho-San, while aligning with her in sympathy.

Directed by Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) hews closely to the plot of Olcott's *Madame Butterfly*, including its eventual drowning of the Butterfly. There are several notable exceptions, however, that complicate its analysis. First of all, this Butterfly lives in China; in fact, she is not a Butterfly at all. Her name is Lotus

Blossom.[4] Secondly, the film stars Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, indisputably the most popular Asian American film actress of the silent era. Thirdly, Frances Marion, one of the most renowned female screenwriters of the twentieth century, and the *first* screenwriter to win two Academy Awards, wrote the screenplay. Additionally, *Toll of the Sea* was filmed in Technicolor, the second in film history and the first of real consequence.[5] Based on these differences, one might question the film's status as a true adaptation of Long's "Madame Butterfly," but Frances Marion herself stated that the film is "practically the step-daughter of Madame Butterfly" in both its inspiration and narrative (Hodges 2012, 32).

Wong was only 17 when *Toll of the Sea* premiered; it was her first leading role, and unfortunately, would also be one of her last. For the majority of her career, Hollywood typecast Wong in various caricatures of Asian females, specifically the "Dragon Lady" and the "Lotus Blossom," both stereotypes that she herself helped popularize. Wong bemoaned these limited opportunities, even leaving the United States in the late 1920s for Europe where she starred in several successful films including *Pavement Butterfly* (1929) and *Piccadilly* (1929). Although fashioned a star, Wong still found herself limited to roles deemed "exotic," and European censors similarly banned on-screen romances with Caucasian costars. She soon returned to Hollywood.

While Wong's portrayal of Lotus Blossom is significant, it inevitably succumbed to orientalist tropes, and Chinese American activists criticized her performance as harmful to the community (ibid., 34). Scholar Graham Russell Hodges, however, rebuffs such criticisms, arguing that she subverts the orientalist narrative through her use of "emotions, hairstyles, choice of costumes, gestures, and words" to represent "Asian cultural currents"—things that the director and screenwriter would not understand (ibid.). In other words, her insider knowledge of the Chinese American community allowed her to transcend stereotypes and access an authenticity that would have been

[4] Colloquially, the trope of the "Butterfly" is also referred to as the "Lotus Blossom" (see: Tajima-Pena's "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed").
[5] The first film produced in Technicolor was *The Gulf Between* (1917), but it received only a limited release. *Toll of the Sea* was the first Technicolor film to receive general release.

oblivious to film producers. Regardless of Wong's presence, however, the film participated heavily in orientalist discourse.

The "waiting" scene for Lotus Blossom is far less agonizing than its sister scene in *Madame Butterfly*, but it incorporates similar oriental signifiers. Lotus Blossom sits out in the garden with her son. She wears a muted *qipao*, and while her costuming is foreign, its neutral coloring does not overly exoticize. A white actor plays her son whose features, arguably, mark her (a young actress plays the boy) easier for assimilation, and perhaps less threatening to viewers. Anna May Wong's Chinese heritage heightens the miscegenation narrative, as opposed to the artificial interraciality produced through yellowface. The white features of the child remind audiences that the romance is artificial, thus neutralizing the threat that interracial relationships pose to white supremacists.

A messenger arrives and informs Lotus Blossom that her husband is on his way. Ecstatic, she runs into her lavishly adorned home (Fig. 2). The oriental markers in this space include flowers, beaded curtains, a silk screen, and curious geometric patterns on the walls and furniture. One prominent pattern resembles the dragon, who is closely tied to oriental imagining. The set designer doubtless used this opportunity to promote Technicolor: the room is awash in various gradations of red. This color itself is an oriental signifier; it overwhelms the senses. Lotus Blossom calls for her maids and requests her "bridal robe" (Franklin 1922, 33:13). This is the item that best signifies Lotus Blossom's oriental aura. The gown is bright, ornamented, richly multicolored. Even in a space marked by tropes, it stands vivid. One cannot help but juxtapose this gown with the American outfit worn earlier, from the scene presented in the introduction. In Western clothes, she appeared uncomfortable, overwhelmed. In her Chinese bridal gown, she is radiant, although decidedly marked as "other." Lotus Blossom's wait is short lived; by the time she finishes preparations, her husband arrives—with his American wife in tow.

