Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context
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Consuming Madame Chrysanthème:
Loti’s ‘dolls’ to Shanghai Baby

Sandra Lyne

1. The scene in the bookshop was extraordinarily violent. Fragments of female anatomy were strewn around the shelves on the covers of books, here a foot and a neck, there a leg. Lips pouted and eyes enticed, autonomous objects devoid of personality and individuality. Impenetrable expressions and mask-like make-up peddled alienated eroticism. Whilst blissfully swooning, a geisha bared her white neck and shoulder, in careful erotic déshabillé. Assuring us of a literary feast of bizarre Oriental sex, a skull-like head ground expensive black pearls between its teeth. An anonymous, moonlit body nestled beneath flimsy white silk, the body’s head hidden provocatively by a fan that suppressed the figure's personality but not its ethnicity. The figure, by its provocative posture and its partial disclosure of a slender leg, promised moonlit sexual activities, and perhaps romance. It invited the viewer to complete the unveiling of flesh, delicate, mysterious and foreign.

2. On another cover, the eroticised nape of a very young girl’s neck was shyly presented to the observer, who was simultaneously voyeur, potential sexual partner, object of imagined seduction, and commercial target. The viewer’s gaze was not challenged by a returned scrutiny: the women averted their eyes or stared impassively, seeming to make no demands of the observer.[1]

3. Both archaic and familiar, we recognise these images. We have seen them before; we think we know whom they represent. Why do they seem familiar, and what is the basis of our knowing? Book marketers certainly assume that we not only know these images, but that they will incite our desire, including the desire to purchase the product. How do the producers of these images, the subjects of the images, and their potential consumers interact? We assume the books will tell us about Asian females, and we have encountered a powerful, pre-formed idea of Asian femininity before we have opened the book. Does this matter?

4. To fully answer these questions would require more space than is available, but a beginning can be made here by connecting the images to historical contexts, and to the Western evolution of a textual and visual construct known as the exotic Asian Woman, from Loti’s...
5. The 'Exotic Asian Woman' construct is otherwise known as 'China Doll', 'Madame Butterfly', or the subject of the 'Asian Woman fetish'. In this paper, visual and literary forms of the construct are treated interchangeably. They are considered as different manifestations of the same entity, evoking a similar phantasm, one by written description, the other by photographic artwork. Reference to 'images' of Asian women in the discussion means the literary and visual forms that are used to create or reproduce the polymorphous 'Asian Woman' construct. 'Characters' created by a writer are often moulded to fit a pre-existing construct or trope familiar to readers. For example, Wei Hui's Coco (Shanghai Baby) is moulded to conform to the 'China Doll' trope, or to a modern day Madame Butterfly figure: both 'China dolls' and 'Butterflies' are forms of the same fetishised, alienated 'Exotic Asian Woman' construct.

6. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, book-covers have increased in brilliance and complexity: book-shops now resemble art-shows. Part of the pleasure of choosing books lies in the perusal of beautifully crafted covers. One also notes an interesting tension between the artist's and writer's constructions of their subject, the exotic Asian woman. Analysis of the dialogue between cover and literary constructs can begin by considering these constructs as signs. Barthes regarded all characters in novels as simply signs, unconnected to reality. In Empire of Signs, we read that conventions of the Japanese language support this idea; characters in novels are regarded as inanimate objects, unlike humans and animals. For the purposes of this study of commercialised use of Asian femininity, it is interesting to note that Barthes describes these signs as products.

7. A literary trope, such as 'Madame Butterfly', is a fetishised inanimate sign invested with human qualities; it has grown in European and American imagination from a heritage of inanimate signs. According to Foucault, meaning is attached over time to certain signs via burgeoning discourses, and reified in popular imagination by repetition. Stereotypical images and their social spaces are presented and structured through on-going discursive practice. The 'Asian Woman' construct, visual and literary, makes no distinction between women from Japan, China and South East Asia: physical attributes such as long dark hair, delicately-constructed bodies and skin that is not too dark have come to signify sexual availability, eagerness to please men and an exciting 'difference' to Western women.

8. Foucault, in his analysis of discourse as a public mode of presenting and structuring objects and their social spaces, finds that although they are unreal entities, images become powerful tools for use by ingroups to mark the differences of outgroups for political or commercial benefits. Stereotypical images of a different subject are usually successfully disseminated by groups with the greatest economic or political power. The constant repetition of these images over time works forcefully on public perceptions of Asian women. Madame Butterfly constructs, created from many images from many sources, represent and affect consumer perceptions of real women, but are inanimate entities.

9. The discourse about Asian women exists within a macro-discourse of the fetishisation and commodification of female sexuality per se and, ingrained in a colonialist past, is embedded in a racialised scientific discourse of political and economic expediency. Manderson and Jolly consider that Orientalist discourse on Asian women's exoticism constitutes a media-driven trajectory.

