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Madama Butterfly: Western Art, Cultural Mobility, and the Construction of Asian Identity from an Orientalist Perspective

Hongling Wu [a], Jianfeng Zhang [a,*]

[a] *College of Literature and Journalism, Jishou University, Jishou 416000, China*

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ABSTRACT

The Italian opera *Madama Butterfly*, which was created in the early 20th century, is one of the representative works of Western art that integrates Eastern elements. This paper examines the evolution of *Madama Butterfly* in its global dissemination and explores how power dynamics within a colonial context have shaped Western perceptions of Japan and its cultural hierarchy. It focuses on the shaping, dissemination and reproduction of the image of Asian women in Western art works, revealing how they have been symbolized and commodified, gradually solidifying into stereotypes of submission, sacrifice, and tragedy to align with Western aesthetic and cultural expectations. At the same time, it explores how Madama Butterfly has been reinterpreted in different historical stages, especially in the context of the awakening of Asian cultural subject consciousness, how Japan and other Asian countries reflect on and challenge the image of the East created by the West through reinterpretation and adaptation. The study reveals that the dissemination of *Madama Butterfly* not only reflects Western cultural hegemony in shaping Asian identities but also underscores the dynamic nature of cultural exchange. In the process of globalization, Asian nations are increasingly transitioning from passive recipients to active cultural agents, driving the reconstruction and critique of Orientalist narratives.

1. Introduction

Composed by Italian opera master Giacomo Puccini, Madama Butterfly is considered one of the most outstanding works in opera history. This Western artistic creation from the early 20th century serves as a classic text of “Oriental" narrative. The work not only carries Western imagination of Eastern culture but also influences subsequent reconstructions and productions of Eastern culture across different media. As a work rooted in Western cultural systems yet set against a Japanese backdrop, Madama Butterfly profoundly embodies the power dynamics in cultural transmission. Depicting Japan during its colonial period, the author constructs and symbolizes Asian imagery through Orientalist narrative logic, deeply influencing the representation of Eastern women in 20th-century films and other artistic works about the East.

This paper conducts research on texts related to Madama Butterfly, analyzing them through theoretical frameworks including Orientalism, cultural semiotics, and surrounding communication theory to explore the unequal cultural relationship between the Western center and Eastern periphery. The research focuses on analyzing how Madama Butterfly constructs stereotypes about “Asia” within the context of “Orientalism,” and reveals its image-shaping process during global dissemination. This process not

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: zhang2023xueshu@163.com

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only embodies the cross-cultural flow of artistic works but also reflects the continuation and reinforcement of cultural hegemony under the Oriental discourse system. Additionally, this paper explores the intertextuality between artistic works, political rituals, and cultural communication, thereby transcending pure artistic evaluation to deeply reveal the cultural and political implications behind the work. Ultimately, in the context of contemporary globalization, we hope to reexamine and deconstruct Asian image representations rooted in colonial history, thereby promoting critical reflection on cultural representation and power structures.

2. The Birth of Madame Butterfly: an "Oriental" Story Centered on the "West"

2.1. The Representation and Narrative in Different Texts

The main storyline of the opera Madama Butterfly first originated from the French writer Pierre Loti's novel Madame Chrysanthème (1887), which was written in the form of a long diary. In this work, Loti narrates, in an autobiographical style, the story of a naval officer's brief marriage to a Japanese woman during his stay in Japan. The novel is set in Nagasaki, a city heavily influenced by Western culture. Even during Japan's period of national isolation (sakoku, 1633–1852), Nagasaki remained an essential port for Japan's interactions with the Western world. Through the perspective of the French officer, the novel provides extensive descriptions of the economic, cultural, and political impacts that the opening of Japan had on Nagasaki, illustrating the city's transformation under Western influence.

In the hands of American writer John Luther Long, Madama Butterfly, written in 1898, retained the story's original setting from Pierre Loti's work but shifted its focus more toward the protagonists' interracial marriage and cultural conflicts. Long's novel even introduced a scene in which the female protagonist, Cho-Cho-San, attempts suicide after being abandoned by a Western man, adding a deeper sense of tragedy to the narrative. This portrayal also laid the foundation for the stereotypical image of Asian women in the Western imagination.

