

*A Picture is worth 10,000 Words?*

Presented to the

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Images are important. For our purposes, images are essential to our story. Who can forget this...JFK, or this...Vietnam girl on road,...or this helicopter on embassy roof.

But for our purposes tonight, this is the image that haunted Claude-Michel Schönberg.

This photograph of a child boarding a plane in Ho Chi Minh City to come to his ex-GI father on the other side of the world began the thought processes that would lead to a restaging of an old story of wartime love, sacrifice, bureaucratic formalities and international negotiation spanning continents, governments, and years.

The old story Schönberg knew was the Puccini opera, *Madame Butterfly*. A quick synopsis for those who may have only a passing acquaintance with the plot.

From the Metropolitan Opera's playbill website:

The title character of *Madama Butterfly*—a young Japanese geisha who clings to the belief that her arrangement with a visiting American naval officer is a loving and permanent marriage—is one of the defining roles in opera. The story triggers ideas about cultural and sexual imperialism for people far removed from the opera house, and film, Broadway, and popular culture in general have riffed endlessly on it. The lyric beauty of Puccini's score, especially the music for the thoroughly believable lead role, has made *Butterfly* timeless.

Japan, early 20th century. Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy inspects a house overlooking Nagasaki harbor that he is leasing from a marriage broker, who has also arranged his union with a young geisha known as Madame Butterfly. He is warned that the girl may view the marriage more seriously, but Pinkerton brushes off his concerns and declares that someday he will take a real, American wife. Butterfly is heard climbing the hill with her friends. In casual conversation after the formal introduction, Butterfly admits her age, 15, and explains that her family was once prominent but lost its position, and she has had to earn her living as a geisha.

#### ACT II—PART 1

Three years have passed, and Butterfly awaits her husband's return. The latest potential husband for Butterfly is a wealthy Prince. Butterfly politely serves the guests tea but insists she is not available for marriage—her American husband has not deserted her. Butterfly is asked what she would do if Pinkerton never returned. The shocked Butterfly replies she would either become a geisha again, or better die. Butterfly is outraged and runs out, returning with her small son. A cannon shot is heard in the harbor announcing the arrival of a ship. Butterfly takes a telescope to the terrace and reads the name of Pinkerton's ship. Overjoyed, Butterfly strews the house with flowers. As night falls, Butterfly and the child settle into a vigil watching over the harbor.

#### ACT II—PART 2

Dawn breaks, and Butterfly carries the child into another room. Pinkerton and Kate, Pinkerton's new wife arrive and Pinkerton is overcome with guilt as he remembers his days in the house and runs from the scene. Butterfly rushes in hoping to find Pinkerton, but sees Kate instead. After a moment, she grasps the situation. Now left without hope, she agrees to give up the child but insists Pinkerton return for him. She dismisses everyone and takes out the dagger with which her father committed suicide, choosing to die with honor rather than live in shame. She is interrupted momentarily when her son comes running in. After saying an emotional goodbye she blindfolds the child. Then she stabs herself as Pinkerton is heard from outside calling her name.

The opera premiered in Milan in 1904 and came to the Metropolitan in New York in 1907.

However, further investigation took him to Pierre Loti, pseudonym of Louis Marie-Julien Viaud a French naval officer and novelist, known for his exotic novels.

In 1876 fellow naval officers persuaded him to turn into a novel passages in his diary dealing with some curious experiences at Constantinople. Loti proceeded to the South Seas as part of his naval training, living in Papeete, Tahiti for two months in 1872, where he "went native".

Several years later he published the Polynesian idyll originally titled *Rarahu* (1880), which was reprinted as *Le Mariage de Loti*, the first book to introduce him to the wider public. The book inspired the 1883 opera, *Lakmé*.

In 1883 Loti achieved a wider public spotlight. First, he published a critically acclaimed novel describing the life of a French naval officer. Second, while serving in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) as a naval officer aboard an ironclad. Loti published three articles in the newspaper *Le Figaro* in September and October 1883 about atrocities that occurred during the Battle of Thuận An (20 August 1883), an attack by the French on the Vietnamese coastal defenses of Hue. He was threatened with suspension from the service for this indiscretion, thus gaining wider public notoriety.

In his characteristic semi-autobiographic style, *Madame Chrysanthème* was presented as the autobiographical journal of a naval officer who was temporarily married to a geisha while he was stationed in Nagasaki, Japan. It closely follows the journal he kept of his summer 1885 affair.

