

【연구논문】

R&H Brand: Breeding of American Paternalism and the Inception of *Flower Drum Song*

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When historians and scholars write about the important moments in musical theatre, it is inevitable to mention Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to talk about the elements of musical theatre and the new forms they offered; *Flower Drum Song* (1958) has been taken up as a scholarly subject and used as a category in the periodization of American musical theatre—known as the first Broadway musical to feature a predominantly all-Asian cast. The show has been interrogated by critics and scholars for its rich sociopolitical and historical context of the post-World War II era and became the target for the misrepresentation of Asian culture. However, studies on Rodgers and Hammerstein, as an all-American brand that contributed to the genesis of *Flower Drum Song*, and the interpretation of why the most American producers of Broadway

musical theater came to create an Asian American show remain unmined.

This essay reveals how Rodgers and Hammerstein strategically intervened in making a public image of the team, and how the calculated paternalistic image of the R&H brand worked for *Flower Drum Song* as an American brand the audience could trust. Moreover, extensive archival research on the pre-performance tactics the practitioners deployed in branding their image as the paternalistic figure is examined through the process of making *Flower Drum Song*—from its genesis to the Broadway opening—to demonstrate how Rodgers and Hammerstein staged the cultural, social, and political situation in the late 1950s with commercial appeal. In this study, I contend that while Rodgers and Hammerstein’s creative talents in music played a crucial role, the branding of Rodgers and Hammerstein of American paternalism was essential in the making of *Flower Drum Song* and that the show was produced purely out of profit-driven pursuit. Through investigation on press releases, critic reviews, public reception and politics with combined methodologies from musicology, sociology, and performance studies, I argue that *Flower Drum Song* is a commercial product of careful attunement to postwar American society to fit the taste of the American audience with the aid of publicity tactics of R&H, the all-American brand.

1. Reconstructing Social/Historical Context

Flower Drum Song, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s eighth musical

based on the 1957 novel, *The Flower Drum Song*, by C.Y. Lee, was carefully planned to fit the taste of the American Broadway audience. Rodgers and Hammerstein, in need of a hit musical after their highly successful musical career in the 1940s, planned a show for the audience to enjoy from the very beginning. As the producers of the show—as well as the composer and the librettist—they adapted the novel for the most popular genre at the time with Broadway audience: a musical comedy (Lewis 33).¹⁾ Chao-Li Chi, who played the role of Dr. Lu Fong, is quoted in an interview by David H. Lewis in his book *Flower Drum Songs the Story of Two Musicals*:

[Rodgers and Hammerstein] kept their ears to the seats and listened for coughing sounds. Shamelessly, they were “clocking the show for laughs,” in the wry recollection of Chao-Li Chi, “Chi watched with mounting dismay as “the committee” (including Kelly, Hammerstein, and Haney) geared audience reactions to their comedy “with a stop watch.” They sat in the audience and clocked the laughter. If a line got a laugh, it was kept and doubled, and if it didn’t get a laugh, out it went. (73)

Rodgers and Hammerstein had two consecutive unsuccessful shows in the first half of the 1950s—*Me and Juliet* (1954) and *Pipe Dream* (1955)—and Rodgers was recovering from cancer, which led to the removal of his left jaw. He was also drinking heavily from

1) Rodgers and Hammerstein were famous for their musical plays—*Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), and *South Pacific* (1949). For an understanding of the musical play and the musical comedy see: Ethan Mordden, *Rodgers & Hammerstein* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 99; Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy*, 4th ed. (New York: ZiffDavis Publishing Company; original edition, 1960); xiii; Geoffrey Holden Block, ed., *The Richard Rodgers Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 181.

depression (Rodgers 285-86, 293-94). Gene Kelly, who was the director of *Flower Drum Song*, states in his biography that he knew *Flower Drum Song* was always an audience show rather than anything for the critics (Lewis 73). They have not had a box office hit musical in the past eight years, and Rodgers and Hammerstein needed a show to mount the duo mainstream once again.

