



Research article

"I Am Not Just a Man": Chinese Butterfly's Identity Anxiety and Ethical Predicament in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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Abstract

M. Butterfly is narrated through the memory of Western white man Rene Gallimard, which makes audience focus on Gallimard's behaviors and ignore the Oriental man Song Liling's emotions, actions, and choices. However, there are many plots portraying Song as a Chinese Butterfly to deconstruct the stereotype of Madame Butterfly. This paper, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, probes into Song's brain texts formed in the growth and working experience and analyzes Song's anxiety and confusion on his multiple and chaotic ethical identities, so as to demonstrate that Song is not a "dragon lady" or a "transvestite". In China, Song is feminized and marginalized in society as "a son of prostitute", "a gay", and "an Opera actor". He wants to change the situation, so he becomes "a spy" for Chinese government and "a lover" for Gallimard, but due to the failure of ethical enlightenment in childhood and the cruel social environment in China, Song is trapped into ethical predicaments of "to be or not to be", struggling in the ethical conflicts between the honor of individual and the interest of nation, as well as between the desire for love and the mission from government. Song is a victim of the era and politics, and his identity anxiety and ethical predicament reflect David Henry Hwang's position as an Asian American playwright and reveal his ethical appeal for gender equality, identity recognition and cultural confidence.

Keywords: *M. Butterfly*, Chinese Butterfly, ethical literary criticism, brain text, identity anxiety, ethical predicament



Gender Equality, peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

1. Introduction

With the premiere of *M. Butterfly* on Broadway at the Eugene O'Neill Theater in March 1988, David Henry Hwang (1957–) becomes the first Asian American playwright who won the Tony Award. *M. Butterfly*, a play about gender, race, identity, sexuality, and Orientalism, is "a visionary work that

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bridges the history and culture of two worlds" (Rich, 1988, p. 13), which tells a love affair between a French diplomat Rene Gallimard and a Chinese Beijing opera actor Song Liling. It is a parody of Giacomo Puccini's three-act opera *Madame Butterfly*, as well as a reproduction of a two-paragraph story in *The New York Times*—a French diplomat Bernard Boursicot fell in love with a Chinese opera "actress" Shi Peipu, who subsequently turned out to be not only a spy, but also a man throughout their twenty-year relationship. When Hwang thought about "what did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?" and found the answer that "he probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly", he mentioned, "the idea of doing a deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly* immediately appealed to me. [...] I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype; speaking of an Asian woman, we would sometimes say, 'She's pulling a Butterfly', which meant playing the submissive Oriental number" (Hwang, 1989, p. 95). Therefore, Hwang creates the Chinese Butterfly Song Liling who performs as Madame Butterfly in the opening scenes and gradually reveals Song's role as a male spy in the next scenes, so as to break the cultural stereotype of submissive Oriental women.

Designed as a Chinese Butterfly and a male spy, Song is sometimes misunderstood as "little more than a disfigured transvestite version of the infamous Chinese 'dragon lady' prostitute stereotype" (Moy, 1990, p. 54). In fact, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Song is not a "dragon lady" or a "transvestite". He, as Andrew Shin mentions, is just "a gay Asian man subject to the double bind of Orientalism and a homophobic culture" (Shin, 2000, p.186). Besides, since *M. Butterfly* is narrated through the memory of Western white man Gallimard, the audience is apt to focus on Gallimard and ignore Song's emotions, actions, and choices. Some scholars even think "in the view of artistic creation, Song is not a stage art image full of flesh and blood as Gallimard, and to a large extent, his existence is just to reflect the light of the character Gallimard" (Lu, 2004, p. 90). Thus, there are few studies on Song Liling. However, there are many plots portraying Song in the drama: as a deconstruction of Madame Butterfly, Song has the characteristics of both Madame Butterfly and Pinkerton, so his psychological activities and literary images are, probably, more complex, and much richer. This paper, focusing on Song Liling's gender and identity, rereads *M. Butterfly* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism—"a research method to read, analyze and interpret literary works, to study literary authors and literary problems from the perspective of ethics" (Nie, 2014, p. 13), so as to analyze the "ethical factors" that lead to different events in the drama and influence the fate of characters, as well as to explore how the playwright shapes his characters and expresses his ethical concerns towards the world, the society, and the era.

2. "Patriotism" and "Electra Complex": Chinese Butterfly's Life Experience and Brain Text

Song Liling is a controversial character in *M. Butterfly*, often regarded as the cunning and shrewd "dragon lady" (Lin, 1997, p. 31), a female counterpart to the manipulative and deceptive Fu Manchu, or sometimes a "transvestite" (Saal, 1998, p. 631). However, what tinges Song with these traits or tendencies are often neglected. According to ethical literary criticism, literature is circumscribed with historical periods and ethical contexts, and "a premise for literary interpretation is to understand literature based on the ethical environment and the ethical context of its particular historical period" (Nie, 2021, p. 14). So, literature cannot be read and interpreted

in accordance with the current ethical environment and context, otherwise it would cause an ethical paradox in the literary judgment. In this regard, it is important to return to the certain historical context and ethical environment where Song lives in. Besides, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Song's emotions, behaviors, and choices are determined by his brain texts formed in life experiences. "Brain text" is the "memory" and "thought" preserved in human's brain, which may be "a complete story, a fragment of some thoughts, or even a single concept" (Nie, 2019, p. 119). In human's cognitive process, both images and sounds in the real life can be abstracted and conceptualized to form concepts in the brain. Then, people can think with the help of brain concepts to obtain "thought", and "thought is the result of brain's thinking about objective or abstract things on the basis of perception, cognition and comprehension", which then can be stored in the brain and form "brain text" (Nie, 2017, p. 30). Therefore, brain text can determine a person's thinking and behavioral patterns that "not only communicate and spread information, but also determine his ideas, thoughts, judgments, choices, actions and emotions" (Nie, 2017, p. 26). It is a deciding factor for Song's lifestyle and moral behaviors.