Originally written in French and published in 1887, *Madame Chrysanthème* was very successful in its day, running to 25 editions in the first five years of its publication with translations into several languages including English. It has been considered a key text in shaping western attitudes toward Japan at the turn of the 20th century.



In 1899 and 1900 Loti visited British India, with the view of describing what he saw. He had risen in his profession, attaining the rank of captain in 1906. He died in 1923 in Hendaye and was interred on the island of Oléron with a state funeral.

Loti was an inveterate collector and his marriage into wealth helped him support this habit. His house in Rochefort is preserved as a museum. One elaborately tiled room is an Orientalist fantasia of a mosque, including a small fountain and five ceremoniously draped coffins containing desiccated bodies. But, that's another story...

Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* became the inspiration for Schöneberg's project combining these 19th century stories into a modern stage musical illustrating the plight of the children of war—Amerasians—*Bui Doi* in Vietnamese.

*Children of the Vietnam War* was the title of a 2009 Smithsonian Magazine article by David Lamb. The problem of the Amerasian children is best told in his words:

"They grew up as the leftovers of an unpopular war, straddling two worlds but belonging to neither. Most never knew their fathers. Many were abandoned by their mothers at the gates of orphanages. Some were discarded in garbage cans. Schoolmates taunted and pummeled them and mocked the features that gave them the face of the enemy—round blue eyes and light skin, or dark skin and tight curly hair if their soldier-dads were African-Americans. Their destiny was to become waifs and beggars, living in the streets and parks of South Vietnam's cities, sustained by a single dream: to get to America and find their fathers."

But neither America nor Vietnam wanted the kids known as Amerasians and commonly dismissed by the as "children of the dust" (*Bui Doi*).

"The care and welfare of these unfortunate children...has never been and is not now considered an area of government responsibility," the U.S. Defense Department said in a 1970 statement.

Five years after the reunification, in 1980, "Our society does not need these bad elements," the Vietnamese director of social welfare in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

As adults, some Amerasians would say that they felt cursed from the start. When, in early April 1975, Saigon was falling to Communist troops from the north and rumors spread that southerners associated with the United States might be massacred, President Gerald Ford announced plans to evacuate 2,000 orphans, many of them Amerasians. Operation Babylift's first official flight crashed in the rice paddies outside Saigon, killing 144 people, most of them children. Despite the crash, the evacuation program continued another three weeks.

No one knows how many Amerasians were born—and ultimately left behind in Vietnam. In Vietnam's conservative society, where premarital chastity is traditionally observed and ethnic homogeneity embraced, many births of children resulting from liaisons with foreigners went unregistered.

According to the Amerasian Independent Voice of America and the Amerasian Fellowship Association, no more than a few hundred Amerasians remain in Vietnam; the groups would like to bring all of them to the United States. The others—some 26,000 men and women now in their 30s and 40s, together with 75,000 Vietnamese they claimed as relatives—began to be resettled in the United States after Representative Stewart B. McKinney of Connecticut called their abandonment a "national embarrassment" in 1980 and urged fellow Americans to take responsibility for them.

But no more than 3 percent found their fathers in their adoptive homeland. Good jobs were scarce. Some Amerasians were vulnerable to drugs, became gang members and ended up in jail. As many as half remained illiterate or semi-illiterate in both Vietnamese and English and never became U.S. citizens. The mainstream Vietnamese-American population looked down on them, assuming that their mothers were prostitutes—which was sometimes the case, though many of the children were products of longer-term, loving relationships, including marriages.

The massacres that President Ford had feared never took place, but the Communists who came south after 1975 to govern a reunited Vietnam were hardly benevolent rulers. Many orphanages were closed, and Amerasians and other youngsters were sent off to rural work farms and re-education camps. The Communists confiscated wealth and property and razed many of the homes of those who had supported the American-backed government of South Vietnam. Mothers of Amerasian children destroyed or hid photographs, letters and official papers that offered evidence of their American connections.

In 1982, the U.S. Congress passed the Amerasian Immigration Act. The law prioritized U.S. immigration to children fathered by U.S. citizens including from Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. However, the law did not provide immigration to mothers or half-siblings, only to Amerasian children. Amerasians would generally have to coordinate with their American fathers in order to obtain a visa. This provided a challenge for many since some fathers did not know they had children or the fathers may not be claiming the children. If the Amerasian children did not have documentation from the American father, then they could be examined for "American" physical features by a group of doctors.

Most of the Amerasians and scores of Vietnamese boat people trapped in the Philippines were eventually resettled in the United States, Australia, Canada and Norway.