In the 1956-57 Broadway season, new musicals such as *West Side Story*, *The Music Man*, and *My Fair Lady* were critically acclaimed (Mordden 197), especially Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* earned critical acclaim as a groundbreaking musical. Moreover, a new popular form of music—blues, swing, and country—was in great demand, and Broadway was undergoing a new shift led by the young voices of theatre (Lewis 5). Rodgers and Hammerstein, however, did not want to take any risk; they returned to their old fashioned way of music style and choreographic structure introduced in their 1943 musical *Oklahoma!*. Compared to the popular songs of the time, *Flower Drum Song*'s music form was considered old fashioned in structure. Another reason for Rodgers and Hammerstein's slump stemmed from not just emergence of new aesthetics in musical industry but changes in social context: 500,000 middle-income families moving from New York to the suburbs during the mid 1940s to late 1950s, resulting in a decrease of theatregoers. Theatre attendance did in fact decline from 1947-1958 by around one million, and another cause for this decline is explained by the popularity of television in every household, substituting theater for television screens (J. Watts 61-73). These definitive factors come into context to explain why Rodgers and Hammerstein decided to minimize financial

risks and were in dire need of a commercial musical.

Rodgers and Hammerstein both understood the significance of public relations and its integral part in conditioning audience reception. Rodgers was a practical man of theatre and an excellent businessman, and Hammerstein was born into a theatrical dynasty, where his grandfather was a theatre impresario who was notorious for his numerous well-publicized lawsuits—sometimes up to forty separate but simultaneous legal feuds took place (Langner 369; Fordin 4). Knowing that publicity was a vital component in pre-performance advertisement, Rodgers and Hammerstein were actively involved in the process for their past productions, but for *Flower Drum Song*, they were in no condition to participate. Both Rodgers and Hammerstein were hospitalized for several weeks: Hammerstein went through two operations, and Rodgers had signed himself in to a hospital for depression after battling with cancer. Chi recalls how Rodgers and Hammerstein were in the hospital, and Gene Kelly, Mr. Fields (co-producer and co-librettist) and Carol Haney (choreographer), took over the show, and along with Keye Luke, who played the role of Wang Chi Yang, the two actors bemoaned watching the novel turning into a lightweight song and dance diversion (Lewis 74). Notwithstanding their health conditions, the producers were clever to use publicity and proliferated press releases to conceal their absence in auditions and rehearsals because it was the last thing they wanted the public to know. The press representatives of the production, Michael Mok and Lawrence Weiner—who had worked with them since 1944—had started feeding information to the newspapers and magazines as early as March of 1958 (Calta). Once they were done

casting the principal roles, the auditions for the chorus and official rehearsals started in Jun., without Rodgers and Hammerstein on site.

Ample publicity was imperative to display a false image of Rodgers and Hammerstein's dynamic involvement in the making of *Flower Drum Song*, and I argue that the nation-wide auditions to cast "Asian talents" were utilized for effective publicity. The West End musical *Miss Saigon*²⁾—written by Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boubill—was immensely publicized in the late 1980s as the first musical production to have travelled all around the world, including Hawaii and the Philippines, in search of an Asian cast; however, *Flower Drum Song* was the first Broadway musical to search major cities to cast "Asian talents." Kelly and Haney went from Boston to San Francisco to cast Asian performers, and full publicity was at work for the auditions, but some auditions never took place.

The production placed ads in New York Chinatown newspapers, and a cover story in *Time* magazine recorded the audition process; it gave vivid descriptions on how they had to go as far as Hawaii to find "oriental talents" for the show, along with a photography spread ("Broadway" 43), but the article was nothing near a genuine story. It tells a tale of a diligent production going coast-to-coast for Asian talents, and although it was true that they did go to Hawaii to cast actor Ed Kenny, the auditions in Chinatown never occurred. Kelly was spotted simply having a good time in Chinatown, San Francisco,

2) *Miss Saigon* opened on September 20, 1989 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London and closed on October 30, 1999. It opened on Broadway at the Broadway Theatre in 1991 and received criticism for its racist portrayal of Asian women and white actors playing Asian characters.

and no one recalls of a formal audition—Kelly and his fellow Hollywood stars were often seen at the nightclub, Forbidden City, in Chinatown, San Francisco enjoying the shows, rather than opening auditions to cast hidden talents. Ivy Tam, wife of the owner of Forbidden City, does not recollect any formal auditions related to the musical taking place, and only one Japanese actor, Jack Soo, who changed his name to sound Chinese, was picked out of the biggest Chinese-populated area in San Francisco (Lewis 43-44). The newspapers were saying something different from what Tam and her colleagues had witnessed in Chinatown. As New York City audiences were curious about what was happening in San Francisco, and Forbidden City was quite famous for its exotic shows, it becomes the perfect venue to arouse the curiosity of an Asian spectacle. For this reason, the Forbidden City, as the setting for their publicized auditions clearly exhibits *Flower Drum Song's* profit-driven approach as entertainment.