John's novel later became the inspiration for American playwright David Belasco's stage adaptation. In 1900, Belasco adapted Long's story into a play, further intensifying the tragic elements by depicting the heroine's ultimate suicide for love. From this point on, the Western portrayal of Asian women as "gentle, submissive, and self-sacrificing" was fully established, profoundly influencing subsequent artistic works of a similar nature.

After watching Belasco's play in 1904, Giacomo Puccini was deeply moved and, following the operatic trends of the time, adapted the drama into an opera. By combining music and theatrical performance, Puccini heightened the emotional intensity and tragic elements of the story, culminating in Cio-Cio-San's death in the final act. Although the opera incorporated Japanese elements such as music, stage design, and rituals, Puccini himself had never visited Japan. As a result, his depiction of Japan was based on a Western imagination of the East. Despite these "misinterpretations," Madama Butterfly continued to be performed worldwide, even in East Asian countries such as Japan and China, reinforcing its status as a classic.

Although the opera Madama Butterfly emerged as a derivative "cultural byproduct" of a French novel, an American novel, and a stage play, its creation and global dissemination reflect a distinctly cross-cultural trajectory. However, its core narrative and artistic representation remained centered on Western cultural perspectives. At every stage of its textual transformation, Western portrayals of Oriental women as submissive and easily conquered, as well as the notion of the East as a colonial subject of the West, were preserved and reinforced. While the story is set in Nagasaki, its interpretation and depiction of "Japan" were not narrated by the Japanese themselves but rather constructed through the cultural and artistic lens of France, the United States, and Italy—countries that shaped and reinterpreted Japan within a Western framework. The opera's evolution exemplifies a process of cultural reconstruction dominated by the West, in which the authentic cultural identity of Japan, as the peripheral subject, was continually filtered and reshaped through layers of Western reinterpretation.

2.2. Geopolitical and Cultural Context of the Colonial Era

As a work born in the early 20th century, the setting of Madame Butterfly is deeply connected with the background of the time. During this period, Japan ended its "closed-door" policy that lasted for more than two centuries. Due to the "black ship" incident of the United States, Japan gradually opened its doors and quickly integrated from a feudal society into the Western modern world (Perry, 1968). Faced with the Japanese culture that was completely different from Western modern society, Westerners did not try to understand and tolerate these "novel" cultures. Instead, they were influenced by the "samurai spirit" and "hara-kiri" that were completely alien to the West. The Japanese culture labeled this country as "singular" or "extraordinary" to "emphasize the difficulty in understanding Japan and the Japanese." (Yokoyama Toshio, 1987). Japanese culture is indeed completely different from Western culture. It was not established through the Western colonial system during its development, and it is not a "peripheral" product of Western colonial cultural expansion. Therefore, it is very difficult for the Western world to discuss Asian culture within the Western framework. In order to gain the right to explain and define the East, the West always incorporates the East into its own discourse system for interpretation.

As a work that emerged in the early 20th century, Madama Butterfly is deeply connected to the geopolitical and cultural context of its time. During this period, Japan had ended its more than two-century-long policy of national isolation (sakoku). Following the arrival of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships," (Maldonado, 2014) Japan gradually opened its doors and rapidly transitioned from a feudal society to integration into the Western modernized world.

Confronted with Japanese culture, which was vastly different from that of the modern West, Westerners did not attempt to understand or embrace these "novel" cultural

elements. Instead, influenced by concepts such as "samurai spirit" and "seppuku" (ritual suicide), which appeared entirely alien to Western perspectives, they labeled Japan as "singular" or "extraordinary" to "emphasize the difficulty of comprehending Japan and its people" (Yokoyama Toshio, 1987: 5).

Indeed, Japanese culture was fundamentally different from Western culture, as its development had not been shaped by the colonial structures of the West and did not emerge as a "peripheral" product of Western colonial expansion. As a result, integrating Asian cultures into a Western interpretive framework posed a significant challenge for the Western world. In its pursuit of the power to define and explain the East, the West consistently incorporated the Orient into its own discursive system, interpreting it through a lens shaped by Western ideology and cultural dominance.