Song Liling grows up in a traditional but complicated family in China, where the social environment is much complex since *M. Butterfly* is mainly set from 1960s to 1970s in Beijing. Thus, Song's thoughts and actions are mainly influenced by his brain texts formed in his upbringing and working experiences at that time, which determine who he is. In *M. Butterfly*, Song's age is "ambiguous and performance-based" (Lipscomb, 2016, p. 198). Although there are no descriptions, it can be predicted from Song's family background. Song's mother is "a prostitute along near the Vietnam border before the Revolution" and his father does not "live to see the Revolution" (Hwang, 1989, p. 28). The "Revolution" here refers to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Thus, it can be inferred that Song grows up in the 1940s and has experienced the World War II. As "the sounds that people hear, the images that they see, the things that they feel all can be converted into memory symbols and can become the information stored in brain and form the brain text" (Nie, 2017, p. 30), what happened in the World War II constructs Song's brain concept of "patriotism" to form his brain text. For Song, he hates the cruel Japanese and the imperialists, showing a sense of "patriotism", because he thinks China is a victim of World War II. For example, when Gallimard praises Song that "her" performance of *Madame Butterfly* is convincing, Song retorts that: "Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know" (Hwang, 1989, p. 17).

In addition, when Gallimard visits Song, he tells Gallimard that "she" lives alone, and his mother is in a village, while his father has died earlier, which indicates that in Song's juvenile times, his father does not accompany with him and witness his growth. Parents play an important role in children's growth and can be the moral examples for them. The absence of a paternal figure of father and his mother's role as a "prostitute" make Song lack good moral examples and ethical enlightenment. Those are important elements that affect Song's ethical consciousness and judgement, influencing his behaviors, decisions, and actions. Meanwhile, a prostitute is usually a woman who has different sexual relationships with men for money. It is the lowest and most humble occupation in China, against the traditional ethical norms. A prostitute is also often linked with disgrace, dirty, evil, corruption, and degeneracy, etc. In traditional China, the prostitute and her family members are always excluded from social life. Thus, Song's childhood is probably full of sufferings and difficulties. He is marginalized, exploited, and excluded by others, so it is hard

for him to “be modern, to speak like a man” (p. 30). That also accounts for that there are no friends mentioned by Song in his dealings with Gallimard. Moreover, Song’s mother often teaches Song the knowledge about the “prostitute”, possibly how to behave like a woman, thus at Paris court, when the judge asks Song how he convinced Gallimard that “he” was a woman, Song answers that her mother “learned a few things about Western men”, so he “borrowed her knowledge” (p. 82). The education from Song’s mother does not help Song get good ethical enlightenment, even leaves him the impression of cruel Western white man and negative memory of disguising, cheating, and behaving like a woman.

As for Song’s father, Song thinks “it is very good that he did not live to see the Revolution. They would, no doubt, have made him kneel on broken glass. Not that he didn’t deserve such a punishment. But he is my father. I would’ve hated to see it happen” (p. 28). These words suggest that Song’s father has made some mistakes or committed a crime in the past, so if he lives to see the Revolution, he would be punished. For Song, his father deserves a punishment, which implies his disagreement of his father’s actions. However, Song loves his father, so he refuses to see his father being punished. Song’s love for his father constructs his brain concept of “Electra complex” as a (wo)man, because although Song’s father has died for many years, Song keeps his father’s “picture in a frame” and always brings it with him (p. 27), which shows his desire for fatherly love. Due to the lack of father figure in childhood, Song fails to have masculine and moral example to follow. In *M. Butterfly*, the reasons why Song selects Gallimard as his spying object and is willing to have sex with him are probably because Gallimard is much older than him. In the first scene, Gallimard in the prison is described as “65” (p. 1), which means Gallimard meets Song in his forties, which can be the age of Song’s father if he is alive.