Situated on the border between Chinatown and white San Francisco, Forbidden City was the most popular and longest-surviving Chinese nightclub (it closed in 1962) in America, where Asian American entertainers performed for the white audiences.

Exuberant big band music plays as a couple—the man in tux and tails, the woman in a satin evening gown—performs a vigorous tap dance. The woman wiggles her hips and shakes her raised index finger; the man jumps down into a split and just as quickly slides back up...he lifts her and swings her in the air, both of them grinning widely...[It looks like] the Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 1940s except, remarkable, that the dancing couple is Asian American and the audience sitting at tables surrounding the dance floor is white. There is a visual disjunct here, a sense

of oddity, and perhaps also of exhilaration, in the sight of two Asians in the lace of what has typically been a stage for whites. This should be Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse, Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. (Kwan 120)

Asian American performers like Dorothy Takahashi Toy and Paul Wing, who were part of the “Chop Suey Circuit,” toured nightclubs—including Forbidden City—throughout the country from Seattle to New York. They advertised themselves as the “Chinese Frank Sinatra,” and the “Chinese Fred and Ginger,” and the entertainers sang popular commercial songs of the time. They promoted their “exotic” looks and played by the white America audiences’ stereotypes of Oriental beauty: “Fan Dance,” the “Chinese Sleeve Dance,” and the “Coolie Dance” were American cabaret with superficial “Oriental” touches. Performers dressed in bunny costumes and tap dancing to “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” from *Oklahoma!*, was one of the popular acts to entertain the white audience (Kwan 120-136). The depiction of the American cabaret with the “Oriental” touches at a Chinese nightclub is staged in *Flower Drum Song*, when Linda Low performs “Fan Tan Fannie,” at the nightclub with the dancers. She has a fan in her hand, a bunny’s soft tail on the top of her cone-shaped hat, and she sings to a song that is Swing Jazz in genre, but with the orchestration of Oriental melodic lines. The Oriental melodic line is in fact the Kung Sang Kak Chi Woo Chinese Pentatonic scale.³⁾ The American genre of

3) “Fan Tan Fannie” is Swing Jazz in genre, but Rodgers and Hammerstein employed the Chinese Pentatonic scale and the related chord progression for the “Oriental” sound. Both Traditional Chinese music and Western music divide one

music incorporates the Chinese melodic lines resulting in an American invention fit for the American audience—just like the performers of *Forbidden City*, the music was neither Oriental nor American.

According to Anthony Lee, the Chop Suey Circuit entertainers were “applauded and enjoyed not for closing the gap between the races but for maintaining (and making entertaining) the distance between them” (A. Lee 248-49). The American vaudeville acts performed by Asian Americans affirmed the superiority of whiteness, reinforced the racial border of white American and Asian American, and proved them a non-threat to mainstream society. In this perspective, it was safe for Rodgers and Hammerstein to stage an act resembling the performances of *Forbidden City* since the Asian American performers could be perceived as pure entertainment for the American Broadway audience. Furthermore, the cabaret acts in *Forbidden City* were the perfect kind of entertainment that could both fulfill the curiosity of Asian foreignness of the American people, and the musical as a form of commercial entertainment. The creators staged the exotic “oriental” acts onto the Broadway stage that targeted the American audience’s interest in Asian foreignness, which was heightened with the United States involvement in World War II.

The historical context of the post war period of the 1940s and 1950s explains the cardinal motives of Rodgers and Hammerstein in producing a musical about Asian Americans. During WWII, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal notions of an assimilationist

octave into twelve notes; however, Traditional Chinese music prefers only five notes within one octave, while Western music use seven notes.

society, and President Harry S. Truman's post war global expansion, instigated an increased interest in racial diversity for Americans. In the midst of the war, the once ethnically homogeneous rural American towns with military training camps were now overflowing with young men from all over the country with different ethnicities, so for an efficient army, the United States needed to resolve differences in race. They tried to embody the social changes brought on by the war through strategically embedding racial unity ideologies on Broadway and in Hollywood to emphasize the importance of resolving differences (Wertheim 55, 103).