However, by positioning Eastern culture as the Other, Europe gained control and discursive authority over it. "the Orient is one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other." (Said, 2008:20) Europe, leveraging its geographical proximity to Eastern countries, engaged in plundering and colonization. Although the concept of the "East" encompasses a broad geographical scope, extending beyond East Asian nations such as Japan and China, it also includes parts of the eastern Mediterranean, such as Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, and the Maghreb—predominantly Muslim countries (Tromans, 2008:158). From a geographical standpoint, Japan is much farther from Europe, making it difficult to be incorporated into Europe's "periphery" in a spatial sense. As a result, in order to establish colonial rule, European countries had to invest greater costs and effort to assert their dominance over Japan and other distant Eastern territories.

When Madame Chrysanthème (1887) was published, Japan had already entered the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) and was actively pursuing industrialization and modernization, striving to integrate into the Western-dominated international order. By the time Madama Butterfly was created, Japan had not only achieved significant economic growth but had also begun its own colonial expansion in Asia. Despite this historical context, the storyline of Madama Butterfly remained consistent with Western cultural narratives, portraying Japan as static, traditional, and backward within the framework of Western colonial expansion. Through a Western-centric perspective, the opera selectively ignored Japan's actual social and cultural development.

In shaping the plot of Madama Butterfly, the opera highlights the special privileges Westerners enjoyed in Japan. In the story, the American officer Pinkerton purchases a house for his convenience and boasts to his colleague that Americans are entitled to 999-year residency rights in Japan. Likewise, he mentions that if he marries under Japanese customs, the marriage could also be contracted for 999 years, but its validity is entirely at his discretion—he may dissolve it whenever he chooses. As an American, Pinkerton does not need to assimilate into Japanese culture or understand Japanese customs. By reinforcing Western superiority, the narrative positions Japan as the "Other," granting the West the authority to define and interpret its culture.

The creation and dissemination of Madama Butterfly coincided with a historical moment when Japan was beginning to challenge Western hegemony. This temporal coincidence gave the opera's depiction of Japan a deeper political significance. By reimagining Japan as a traditional, weak, and easily dominated nation, the Western narrative effectively countered anxieties surrounding Japan's rise. In doing so, it reaffirmed the West's perceived cultural and moral superiority over the East.

3. The Construction of Power and Discourse in Madama Butterfly

3.1. Symbolism of Core and Periphery in Character Representation

The narrative of Madama Butterfly is entirely dominated by Western characters. The story is centered around an American naval officer as the protagonist, while the female lead is a Japanese geisha. This character and gender arrangement symbolically reflects the power dynamics between the core and the periphery.

As an American officer, Pinkerton enjoys supreme privilege in both material wealth and social status. His sense of superiority is evident in his interactions with the Japanese, as he displays open arrogance and disdain toward them. Despite residing in Japan, Pinkerton never shows any intention of integrating into local culture; instead, he views this foreign world with a detached and condescending gaze. This attitude is particularly evident in the wedding scene—what is considered a sacred ceremony by the Japanese is, to him, nothing more than a ridiculous farce. He exhibits clear contempt and rejection toward traditional Japanese marriage customs, perceiving them as bizarre, absurd, and even repulsive. During the wedding, he openly expresses his desire to return to America and marry a "real" American wife, reinforcing his perception of cultural superiority.

In stark contrast to Pinkerton's arrogance, the Japanese characters in the story display almost blind admiration and reverence toward him. To them, this Western officer appears almost like a "king," embodying supreme dignity and charm. Some of Cio-Cio-San's female relatives even secretly hope that he will soon abandon her so that they might have the chance to marry this "noble" Western man. This self-deprecating attitude in their language further reinforces the unequal power dynamics between the East and the West, depicting a clear hierarchy in which the Japanese characters willingly place themselves in a subordinate position.

