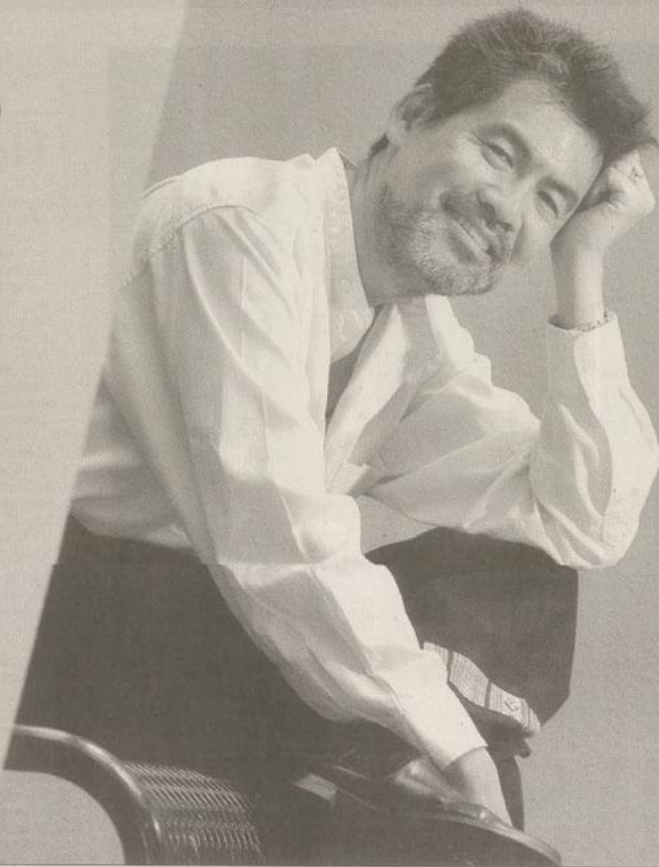


## ARTS

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# Enter the musical

Playwright David Henry Hwang has tackled the weighty and the whimsical. Next up, Bruce Lee on Broadway. Caitlin Wong reports



**AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT** David Henry Hwang has proved his artistic breadth in works ranging from the cerebral *M. Butterfly* to Disney on Broadway's *Tarzan*. But the 48-year-old father of two says that his recent commercial ventures are just "on the sideline".

"It's nice doing intellectual works like *M. Butterfly* because it's completely an expression of myself. To be able to do that in the public eye is nice," he says. "But, as

you get older, you also start to balance things, and the commercial projects are fun to do. Last year, though, I started to want to do intellectual works again. I'd also like to create Chinese-American musicals for Broadway."

So, having dabbled in Disney on Broadway's *Aida* in 2000 and *Tarzan*, which premiered last month, Hwang's latest project will be another musical, this time based on the life and times of Hong

Kong kung fu star Bruce Lee. He says he has yet to write the script, but the idea has already been approved by Lee's family and he hopes to stage the show in 2008.

"Bruce Lee is honoured around the world because he represents an image of someone who's heroic, righteous and strong," says Hwang, a guest speaker at last week's Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's 15th Anniversary Distinguished Lecture Series.

He says the west's view of China has changed a great deal in his lifetime: "There has been a complete shift from the old stereotypes of China, and Bruce Lee contributed to that."

Hwang says he envisages a musical featuring other symbolic figures, such as actor James Dean, whom Lee admired. A worldwide search is expected for the role.

The Bruce Lee project can be traced to Hwang's 25-year obsession with Asians in the US, their social and cultural identity, and the issues they face.

This concern has intensified recently with his and America's growing interest in China. Hwang, who regards himself as "basically American", says the increasing complexity of US-Chinese relations has lured him closer to subjects that are dear to his heart.

"The pull of China is quite strong for many people, Chinese and non-Chinese," he says. "I am kind of Chinese, and there is some part of me that continues to be interested in these issues."

"It is fascinating to watch how these two powers are interacting, and how

their misunderstanding is played out on an international level."

China's recent, rapid rise has altered the way the Americans view the Chinese and offers Hwang fresh professional opportunities. He recently visited Shanghai and Beijing to research the possibility of staging his works there.

"There's a lot of interest in the Broadway style of theatre in Shanghai, and I'm trying to find out what the audiences in China think of my works," Hwang says.

He has yet to decide what work he

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would bring to the mainland, but it would definitely be in Chinese, he says.

An overseas venture seems a logical progression from Hwang's success in the US. An English graduate of Stanford University, Hwang took up theatre history at the Yale University School of Drama in 1980, but left for professional theatre in New York the following year, without completing a degree.