The propaganda was that the United States was being humanitarian, but in reality, they were pursuing its own military and political policies—just as Rodgers and Hammerstein were reflected in the media as humanitarians, but in fact were pursuing their own personal needs for a box office hit musical. In January 1943, the Office of War Information directed Hollywood producers to “depict democracy by showing persons of different race, religion and economic status mingling on even terms in factory or other war service and also in settings of everyday life.” Countless Hollywood films started to depict the diversity of race of Anglo, Italian, Polish, Hispanic, Jewish, and Irish soldiers all fighting together to save American democracy, although African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans were excluded from that diversity⁴) (Most 99). The propaganda was not confined to the film industry, Broadway

4) During the 1930s and in the years immediately after Pearl Harbor, almost every American playwright of any note addressed the war and its issues. For a list of Broadway productions of the 1942-43 season, see: Wertheim 33, 41-47, 55-125.

productions addressed the war and its issues, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were no exception. As firm supporters of Roosevelt, Hammerstein, in particular, was an active member of the Writer's War Board in 1942 to its expansion as a liaison with the Office of War Information (Kirle 251, 253-54). At the height of the war, they created the ideal Mid-West utopian space for the American audience in *Oklahoma!*, and embodied racial diversity in the post war period with *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *Flower Drum Song*. As stated in several of Rodgers and Hammerstein's press releases for *Flower Drum Song*, the creators emphasized their pursuit of "universal harmony"—a term they would use repeatedly to label the show. Although the intended humanistic approach of "universal harmony" to *Flower Drum Song* provided crucial framework of the production, their views were a mere reflection of the classic liberalism of the 1950s and early 1960s. Hammerstein took a stand on Nazism, reacted to McCarthyism in the 1950s, and was on various theatrical and charitable committees including the World Federalists (Nolan 178). But it was not just Hammerstein; it was a time when America was interested in Asia and the Pacific, and the creators took full advantage of the public's curiosity towards Asia.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor moved the American public into the war, and it led to an increased interest in the Asian culture and their stories. In addition to *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, Asian-themed movies—*Rashomon* (1950), *Sayonara* (1957), and plays—*The World of Suzie Wong* (1958) and *Kataki* (1959)⁵—were produced in

5) The movie *Rashomon* (1950) was written by Ryunosuke, and then made into a film by Kurosawa, which was a huge hit worldwide. The film was then adapted

New York City. This was due to the alleviation of the restrictions on Asian immigration in the 1940s and 1950s. Going further back in time, the Immigration Act in 1924 was passed, prohibiting all Asians to immigrate to America and for those who were already living in America were deprived of their citizenship. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, U.S. laws put restriction on Chinese women to prevent Asian immigrants from forming families, stripping the citizenship of American-born women who married noncitizens, and criminalizing miscegenation. As a result, Chinatown was composed largely of male population (Klein 229). As World War II came to an end, China and the Philippines were allies to America since the United States needed military presence in Asia to promote its interest in becoming a world power; the United States had to be friendlier to Asian countries to prevent them from becoming communist regimes. The American audience started reading the books of Chinese and Filipino American writers, and publishers began to scout the Asian writers. The American society was moving towards an interest in Chinese American writers and culture in particular—most popular Asian American literary works of the 1940s and 50s were written by Chinese Americans. It is for this reason why Japanese, Korean, and Filipino American performers at the Forbidden City in San Francisco marked themselves as “Chinese.” By 1952, restrictions on Asian immigration were mostly lifted, but the U.S. laws on Asian

into a play in English by two British playwrights Fay and Michael Kanin in 1959. *Kataki* (1959) was written by Shimon Wincelberg, and *Sayonara* (1957) was based on a novel written by James Michener and Paul Osborn. *The World of Suzy Wong* was both produced into a play and a film in 1958 and 1960 and was written by Paul Osborn based on the novel by Richard Mason.

Americans—the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the restriction of Japanese immigration in 1907, and the prohibition of the immigration of South Asian and the Pacific islanders in 1917—established the meaning of Asianness as foreign⁶⁾ (E. Lee 20; McConachie 397; Klein 224).