The absence of a father figure and the education from a prostitute mother in childhood construct Song’s brain texts such as the knowledge of behaving like a woman, and the ambiguity of gender, etc. So, when Song grows up, he chooses to become an actor playing Qian Dan, the female roles in Peking Opera. However, the social and ethical environment is not favorable for Song’s working at that time. Since the establishment of New China in 1949, everything is waiting for flourish, especially the development and improvement of social productivity, because after World War II people in China are not only in social unrest, but also in the famine and disease. In the 1950s, after the implementation of land reform in China, the labor production was advocated in the society, and people opposed the unhealthy tendency of being extravagant or wasteful. So, Song as a Peking Opera actor is not welcomed even discriminated against by people because he could make little contribution to society. Actors in society that time are “like gamblers or prostitutes” (p. 48), being detested by others. Song’s role—Qian Dan—is regarded as “a reactionary remnant of male” (p. 63) and Song himself is considered as an “actor-oppressor”, who “lived above the common people and looked down on their labor” (p. 70). In fact, since the government in Qing Dynasty has banned the women from participating in theatrical performances, the female characters in Peking Opera are all played by men, and there are many male audiences keeping the actor as a lover for entertainment. Thus, before the Revolution, the actors are feminized and oppressed by ordinary people. Under such repressive environment, Song is again excluded from the society and left isolated. Hence, Song has no idea on how to behave and live in society. The prejudice about his occupation and the confusion of his ethical identity as an actor are collected in Song’s memory, forming his brain texts, determining his choices, and laying basis for his ethical predicaments.

Although Song is not welcomed at that time in China as an Opera actor, he still has the opportunity to keep contact with some foreigners from Western countries. In the early years of New China, the primary task of China's foreign policy is to get rid of imperialist control, to oppose imperialist policies of aggression and war, and to restore national independence and sovereignty, since after World War II the imperialists led by the United States refused to recognize New China, and imposed blockade, embargo, encirclement, and isolation on China. Then, in the 1950s to 1960s, under the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, China proposed Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and established diplomatic relations with many foreign countries to uphold the peace and stability in Asia and the world. For example, China established diplomatic relation with France in 1964. Therefore, some foreign countries set up embassies in Beijing, and for the convenience of diplomatic and cultural communication, Beijing Opera actors were often invited to give performance. In *M. Butterfly*, Song often goes to those occasions, so he learns to speak French and can sing *Madame Butterfly* in Italian. Those working experiences make Song understand the thinking patterns of some Westerners, forming his brain texts of the Western culture, as well as the Western men's thoughts and fantasies.

For example, Song scolds that "The West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor [...] The West believes the East, down deep, wants to be dominated—because a woman can't think for herself" (p. 83). For those Westerners who know the actor in Peking opera is almost played by men, they often takes the Dan role as a kind of feminine expression of Chinese culture, and the men who play it are thought to have no masculinity so that they could play women convincingly; but for some westerners who do not know that, they would think the performance of women's tenderness, submissiveness, and chastity is the characteristic in traditional Chinese culture, especially under the patriarchal power in society for thousands of years. Thus, Song's traditional performance can strengthen the Western misunderstanding of Chinese culture, providing a foothold for their fantasy of Orientalism. In *M. Butterfly*, Song fulfills Gallimard's "Puccini-influenced view of Eastern women" and recognizes this element in Gallimard's character (Boles, 2013, p. 61). When Gallimard tells Song that *Madame Butterfly* is a beautiful story, Song replies that "it's one of your fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man" (Hwang, 1989, p. 17). Furthermore, Song answers why Gallimard did not found "he" was a female: "because when he finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman" (p. 83). Indeed, it is the brain text of Westerners' Oriental fantasy formed in Song's working experiences that makes Song become a good spy in his dealings with Gallimard.

In the Oriental society, Song's family background and his actor occupation bring him into a marginalized, discriminated, and abandoned situation, so he becomes an "orphan" in China. However, since Song has experienced the World War II and kept contact with foreigners, Song preserves the brain texts of patriotism, the hate for imperialism and racial discrimination, and most importantly the knowledge of Westerner's thinking and culture in his brain. Therefore, Song's ethical choice of being a spy for Chinese government, particularly during the Cultural Revolution in China, can be taken as his love for his country and his desire to change people's views on his ethical identity as an Opera actor, which expresses his longing for being accepted and appreciated by people, so as to move from the margin to the center in society. Thus, Song is not a "dragon lady", but a "victim" of the era and politics. Song's identity anxiety comes from his "desire for

status" (De Botton, 2005, p. 5), since he has been in danger of falling to confirm the ideals of success laid down by the society and been stripped off dignity and respect in China.

3. "I Am Not Just a Man": Chinese Butterfly's Identity Anxiety and Ethical Confusion

In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling has multiple and chaotic ethical identities due to the complicated ethical environment he lives in, and those ethical identities are preserved in his brain, influencing his thoughts and choices, too. In literary works, "all the ethical problems are related to ethical identity" (Nie, 2014, p. 21), for example, the ethical confusion and ethical predicament caused by the changes of ethical identities. So, it is necessary to analyze the protagonist's ethical identity for interpreting his behaviors and decisions. Ethical identity can be classified into various types, such as "the identity based on blood relations, the identity based on ethical relationships, the identity based on moral norms, or on collective and social relations, and on professions, etc." (Nie, 2014, p. 263). For blood relations, Song is the "son" of a prostitute, and a "mother" of a child; for moral norms in China, Song is not only a "man", but also a "gay"; for collective and social relations, Song is a Chinese, an "orphan" in society, a cultural exchange envoy, as well as a spy for Chinese government; for professional relations, Song is a Peking Opera actor; and for love or marital relationships, Song is Gallimard's lover, then his "wife". In *M. Butterfly*, Song's ethnic identity, social identity, professional identity, and marital identity are intertwined even conflicted with each other, especially in his dealings with Gallimard, which brings about his ethical confusion on gender and identity and leads to different ethical predicaments.