He achieved early success in 1980 when an off-Broadway production of his first play, *FOB*, an acronym for "fresh off

the boat", won an Obie Award for the best new play of the season.

Focused on a Chinese immigrant's debate whether to abandon his Chinese identity in order to fit into mainstream American culture, *FOB* was the first of Hwang's assessments of cultural differences and assimilation, gender, and the conflict of tradition with western values.

His best-known work is *M. Butterfly*, a 1988 Broadway production that made him the first Asian-American to win a Tony Award for best play. The show also won Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk and John Glessner awards, and was made into a feature film in 1993, directed by David Cronenberg and starring John Lone and Jeremy Irons.

Over the past six years, Hwang has shifted his energy towards more commercial ventures, such as his collaborations with Disney. He says increasing globalisation now makes the label "Chinese-American" less meaningful.

As society continues to evolve, one generation's breakthroughs – such as its migration to America – have become another generation's stereotypes, that early migrants were backward and illiterate, and so on, Hwang says.

"Multi-culturalism has been superseded by internationalisation in today's global world."

"Old labels become obsolete, and 'Chinese-American' as a label has decreased in usefulness ... Now, it means that we share only similar facial features," the playwright says.



David Henry Hwang (top) wrote the award-winning stage play *M. Butterfly*, which was adapted into a film starring John Lone (above). PHOTOS: OLIVER TSANG/APPA

SCHOOL  
DAYSDAVID HWANG  
Playwright'You don't need  
most of the  
stuff you learn'

I was 10 when my grandmother fell ill and I remember thinking that if anything happened to her, our family's history would be lost forever.

Grandma lived in the Philippines and we lived in Los Angeles so I asked my parents if I could go stay and with her.

I did and the result was that I compiled a 90-page history of my family from listening to my grandmother's stories.

I distributed it to the family and it was well received. I suppose that was the first real writing I did.

Being a playwright for 25 years and writing about being Chinese has been about putting my own life into context.

I grew up in typical American suburbia with parents who wanted to assimilate into the American way of life.

I don't have any memories of being harassed although I remember mum saying: "If people do say things to you about being Chinese, it just means they're being ignorant."

What I remember about school, which was like reading water, was taking part in activities that were separate from the curriculum. In elementary school I found I liked the violin and I did that out of school.

In secondary school I took up debating on the advice of a friend and although it was in school it wasn't part of what we were supposed to learn.

Elementary school was a typical southern Californian place with a large grassy area and basketball court surrounded by one-storey ranch-style classrooms.

I've pleasant memories from that time and was active in *musical government* - it was a way of being competitive if you weren't good at sports.

I particularly remember my fifth grade teacher from those days taking an interest in me.

She challenged me to think beyond the syllabus and stretch my mind. I felt generally that

school was easy but that was because I think standards were relatively low, yet this teacher didn't allow me to coast.

Another teacher in secondary school, Mrs Fenton, encouraged me to take an interest in drama and was an influence in getting me involved in debating.

Secondary school was less fun as I felt a little geeky. Having acne didn't help either. There's a line in my play *M. Butterfly* in which a character, Mark, says:

"There's no guarantee of failure in life like happiness in high school." There's some truth to that. I think a lot of people,

particularly men, who are regarded as successful now, had an unhappy secondary school experience.

You perhaps don't identify with the things that are valued by your peer group - such as to be good looking and good at sport. Debating was useful in that I met a lot of people who were bright and didn't fit in.

I went to Stanford University not knowing what I wanted to do and majored in English. My dad wanted me to pursue something like business and I thought I might end up at law school afterwards.

I saw some plays at Stanford and thought I could do that, so I set about writing in my spare time. A professor told me what I wrote was really bad but he encouraged me to see plays and we designed a playwright major for the university.

I eventually wrote and staged my own play *FOB*, short for *Fresh Off the Boat*. I wanted dad, who'd never read a play before, to see it. Yet on spotting some swear words, he said: "I sent you to Stanford and you write this junk!" Yet when he saw the production, though, he loved it and even cried. It was then that my parents became supportive of what I wanted to do.

Looking back, that project with grandma in the Philippines was the beginning of an interest that has sustained me throughout my life.

Writing plays is a way of exploring myself and the world around me. You work with fascinating artists in a

dynamic environment. I like writing at home, going to rehearsals, the interaction with the actors and directors and then the communication with the audience.

When I look back, I think children are expected to be generalists.

But as you grow up, you don't need most of the stuff you learn. What you need to do is find a field that you feel good at because adult society is a world of specialists.



Tony Award-winning Broadway playwright David Henry Hwang recently gave a talk in Hong Kong on "The End of Chinese America" as the YK Pao Distinguished Visiting Artist at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He was talking to David Phair.