Similar to the 1915 adaptation, this scene of Lotus Blossom's preparation is juxtaposed with the arrival of her husband (Allen Carver) and his American wife (Elsie). Allen anxiously anticipates his reunion with Lotus Blossom, and when he gets cold feet,

Elsie forces him to honor the meeting. The audience is aware of Lotus Blossom's hopes, and watches from afar as her disappointment unfolds. Unlike the 1915 version, however, the audience's gaze never aligns with the Butterfly. The viewer is kept distant, the receiver of the exotic images.

The final case study, *Madame Butterfly* (1932), returns to Japan. Marion Gering directs the film, which stars Sylvia Sydney in yellowface as tragic Cho-Cho-San and Cary Grant as the dashing Pinkerton. The narrative closely mirrors its predecessors. Uniquely, this film incorporates sound, a technology popularized in 1927 with the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*. This technological advancement allows the audience to not only hear the Butterfly's dialogue, but also a truncated adaptation of Puccini's score.[6]

Little can be said of Sylvia Sydney's performance that has not already been explored through discussions of Pickford's yellowface performance—with two notable exceptions. First, she uses heavier makeup to style her oriental appearance. Whereas Olcott pressed Pickford to tone down her yellowface, Sydney configures her eyes into almond shapes, lightens her complexion, and arches her eyebrows. Additionally, Sydney employs dialogue to fashion her character. While the previous adaptations expressed pidgin English through intertitles, Sydney directly stumbles through her "broken" English, uttering comments such as "you the most, best nice man in whole world," and replacing her R's with L's (e.g. "vely") (Gering 1932, 36:55). Notably, the film fails to incorporate any actual Japanese language. Overall, critics generally celebrated Sydney for her performance, with one fan even noting that her "Japanesey" attitude elicited "an aura of mystery…not unlike an oriental" (Screenland 1993). This reinforces King's notion of the enigmatic signifier as demarcation of the oriental. The mystery of the Orient is something that cannot be decoded, but it is nonetheless attractive.

This version's waiting scene also codes several oriental markers. Its pacing hews closely to that in the 1915 version, although its conclusion is more agonizing. Cho-Cho-San runs into the home (through a garden of blossoms), and informs Suzuki that

[6] For those interested in a study with greater emphasis on the soundscape of such films, please see W. Anthony Sheppard's article "Cinematic realism, reflexivity, and the American 'Madame Butterfly' narratives."

Pinkerton's ship has arrived. She commands Suzuki to "buy many lanterns, much flowers, much everything." Once again, specific objects mark the oriental aura of both the space and the Butterfly. The subsequent scene opens with a close-up of a lantern. The camera pans right and lands on Cho-Cho-San's face. She readies Pinkerton's chair before sitting near the window to wait. As expected, this shot is delicately framed with lanterns, flowers, and a moonlit horizon (Fig. 3). Without the use of intertitles, the filmmaker signals temporality through editing. Dissolves and fades insinuate the passage of time. The camera lingers on the deflating joy of Cho-Cho-San. Finally, come morning, Suzuki informs Cho-Cho-San (and the viewers) that "the night has passed" but Cho-Cho-San will "wait for always."