10. Journals, web-sites, novels, theatre and operatic performances, movies and travel advertisements promote images of Asian women designed to appeal to a European, often male gaze, that have evolved from nineteenth century biological hierarchies. Said acknowledged in 1978 that contemporary stereotypical packaging of 'ethnicity', and its inadequacies as authentic representation' maintains links to nineteenth century discourses:
One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardised moulds ... standardisation, and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth century academic and imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient’. By reproducing stereotypical images of Asian women on and in books, marketers and writers, unwittingly or not, are participating in a long-standing discursive practice of exoticism that assumes ownership of the images and the right to generate successful commercial transactions from them: they are using constructs that have their roots in racism.

As marketers seek to attract a visually fixated public to consume its printed word products, more emphasis is placed on packaging and shop-floor display. Very few books written by or about Asian women escape enclosure in attractive covers featuring an 'Exotic Oriental Woman' construct; alluring geisha or courtesans. The book may explore social, religious, hierarchical relations, but generally the covers do not. These cover images of beautiful women are surrounded by Orientalist signs linking them to imperialistic economies of desire both past and present, thus reinforcing stereotypes and implicating the book in issues of race, essentialism and inequality. These images often associate Asian women with Western fantasies of available hyper-sexuality and youthful, graceful, compliant femininity and idealised womanhood (read 'girlhood'). Rosemary Breger points out in Myth and Stereotype, that to idealise women is also to dehumanise them.

Idealisation is one aspect of contemporary representation of Asian women: fragmentation and fetishisation are others. The bookshop display described above focuses on the parts of Asian women that facilitate book sales: parts that tease, titillate and play along with Western fantasy, disconnected from any sense that individual personality is important. Suggestive of the remains of a cannibalistic feast, the visual display of alienation could appeal to one's sense of the surreal, but it highlights the utilitarian use that is made of Asian-ness, particularly female Asian-ness, in a consumerist global culture. Miller, in Seductions, defines Asian women's value in commodified economies of desire:

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Their presence ... is as forms of coinage, exchange value offered or stolen or forbidden, tokens of men's power and wealth or lack of them. The sexual use and productiveness of women...seem equivalent to their actual presence and their consciousness. They are, finally. 'Orientalised' with Said's terms into the perceptions and the language which express, but also elaborate on, the uses men have for women within exploitative societies.
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Contemporary Western consumers have, generally, been routinely exposed to the visual display, fragmentation and voyeuristic contemplation of any kind of female body, alienated from personality and context (fetishised). The eroticised female body has long been framed in a variety of scenarios; peep-shows, art exhibitions, strip joints, movies, television and product and travel advertising. Williams in Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible, theorises the development of fetishised representations of women and sex in European and American cultures.

Williams analyses Marxian and Freudian usage of the term 'fetish', and explores a synthesis of the two: phallic fixation within a commodified economic system of desire. According to Williams, fetishism is the [generally] male fixation upon and scrutiny of sexual objects, artefacts or body parts isolated from the 'dynamic relation of exchange within which they operate'. Marx's concept of the fetish assumes that an economy of desire relies on the transformative commodification of objects. Objects of labour are infused with human qualities and desire, as if infused with light; potency and desire is transferred from person to thing; 'the social relations between men, via the exchange of money, assume the fantastic form of a relation between things'.

Williams proposes that this Marxian concept, when combined with Freudian phallic fixation, imagines an alienated economy of desire where male pleasure is paramount. The phallus is the ultimate focus of delight to which all must ultimately be directed. When the practice of using female constructs as advertising devices is embedded in this economy, fragmented body parts become objects of desire, isolated from the more intricate social milieu of reciprocity, connectedness, and the interaction of personality. The female is visually present and ostensibly the focus of desire, but fascination with the phallus empowers fetishised representations of Asian women.

**Ethnicity as Exhibition**

The alienation of personality and context that is engendered by fetishism has also been
explored by anthropologists seeking to reinscribe the identities of subjects objectified in a long tradition of racialised photographic anthropology. Framing and fetishising others, in the manner of commercial book marketing, has a long tradition in visual anthropology. Both modes of display highlight difference and assign essentialised sexuality to their subjects, and display them to voyeuristic, powerful gazes both of the camera and the consumer.

According to Iskander Mydin, photographic exhibitions of native subjects, from a variety of cultures, were used to visually reify nineteenth century theories such as biological determinism. This latter 'ism' considered physical attributes as indicative of standardised moral, mental and psychological qualities, such as promiscuity, intelligence, and childishness. Mydin writes that 'allegories, such as the noble savage, the fecund native, the sexually subversive odalisque and the 'type' were used as 'structures' by which to categorise photographed natives. The subjects were thus 'distanced' from their own humanity, 'transformed from living entities to allegorical, metaphorical and aesthetic ideas.' They were fetishised.

Their transformation was also commodification. Because reports of new discoveries in such new fields of phrenology, comparative anatomy and racial typology were of public interest, there was a demand for publications of 'scientific', illustrated literature. Marketers of these scientific products used 'allegories' to describe the meaning of manufactured individuals (such as studio anthropological models), posed scenes and events.... [These allegorical structures were] linked to the saleability of these images.... The public and the manufacturers of the images co-operated in a process of consuming or sustaining the consumption of these abstractions and imagined realities.