2. Building the Audience Reception

Pre-performance advertisement was used to condition audience reception before and after the Boston tryouts, which took place at the Shubert Theatre from October 27 to November 29 of 1958, and each story that circulated the press originated in the minds of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Mok and Weiner—who had helped to demonstrate publicity tactics that guided past shows’ box office hits—actively participated in building audience reception through publicity tools; they handled publicity, public relations and scheduling of major productions for *Flower Drum Song*. After production meetings with Rodgers and Hammerstein, the agents also provided the text for the newspaper articles, and information on *Flower Drum Song* was fed into newspapers and magazines in America.

There is evidence that Mok had been sending out detailed reviews since *South Pacific* each weekend for all major newspapers—some letters are specifically written “For Release” and “Exclusive for the ‘New York Post’”⁷⁾ (Mok). In addition to the basic information of

6) For information on Asian Americans and the Immigration laws in the 1920s to 1950s read E. Lee, 13-22; McConachie, 385-398; Klein, 224-226.

7) The “Michael Mok” boxes are situated in the New York Public Library, and I

the show, explicit statistics are dated in the letters, such as the number of performances staged so far, the number of company players as well as stage managers, and how “5,000,000 pounds of ice have been consumed by the Majestic’s air-conditioning machinery for the comfort of the customers” (Mok). He also wrote detailed reviews of *Flower Drum Song* to the editor of *New York Times* and John Beaufort for *Christian Science Monitor* on April 1, 1959, depicting how Umeki was being “Americanized,” and how the feminine lead in the latest Rodgers and Hammerstein hit was at her happiest moment in life (Mok). Apparently, through Mok, Rodgers and Hammerstein sent out regular press releases about the tryouts especially to the *Daily Boston Globe* each week. This is evident because the same word choices and sentence structures are found in the November 2nd, 9th and 23rd papers in the “Boston Stage” section of the *Daily Boston Globe*, without credited text. The newspaper journalists would rely on such press releases and write about it; some were printed as they were sent, and in rare cases, the journalist was invited as a spectator to the rehearsal.

In the November 30, 1958 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*—one day before the grand opening of *Flower Drum Song*—a full coverage of the rehearsal scenes was distributed with the title “The R&H Brand on a Musical,” written by Joanne Stang. Stang, a freelance writer refers Rodgers and Hammerstein to be “immune to the massive tribulation entailed in the climb,” and goes on praising that for Rodgers and Hammerstein, it is possible to “handle the

would like to thank the library for allowing me access to the archives. See Mok.

massive machinery of a musical without panic or temperament.” It was not common for Rodgers and Hammerstein to grant access to a show in preparation, and she goes on emphatically:

Not for them the frantic, early quest for backers; not for them the cold sweat of discovering that the show which seemed so swell as an idea looks like a bust in rehearsal; not for them the bitter quarrels that have marked some prominent recent musical show collaborations; not for them the sleepless nights locked in a hotel room after the out-of-town opening to rewrite everything. (16)

Contradicting Stang’s statement, during rehearsals, Rodgers was constantly dozing off and was barely awake. Interestingly, Rodgers wrote to his wife during one of the rehearsals: “Oscar has slowed down again. Joe is doing nothing. Gene is paying too much attention to details in directing, and I’m the only one who’s faultless. Aren’t you proud?” (Secret 341) It is hard to say that the article was an actual report of the rehearsals; it was more of effective press agency.

An important factor that determines the show’s inception to be of commercial intent is that during the Boston tryouts, they put emphasis on the show as a musical comedy—a show about love. In the October 25th and 28th issue of *Christian Science Monitor*, September 10, 1958 issue of *Daily Boston Globe* and in the articles published by *New Journal and Guide* on Jul. and *Chicago Defender* of Jun. 21, 1958, the creators do not indicate about the Asian American society or the pursuit of “universal harmony” yet. Even up till the opening night on Broadway, Rodgers, in an interview with *Newsweek*, claims that they wanted to put on an entertaining show

and that “there isn’t much plot to the novel, … but its strong character and background, like Chinese ‘Life with Father’; I just fell in love with it”⁸⁾ (“They’re Back”). Planned as a rendition of a happier version of the original novel, Rodgers concentrated on releasing press materials about a romantic musical comedy and a would-be hit, and these articles were influential in labeling the show light-hearted and the critics were quick to follow suit.