This starkly contrasted power structure reveals the underlying cultural relations embedded in Western narratives. Pinkerton, as the representative of the West, remains firmly positioned at the center of power, even in a foreign land, while the Eastern characters on the periphery are depicted as reverent and submissive toward Western authority. This characterization not only reflects the cultural biases of the creators but also serves as a metaphor for the real-world

dynamics of the colonial era—where Western influence continued to dominate even in the heart of Japan. This dominance granted the West the unchecked freedom to interpret, define, and even reshape Japanese culture to align with Western expectations and imagination.

3.2. The Representation of Asian Women in Colonial Aesthetics

The portrayal of female characters in this work most clearly reflects the way Western colonial aesthetics, represented by Europe, construct an imagined vision of Eastern women. When discussing the East within the framework of Western discourse, Said consistently depicts the Orient as "irrational, depraved, naive, and abnormal," whereas The West represented by Europe "is rational, chaste, mature, and normal." (Said, 2008: 25).

One of the most controversial aspects of the operatic adaptation of Madama Butterfly is the protagonist's "American Dream." After her marriage, Cio-Cio-San seeks to gain acceptance by abandoning her own culture and beliefs to conform to the expectations of her Western husband. She diligently learns Western customs, dresses in Western clothing at home, worships Western deities, and even insists that her servant call her "Miss Pinkerton"—all in an effort to sever her ties with Japanese society.

Cio-Cio-San remains unwavering in her faith that she will reunite with her husband, fantasizing that one day, Pinkerton will return and take her to America to live as a true American wife. Through her character, it becomes evident how the West seeks to construct an idealized image of the Oriental woman—one defined by ultimate self-sacrifice, unquestioning loyalty, delicate exotic charm, and absolute obedience to Western men. These characteristics embody the Western gaze's romanticized vision of Eastern women. In a broader sense, Cio-Cio-San herself can be seen as a symbolic representation of the West's imagination of the East.

When explaining the relationship between "Orientalism" and "gender," Chizuko Ueno points out that "the Orientalist schema is identical to that of gender in the structuralist paradigm of binary oppositions" (Chizuko Ueno, 1996: 167). She simultaneously quotes Lévi-Strauss's statement expressing binary opposition relationships "West, East, men, women; culture, nature." (Chizuko Ueno, 1996: 167). A binary opposition structure also exists in Orientalist discourse: the West corresponds to men and culture; the East corresponds to women and nature. This structural correspondence explains why the West, when creating artistic works about the East, especially on Asian themes, tends to place "women" at the center of the narrative. The East in Western cultural imagination lacks "masculine qualities"—such as strength, decisiveness, and the desire to conquer—and this stereotype reflects the West's underlying mentality to weaken Eastern images. By feminizing the East, Western culture constructs an implicit power relationship that positions the East in a perpetually passive and conquered position within this binary opposition.

The French sociologist Michel Foucault viewed discourse as a form of power, stating that "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized." (Foucault, 1970: 52-53). The character design in Madama Butterfly exemplifies the discursive dominance of the West over the East under cultural hegemony.

Through artistic works, the West defines and reconstructs the "Orient," reinforcing a power dynamic in which the West—much like Pinkerton—is depicted as strong, wealthy, and possessing absolute authority, while the East is portrayed as respectful, submissive, and filled with admiration and fantasies about the West. This artistic representation reinforces the West's control over the East, conveying a form of discursive surveillance that mirrors the hegemonic gaze Western nations impose upon their colonized Eastern counterparts.

3.3. The Dissemination and Reproduction of the "Asian Female" Representation

The representation of Madama Butterfly conforms to the stereotype of "Asian women" in Western art, such as "docile, passive, loyal, and sacrificial." This image has been continuously replicated and reinforced through subsequent film and artistic works. Nearly all love stories set in China and Japan during the 20th century constructed this impression. For example, Sayonara (Joshua Logan, 1957), The World of Suzie Wong (1960), Flower Drum Song (1961), and the musical of 1989 Miss Saigon all reinforced the Asian female image in Western public consciousness by repeating character designs and story patterns similar to those in Madama Butterfly.