Firstly, as a "man" in China, Song has the tendencies towards femininity and "homosexuality" (Eng, 2014, p. 132), which results in his gender anxiety and ethical confusion about his identity as a man or as a woman, or as a gay, strengthening his feelings of being excluded by the society. Those are influenced by the brain text formed in his mother's education on how to behave like a woman for "pleasing a man" (Hwang, 1989, p. 40). In addition to his feminine appearance—beautiful, elegant, and delicate, Song seldom dresses men's clothes, but often wears female or neutral costumes, such as Japanese kimono, black gown, sheer dressing gown, and Chinese Qipao, etc. These clothes are used for spying activities because they are "the most effective medium of sexual fantasy among the Western imperialists because they are vivid visual symbols, representing the Other, the conquered Orient and Oriental women" (Tang, 2004, p. 43). It cannot be denied that Song may like to wear them, just as what Comrade Chin, an officer of Chinese government, says: "every time I come here, you're wearing a dress. Is that because you're an actor? Or what?" (48). However, Song tells Chin it is only a disguise, but the fact is that Song not only wears women's clothes, but also claims to be "a Chinese girl" (Hwang, 1989, p. 31). Thus, Song is not a "transvestite", but a homosexual, who disguises himself as a woman in daily life and accepts her female identity, even enters a kind of ideal state of androgyny.

In the drama, the first time when Song invites Gallimard to his apartment, he tells Gallimard: "I fell I am not myself" (p. 30). This indicates that Song knows that he is a man, but he continues to behave as a woman driven by his "Electra complex". Gradually, "he" falls in love with Gallimard, nearly 20 years older than him: "To feel something inside me—day and night—something I know is yours" (p. 51). Afterwards, Song makes love with Gallimard. Indeed, as a spy, Song does not have to develop a sexual relationship with Gallimard to gain his trust, because there are some

other ways to disguise. At court, when Gallimard scolds why Song chose him to do the spying, Song says: "Rene, just maybe—I want you" (p. 85) and "I am not just a man" (p. 86). Those all demonstrate that Song is a gay, and here "I am not just a man" expresses Song's love for Gallimard and shows his desire for that Gallimard could admit he is same with him and accept his true gender. However, homosexual is kinky and not accepted by people at that time in China. The love and sex between men are against the social ethical norms. Comrade Chin once warns Song: "Don't forget there is no homosexuality in China" (p. 48), because every position Song takes just stands for their Chairman Mao. Chin's words can represent almost all others' attitudes towards homosexuality in China that time, which exacerbate Song's identity anxiety and make him fall into the ethical conflict of "to be or not to be".

Secondly, Song has confusions about and conflicts with his ethical identity as a "Chinese". Since "brain text can be constantly combined and modified by human brain according to certain ethical rules" (Nie, 2017, p. 33), Song's ethical confusion of his "Chinese" identity is the result of the combination and modification of his brain texts: his patriotism and hate for imperialism, his being isolated in society, and his perception about the advanced West during his working for cultural exchange. In the interactions between Song and Gallimard, Song directly uses some words such as "submissive Oriental woman", "cruel white man", "adventurous imperialist", "white devil" and "passive Oriental" to accuse Gallimard of his superior thoughts towards the East. Song also attempts to break Gallimard's imperialist fantasy: "what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? (Hwang, 1989, p. 17). So, it is Song's brain text of patriotism that makes him be willing to sacrifice himself and become a spy for Chinese government. However, as a son of prostitute and an Opera actor, he is marginalized and discriminated by people, which renders him an "orphan" in society. His homosexual tendency is disgusted by others, too. Thus, Song's ethical identity as a Chinese man is much complicated and dramatic. When Song talks with Gallimard, he sneers at those backward sides of China and tells Gallimard the social status of Chinese women is very low and never changed even though the society has gone through the Revolution. Song also satirizes the preference of boys over girls in China's traditions and points out that in the "New Society", men and women are all "kept ignorant equally" (p. 43). All of those present Song's distorted and unbalanced mentality of being as a Chinese.

Besides, after Song gets in touch with foreigners and their culture, he is attracted by Western lifestyles and social values, and he learns French and Italian. In *M. Butterfly*, Song mentions his longings for Western life many times: "How I wish there were even a tiny cafe to sit in. With cappuccinos, and men in tuxedos and bad expatriate jazz" (p. 21; p. 86). Song thinks Gallimard comes from "a progressive society" (p. 43) and "France is a country living in the modern era" (p. 29), while China is "old". Song's adoration of Western life and his awkward position in China lead to his ethical predicament: to be a Chinese or not, triggering his confusion about his ethical identity as a Chinese man. From the psychological perspective, it can be another kind of manifestation of Song's "Electra Complex". Song's mother (the East) makes him feel depressed, so that he wants to escape into the West to look for protection, for care, for love, as well as for freedom and equality. However, his "patriotism" constrains his irrational will, so he chooses to be a spy for government to prove his important role in the Oriental society as a Chinese man. However, with the development of Cultural Revolution in China, Song is suppressed and loses his

ethical identity as a spy, and his ethical identity as a Chinese man is also conflicted with other ethical identities.

