

The Generation and Transcendence of Asian Identity from the Metatheatrical Features of The Yellow Face

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Abstract: David Henry Hwang, a distinguished Chinese-American playwright, persists in his examination of Asian cultural identity within the context of his semi-autobiographical and recent creation, *The Yellow Face*. This theatrical piece has garnered substantial acclaim in the realm of contemporary American theater. However, the current stage of research on this play predominantly focuses on its satire of ethnic identity stereotypes, without establishing a connection between its theatrical techniques and underlying themes. Therefore, this paper intends to initiate its analysis from four specific metatheatrical features: “Role-playing within the role,” “real-life reference,” “the play within the play,” and “self-reference.” It will separately explore the generation of performative Asian identity, the otherization of Asian identity, and the resolution through an ethnically integrated community as depicted in *The Yellow Face*. Additionally, it will examine how the playwright employs these forms of expression to achieve both a satirical critique and a transcendence of the entrenched ethnic identity labels.

1. Introduction

The year 1988 witnessed the groundbreaking performance of *M. Butterfly*, which took the theater scene by storm and solidified David Henry Hwang's prominent position in contemporary American drama. Born in 1957, Hwang not only garnered numerous prestigious awards, including the Tony Award but also became the first Asian American playwright to showcase his work on Broadway. In 2007, his semi-autobiographical play, *The Yellow Face*, staged at the Los Angeles Music Center, sparked intense discussions and widespread attention in the theatrical community. This production not only secured the esteemed Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Hwang but also marked his third nomination for the Obie Award, rekindling his passion for engaging with the theatrical creative process ^[1].

Spanning from the initial implementation of Brechtian distancing techniques in *M. Butterfly* to the more comprehensive utilization of metatheatrical strategies in *The Yellow Face*, Hwang adeptly achieved not only the subversion and deconstruction of Orientalist fantasies but also the transcendence of stagnant and rigid cultural identities. This culminated in the presentation of a multifaceted and all-encompassing communal conceptual framework. In contrast to the comprehensive analyses conducted by scholars on various aspects, including themes and creative

strategies, of *M. Butterfly*, the examination of *The Yellow Face* has exhibited a relatively limited and uniform perspective on the play's satirical treatment of Asian identity and cultural labels. There are limited interpretations that draw connections between its theatrical attributes and thematic explorations from a meta-theatrical vantage point.

The hallmark characteristic of meta-theatre lies in the self-conscious presentation of the dramatic medium itself. By continuously shattering the illusion of stage performance, it serves to remind the audience that what they are witnessing is a performative theatrical production rather than a mere replication and reenactment of reality. As asserted by Abel Lionel, it is in line with this notion that meta-theatre distinctly imparts a heightened impression, emphasizing that metatheatre gives a stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness^[2]. Moreover, metatheatre extends its influence by propelling spectators towards the boundary between dreams and reality, between the stage and the world, and compelling individuals to continually scrutinize the illusory nature of the world.

In his 1986 publication titled *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby introduced the concept of the drama/culture complex. He delineated the phenomenon of the interplay between reality and illusion within the context of this "seeing double," categorizing the creative techniques of metadrama into five distinct types: "the play within the play," "the ceremony within the play," "role-playing within the role," "literary and real-life reference," and "self-reference"^[3].

With this in mind, this paper intends to initiate its analysis from four specific metatheatrical features: "Role-playing within the role," "real-life reference," "the play within the play," and "self-reference." It will separately explore the generation of performative Asian identity, the otherization of Asian identity, and the resolution through an ethnically integrated community as depicted in *The Yellow Face*. Additionally, it will examine how the playwright employs these forms of expression to achieve both a satirical critique and a transcendence of the entrenched ethnic identity labels.