The Boston Tryouts received mostly positive reviews, and the show as a romantic musical comedy is remarked in most of them. *Boston Herald’s* critic Elliot Norton proclaimed on October 29, 1958 “*Flower Drum Song* can’t miss being hit,” “‘Flower Drum’ Sure Hit” rang the November 3rd issue of *The Billboard’s* headline, and Elinor Hughes of the *Herald* claimed it as “a warm and happy show.” All the critics complimented on the two female leads, Umeki and Suzuki, but the show drew mixed comments as well; “Trimmed and paced, ‘Flower Drum Song’ is almost certain to be a winner,” said Cyrus Durgin of the *Boston Globe*, Norton wrote “When they trim down a little and tighten it up a lot and get it to move with even speed from first curtain to final gaiety ‘Flower Drum Song’ will surely rank with the best works of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein,” and *Variety* summed it up as “a fundamentally basic show built around family pride, love and the right man for the right girl,” and thought the show had “a few side meanderings.” Rodgers and Hammerstein’s strategy of presenting *Flower Drum Song* as a

8) *Life with Father* is originally a humorous autobiographical book of stories by Clarence Day, Jr. It is a light-hearted, American comedy that was adapted in 1939 into a Broadway play, and was made into a movie and a popular television series in 1947.

popular commercial musical comedy had worked. The conscious strategies had structured the way the critics and audience received the performance; it conditioned the reception and the reviews, and provided the framework for the production.

Based on the reviews and audience reactions of the Boston Tryouts, the creative team of *Flower Drum Song* clocked the laughs, excised and replaced songs, and diminished the weak characters including several overall changes, all according to the critics and audience feedback. Throughout the history of American musical theatre, critics have played an essential role of the collaborator—whether supportive or hostile. During the golden age era, there were seven major critics—Walter Kerr, Brooks Atkinson, Richard Watts Jr., John Chapman, Robert Coleman, John McClain, and Frank Aston—who wrote for New York daily newspapers; the *New York Herald-Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *Post*, the *Daily News*, and the *World Telegram and Sun* (Knapp, Morris, and Wolf 371; J. Watts 38-39). Critics had significant influence during the tryout period, and they helped increase ticket sales and shape subsequent audience reception of the show. They gave outside perspective, and provided feedback, and this would exert a considerable effect on the trimming process of the show. C.Y. Lee explains that if they gave bad reviews, the critics in the 1950s were influential enough to close a show (Shin 81-82). In a survey by *Variety* magazine, during the 1957-1958 season, Kerr—a *New York Herald-Tribune* critic—and the public tabulated reviews as whether favorable or unfavorable: Kerr rejected seventy percent, whereas the public rejected seventy-three percent of the musicals staged on Broadway of that season⁹) (J. Watts 39). In other words,

the Broadway American audiences were more critical than the critics, and this reveals how the critics matched with box office returns in 1958.

Rodgers and Hammerstein had turned to the esteemed *Boston Herald's* critic, Elliot Norton, for valuable Boston tryout feedback in previous years. When Norton thought Ed Kenney, who played the role of Wang Ta, was “too brash,” Rodgers and Hammerstein would take action and lessen the focus on Kenney, and as the critics all praised Umeki and Suzuki, Rodgers and Hammerstein reduced the role of Helen Chao, played by Arabella Hong¹⁰) (Lewis 66). The critics’ influence is directly related to the ticket sales in the case of *Flower Drum Song*; by October 29th, the New York advance sales were over one million dollars and most of the performances were already sold out¹¹) (“Moneymakers”). In the October 29 issue of *Variety* magazine, titled “Drum’ Beats Boffo \$1,000,000 Advance,” the unknown writer explicitly mentions the reported advance sale of the Broadway presentation, and the show had only opened two days ago on the 27th of October. This can be interpreted that the advance ticket sales for the New York production had already started to fill up as early as October 29, 1958—one day after the critics sent out their reviews. Rodgers and Hammerstein were fully aware of the importance of the critic reviews and acknowledged the importance of tryouts before going on to Broadway.

9) According to *Variety*, “rejection” means the play did not recover production costs.

10) For detailed information on the deleted scenes and roles, see Lewis, *Flower Drum Songs*, 66-73; Shin, “Forty Percent,” 83.