The scene is punctuated by Pinkerton's arrival, as in previous adaptations, so that the audience is privy to information withheld from Cho-Cho-San. Again, this places viewers in a position of dominance to the unknowing Butterfly. The scene is also punctuated by moments of comic relief, brought about by Cho-Cho-San's unconscious race-based humor. For example, Cho-Cho-San tells her son (played by an Asian American child) that he has the "exact resemblance" to his father; Suzuki knowingly balks at this comparison. When informed that they are running out of money, Cho-Cho-San comments, "We be vely American. Spend everything." Here, American audiences can laugh at themselves, but only because an American actress delivers the joke. Additionally, this joke is built upon the ignorance of Cho-Cho-San; even in a moment superficially mocking America, the audiences laugh at her naïveté, reassured of their intellectual dominance. Ultimately, this humor, which is present throughout the film, serves to minimize the tragedy.

All three adaptations include some version of the "waiting" scene, providing an opportunity to track the evolution of the Butterfly tradition. Despite the rising Asia-phobia in the US, the films' oriental discourse remains static. All three scenes rely on similar tropes to signify the Orient (e.g. blossoms, silk screens, lanterns, costuming). All three actresses perform Cho-Cho-San with similar gestures. All three films construct Cho-Cho-San as foreign, particularly through her employment of pidgin English in both the intertitles and spoken dialogue. Perhaps *Toll of the Sea*'s casting of an Asian

American actress presented an opportunity for a less orientalist discourse, but it falls short. The three adaptations may vary, but not in their portrayal of the Butterfly.

In contradiction, perhaps, Japan produced its own adaptation of "Madame Butterfly." This short animated film titled *Ocho Fujin No Gensou* (*Fantasy of Madame Butterfly*) premiered in 1940, at the height of US-Japan tensions. The film only portrays the "waiting" scene and the Butterfly's subsequent suicide. Unsurprisingly, this film emphasizes the desperation of the Butterfly and the cruelty of the Western naval officer. In selecting just this one scene for adaptation, without providing the greater context of her relationship with her "husband," filmmakers emphasize the barbarity of the American's treatment of the innocent Japanese woman. This contradicts Hollywood's move towards rescuing the character of the husband.

"THAT HONORABLE PINKERTON"

One major evolution in these films is not the depiction of the Butterfly, but rather the depiction of the American "husband." The 1915 *Madame Butterfly* portrays the least sympathetic husband. He receives the least amount of screen time. His untoward intentions toward the Butterfly are the most articulated, and he remains cold and uncaring in his interactions with his wife. In one particularly tragic scene, the Butterfly proffers to her husband a slip of paper with a shaky "I love you" scribbled on it (Olcott 1915, 26:25). She has taught herself English. Pinkerton glances at it quickly and then throws it on the ground; the Butterfly collapses in tears. Pinkerton refuses responsibility for his child. He never returns to Cho-Cho-San. She dies waiting for his return.

Allen Carter in *Toll of the Sea* presents a slightly more sympathetic portrayal. He is tender to Lotus Blossom; the film suggests that he might even love her, although his American colleagues scoff at the suggestion, convincing him to abandon her because "she is different" (Franklin 1922, 10:15). Carter, too, marries an American woman, but upon returning to Asia he visits Lotus Blossom; he even apologizes to her. Inevitably, Lotus Blossom gives her son to the American wife before drowning in the sea. Carter remains the villain in the narrative, but his tenderness and penitence are redemptive.

Cary Grant as Pinkerton, however, most persuasively portrays the relatable and sympathetic husband. As the ultimate matinee idol, Grant's charisma and attraction play a significant role in eliciting this sympathy. The narrative lingers on his perspective and repeatedly justifies his actions. Unlike the other adaptations, the initial meeting between Cho-Cho-San and Pinkerton is extensive; he shows true attraction for her and defends their relationship. He helps her avoid the undesirable life of a geisha. Upon their marriage, the broker carefully explains that the union is dissolvable, thus justifying his abandonment. Their relationship remains tender. In one touching scene, Pinkerton lovingly serenades his wife with a rendition of "Flower of Japan."[7]

