Gender Trouble in Asian American Literature: David Henry Hwang's *The Sound of a Voice*¹

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I begin this paper by posing a question: can David Henry Hwang’s recent play be a valuable text when discussing representations of gender in Asian American literature? The issue of gender has kept coming up in relation to Asian American literature. This culminated in a much-celebrated debate—which almost turned into a feud—between Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin, and in the critical responses of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. More than ever before, the beginning of the twenty-first century has been receptive moment for Asian American writers. The new generation of Asian American writers are actively engaging themselves in finding their own materials for writing. Unfortunately, Asian American women writers have been

¹ The term "gender trouble" is borrowed from a famous book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990) by Judith Butler, in which she discusses gender in its postmodern form and illustrates the problematic nature of gender as a category of essence. She questions the binary opposition or the specific categorization of gender, the concept that a person is male or female, masculine or feminine. Butler aims to show that gender is not just a social construct, but rather a kind of performance. Since its publication in 1990, *Gender Trouble* has become one of the key works of contemporary feminist theory, and an essential work for anyone interested in the study of gender, sexuality, or the politics of sexuality in culture.
relatively inactive in the field of playwriting, despite the fact that theater practice is the most powerful means for constructing or subverting cultural meaning, particularly in representation of gender identity.

David Henry Hwang's understanding of the politics of the representation of gender and ethnicity and sexuality was much discussed when his Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* was acclaimed by the critics and audiences alike. As the most actively writing and producing playwright and theatre-practitioner, Hwang has been one of the most politically sensitive "spokesperson" of the Asian American community. However, since the writer himself has expressed his opinion in many interviews and lectures, that authenticity is flexible enough to encompass change. From Hwang's point of view, identity is fluid; it is neither static nor intrinsic. It is, therefore, important to trace his latest project to find how his politics of representation have changed since his much-debated mainstream success.

This is not to suggest that Asian American writers must represent for their own community and that their representational strategies are always subject to surveillance by the community critics. In fact, it is difficult to define the category itself of Asian American literature. The fundamental definition of Asian American literature is currently in flux. This is part of a continuing evolution. Today the categorization alludes to more than just the writer's race, national origin, or genetic heritage; it alludes to subject matters, shared memories, and the writer's conscious identification with the Asian American community. Amy Ling asks very significant questions in her anthology, *Yellow Light*:

2) I was honored to be a part of the challenging project of putting together this anthology, together with Amy Ling, the former director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As the program's only graduate assistant from 1993 to 1996, I also wrote to