For Dower, the act of framing and publishing these images appropriates and decontextualises the body from time and space. Those who exist within images are frozen as real time moves on. By enclosing subjects within 'allegorical structures', lives and cultures of the other are rendered unchanging, static; it is implied that the subjects are incapable of change. 'This is the hidden danger which underlies the celebration of cultural difference ... it ... ultimately denigrates purposeful human activity and the project of social change'.

Cultural exhibitions were a form of travelling for Victorian audiences with a touristic urge: they could, they believed, see the diverse cultures and peoples of the 'Empire' without having to move out of Europe. Modern novels, coated in images of Asian sexuality, are a form of fantasy travel. They are labelled as 'ethnic' (therefore 'different' and tasty) and easily consumable on public transport. We are familiar with these 'Asian woman' constructs; they appear often in contemporary travel advertisements, where young, smiling, honey-coloured women (not too dark) beam their approval and willingness to serve all they may fly or share a pool with, entertain or clean up after. Webb's The Emperor's General and Setlowe's The Sexual Occupation of Japan, for instance, portray Asian women in similar roles: sex servants and nurturers who scrub backs and ply men with food and sake.

When a financial transaction is made in response to a frozen, fetishised Asian woman construct, a material and mental connection is made between economies and industrial structures capitalising on the idea of unchanging Asian femininity. The Asian sex tourism industry, aimed at Western men, is based largely on this idea.

Like these postcards, images on book-covers and in novels are also small, hand-sized, and therefore available for private scrutiny, intimate, and can misrepresent Asian cultures. Robert Rydell, in 'Souvenirs of Imperialism: World's Fair Postcards' analyses the late Victorian obsession with postcards; these postcards often depicted exotic people on display at a number of vast exhibition halls in Europe and America. He attributes some of this enthusiasm to an 'exhibitionary complex', where Europe's imperialistic policies were reinforced by displays of ethnic people dwarfed by their surroundings and out of context, exhibited for public scrutiny. 'By affixing images of colonial people onto their cards, postcard publishers quite literally framed nonwhites as commodities to be collected, traded and recombined in modular fashion with other marketable goods on display at the fairs.'
25. Ellen Handy, while examining the place of picture postcards of Japanese women in American society in the 1860s, asks questions that can be asked of our own commercialised practices of 'ethnic display'.[24] What do these pictures include, what do they exclude, and how do they position subjects? Their Japanese female subjects were labelled as abstracted and idealised concepts, rather than identified as people: 'Miss Pomegranate', 'Wisteria', 'Queen of the Geisha' and so on. Handy notes that the new woman of the time was excluded and that females were not displayed working. Only things that excited the senses were used. Few women in business suits appear on the covers of contemporary novels about Asian women: the women loll about, waiting to be enjoyed. This is a common theme in nineteenth century harem paintings depicting Middle Eastern women. Such representations are not documentations: they are misrepresentations for fantasy's sake.

26. Handy also notes that personality was suppressed in early postcards; bland expressions, in a manner that reminds us of the averted gazes and body fragments seen above. The women portrayed on 'Cheesecake postcards'[25] as 'types' and 'beauties' were unconnected to family; and they were surrounded by visual signs that emphasised their 'difference', reminding us of contemporary 'multicultural' literary products.

27. Art critics' interpretations of erotised paintings provide useful tools for analysing how erotised Asian representations influence potential customers. Bryson, in Word and Image, discusses the process of alienation that is necessary to present the erotised female body to a consuming gaze in French rococo paintings.[26] The body to be contemplated is removed from the context to which it belongs, and placed into that of the viewer, which in this case is the book-cover in the shop. Perspective is minimised, implying intimacy, so that the body or body part is drawn close to the viewer, and not seen as through a window. 'For its erotic content to be fully yielded up, the body must be presented to the viewer as though uniquely made to gratify and be consumed in the moment of the glance. All signs that the body has other purposes, another history, are to be suppressed; it cannot even have a setting of its own'.[27]

28. In the book cover art under discussion, desire is reduced to the simplest of signification: lips, eyes, and sensitive areas such as the neck and soles of the feet. The cover-art allows no 'rivals' to the consumers' gaze: it does not 'threaten to exclude the spectator, for the aim of the image is appropriation by the viewer, with the least possible resistance'.[28]

29. When a female visual image is surrounded with signs that mark her as 'Asian', and subsequently exhibited to emphasise her stimulating, erotic 'difference', it is implied that the female's eroticism and exoticism is inherently Asian: She is a 'type'; category 'Asian'. In an analysis of the eroticisation of early travel paintings of Pacific women, that also relates to representations of Asian women, Jolly notices that the artists classified their subjects with 'marks of an inscrutable difference—the tattoo, the statue, the shrouded corpse,—[that] enhance desire, combining the half-revealed bodies of beautiful women with other elements which render them remote and dangerous.[29]