2. Role-playing within the role: performative generation of Asian identity

Milanezi characterizes role-playing as an exceptional means of delineating characters, elucidating the identities they aspire to attain, and revealing certain inherent truths within their personalities^[4]. Through the enigmatic dual nesting on stage, role-playing becomes a platform for the profound desires and identity assertions of dramatic personae. In response to white actors portraying Asian characters in the musical *Miss Saigon*, Chinese-American playwright DHH (abbreviation for David Henry Hwang) created the satirical work *Face Value* as a countermeasure. Ironically, the chosen lead actor for his creation, Marcus, turned out to be of Caucasian descent. However, in what can be described as a misplaced ethnic identity comedy^[5], Marcus himself amalgamated the Asian identity of his stage role with his actual identity, embracing a newfound Asian identity through iterative acts of role-playing.

Prior to the colloquium with Asian-American students, David Henry Hwang (DHH) displayed adept and agile thinking by promptly altering the nomenclature of the actor from "Marcus Dahlman" to the more culturally identifiable appellation of "Marcus Gee." This judicious adjustment was undertaken with the explicit intention of rendering it more congruent with the contextual discourse. Consequently, Marcus found himself in the unforeseen role of an involuntary participant in Asian role-play, driven by exigent circumstances and reluctantly ensnared within a milieu populated by media representatives and an audience comprised of Asian-American observers. However, the pivotal juncture arrived when Marcus, in the wake of a profoundly impactful interaction with the earnest expressions of discontent conveyed by Asian-American students regarding the perpetuation of entrenched societal stereotypes, underwent a marked transformation. This transformative process was catalyzed by the emotional resonance of the grievances articulated

by his fellow students, compelling him to take a staunch stance against the deep-seated biases rooted in racial preconceptions. This newfound resolve positioned Marcus not merely as an observer but as an active participant in vociferously condemning racial prejudices. The culmination of this transformation led to an internal evolution, as he discovered a sense of belonging within the Asian community, an identity he had not anticipated.

While the culminating outcome of DHH's production *Face Value* may have been deemed unsuccessful, the narrative arc of Marcus's journey spiraled into an unforeseen trajectory. Evolving from a seemingly minor role within a theatrical experiment, Marcus emerged as a highly sought-after Asian-American actor on the prestigious Broadway stage. The media, along with theater enthusiasts, hailed him as an emblematic exemplar, celebrating his ability to redefine and contemporize the portrayal of an Asian monarch within an epoch characterized by a robust multicultural ethos. Ultimately, Marcus's profound metamorphosis delineates the pivotal role of role-play in the assimilation and internalization of an ethnic identity. In a strikingly organic fashion, he transitioned from a passive participant to a vocal spokesperson for the Asian community, thus assuming the mantle relinquished by DHH. In his prominent public address that vehemently repudiated racial essentialism, Marcus put forth a cogent argument emphasizing that superficial markers of appearance are subordinate to the autonomous agency one wields in the process of identity construction. He emphasized the active selection of one's own identity, echoing his assertion that he was on the path to realizing the aspirations he had long harbored.

In light of the profound transformation in Marcus's ethnic identity, a fundamental query arises, mirroring DHH's own contemplation: Is race an enduring construct imbued with utility, or does it remain ensnared within the realm of mythos? Marcus's journey serves as a potent testament to the dynamism inherent within ethnic identity and compels us to reconsider the perpetuation and relevance of racial categorization in contemporary society. Through Marcus's transition from involuntary role-playing to voluntary identity performance, the performative nature and socially constructed aspect of Asian identity were revealed. Ethnicity is not solely a creation of a particular culture^[6]; rather, it possesses a fictitious quality, shaped and solidified through continuous referencing and enactment of established norms^[7]. "Yellow Face" originally functions as a cultural label resulting from the Western discourse hegemony's tendency to categorize the Asian community into a convergence.