In Sayonara, the romance between a U.S. Air Force pilot and a Japanese dancer continues the narrative structure of an Eastern woman falling in love with a Western man, much like Madama Butterfly, though with a different ending. In The World of Suzie Wong, the contrast between the Hong Kong prostitute Suzie Wong and the British painter further amplifies the commodification and sexualization of Asian women. Although Flower Drum Song appears to depict the Chinese-American community, it continues the implicit narrative that Eastern women must undergo Westernization to achieve happiness. Meanwhile, Miss Saigon reinforces the core Orientalist themes of Madama Butterfly, setting its story against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. (Edward, 1991) The protagonist, a Vietnamese prostitute, falls in love with an American soldier, only to be abandoned, forced into separation, and ultimately driven to suicide. Despite the inclusion of a romantic element, the underlying narrative logic remains unchanged—the departure of the Western man, the waiting, and ultimate sacrifice of the Eastern woman.

These works share a common approach in defining their female protagonists, consistently portraying Asian women in marginalized roles—whether as a Japanese dancer, a Hong Kong prostitute, a Chinese-American immigrant, or a Vietnamese sex worker during the Vietnam War. These character choices serve a dual purpose: on one hand, they emphasize the accessibility of Eastern women; on the other, they reinforce their position as cultural "Others." The depiction of geishas and prostitutes caters to Western sexual fantasies about Asian women,

while simultaneously justifying these fantasies under the pretext of cultural differences. Meanwhile, the characterization of immigrant or displaced women strengthens the notion of the East's dependence on the West, implying that Eastern women can only attain a better life through the assistance of Western (male) figures.

The persistence and reproduction of these portrayals also reflect the political attitudes of the West toward Asian countries during the Cold War era. Within the context of U.S. military alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other Asian nations, the unequal romantic relationships between Western men and Asian women serve as an implicit metaphor for the discursive and power dynamics between the West and East Asia. (Green, 1999)

In this framework, the West provides protection and guidance to countries like Japan and South Korea, while the East reciprocates with loyalty and obedience. As a result, even though some narratives deviate from the tragic ending of Madama Butterfly, they do not fundamentally challenge the existing power structure. Even in seemingly progressive storylines, the value of female characters remains defined through their relationships with Western men. Their dependence on and "love" for Western men ultimately signifies acceptance and internalization of Western values.

Thus, "Asian women" as a symbolic construct have never truly emerged as independent from the Western "periphery." Instead, they continue to exist in relation to and in dependence upon Western narratives and authority.

3.4. The Stability of the Western Artistic as "Center"

Juri Lotman introduced the concept of the "semiosphere," arguing that, much like the biosphere, signs exist within a specific domain known as the semiotic space. He stated: "The semiosphere is the totality of all cultures and constitutes the environment in which culture emerges and exists." (Lotman, 1998: 20). This space consists of both a "center" and a "periphery", with cultural symbols not being static but continuously circulating and transforming between these two areas. Signs flow from the periphery toward the center, providing continuous dynamism to the semiotic space. Throughout this semiotic exchange, the core elements of the work maintain a certain stability, while the periphery injects new vitality and evolving meanings, ensuring its relevance across time and space. (Kang Cheng, 2006)

As scholar Lu Di noted, "Any information spreads spatially from the center or periphery to the periphery or center in sequence, gradually increasing or decreasing; any change progresses from simple to complex and takes a long or short time." (Lu Di, 2021: 29).

As a work embedded with Orientalist stereotypes, Madama Butterfly establishes itself at the center of the semiotic space through Western operatic traditions and Orientalist narratives. Meanwhile, various artistic derivatives and adaptations surrounding the figure of Madama Butterfly form the periphery of this space. These peripheral elements continuously feed new creative interpretations and insights back into the center, shaping a cyclical process of transmission, where meaning flows from periphery to center and then back again. This dynamic process has allowed Madama Butterfly to be continuously performed, disseminated, and consumed across different cultural contexts, solidifying its status as a timeless artistic classic.