Thirdly, Song has identity anxiety as a Peking Opera actor. Despite the discrimination from the society, Song loves and is very proud of his career, but one would never only be fed with "love" or "pride". The first time when Gallimard praises Song's performance of *Madame Butterfly*, Song invites Gallimard to see the "real theatre" in Beijing, which makes Gallimard wonder "what did she do to make her so proud?" (p. 20). Besides, differing from some who think Opera actor is "decadent" (p. 69), Song believes it is "art for the masses" (p. 21) and takes Peking Opera as an elegant art representing the Chinese culture, so he often plays it for Westerners as the "cultural exchange" (p. 80). Undoubtedly, Song is proficient in Peking Opera. As a man playing the Dan roles, Song needs to ponder over the woman's psychology in the process of performing, and over the time Song gradually knows how a woman is supposed to act, and the performance of female roles enables Song understand women's feelings and become more feminized and homosexual. Thus, Song sometimes is trapped into the role-playing/acting. However, the disgust from people in China brings him back to reality. Although Song is not welcomed in China, Peking Opera that time is very popular among Westerners and considered to be quite elegant, which gives rise to his doubt on ethical identity as an actor and his status in China. Besides, with the development of Song's relationship with Gallimard, Song begins to get other ethical identities, such as spy, lover, then wife, and mother, etc.

Song's patriotism and this identity anxiety preserved in the form of memory as brain texts, promoting him to become a spy for Chinese government. In the process of spying, Song's brain texts such as the knowledge towards Western white men, the Opera performing experience, and his hate for imperialists are all combined and modified together to help him complete the mission. Undeniably, Song is a qualified and excellent spy, and he knows "how to gamble" (p. 62). In *M. Butterfly*, Song successfully figures out Gallimard's fantasy over a submissive Oriental girl and strategically exhibits "her" inner and essential Oriental female self: modesty and timidity, especially when Gallimard wants to strip off her clothes. So, Gallimard considers "Song's Westernized or masculine exterior as mere veneer, masking the fullness of the inner truth of Oriental womanhood" (Kondo, 1990, p. 16). Through the presentation of shyness and submissiveness, as well as by wearing women's clothes and talking about "her" poor birth, Song satisfies Gallimard's Oriental desire for "power over a beautiful woman" (Hwang, 1989, p. 36), which shows Song's shrewdness as a spy. Benefiting from his working experience, Song is trained to have amazing memory ability, thus he could send back lots of useful information to Chinese government. Song collects the information in a roundabout way: "I want to know what you know. To be impressed by my man" (p. 43), which flatters Gallimard's vanity as a powerful Western white man and lets him be willing to provide information. Meanwhile, Song also sends some false information to Gallimard, so Gallimard is convinced that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (p. 46).

Last but not the least, Song's ethical identity as an actor, a spy and a lover are intertwined and mixed with each other. Due to the lack of good ethical enlightenment in childhood, Song violates the ethical norms in society in the process of spying. Song's first wrong ethical choice is to disguise as a woman to do the spying and to have sex with Gallimard, which represents his ethical confusion about gender and identity. Then, Song destroys Gallimard's family as a lover. When Song finds that Gallimard possibly has infertility because Gallimard's wife Helga asks him to take

some tests in hospital, Song persuades Gallimard not to see the doctor: "In Imperial China, when a man found that one wife was inadequate, he turned to another—to give him his son" (p. 51). What is more, Song deceives Gallimard that "she" is pregnant, which lets Gallimard believe Song's gender and identity as a Chinese woman and get divorced with his wife Helga. However, Song must really produce a "son" for Gallimard, otherwise his lies would be exposed, then he breaks the ethical standard and moral order in society again: Song asks Comrade Chin to find "a Chinese baby with blond hair" for him despite that he knows "the trading of babies has to be a counterrevolutionary act" (p. 62).

In the process of making ethical choices, people's ethical consciousness begins to emerge, and the concepts of good and evil are gradually formed, which is the result of the functioning of "brain text" (Nie, 2017, p. 33). Lacking ethical consciousness, Song takes the baby as a tool or trade for spying and as a sacrifice of politics, which is inhumane and cruel. To some extent, Song loses his rational will. Except for the spying, the reason why Song wants a baby is because he falls in love with Gallimard and as a homosexual he could not produce one. It is the baby that makes Gallimard "want to be burdened" (Hwang, 1989, p. 67) and divorce his wife. Song's this act lets Gallimard bear responsibility and morality as a father because "identity is associated with responsibility and obligation" (Nie, 2014, p. 263). However, Song himself does not take the responsibility as a "mother". He does not take care of the baby during the Cultural Revolution in China, and in *M. Butterfly*, there are no descriptions about his life with the baby. Therefore, Song cannot bear the responsibility of being a "mother", even being Gallimard's "wife".