The inclusion of "white face" performers in "yellow face" character portrayals undeniably fosters a considerable sensation of alienation, consequently inducing a deliberate obfuscation of demarcations that traditionally separate the real from the illusory. This enactment of role transformation, characterized by the assimilation of individuals not of the represented ethnicity into roles ostensibly requiring such ethnic representation, serves as a catalyst for prompting the spectatorship to engage in a cognizant contemplation of the intrinsic essence governing the performative architecture of Asian identity. This deliberate theatrical transposition dismantles preconceived notions and encourages a critical reevaluation of the underpinnings of racial representation within the context of dramatic creation. As a result, it propels an augmented discernment of the intricate interplay between the constructed narrative on stage and the broader socio-cultural tapestry, thereby accentuating the permeable yet consequential boundaries between representation and verisimilitude.

3. Real-life reference: otherization of Asian community

The concept of real-life reference entails the deliberate incorporation of allusions, parallels with actuality, and the consequent emergence of metaphorical and intertextual implications within the theatrical context. Through the intricate interplay that transpires between the textual narrative and

the tangible reality, as well as the reciprocal dynamic between performance and cultural milieu within the complex amalgam of drama and culture, the inherent self-awareness intrinsic to meta-theatre becomes conspicuously manifest. Consequently, a process of reevaluation is triggered within the audience, which catalyzes a profound interface between the theatrical realm and the authentic nuances of lived experience.

It is worth noting that mainstream white culture has historically constructed a distinctly formulated ethnic prism through which Asians are viewed, with *The Yellow Face* serving as a vestige of the "Yellow Peril" discourse, emblematic of cultural alterity^[8] This narrative framework becomes a conduit for the articulation of deep-seated biases rooted in the historical substrata that underlie the ostensibly assimilationist narrative within the American racial context. Despite the professed diversity in the construction of the United States' national image since the 1960s, wherein traditional literary canons are constantly subjected to scrutiny and revision, and ethnic minority literature, women's literature, LGBTQ literature, and more have progressively entered the purview of the construction of American national literature, the ideal of complete "decentralization" in the process of nation-building is difficult to fully realize. The binary opposition between mainstream and periphery has not easily disintegrated due to this transformation. The inclusion of Chinese-American literature within the framework of American national literature, characterized by its heterogeneity and resistance to mainstream paradigms, carries with it a nuanced implication - that Chinese-American literature is once again subjected to the control of mainstream American discourse.

The experiential dimension of David Henry Hwang (DHH) and his father HYH's (initials denoting David Henry Hwang's father) participation in political activism, alongside their forays into capital investment, unveils an intricate layer of the Asian identity narrative. Their engagement within such pursuits drew them under the purview of governmental suspicion and scrutiny, a phenomenon seemingly predicated on the arbitrary targeting of individuals with surnames such as "Lee" or "Wong." Evident here is the inherent dissonance between the mainstream rhetoric of liberty and equality and the lived experience of racialized individuals. Despite DHH's repeated assertions that "we really don't all look alike," the label of "yellow face" crudely enforces a categorical division upon Asians within society, disregarding the heterogeneity embedded within their own community. The amalgamation of fascination and rejection towards external and exotic traits is rooted in the self-imposed sense of superiority and apprehension towards internal diversity within the cultural collective^[9]. Paradoxically, this process of demarcating cultural outsiders concurrently becomes a conduit through which mainstream culture shapes its own construct of subjectivity.

In contrast, HYH, as a first-generation immigrant, adhered to the precepts of the American Dream perpetuated by mainstream discourse. His optimistic outlook led him to perceive governmental subpoenas as an avenue to champion the concerns of the Asian community, anticipating that his vocal expressions could have lasting improvements in their public image. However, this optimistic narrative was irrevocably shattered through an anonymous journalist's interview with DHH. The interview, characterized by its portrayal of Asians as "yellow-faced villains in movies," epitomized the manipulation of facts to construct a narrative guided by the journalist's own prerogatives, wherein the relative significance of events was arbitrarily determined. Through the lens of media manipulation and selective erasure of historical truths, the media evolves into an instrument wielded to formulate an authoritative historical narrative^[10]. By deconstructing, reconstructing, and rewriting factual events, the mainstream discourse molds the marginalization of "yellow face" as the dominant narrative. It is within this narrative framework that Marcus Gee, drawn into the vortex of investigation based on the Asian connotations of his surname, becomes ensnared. However, when Marcus openly acknowledges his lack of Asian heritage, the witch-hunt

targeted at Asians devolves into a farcical spectacle, a satirical exposé of the latent discriminatory biases that persist beneath the facade of liberty and equality.