Additionally, when Pinkerton returns to Japan and discovers that Cho-Cho-San has waited for him, he is distraught. He immediately explains the situation to his American wife, and she absolves him of wrongdoing, "Don't feel so badly about it dear; it isn't your fault" (Gering 1932, 1:09:12). Here, the American wife, the distant observer, stands in for the viewers. Her quick forgiveness allows the audiences to also forgive. She dehumanizes Cho-Cho-San by dismissing her pain and reinforcing her disposability. Pinkerton's tender regard for his American wife portrays him as a family man, an upstanding soldier who miscalculated in a foreign land, having succumbed to the exotic spell of the Orient. Pinkerton apologizes to the Butterfly, explaining "Oh I never dreamed you'd wait. They told me you'd forget and go back to your own people" (Gering 1932, 1:13:50). Through dialogue, the film grants him excuses, justifying his actions. Additionally, Pinkerton never discovers the existence of his son; the Butterfly kills herself without informing him. Consequently, he is not vilified for abandoning his family; his only perceived mistake is poor communication with his foreign mistress.

[7] In the lyrics, Pinkerton refers to Cho-Cho-San as his "Flower of Japan," his "picture off a fan," and his "dream world." This dehumanization reinforces the contemporary tendency to use objects as a means of signifying the *other*.

So while the orientalist performance of the Butterfly varies little, the American presence varies greatly. It is not the projection of Asia that alters, but rather the way that the United States reacts to it. Just as audiences can forgive Pinkerton's actions, so too can they forgive their own actions with regard to Asian Americans and Asian foreign relations. Pinkerton evolves into the ideal imperialist soldier. The Butterfly remains distant, unassimilable, other. As previously argued by Brody, Kaplan, and King, these films reflect US culture and US attitudes. As historical relations worsened with East Asians, American audiences absolved themselves of their sins.

TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION

Film's technological evolution coincided with the progression of the Butterfly adaptations. Although produced within the same 20 year span, the three films present a unique technological period in cinema. *Madame Butterfly* (1915) represents cinema's monochrome, silent era. *Toll of the Sea* is Hollywood's second film produced in color, and the first with widespread release. And while *Madame Butterfly* (1932) returns to monochrome, it exemplifies the early sound era. Therefore, these films showcase the Butterfly tradition through varied technology. As previously explored, I do not argue that the technology significantly altered the projection of the Orient on screen, but it did affect the reception of these oriental markers. Evidence of this is the press' responses to the films, as appearing in contemporary newspapers, journals, and magazines. While press responses alone cannot fully stand in for audience reception, they signal the popular discourse around these films.

Coverage of *Madame Butterfly* (1915) over emphasized the film's perceived attention to Japanese customs and appearances. While there were a few criticisms, such as the *New York Times* comment on Pickford's appearance as "too occidental," most critics celebrated the film's ability to present an "authentic" Japan. For instance, the *San Francisco Chronicle* celebrates cinema's advantage over staged adaptations because "details of the plot, only suggested in the dramatic presentation, are brought out with picturesque beauty and effectiveness" (San Francisco Chronicle 1915). Here, we have the first technological shift in the Butterfly tradition—the move from stage to screen.

The Santa Ana Register noted that in the 1915 version, "Every detail of the staging is correct and artistic in the extreme. It breathes the very spirit, life and atmosphere of Japan" (Santa Ana Register 1915). The *San Francisco Chronicle* also celebrated Pickford's portrayal as a "thorough Oriental" (San Francisco Chronicle 1915). Notably, theater owners participated in the staging of "authentic" Japan. In Los Angeles, "Tally's Broadway" theater transformed into a "Nipponese bower of beauty," complete with "Japanese lanterns, "Japanese costumes," and "pretty girls in Jap dresses who will take you to your seats" (Los Angeles Times 1915). Similarly, the Santa Ana "West End Theatre" decorated its lobby with cherry blossoms and Japanese lanterns, while the "Imperial Theatre" in San Francisco accompanied the film with a massive orchestra and Japanese dancers to "add to the atmospheric presentation" (Santa Ana Register 1915). These descriptions reveal ways in which the theaters participated in oriental space making, in attempts to bolster the authentic experience viewers received in viewing.