4. "I Am Your Butterfly": Chinese Butterfly's Ethical Predicament and Ethical Choice

Song's multiple ethical identities are intertwined even conflicted with each other in the process of making ethical choices, which makes him often feel confused, leading to his difficulty on the recognition of ethical identity. Identity recognition or affirmation is a process of self-identity construction, but Song always vacillates among his ethical identities as a gay, Chinese, spy, actor, and lover, and cannot get rid of the constraints in society, thus falling into ethical predicaments. Ethical predicament is "the intractable contradictions and conflicts inflicted by ethical confusion of the characters in literary works" (Nie, 2014, p. 258). Song's confusion comes from his brain texts of the disapproval and exclusion from the society. On the one hand, Song desires to change people's perception on his identities in China; on the other hand, he admires the equality, freedom, and love in the Western world. As a result, Song faces various ethical predicaments or dilemmas, including the ethical conflicts between the honor of individual and the interest of nation, as well as the love towards Gallimard and the mission from government, etc.

With the rising of Cultural Revolution in the 1960s in China, the ethical environment has changed and became more complex. Overnight, the new Revolutionary operas are everywhere, and they are the only entertainments allowed. The doctrine of Cultural Revolution implies continuous anarchy, so "contact between Chinese and foreigners became impossible" (Hwang, 1989, p. 68). Song and Gallimard are forced apart and lose contact with each other. At the same time, Song loses his job as an actor, and his spying role for government is stopped. Besides, there is a movement of breaking away from the "Four Olds": old thoughts, culture, habits, and customs. Song's and Gallimard's apartments are confiscated; Song's servant is arrested; Song himself is

sentenced to a “rehabilitation center” (p. 72) to turn into something good. Then, Song works as a farmer in the fields in a remote countryside for many years. The loss or change of ethical identities gives rise to the ethical predicament. Song firstly is confronted with the ethical conflict between the honor of individual and the interest of nation. In the field, Song feels abandoned by the society and his country again. He is ashamed and bitterly humiliated. Before the Cultural Revolution, Song is devoted to contributing to the government and willing to sacrifice himself to collect useful information so as to change his marginalized position in society. However, during the Revolution, Song’s fame as a son of a prostitute, or as an Opera actor or homosexual, counts against him. He is forced to kneel in front of the public to admit his crimes:

CHIN: Actor-oppressor, for years you have lived above the common people and looked down on their labor. While the farmer ate millet—

SONG: I ate pastries from France and sweetmeats from silver trays,

CHIN: And how did you come to live in such an exalted position?

SONG: I was a plaything for the imperialists!

CHIN: What did you do?

SONG: I shamed China by allowing myself to be corrupted by a foreigner...

CHIN: What does this mean? The People demand a full confession!

SONG: I engaged in the lowest perversions with China’s enemies! (p. 70)

For Song at this moment, he almost loses all his dignity and honor as an Opera actor or a Chinese man. He is regarded as actor-oppressor, and his spying contribution for Chinese government is ignored and put aside by Comrade Chin. Moreover, he is thought to be a “traitor”, wearing dresses such as lace and applique, which would “stink up China” (p. 72) with his pervert stuff as a homosexual. Thus, Song feels lost and confused. Under a banner reading “The Actor Renounces His Decadent Profession” (p. 69), Song has no idea on who he is or what kind of person he should be and could not find the value of his existence and the meaning of his life. What he could do is to repeatedly shout, “I want to serve the people”, thus his ethical identity as an actor and a Chinese man can be “rehabilitated” (p. 71). However, even though Song has worked in the fields for four years to serve the Revolution, he still could not change his status. Chin thinks that Song has “just spent too many years in luxury to any good to the Revolution” (p. 71), so he should go to France to serve the people again without using the “Revolution’s money” (p. 72).

Then, Song falls into the ethical predicament: to be a spy for Chinese government again or not. On the one hand, Song is disappointed about the discrimination from people in China, even has some painful and disruptive emotions towards the country, so, at first, he refuses it: “That’s crazy. It’s been four years”, and then he explains that Gallimard is “a white man” and he is “just his plaything” (p. 72); on the other hand, Song wishes to change his embarrassing situation: being again excluded in the society. However, Chin’s attitude makes him feel more embarrassed because Chin takes him as a “pervert” (p. 73), serving for Chairman Mao to “pollute the place where pollution begins—the West” (p. 72). Song does not know how to make the choice at the very beginning, but eventually, he determines to go to France and get engaged in the spying again. Song’s complicated psychological process in making ethical choice reflects the process of the

combination and modification of his brain text of the “patriotism”, as well as his brain text of the desire to change people’s opinions upon his ethical identities, etc.

Facing the honor of individual and the interest of his nation, Song chooses to let bygones be bygones and serves for the nation as a spy again. Although Song has some complains, he always puts the interest of nation in the first place. For example, when Song arrives at Paris, he walks to the Chinatown district, but no one offers to help him, so he thinks “the Chinese, they are stingy” (p. 80). This view comes from his brain text of the discrimination from people towards him in China. However, Song never forgets his mission and finds a tailor who could make a kimono for him to meet Gallimard. In Paris, Song’s ethical identities as an Opera actor and a spy are regained. He does “some demonstrations around France as part of his cultural exchange” (p. 80) to do the spying. Besides, Song always takes his ethical identity—a Chinese spy—as the premise for any actions. Firstly, Song tells Gallimard the Chinese government has their son and they will only protect him if they agree to pass secrets, which forces Gallimard to find a job as a diplomatic courier, “handling sensitive documents” (p. 81). Secondly, at Paris court, Song points out the misperception of Orient and Oriental from the West towards the East, and bravely takes off his clothes to demonstrate that the Chinese, or the Orientals, or the East, are not feminine. Song’s those ethical choices are dominated by his brain texts, such as “patriotism” and “the hate for imperialism or racial discrimination”, etc. Different from Gallimard, in front of the individual and the nation, Song chooses the latter and fulfills his missions.