30. On the covers of books, and in the constructs inside, a wealth of 'marks of difference' feed reader expectations of different sexuality: stark red and white make-up, fans, the Japanese flag, black pearl, distinctively-marked lips, eye shape, silks, a different head-rest, and a kimono. Ben-Ami, in his study of stereotypical images of Japan in Western media, argues that difference in itself is neutral; it is a 'truism'.[30] However, 'the implicit assumption that these differences reflect the innate characteristics of different peoples' is a contemporary reinscription of biological determinism,[31] and a 'barrier to a rational understanding of Japan.[32] Such celebration of difference, he claims, has been discussed in terms of 'culture ' since Ruth Benedict, but race is often the word that is actually meant.[33] The substitution of the term 'culture' for 'race' began with Franz Boas, the founder of American cultural anthropology.[34]

31. Female Asian constructs have been idealised, fetishised, framed and fragmented in contemporary novels, and occasionally, incongruously juxtaposed when cover and inner constructs deliver conflicting messages. In the sample of publications displayed above, some of the constructs on the covers mirrored those on the inside; the pearl-crunching skull on the cover of Lillian Ng's Swallowing Clouds was an accurate indicator of the distorted, banal caricature of 'Asian' hyper-sexuality on the inside. However, in a multiculturalist climate where previously silent, marginalised voices are heard (published), positive female representation and commercial interests can conflict. The constructs on the cover of books sometimes differ markedly from those found within. Book marketers, sometimes in
In collaboration with writers, do not always see the incongruity of presenting stereotypical constructs of Asian women on the covers of literature written specifically to clear up myths about them.

32. In several of the titles displayed above, notably Downer's and Dalby's historical and anthropological studies of Japanese geisha, the books' contents disappoint readers hoping for lascivious revelations. Having promised them sensual delights and imagined access to the body displayed via the cover blurbs, the actual contents are found to be prosaic, factual studies of the workaday details of artisans. The literary constructs of Downer's and Dalby's texts were not derivatives of male desire, or quasi persons, or dolls. Facts, figures, day-to-day accounts, historical and anthropological information set Geisha in historical and social contexts and portrayed women as complete persons.

33. In a similar way, the cover of Liza Dalby's *The Tale of Murasaki* concentrates interest on a young woman's neck: her focus is elsewhere, leaving us free to contemplate the eroticised body part. In this type of representation of Asian females, women passively accept the gaze of desire or mere inspection. This passivity is at odds with the active and unstereotypical female constructs found within the novel. The Murasaki character reflects this inconsistency in the text: she resists marriage until an age considered to be quite advanced in eleventh century Japan, and pursues a writing career in a harshly patriarchal environment. She maintains a degree of personal dignity and status, but writes popular tales of traditional voluptuous ladies being ravished by handsome, raping, macho Prince Genji.

34. This parallels a paradox negotiated by many writers today: desiring a 'best-seller', they sometimes chose 'tried and true' constructs of femininity that essentialise and relegate women to superficial, submissive roles in order to feed public tastes for eroticism. Richard Todd, in his book, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today*, clearly portrays the powerful effects that commercial interests have in determining the type of product that authors produce in order to `sell'.

35. The 'Exotic Asian Woman' construct is most widely articulated in the figure of 'Madame Butterfly', the Japanese child 'bride of convenience' who loses all for the sake of her American lover. Its use in contemporary media and art forms resurrects ghosts of biological determinism and social/racial hierarchies of the mid and late nineteenth century, when Asians were situated (by European anthropologists) below Caucasians, but above 'Negroes' in categories determined by skull capacity, intellectual ability, skin colour and language quality. 'Negritude' constituted an evolutionary link between apes and humanity. The brains of 'Negroes', women and children were deemed to be roughly of equal size and quality, which may explain why early male travellers often described Asian women as 'dolls', giggling, superficial, and frivolous.

36. How has the concept of Asian women as 'dolls' evolved? Who were the doll-makers, and which play-spaces did they inhabit? Pierre Loti, whose novel/travelogue *Madame Chrysanthème* was the literary ancestor of Puccini's opera, depicted Japanese women as 'dolls'. Loti, a French naval officer, describes his summer-long temporary 'marriage' to a refined young Japanese woman, Kikou-san (Madame Chrysanthème), and records highly selective and subjective memories of Japanese life in the mountains above Nagasaki. Loti assesses, in a half-cynical, indulgent manner, the indigenous females. He is especially pleased with very young girls ['mousmes']. 'They are so laughing, so merry, all these little Nipponese dolls.'
Still paternalistic, Loti refers to his wife as ‘that doll’, noting that ‘I have chosen her to amuse me’[43] and resolves that he will ‘enjoy the last days in Japan, and derive therefrom all the amusement possible’. In Madame Chrysanthème, Loti describes a traditional Japanese meal, remarking that it resembles ‘a doll’s tea-party’, presided over by ‘three over-dressed women’. Loti (and subsequently other writers of the Butterfly story) is able to create a construct that can be comfortably exploited, without the complications involved with European female/male relationships. Asian females become replicas, simulacra. Proper relationships are not possible with such an item; a commodity indistinguishable from the trinkets and fripperies of Japan’s exotic merchandise. By rendering the women ‘dolls’, he positions himself as the controller of the playroom, the subject to whom the ‘dolls’ must give diversion and pleasure. The ‘dolls’ of course, do not cry ‘real’ tears, their culture permits play: thus the ‘owner’ is freed from the complications of emotional entanglement and questions of ethics.