The utilization of real-life reference frequently assumes the role of an indispensable crucible in fostering the inception and maturation of metatheatre. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced when explicit dramatic discourse is strategically harnessed to evoke latent societal and historical narratives that might otherwise remain concealed from immediate view. Within the perceptible fabric of intertextual interplay, a notable dynamic of self-conscious meta-theatricality unfolds, affording an intricate vantage point for spectators to partake in a dualistic revelation: one that encompasses not only the outlooks of detached observers but also the perspectives of embedded narrators, all ensconced within the intricate milieu of Asian identity. The implicit synergy between the dramaturgical constructs and real-life references engenders an environment wherein the performative narrative operates as a multifaceted conduit. This conduit seamlessly bridges the chasm between historical epochs, interweaving lived experiences with artistic expression. Consequently, this performative interplay functions as a prismatic lens, permitting the audience to delve into the socio-cultural backdrop from manifold stances. This deliberative deployment of meta-theatricality intensifies the audience's cognitive resonance and resonates within the broader framework of theatrical reception, ultimately culminating in an elevated comprehension of the intricate dialectics underpinning Asian identity construction within the realm of dramatic representation.

4. The play within the play and self-reference: ethnically integrated community

The theatrical construct denoted as the "play within the play" delineates a complex stratagem characterized by its dual-layered nesting, wherein the dramatis personae encapsulated within the overarching narrative engage in a secondary thespian endeavor upon the very stage of their existence. This arrangement engenders an intricate dynamic whereby two discrete tiers of performance coexist, serving as a conduit for the realization within the audience's consciousness that their vantage point does not encompass an unfurling actuality but rather an ingeniously fabricated tableau. The duality within this framework unfurls an indirect metaphor, illuminating the intrinsic performativity that constitutes the core essence of theatrical production. In parallel, self-reference occupies the acme as the most heightened and intense manifestation of metatheatre. Manifesting in manifold ways, it is characterized by the direct self-awareness displayed either by the theatrical personages themselves or, indeed, by the dramatic composition in its entirety. Within this immersive vantage point, the phenomenon of theatrical self-reference delivers an unanticipated awakening, akin to a sudden deluge of cold water upon the visage of a slumbering spectator lost in reverie. This awakening unfurls the artifice concealed within the folds of the theatrical tapestry, dispelling the illusion of veracity and exposing the underlying fictitious underpinnings that belie the outward semblance of reality. In effect, self-reference unravels the threads of illusion spun by the theatre, ushering the audience from a state of suspended disbelief into an arena of heightened consciousness, wherein the play's construct is laid bare, and the audience grapples with the intricate symbiosis between performance and its intrinsic fabrication.

During the casting process for *Face Value*, DHH interweaves scenes from *Go for Broke*, where Marcus portrays a white soldier in contrast with an Asian soldier. After learning that Marcus has become a prominent Asian actor on Broadway, DHH stages a closing scene from *The King and I*, where Marcus assumes the role of an Asian king. This nested structure of a play within a play allows Marcus' ethnic identity to shift between different theatrical performances, creating a sense for the audience that reality and fiction coexist within both the performance and reality itself. Simultaneously, as a stage mockumentary, *The Yellow Face* incorporates a multitude of news

articles and media comments that blur the line between reality and fiction. This creates a collage and fusion of theatrical and non-theatrical texts, allowing "various issues revolving around racial differences to exist in the realm of both truth and illusion"^[11], producing a pronounced Brechtian alienation effect. In the closing scene of the Act Two, Marcus unexpectedly breaks free from the performance and directly challenges the playwright, asking him, "Then why did you create me?" At this point, DHH's and David Henry Hwang's identities merge, with DHH first warning Marcus, "Hey, hey! If you're my creation, you'll do as I say!", and later, under Marcus' insistence, reluctantly admitting the fictitious nature of the dramatic character: "Marcus is... a fictional character, created by me." Through the self-referential technique of metatheatre, the fourth wall of the stage is completely dismantled, allowing the audience to break away from the narrative structure of the play and critically examine the real-life issues reflected by the stage performance.