In *M. Butterfly*, Song appears as a spy at the start and the end, but this ethical identity is intertwined with his other ethical identities such as Gallimard’s lover and wife, which produces confusions, contradictions, and conflicts, influencing Song’s ethical choices and bringing him into ethical dilemmas. According to ethical literary criticism, “ethical dilemma often consists of two moral propositions, if a person makes moral judgment on them respectively, each choice is correct that conforms to the universal moral principles. However, once the person makes a choice between the two, it will lead to another violation of ethics, that is, against the universal morality” (Nie, 2014, p. 262). For Song, as a spy for Chinese government, collecting information and being loyal to his country are his ethical responsibility and obligation, which should be in line with the ethical norms in society. However, as the wife of Gallimard and a “mother” of a child, Song and Gallimard have lived together for many years with each other and formed a family. Despite that Song is a homosexual who may play as a female role in the family, for Song at this moment, complying with family and marital ethics is also his responsibility and obligation, for example, to take care of family members, or to ensure the stability and safety of family. If Song chooses to do the spying, he will betray Gallimard and their family; but if Song refuses to do it, he will betray his country. Thus, neither of the two options is what he would like to do, and no matter what he chooses, he would be in great pain. However, he must make a choice.

In fact, before the Cultural Revolution, Song and Gallimard do not form a family. Song is just a lover of Gallimard, at the same time a spy for Chinese government. At that moment, Song does not have to take on family or marital responsibilities. So, at the beginning, Song chooses to do some spying; but in that process, Song gradually falls in love with Gallimard, which makes him fall into ethical predicament. Song always attempts to find a balance between the love and the mission, but it is hard for him to make a choice. So, in *M. Butterfly*, Song sometimes is devoted to spying, sometimes is indulged in love, since there are many Gallimard and Song’s private or daily

dialogues, nothing about the spying. Moreover, Song does not want to hurt Gallimard, and he even reminds Gallimard that "there is an element of danger" (Hwang, 1989, p. 29) if he keeps contact with him. Song keeps the balance between his mission and his love for several years. However, when Gallimard tries to strip "her" and the truth would be exposed, Song must make a choice again. Then, Song finds a way around the problem, he lies to Gallimard that "she" is pregnant and conceals his spy identity, but this makes Gallimard break the ethical norm—divorcing his wife and marrying his lover, then Song falls into ethical predicament again: to be Gallimard's wife or not.

Afterwards, Song is indulged into the love and almost forgets his mission as a spy. Song believes "she" is "worthy to love" (p. 65), so he begins to worry about Gallimard. Firstly, Song feels ashamed that he tricks Gallimard because Gallimard is very patient in dealing with his "eccentricities" (p. 64), like allowing Song to wear clothes when making love, and Song thinks he is not worthy for Gallimard to end his career of "one of the West's most promising diplomats" (p. 65). Secondly, Song and Gallimard look forward to their new life and even think of the names of their child: "Peepee" (p. 66). Song promises to Gallimard that he would raise their child and never give "burden" on him (p. 67). For that period, Song completely forgets his ethical identity as a spy and his mission, which can account for why Comrade Chin blames Song for his perverted delight during the Cultural Revolution: "You and your white vice-consul! Stuck up there in your flat, living off the People's Treasury! [...] You two...homos!" (p. 72). If Gallimard is caught in his Butterfly dream, Song also struggles in his self-deception of love. Therefore, Song is punished during the Cultural Revolution because of his disloyalty to the government.

With the reassignment of spying by Comrade Chin, Song has to make the choice between the love and mission again. When Song arrives at Paris, "she" and Gallimard live together and form a family. For fifteen years, Song fulfills his mission and remains the love with Gallimard until they are arrested. However, when the truth comes out, Song's efforts are all in vain, and he must make a choice again. In general, "ethical dilemma is difficult to have the best of both sides. Once a choice is made, the result is often tragic. If a person does not make a choice, it will also lead to tragedy" (Nie, 2014, p. 263). In fact, when Song decides to do the spying and to deceive Gallimard, the result is doomed to be tragic. Song always wants to balance his mission and his love, but he seemingly ignores that his love is based on the deceiving of himself and others, thus it is not easy for him to make a correct choice. Eventually, Song chooses his mission as a spy, as well as a Chinese man, and sacrifices his love.

However, after accomplishing his mission, Song is still struggling in his love. At Paris court, Song attempts to save the "love" and "family" between Gallimard and him. Song strips off his clothes, displaying his real identity and true gender towards Gallimard and wishing Gallimard could face up to the reality and their love. However, for Gallimard, he now cannot live with Song, "not after twenty years of betrayal" (Hwang, 1989, p. 90), but because what he loves is his fantasy, an object that could satisfy his desire for power and for the change of his ethical identity as an impotent Western white man. For Gallimard, Song "must have some kind of identity problem", but Song retorts, "he was just a man" and "he was not just any man!" (p. 88). Song shows his homosexual identity towards Gallimard and tries to let Gallimard admit that he also loves him:

SONG: I'm your Butterfly. Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me. Now, open your eyes and admit it you adore me. (He removes his hand from Gallimard's eyes.)