37. The process of commercially constructing Asian women as dolls evokes the image of the toy maker, who assembles fragmented parts, the torso, the limbs and head, into a dummy human in a parody of human reproduction. Simone Lazaroo, in The Australian Fiancé, recognises the connection between image-makers and Asian women, and uses the doll-maker metaphor in a subversive way.[46] In a scene in which she and her Australian fiancé visit a doll-maker in Singapore, ‘The Australian assumes she’ll want the maiden with her long hair of fine black thread, her sky-blue gown with white blossom ... But she is pointing to the doll with the ornate helmet and silver sword, the black boots, gold coat, pink and turquoise belted trousers ... I want the general who conquers the foreign barbarians.[47]

38. The doll-maker hands her two dolls: a pale haired ‘barbarian’ [male] doll, and the warrior-woman doll, and remarks that: ‘they do not go together, you know’. This scene questions a traditional idea that it is ‘natural’ for Western men to manifest superiority based on resources, agency and power in their relationships with Asian women. Read as the protagonist’s unspeakable, hidden knowledge of her own history and value, the doll imagery supplants opportunistic submission with the aggression of the female warrior. This latter representation is now so common in Japanese-based video games that its resistance potential is threatened by over-use.

39. The Madame Butterfly/exotic oriental woman trope is used interchangeably with the concept of a ‘China Doll’. Asian women on display have much in common with dolls: they share a displaced humanity, do not think for themselves and are perceived as passive objects of play, who have been selected, purchased and disposed of at will, both in traditional, indigenous practice and by Westerners seeking exotic pleasures at bargain prices.

A personal encounter with a doll

40. In the following extract from my diary, I describe a personal encounter with European embodiment and performance of Asian femininity, a scene from an operatic performance featuring the ubiquitous Madame Butterfly. I encountered her, far from my working-class origins, in the State Opera of S.A., through playing Asian women in operatic performances. Madama Butterfly is permeated with the history, myths and mind-sets formed through initial Western contact with Asians in the nineteenth century.

41. The backstage darkness of the Adelaide Festival Centre is filled with the bittersweet pathos of Puccini’s Humming Chorus, as musically embodied longing entrances the audience. Onstage, the teenage Cho-Cho-san and her blue-eyed son Sorrow peer through holes in the shoji, vainly awaiting the return of Captain Pinkerton. They wear their best clothes and...
have decorated their small Nagasaki house with flowers. The audience, knowing that Pinkerton has already married an American wife, and that he will send her to claim his Japanese bride’s child, exudes muffled empathy and subdued sniffing. They also know that Butterfly (Cho-Cho San), having isolated herself by accepting Christianity and rejecting other wealthy suitors will commit suicide, giving new meaning to the Western practice of impaling butterflies on a pin. Cho Cho San is also unaware that the American rights of marriage and divorce do not apply to her. It is one hundred years since the opera Madama Butterfly was first performed, and, largely because of the romanticism of its libretto and Puccini’s powerful music, what began as a tale of prosaic convenience and unabashed colonialist exploitation still draws large crowds.

42. Puccini’s Butterfly construction acts in a puppet-like way, rather than as a woman who thinks. It is really ‘cute’. Reifying nineteenth scientific and aesthetic ideas about women, Puccini imbues Butterfly with gullibility and childish simplicity: Cho-Cho-san believes Pinkerton will return, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and is too simple to perceive the double standards in Western attitudes regarding Asian women.

43. Butterfly suffers, waits, cares for the child, and suicides. This again, is typical of nineteenth century/early twentieth century sentimental depictions of femininity, which popular audiences found so moving. Dead heroines clad in white litter the nineteenth century operatic stage (e.g. Lucia Di Lammermoor, and Verdi’s La Traviata). Uncomfortable questions about the legitimacy of colonialist exploitation of indigenous women are deflected in contemplation of this sacrificial female, who redeems and transforms Pinkerton’s careless mistreatment. Butterfly’s death conveniently leaves the way clear for the real American marriage to proceed, and the Amerasian child is to be brought up in America, a land of golden opportunities. This type of gendered and racialised construction merges into mainstream consciousness: Asian women are perceived in the ‘real world’ to embody an essentialist, close-to-nature sensuality unspoilt by Western prohibitions. These representations were perpetuated in the earliest black and white films.