4. Modern Interpretations of Madama Butterfly

4.1. The Transformation of Japan's Political and Cultural Status

Although the Meiji Restoration brought significant changes to Japanese society, marking its transition from feudalism to modernization, this transformation occurred alongside the expansion of Western imperialism. As an Asian nation, Japan occupied an ambiguous geopolitical position—it was the first country in Asia to achieve industrialization while simultaneously experiencing cultural infiltration from the West. As a peripheral entity within the Western world, Japan was not only at a disadvantage geopolitically but also found itself in a passive role within the structures of cultural representation. Japan lacked the authority to define its own image and was instead imagined and interpreted through Western artistic perspectives.

However, after the World War II, particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s, Japan underwent a period of economic recovery and cultural revival, significantly altering its position within the global peripheral communication system. The country's remarkable transformation—from a defeated nation to the world's second-largest economy—provided Japan with both the capital and agency to redefine its cultural identity. During this period, Japan transitioned from a passive receiver of Western culture to a cultural exporter. Traditional Japanese arts such as architecture, fine arts, and classical music, as well as modern cultural forms like anime and pop music, gradually gained acceptance in the West and were even imitated. The Japanese modern culture that had emerged as a peripheral product of Western influence in the 20th century was now being redefined.

Peter Burke describes cultural change as follows: the history of culture, in general, can be seen as a struggle between two forces. Sometimes one trend dominates; at other times, another prevails. In the long run, a balance is maintained between the two. (Burke, 2009). In this historical shift, the relationship between Japan and Western culture evolved from inequality to parity. The passive, submissive, and self-sacrificing image of Japan, as represented in Madama Butterfly, starkly contrasts with its modern international status. In the global cultural market, Japan has transitioned from being a mere subject of exotic consumption to a semi-peripheral cultural powerhouse capable of exporting its own cultural symbols, thereby engaging in a more complex interaction with the Western cultural center.

By integrating itself into the Western cultural framework, Japan has effectively shed its peripheral identity. This transformation disrupts the traditional center-periphery binary structure, creating a more complex, multi-centered cultural network. In this process, Japan has successfully

shifted from being the “Other” to an active participant with cultural agency and discursive power.

4.2. Madama Butterfly in the East: Reception and Criticism

As a globally renowned and phenomenon-level opera, Madama Butterfly has frequently encountered resistance upon entering Eastern markets. Eastern scholars and audiences often approach the opera with a critical perspective, analyzing it beyond mere artistic appreciation. Many Eastern viewers argue that the story clearly reflects stereotypes and cultural biases against the East.

Katahira Miyuki, a professor at Momoyama Gakuin University in Japan, conducted a survey on the opera’s reception among Japanese audiences. The majority of respondents expressed confusion over Cio-Cio-San’s blind devotion to a Western man and her self-destructive love. Many pointed out the opera’s numerous stereotypes and misconceptions about Japan, which, in their view, cannot be easily altered in current Italian productions of Madama Butterfly.

For Eastern audiences, particularly Japanese viewers, the opera presents a unique dilemma of “reverse adaptation”: they must either accept the distorted self-image presented in the story—essentially acknowledging the Western-constructed version of “Japan”—or completely reject a work that has already established itself as an authoritative piece in global art history.

Japanese artists have also made efforts to modernize and reinterpret Madama Butterfly. Japanese opera singer Takao Okamura revealed in the documentary “Puccini ni Idomu: Okamura Takao no Opera Jinsei” (Challenging Puccini: The Opera Life of Takao Okamura) that he once performed as Cio-Cio-San’s uncle at a German opera house. In that production, the character wore a traditional Japanese wig, a Western-style dress, and held a torii gate in his hands. When Okamura requested to wear an authentically Japanese costume instead, he was told that only he and a few Japanese audience members knew what was right or wrong. Determined to present a more authentic portrayal of Japanese culture, Okamura decided to correct the cultural inaccuracies in Madama Butterfly by modifying the Italian version of the opera. He not only revised certain misconceptions about Japanese culture in the libretto but also introduced costume and stage design changes to better reflect an authentic Japanese aesthetic. However, these efforts did not lead to a fundamental transformation of the opera. To this day, the Italian version of Madama Butterfly, laden with Japanese stereotypes, continues to be performed in major theaters across Japan.