GALLIMARD: You, who knew every inch of my desires—how could you, of all people, have made such a mistake?

SONG: What?

GALLIMARD: You showed me your true self. When all I loved was the lie. A perfect lie, which you let fall to the ground—and now, it's old and soiled.

SONG: So—you never really loved me? Only when I was playing a part? (p. 89)

Song hopes Gallimard not to be so "stubborn" (p. 90), because if they two accept their identities each other, they possibly could have a new beginning; but for Gallimard, Song breaks his Butterfly dream and betrays him: it is Song himself that destroys their love and family. So, Gallimard lets Song "get out his life" (p. 90). In the ethical conflict between love and mission, it is hard to balance them at once. Song chooses to accomplish his mission, but becomes a loser in love, losing his ethical identities as a wife, even a mother. Although the love between Song and Gallimard seems to be abnormal, possibly not recognized by the society, the result for Song as a homosexual is undoubtedly tragic due to the complicated ethical environment. In the end, Song declares that he would never put on those robes for Opera again. This indicates that Song only dresses on the Butterfly kimono and disguises himself as a woman for his love towards Gallimard. In the ending scene of *M. Butterfly*, when Gallimard kills himself, Song smokes a cigarette, seemingly indifferent and lonely, and then comes back to China. The love between Song and Gallimard ends in failure. The ethical conflict between love and mission is hard to find a satisfactory way to solve. In fact, under the homophobic ethical environment, it is difficult for Song to get the equal love, and he is also a victim. Even if Gallimard does not kill himself and chooses to accept Song, the ethical environment they live in, the opposition of their cultural identities, and the unequal power relation between the East and the West those all will make it difficult for them to achieve "real equality", thus the ending would inevitably be a tragedy, which "presents the playwright's ethical appeal for a solution to this ethical dilemma" (Yin, 2020, p. 136). Therefore, Song's stripping off clothes at Paris court and his words "I am not just a man" represent his desperate plea to be seen and accepted for who he really is, appealing Gallimard, the audience, as well as the public to have more open, equal, and tolerant attitudes towards the gender, identity, and love.

5. Conclusion

In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling's brain texts are constantly combined and modified with the changes of ethical environments, which determines who he is: his identity anxiety, ethical predicament, and ethical choice. Although Song is marginalized in the Oriental society, his brain text of "patriotism" always reminds him of his ethical identity as a Chinese or a Chinese spy, so that he can fulfill his mission, which shows the power of storing positive brain text since "not only a person's thoughts and actions are determined by their brain text, but also his/her ethics and morality are determined by their brain text" (Nie, 2017, p. 33). In fact, Song's anxiety, predicament, and conflict in the drama are also the decoding of the playwright's brain texts and his own ethical predicaments as a Chinese American. Since "the writing of literary works has fundamentally been a process of recollecting,

reworking, replicating, representing, and storing brain texts" (Nie, 2021, p. 414), Hwang's writing of the Chinese Butterfly Song Liling is to deconstruct or modify the stereotype of Madame Butterfly in Western culture. In the "Afterword" of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang thought that the reason why Bouriscot did not find Shi Peipu was a man was because he had found his "Madame Butterfly", and this Madame Butterfly contained "a wealth of sexist and racist clichés" in East-West romance (Hwang, 1989, p. 95). On the one hand, Madame Butterfly is a kind of sexual fantasy of Western white men; on the other hand, "the Orient and Orientals represented by Madame Butterfly are all castrated and feminized" (Tao & Chen, 2023, p. 221). As Hwang chided, "good natives of both sexes necessarily take on 'feminine' characteristics in a colonialist world" (Hwang, 1989, p. 99). Thus, Hwang created this Chinese Butterfly.

Meanwhile, the writing of Song's different gender and identity shows Hwang's ethical consciousness regarding "the construction of the cultural identity of Chinese Americans" (Tao & Chen, 2023, p. 225). As an Asian American playwright, Hwang is also in a marginal position in America. For Hwang, the construction of cultural identity is of vital importance and significance. Probably, there will be self-doubt, self-negation, and self-modification, but only when discarding the prejudices from his own can one make correct ethical choices. Therefore, by presenting Song's stripping off clothes and the words "I am not just a man", Hwang encourages the Western audience to see and understand the real appearance of the East. Only when the West actively gets rid of cultural misunderstanding can the East and the West actualize equal exchange and mutual understanding. By restoring the real Orient, Hwang aims to "reconstruct the East-West culture through the reversion of the 'male' and 'female' roles" (Zhu, 2004, p. 74) and to move the Oriental character from the margin to the center. As China gradually moves towards the center of the world and its superpower status solidifies, *M. Butterfly's* stature "will continue to grow given its relevance in challenging assumptions between the East and West" (Boles, 2013, p. 65). Thus, the cultural identity and political position of the playwright undoubtedly play an important role in this process.

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