44. Europeans and Americans have been fed a steady diet of such images, especially via films about American military involvement in South East Asia. Morris gives a comprehensive overview of fetishised literary representations of Japanese women from the 1890’s to the present day. My study deals with two extremes: contemporary representations linked to those of the nineteenth century. Confining herself to Western fiction, Morris maps changes in representation of Japanese women, covering the eras before and after the world wars, and from the 1970s to the present day, providing cameo snaps and commentary on significant texts. She finds that such representations have not significantly changed from their original form.

A Modern Novel Gives the Butterfly story a new twist

45. Today, some Asian women write novels that reinforce stereotypical representations of Asian femininity, and some write against them. It is no longer a matter of white European males writing nostalgic-cum-mythic tales of women who make them feel like real men. Mydin notes that exoticism has moved out of the ‘Orientalist’ phase to the modernist where the ‘relationship of producer, subject, and audience’ is interchangeable. ‘Subject can become producer, or audience; producer can become subject.’

46. Wei Hui’s semi-autobiographical novel Shanghai Baby reflects this changed relationship. Before this is discussed, it would be helpful to focus on the book’s cover, that is rich with familiar signs that mark the subject as ‘exotic’: The Shanghai baby/China doll construct averts its eyes, as our attention is diverted to its light, bare skin, rich black hair and sensuous lips. ‘Tattoos’ (the washable variety?) brand the body with overtones of primitivism, and the colour combinations, white face, black hair, tinted lips, although in a Chinese context, evoke Japanese geisha, ‘Madame Butterfly’ make-up. (Madame Butterfly was a geisha). The shift from pink to red lips, and the loosened hair eroticise and modernise the geisha-like image. The geisha face has become an easily recognised trope of female Asian eroticism in Western book-cover art and performing arts and media, especially in the wake of Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha. Images of Chinese and Japanese femininity are often merged, as is demonstrated in David Hwang’s M Butterfly first performed in 1988. This play features Chinese transvestite Song Lilang who, singing the Madame Butterfly role, attracts the fetishistic love of a French diplomat. Rene calls Song ‘Butterfly’, his ‘perfect woman’.
Wei Hui’s *Shanghai Baby* also constructs a Chinese Butterfly: the hedonistic, ultra-modern, shopping and partying kind. *Shanghai Baby* is a good example of the ambivalence found in a great deal of writing featuring Asian women, for a largely Westernised readership.

(Wei Hui’s book was banned as ‘decadent’ in China). Claiming to be a ‘feminist’, she consciously creates a contemporary ‘Madame Butterfly/China Doll’ construct named Coco, who is also the writer, Wei Hui. Although a ‘feminist’, Wei Hui creates confusion throughout the text by her denial that such constructs relinquish personal power to others, notably men willing to fetishise Asian women. This desire for both fetishisation and liberation reveals itself in the rape scene in the book, where Mark, Coco’s European lover, fetishist and the ‘fascist’ representative of Shanghai’s colonialist past, rapes her. The act can be called ‘rape’, because, she both accepts and rejects Mark’s aggressive advances. Coco’s response is a flat refusal to accept that anyone could rape her; confusion ensues between “two personalities”, that of prostitute/Asian doll and of the sexually liberated woman.

I began to cry ... I ... suddenly felt even cheaper than the prostitutes dancing downstairs. At least they had professionalism and a certain coolness, while I was awkward and horribly torn between two personalities. I couldn’t stand the face I saw reflected in the grimy mirror.

Coco often expresses a sense of nostalgia for the ‘romance’ of Shanghai’s colonialist past, and she longs to relive the mid-nineteenth century ‘bourgeois atmosphere’ of Manet’s paintings. This could indicate a naïve perception of what status a young Chinese woman may have had in that era’s racist, social hierarchies.

Mark is a German international consultant, Coco, a Shanghai-born aspiring author who has had a book, *The Shriek of the Butterfly* published, and is in the middle of writing another. Mark calls her ‘baby’ another form of ‘doll’, for babies are to be cuddled and played with, and are controlled by the person who names the subject ‘doll’ or ‘baby’. In Shanghai, women who had light skin and were pretty were referred to as ‘foreign dolls’. Mark prowls the Asian ‘playground’, the nightclubs where Western men seek relationships, sex or both with young, thin Asian women with long black hair; ‘China Dolls’. The ‘dolls’ also ‘hunt’ Western men of means. *Shanghai Baby* replays the Butterfly themes of a Western man ‘hunting’ for pleasure with an Asian female, the presence of a ‘real’ wife who is inevitably blonde, and Coco’s inevitable abandonment as he travels home to resume his authentic, non-fantasy life.

Coco’s world is far removed from Madame Butterfly’s. Coco is a hard-headed, well-educated, contemporary ‘Shanghai baby’ who is conscious of her power and the magnetism of ‘Asian women’ fetishes, and the Butterfly myth. She is also a member of a privileged elite of Chinese youth, who live in a highly Westernised environment.