Some Western scholars have also explored the cultural complexities and reception issues surrounding this work. Groos directly addresses the colonial mindset embedded in the opera, arguing that Cio-Cio-San is “sacrificed” because she embodies three layers of marginalization: being a woman, an Easterner, and a Japanese person. This multi-layered marginalization not only reflects the power inequalities of Western imperialism but also reinforces stereotypical depictions of Eastern women. As Groos notes, “the Japanese response would inevitably resist and in some instances actively subvert it.” (Groos, 1989: 177). Similarly, Slonimsky questions the incompatibility between Western musical aesthetics and Japanese audience perception, stating, “I can say nothing for the music of Madama Butterfly. Western music is too complicated for a Japanese person. Even Caruso’s celebrated singing does not appeal very much more than the barking of dogs in faraway woods.” (Slonimsky, 1969: 5).

Opera, as an artistic medium, is not culturally neutral; rather, it is a product of the long-term development of Western civilization. Its musical structure follows Western tonal and harmonic systems, its vocal techniques are rooted in European bel canto traditions, and its dramatic construction relies on Western narrative logic and modes of emotional expression. These deeply ingrained elements inherently carry Western cultural values and aesthetic preferences, forming an implicit cultural framework.

As a result, when Japanese artists attempt to revise the cultural representations in Madama Butterfly while preserving the operatic form, they face an inherent contradiction. Even if costumes, stage designs, or specific cultural details are altered, the opera’s fundamental Western artistic framework remains intact. This makes it nearly impossible to achieve a truly transformative cultural adaptation.

For Asian audiences today, viewing these works—once considered “peripheral” by the Western cultural center—can be equally unsettling. This discomfort stems not only from the superficial distortions of culture but also from the deep-seated power imbalance embedded in the cultural representation.

When Asian audiences engage with these works, they do not merely see a misrepresented version of themselves; they also witness how the Orient has been shaped through the Western gaze to serve as a symbol fulfilling Western fantasies. This construct makes it difficult for Asian audiences to find authentic cultural recognition within these narratives. Instead, it heightens their awareness of Western cultural hegemony, reinforcing critical perspectives on how power dynamics influence representation and prompting deeper reflection on how to redefine and assert their own cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

As an artistic medium, opera serves as a unique representation of social and cultural transformations. This study has traced the evolution of Madama Butterfly in its global dissemination, revealing how Western art has constructed an imagined vision of Japan and Asia through the symbolization of Eastern female figures. The opera’s creators and its Western adaptors, using the operatic medium, have shaped an "Oriental" space that aligns with Western aesthetic and cultural expectations. This artistic representation is not a neutral cultural expression but rather a cultural construct embedded with power dynamics. The emergence of Madama Butterfly exemplifies the profound influence of Orientalism in artistic works.

As a cultural symbol, Madama Butterfly has undergone a complex process of movement from the center to the periphery, and back to the center throughout its global dis-

semination. Western opera traditions and Orientalist narratives have established the opera as a semiotic center, yet when introduced into Asian cultural contexts, reinterpretations and critiques from the periphery have reinvigorated the core with new meanings. This cyclical cultural flow not only reflects the role of Western cultural hegemony in shaping Asian identities but also illustrates the fluidity and complexity of cultural exchange.

With the increasing cultural awareness of Asian nations, interpretations of Madama Butterfly are no longer confined to a Western-centric perspective. Asian artists have actively reinterpreted and reconstructed the figure of Cio-Cio-San, deconstructing and challenging the long-standing stereotypes of Eastern women. These efforts have also prompted the West to critically reassess its own Orientalist narratives, contributing to a broader dialogue on cultural representation and power dynamics.

In conclusion, Madama Butterfly, as a symbolic vehicle for the dissemination of Orientalism, reflects not only the historical trajectory of East and West cultural encounters but also the emerging trends of cultural exchange in the context of globalization. Throughout this process, Asian nations have gradually shifted from passive recipients to active cultural creators, driving the reconstruction and critique of Orientalist narratives. This transformation fosters a more equitable and interactive cultural dialogue, challenging dominant representations and enabling a more balanced exchange of perspectives.

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