For Amerasians the journey to a new life would be much tougher. About 500 of them left for the United States with Hanoi's approval in 1982 and 1983, but Hanoi and Washington—which did not then have diplomatic relations—could not agree on what to do with the vast majority who remained in Vietnam. Hanoi insisted they were American citizens who were not discriminated against and thus could not be classified as political refugees. Washington, like Hanoi, wanted to use the Amerasians as leverage for settling larger issues between the two countries. Not until 1986, in secret negotiations covering a range of disagreements, did Washington and Hanoi hold direct talks on Amerasians' future.

In October 1985, *Newsday* photographer Audrey Tiernan, on assignment in Ho Chi Minh City, took one photo of a disabled Amerasian child, Le Van Minh, that was printed in newspapers around the world.

This photo started a chain of events that led not only to his immigration to the U.S. but to the Amerasian Homecoming Act in Congress. Huntington High School students called their congressman, Robert Mrazek. "I went back to Washington feeling very guilty," he says. "The students had come to see me thinking their congressman could change the world and I, in effect, had told them I couldn't." But, he asked himself, would it be possible to find someone at the U.S. State Department and someone from Vietnam's delegation to the United Nations willing to make an exception? Mrazek began making phone calls and writing letters.

Vietnam and the United States were enemies and had no official contacts. Humanitarian considerations carried no weight. Several months later, in May 1987, he flew to Ho Chi Minh City.

Mrazek had found a senior Vietnamese official who thought that helping Minh might lead to improved relations with the United States, and the congressman had persuaded a majority of his colleagues in the House of Representatives to press for help with Minh's visa. He could bring the boy home with him. Mrazek had hardly set his feet on Vietnamese soil before the kids were tagging along. They were Amerasians. Some called him "Daddy." They tugged at his hand to direct him to the shuttered church where they lived. Another 60 or 70 Amerasians were camped in the yard. The refrain Mrazek kept hearing was, "I want to go to the land of my father." "It just hit me," Mrazek says. "We weren't talking about just the one boy. There were lots of these kids, and they were painful reminders to the Vietnamese of the war and all it had cost them. I thought, 'Well, we're bringing one back. Let's bring them all back, at least the ones who want to come.' "

Two hundred were on hand to greet Minh, Mrazek and Tiernan when their plane landed at New York's Kennedy International Airport.

After living with foster parents, Minh eventually settled in San Jose, California. He married and has two children of his own.

Pushed into action by those high school students in his New York district, Robert Mrazek slipped his three-page immigration bill addendum into the regular appropriations bill, which Congress quickly approved and President Ronald Reagan signed in December 1987. While the bill had 204 co-sponsors, Carl Perkins was the only KY congressman to sign on. The new law called for bringing Amerasians to the United States as immigrants, not refugees, and granted entry to almost anyone who had the slightest touch of a Western appearance.

The American Homecoming Act or the Amerasian Homecoming Act increased Vietnamese Amerasian immigration to the U.S. because it allowed applicants to establish mixed race identity by appearance alone. Additionally, the American Homecoming Act allowed the Amerasian children and their immediate relatives to receive refugee benefits. About 23,000 Amerasians and 67,000 of their relatives entered the United States under this act. While the American Homecoming Act was the most successful program in moving Vietnamese Amerasian children to the United States, the act was not the first attempt by the U.S. government. Additionally the act experienced flaws and controversies over the refugees it did and did not include since the act only allowed Vietnamese Amerasian children.

Additionally, since the U.S. and Vietnam's governments did not have diplomatic relations, the law could not be applied to Vietnamese Amerasian children. Essentially the Amerasian Immigration Act did little for Amerasian children and even less for Vietnamese Amerasian children.

As a way to address Vietnamese Amerasian children, the U.S. government permitted another route for Vietnamese-born children of American soldiers to the United States. The children would be classified as immigrants, but would also be eligible to receive refugee benefits. The U.S. and Vietnam governments established the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). The program is housed in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The ODP created a system where South Vietnamese soldiers and others connected to the U.S. war effort could emigrate from Vietnam to the United States. Initially the Amerasian children had to have documentation from their American fathers to be issued a visa, however the program eventually expanded to individuals that did not have firm



documentation. The Orderly Departure Program moved around 6,000 Amerasians and 11,000 relatives to the United States.