Coco and her friends constantly go to rock parties, eat at fashionable restaurants, take drugs and sleeping pills, wear Opium perfume and Shiseido (Japanese) cosmetics, speed off from kerbs in a ‘white VW Santana 200’, play on a Strauss piano, and sit on fabric sofas from Ikea. Coco has named herself after Coco Chanel, but one may infer a tenuous link with Madame Butterfly’s Cho Cho San.

Coco is a construct within a construct: Throughout the book, the pace is slowed as Coco invites the reader to gaze at her image through the lens of a camera or the eye of the beholder, or as if framed in a comic book: ‘To most men, I qualify as a little beauty ... with a pair of outsize eyes right out of a Japanese cartoon, and a long Coco Chanel neck’. Coco constantly romanticises ordinary situations by projecting them on to movie scenarios, and visualises herself and others participating in a movie-life. For instance, Coco, referring to her relationship with the drug-addicted, suicidal Tian Tian, says that ‘My brain was a screen covered in dust, and my darling and I were the world’s most hopeless leading couple’ and Mark’s breath smells like ‘a James Bond martini’. When describing a friend’s discovery of romance, Coco effuses: ‘she still found a flame burning in his eyes, just like the scene in Titanic when Rose discovers the light in Jack’s eyes that sets her heart thumping.’

Coco represents a site of Oriental fantasy for Mark, her German lover, but for
Coco and her friends, the West was the desired fantasy world, and especially the world of Hollywood movies and stars such as Marilyn Monroe.

53. If Wei Hui is ‘a feminist helping her generation of women understand themselves’, as we read in the frontispiece,[61] it is surprising that her mouthpiece, Coco, assigns more power to the beauty of Western women than to that of Asian women: ‘A Caucasian woman’s beauty can launch a thousand ships. In contrast, the beauty of an Asian woman relies on the knit brows and enticing eyes of a pin-up girl from some exotic by-gone era, like the singer Sandy Lam or the movie star Gong Li.’[62] Here, an Asian woman’s beauty is seen to be derived from performance, but that of a Western woman, Helen of Troy, has power and agency in the world of men.

54. In attempting to strive for a Western readership, Wei Hui casts the Western man, Mark, as virile, and the loved Asian Tian Tian as ineffective and drug-addicted, reminding us of nineteenth century stereotyping of Asian males as effeminate and opium-dazed. Coco identifies more with the materialistic West than with the ‘peasants who scrape a living’ in China. Quoting Sylvia Plath’s sentiment that ‘every woman loves a Fascist’,[63] we learn that part of Mark’s appeal was his aggressive ‘jack-booted’ sexual domination. Coco is reduced to taking petty revenge on him by stealing a small amount of cash and his wedding ring, thus constructing herself as a prostitute.

55. Wei Hui’s novel communicates ambivalence concerning the desired model for contemporary Asian femininity. On the one hand she creates a sexual adventurous, materialistic Coco who has apparently discovered herself, and on the other, the fetishised Asian Doll, who so easily attracts Western men who ‘hunt’ this pre-existing fantasy figure. Coco expresses a desire to be dominated, and wholeheartedly identifies with and endorses Western consumerism, values and aesthetics.

56. The term ‘Shanghai Baby’ may be more aggressive, and imply increased agency than the passive ‘China Doll’, but Wei Hui does not risk writing a novel minus the ready-made selling hook, Madame Butterfly. She solicits attention from a reader hungry for the old ideas of Asian hyper-sexuality and availability, and the notion that only the young Asian women are worth writing about. At least the Cho-Cho-san (Coco) of this version of the ‘Madama Butterfly’ myth does not suicide, but leaves that to her Asian boyfriend, Tian Tian, as she goes off to resume her career as a writer, having had a good cry first.

Implications

57. In a global environment that accepts cheap access to Asian human resources, displays of Asians as fantasy-capital in order to sell books raise familiar but unwelcome ghosts of neo-colonialism and exploitation. In movies and novels, our focus is directed to weeping or wounded women of the Cultural Revolution, feuding wives of polygamous marriages, geisha or fantastic fighting warriors. Many film producers, book marketers and some writers dwell only on exotic forms of Asian femininity that closely resemble old racist stereotypes, discarding representations of other Asian women as of no relevance to public interest.

58. Asian individuals who possess non-exotic talents and/or the wrong figure-type or are in an unsuitable age group and lack tragic lives do not sell as well. Old hags with histories of a lost, exotic youth are commonly represented in exoticised tales of Asia, such as the older women depicted in Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha, in order to set off the younger, more ‘showy’ females. Contemporary marketing of Asian women, through cover art and the selection of marketable stories about Asian women, is linked to the wider agenda that packages Asian women as dolls to be sold in a global toyshop.[64] This discussion has responded to assumptions made by international publishing industry that consumers want to read about one type of Asian woman (under thirty) exclusively, or to focus on bizarre, tragic, cruel or salacious aspects of different cultures.