In a similar way, critics of *Toll of the Sea* commented on the perceived natural display of the Orient, but they simultaneously emphasized Technicolor's ability to heighten the authentic. For instance, *The Evening News* in Harrisburg, PA marveled at Technicolor's "depiction on the screen of persons and scenes just as they look to the eye," and its achievement in "natural color" (Evening News 1923). *The Minneapolis Star* noted that Technicolor gives "the verisimilitude of life to a photoplay" and not only "enhances the beauty of a picture immeasurably, but it adds to the illusion of reality" (The Minneapolis Star 1923). Other reviews emphasized the authentic cast, celebrating the "Chinese girl" Ana May Wong "from whom great things may be expected" (Harrisburg Telegraph 1923). Chinese journalist Chungshu Kwei even wrote in *The Chinese Students' Monthly* that the film was "easily the best that ever purports to portray on the screen the daily life of the Chinese" (Hodges 2012, 35). *Toll of the Sea*, therefore, heightened the discourse of natural photography; the addition of Technicolor provided an organic experience unlike previous adaptations.

Madame Butterfly (1932) also received praise for managing to "assume the beauty and loveliness of old Japan." Reviewers commented on the ability for sound to present "Japanese accents" and incorporate Puccini's score. The real emphasis on authenticity,

however, centered on Sylvia Sydney's portrayal of Cho-Cho-San, "with her naturally slanting eyes and piquant Oriental features" (Weir 1933). *Picture Play Magazine* exclaimed that Sydney appeared "genuinely Japanesey" and "more Japanese than her Japanese hairdresser;" and *The New Movie Magazine* concurred that Sydney looked naturally Japanese (ibid.; Picture Play Magazine 1933). Unlike previous Butterflies (even Anna May Wong), critics celebrated Sydney's natural performance, for her ability to literally embody the foreign.

CONCLUSION

In the 1933 issue of *Motion Picture Reviews*, one reviewer presciently commented on the danger of Butterfly adaptations. Specifically referring to *Madame Butterfly* (1932), the reviewer wrote:

> It is charming, but ordinary. Sylvia Sydney is wistfully appealing and Cary Grant well cast, but one never forgets, in spite of authentic settings, that the cast are Occidentals masquerading as Orientals, and in view of the present situations on the pacific it seems a questionable moment to have filmed this story of the trusting Japanese maiden betrayed by the American naval officer. (Motion Picture Review 1933)

The "present situations" cited by this reviewer likely refer to Japan's seizure of Manchuria over the objections of the League of Nations. US-Japan tensions quickly escalated in the subsequent years; Japan continued to seize China's land, and the US responded with harsh economic sanctions. Within ten years of this film's premiere, Japan would attack Pearl Harbor, and the United States would incarcerate over 100,000 of its Japanese American citizens. The reviewer implies the danger of offending Japan, but perhaps the real danger of such adaptations was their ability to convince US citizens of their inherent dominance over East Asians—and their inculpability in the government's discriminatory practices.

The Butterfly tradition exploited East Asia from its very conception, but film nurtured a space of the authentic; through advancing technology, the orientalist discourse appeared real. As tensions increased in the Pacific, cinematic representations of "Madame Butterfly" pared down the critical portrayal of the American to protect

America's image on the global stage. This altered relationship justified imperialist tendencies, reinforced the "benevolent" in benevolent assimilation, and reinscribed American moral dominion and authority. American audiences looked at the Butterfly and saw the Other; but they also saw themselves.

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APPENDIX A

Figure 1. Oriental signifiers: blossoms and blossom wallpapering. (Madame Butterfly, 1915).

Figure 2. Oriental signifiers: blossoms, lanterns, and red décor. (Toll of the Sea, 1922).

Figure 3. Oriental signifiers: blossoms and lanterns. (Madame Butterfly, 1932).

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