At Marcus' request, DHH crafts for him a fulfilling ending. Marcus travels far across the ocean to Guizhou, China, and within the "big song" of the Dong ethnic group, he discovers his envisioned utopia. The tradition of the "big song" spread to China through the Silk Road over a thousand years ago, originating in the Karakoram Mountains, passing through the Middle East, and spanning across Asia, encompassing nearly half the world. As he wrote in the letter to DHH, "all these songs once came from somewhere else—sorta like me." Marcus isn't intentionally seeking an exotic pastoral charm in the pristine landscape of Guizhou. Thus, he's warmly invited by the villagers to join in the choir of the "big song" and found what he had lost. These songs, as a bridge connecting Marcus with the cultural identity of the Dong villagers, establish a vibrant and organic community beyond ethnicity.

By intentionally breaking the illusion of the stage, the metatheatrical techniques of play within the play and self-reference in metatheatre vividly showcase the self-awareness of the theatre itself^[12]. Through the deliberate fracture of the illusory veneer of the theatrical realm, the strategic employment of metatheatrical strategies, notably the enactment of a "play within the play" and the invocation of self-referential elements within the metatheatrical framework, conspicuously illuminates the inherent self-consciousness innate to the theatrical medium itself. This orchestration of meta-theatricality engenders a perceptible fusion wherein the boundaries demarcating reality from illusion and narrative from enactment become intentionally malleable. As a consequence, these intertwined metatheatrical devices substantively counteract the propensity towards constrictive racial essentialism, fostering a nuanced and expansive perspective. The enactment of a "play within the play" offers an intricately reflective dimension, wherein the dramatic narrative unveils its own artificiality and interplay. This self-referential discourse functions as a prism through which the audience is compelled to navigate the multifaceted layers of representation. Furthermore, the metatheatrical amalgamation of these techniques disrupts the conventional passivity of theatrical consumption, propelling the spectators into an introspective sphere where critical contemplation is spurred. This conscious destabilization of conventional theatrical boundaries ultimately serves to challenge and reconfigure static notions of racial identity, offering a more intricate and dynamic understanding that transcends reductionist paradigms.

5. Conclusion

Approximately twenty years after the notably experimental and theatrically striking staging of *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang embarked once again on exploration, this time with *The Yellow Face*, serving as a veritable laboratory for holistic dramatic innovation. Encasing a non-linear and fragmented narrative structure within the overarching realm of metatheatre, Hwang adroitly employed an array of techniques, including "role-playing within the role," "real-life reference," "the play within the play," and "self-reference." These techniques collectively functioned as analytical

tools, facilitating an incisive dissection of the fundamental constituents underpinning the performative genesis of Asian identity and the quandary of otherization. In this process, the playwright illuminated the yearning for amalgamated identities that transcend the confines of culture and race, thus fostering a sense of hybridity that goes beyond mere categorization ^[13].

Of particular significance was the playwright's strategic deconstruction of the dichotomous schism between reality and illusion, where the self-aware personae within the dramaturgical construct shattered this divide. Notably, the symbolic "Yellow Face" label within the dramatic microcosm operated as a metaphorical device, emblematic of the crystallized Asian identity prevailing in the tangible realm. As the dramatic narrative reached its denouement, Hwang's narrative trajectory converged once more with reality. This denouement witnessed the playwright's reengagement with the quest for his own distinct visage, while also offering the audience a view of potential pathways for transcending and harmonizing diverse countenances.

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