The 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Bill (H.R. 3171) took effect on March 21, 1988 and allowed Vietnamese Amerasians born January 1, 1962 through January 1, 1976 to apply for immigrant visas until March 21, 1990. Additionally the legislation removed immigration quotas and reduced legal barriers for Vietnamese Amerasians' immigration. As a result of the act around 20,000 Amerasian children left Vietnam. Prior to the Amerasian Homecoming Act, many Amerasian children faced prejudice in Vietnam sometimes referred to as *bui doi* ("the dust of life" or "trash"). However, after the act many of these children would be called "golden children" since not only could the Amerasian children move to the United States, but so could their families. The act allowed the spouse, child, mother, or the next of kin of the Amerasian child to emigrate. The act was significant, because it allowed applicants to establish mixed race identity by appearance alone.

The American Homecoming Act operated through the Orderly Departure Program in the respective U.S. embassies. U.S. Embassy officials would conduct interviews for Amerasians children and their families. The interviews were intended to prove whether or not the child's father was a U.S. military personnel. Under the American Homecoming Act, Vietnamese Amerasian children did not have to have documentation from their American fathers; however, if they did their case would be processed quicker. The approval rating for Amerasian applicants was approximately 95 percent.<sup>[5]</sup> The approved applicants and their families would go through a medical exam. The medical exam was less extensive than other immigration medical exams. If they passed, the U.S. would notify Vietnamese authorities and would process them for departure. The Amerasians would then be sent to the Philippines for a 6-month English language (ESL) and cultural orientation (CO) program. Once the Amerasians arrived in the United States they would be resettled by private voluntary agencies contracted with the U.S. State Department. Some Amerasians gave accounts that some "fake families" approached them as a way to immigrate to the United States. The U.S. Attorney General and the Secretary of State were required to submit progress reports to the U.S. Congress every three years.

The Amerasians who had been so despised in Vietnam had a passport—their faces—to a new life, and because they could bring family members with them, they were showered with gifts, money and attention by Vietnamese seeking free passage to America.

Most were eager to find their fathers, but only 33 percent knew his name.

"Amerasians had 30 years of trauma, and you can't just turn that around in a short period of time or undo what happened to them in Vietnam," says Sandy Dang, a Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States in 1981 and has run an outreach program for Asian youths in Washington, D.C. "Basically they were unwanted children. In Vietnam, they weren't accepted as Vietnamese and in America they weren't considered Americans. They searched for love but usually didn't find it. Of all the immigrants in the United States, the Amerasians, I think, are the group that's had the hardest time finding the American Dream."

The Amerasian Fellowship Association now holds regional "galas" around the country—sit-down dinners with music and speeches and hosts in tuxedos—that attract 500 or 600 "brothers and sisters" and celebrate the Amerasian community as a unique immigrant population.

This background led to this unique musical. Written first in French, Schönberg rewrote it in English for its premiere in Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, on 20 September 1989. Schönberg and his collaborator Alain Boublil had an impressive track record. *Les Misérables* set a high bar, as did other joint efforts. Their discovery that the 19th century novelist was French merely confirmed the connections to the photograph that had originally drawn their attention to the story. The connection of Indo-China to the French colonial empire cemented the connection between Schönberg and the story. In 1954, the French, forced to withdraw from Vietnam after nearly a century of colonial rule, moved 25,000 Vietnamese children of French parentage and gave them citizenship. The differences between the French approach and the attitude of most Americans was striking. *Miss Saigon* became a three year effort that reworked the novel, moved the setting, and brought into contemporary focus the age old issues of young men far from home at war and the inevitable result in graphic terms. You have heard the original operatic plot. I will only outline the



essence of the reworking. Soldier meets girl; girl loves soldier; girl sees love and a future; soldier leaves war zone and resumes his life in the U.S. Girl left with child-unknown to soldier; Soldier racked by guilt returns to Vietnam—finds girl—discovers child— if it sounds very familiar it should. For those who remember and those who have never seen it, I will reveal no more of the plot.

The show closed after 4,092 performances in October 1999 and moved to New York for over 4,000 more performances and then a tour. It has since been performed around the world in a dozen languages.

Here is Hugh Maynard and the chorus of Miss Saigon's 25th anniversary performance in London. (VLC 1:18:40)

The revival is now at the Broadway Theatre in New York through mid-January!

The Metropolitan Opera will stage six performances of *Madame Butterfly* this season in November! So, we have the unique opportunity to see both *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon* in one trip to New York.

Ken Burns new film on PBS will begin Sept. 17. It will be presented in 10 parts over the next couple of months. His haunting *The Civil War* established his reputation as our premier video documentarian.

Having all three of these events occurring at the same time is extraordinary!!

Full diplomatic relations with Vietnam were reestablished in 1995.