59. Both in Victorian and contemporary times, a few writers have written against racial and gender stereotypes, but the literature industry, by its need to sell books and return profits, responding to a ‘free market’, sustains the life of superficial exotic Asian woman constructs, and, by favouring a certain type of profitable writing, silences other voices that must find small publishers and a smaller audience. This process also carries with it the memory of the hierarchical categorisation of people and a practice of exhibiting ethnicity for profit: The Madame Butterfly/China Doll construct, fetishised, stereotyped, framed, photographed, exhibited, alienated or displayed as cheesecake, plays a far from innocuous role when it
Endnotes

[1] Photographs of book covers, read from left to right: Fig. 1: Arthur Golden, Memoirs of a Geisha, London: Vintage, 1998; Fig. 2: Mako Yoshikawa, One Hundred and One Ways, London: Piatkus, 1999; Fig. 3: Lau Siew Mei, Playing Madame Mao, Sydney: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2000; Fig. 4: Bandula Chandraratna, Mirage, London: Phoenix House, 2000; Fig. 5: Richard Setlowe, The Sexual Occupation of Japan: A Novel, Sydney: Harper Collins, 1999; Fig. 6: Liza Dalby, Geisha, London: Vintage, 2000; Fig. 7: Liza Dalby, The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel, London: Chatto and Windus, 2000; Fig. 8: Lillian Ng, Swallowing Clouds, Hopewell, N.J.: Eco Press, 1999; Fig. 9: Lesley Downer, Geisha: The Secret History of a Vanishing World, London: Headline, 2000.


[6] Women from India and the Middle East are often referred to as 'Oriental' women, but their representation according to Salome and Scheherazade tropes is sufficiently different from that of Madam Butterfly to constitute a separate study.


[8] Manderson and Jolly, eds. Sites of Desire, p. 15. This trajectory, or continuous discourse on race and science is not a simple progression: it has undergone many changes along the way, depending on political and social circumstances. See Shearer West, The Victorians and Race, Aldershot and Vermont, 1998.


[16] A photographic gaze is similar in conception to Foucault's 'powerful gazes': Manderson posits that the 'gaze' is also a method of 'grasp', of appropriation, of desire, in Sites of Desire, p. 92. Also see Mackie, 'The Metropolitan Gaze', and John D. Kelly, 'Gaze and Grasp: Plantations, Desires, Indentured Indians, and Colonial Law in Fiji,' in Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure, ed. Manderson & Jolly, p. 92.


[27] Bryson, Word and Image, p. 92.


[33] Ben-Ami's stance on this issue is controversial: his article 'Is Japan Different?' examines the argument in detail.


[35] Dalby, Geisha and The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel; Downer, Geisha: The Secret History of a Vanishing World

[36] The back of the neck is an erogenous zone that geisha traditionally left free of paint.

[37] For an interesting discussion about the pros and cons of whether Genji was a rapist or just simply irresistible, see Royall Tyler, 'Marriage, Rank and Rape in "The Tale of Genji'”, in Intersections: Gender History and Culture in the Asian Context, 7, (March 2002), site accessed 3 October 2002.


[41] Pierre Loti is a non-de plume for Julien Viaud (1850-1923), a French naval officer active in the European Expansionist era who wrote novels, indistinguishable from memoir-travelogues, between 1880 and 1914.

[42] Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 74.

[43] Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 74.

[44] Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 289.


[47] Lazaroo, The Australian Fiancé, p. 34.

[48] Lazaroo, The Australian Fiancé, p. 34.


[51] Narrelle Morris, 'Innocence to Deviance: The Fetishisation of Japanese Women in Western Fiction, 1890s-
The Shriek of the Butterfly is Coco's fictitious book of erotic short stories that she has previously published. Her readers responded with letters containing offers of sex and other indications that the content was Asian exoticism/eroticism. Marchetti's *Romance and the Yellow Peril* contains a chapter entitled ""The Scream"" of the Butterfly" pp. 78-108. It is not known if there is any connection. Probably Coco was trying for an alienated, surreal effect; it could be inferred that the book was a feminist rejection of old taboos of female sexuality, or the 'shriek' could symbolise hunter/hunted in an jungle-like environment of instincts.

Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, p. 71.


Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, p. 76.


Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, p. 142.


The contradictions, paradoxes, ambivalence and contentiousness of the issue of Asian prostitutes and mail order brides as 'victims', 'workers' or 'heroines' is a complex, prolific area of contemporary debate, that I do not have time to deal with here. There are conflicting issues involving on the one hand prostitutes' rights to assert their sexuality, voluntary prostitution, exoticism as a source of empowering women, and on the other, issues centred around child prostitution as the entry-point for adult prostitution, sex work enforced by slavery, economic necessity, government, military and indigenous patriarchal structures and policies that permit and foster prostitution. It is a vast area of research. See Erick Cohen, *Hill Tribes, Islands and Open-ended Prostitution*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996; Yayori Matsu, *Women in the New Asia*, New York, Zed Books, 1998; Katherine Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*, New York: Columbia UP, 1997; Jo Doezma and Kamala Kampadoo (eds), *Global Sex Workers*, New York: Routledge, 1998.