11) See also “Legitimate: ‘Drum Song’ Pays another \$100,000; 200% Net so Far,” *Variety* 5 Jul. 1961: 55; “Legitimate: ‘Drum Song’ Hits \$500,000 Profit,” *Variety* 9 Nov. 1960: 63.

3. The R&H Brand: the Breeding of American Paternalism

Rodgers and Hammerstein shaped audience reception by conditioning *Flower Drum Song* as a show conscientious of the socio-political context and issues of American society, which establishes the central theme that would regularly appear in subsequent press materials and articles emphasizing “universal harmony,” and the R&H brand as paternalistic figures. With *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers and Hammerstein became a household name, and R&H, as a branded name, first appeared in print on October 25, 1947 in an article by the former *New York Times* critic Lewis Nichols. The brand name was now capable of counting more than half a million dollars in advance business with thousands in line at the ticket booths. Nichols claimed, “[Rodgers and Hammerstein] have replaced the star system, or perhaps more exactly, they have become stars in themselves” (“R.&H.”). By 1949, their names were branded, and it became less of a task for publicity agents to promote *South Pacific* (Weiner). Those who knew their names trusted the R&H brand to purchase advance tickets. Rodgers and Hammerstein were the first songwriters to take on the roles of the advertising process and become a powerful tool in publicity. They recognized the audience both as a potential critic and collaborator, and with the emergence of America as the international super power in the postwar era, the R&H brand was explicitly geared toward American paternalism in shaping the American audience.

The critics and audiences received the spinning stories of the press materials presenting *Flower Drum Song* as a romantic musical comedy,

and it settled into the American public after the Boston tryouts as planned. The next step for Rodgers and Hammerstein was to make sure it would be labeled as a R&H brand musical that would rewrite musical theatre history just like their previous hits did; *Flower Drum Song* would be the first major musical about Chinese Americans with an all-Asian cast with a Chinatown setting in America. Knowing that the show's success depended upon careful attunement to the American populace, and as America in the 1950s was interested in the Chinese culture in particular, the duo decided to recruit a cast of Asians only. However, their definition of an "all-Asian cast" reflects the imagined reality by the Western mind. The role of Madam Liang was to be played by Anna May Wong, but she passed away, and they were unable to find Chinese actors for the whole cast, so they cast Juanita Hall in the role of Madam Liang, who was African American; Ed Kenney in the role of Wang Ta was Hawaiian; Mei Li, played by Miyoshi Umeki, was Japanese; Linda Low was played by Pat Suzuki, a Japanese American singer and actress with a famed career; and Larry Blyden, who played Sammy Fong, was a Jewish American (Mordden 195). But this did not interfere with their strategy for putting emphasis on the "universal harmony" theme because they did not think ethnic specificities mattered as long as they "looked" oriental. It was still being billed as a "warm and happy" show, but the underlying theme of *Flower Drum Song* would be the confrontation between Far Eastern and American cultures under American paternalism, which would be the significant mark to condition reception. As Rodgers puts it, the story was "told in terms of the conflicts between first and second generation Chinese-

Americans in San Francisco” (Hyland 244). Accordingly, an imagined all-Asian cast press release would be carefully fed into the press with planned out interviews and personal remarks made by Rodgers and Hammerstein themselves.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s intended humanistic approach to *Flower Drum Song* provided the final but crucial framework of the production, and they were clever to gauge the movement of classic liberalism in America and utilize it as one of their key strategies in fashioning the show. As a single image can have a profound effect upon audience interpretation, Rodgers and Hammerstein consciously utilized the program to show that Orientals were just like all white Americans, and to accept the difference of cultures was the progressive and paternal thing to do. The programs for *Flower Drum Song* indicated not only the actor’s name and previous experience in theatre; it included the actors’ ethnic mix, their immigrant origins, and place of birth. Under each biography, the actors were identified as “native Japanese,···Californian,···part Chinese and part Hawaiian,···born in Manila,···American of Korean extraction,” and so on (Klein 235). Before the curtains rose, the program educated the American audience into thinking that they were actively taking part in the engagement of “universal harmony.”

The February issue in 1959 of *Holiday Magazine* titled “The Nicest Guys in Show Business,” reinforced the R&H brand as the American paternalistic figure in Southeast Asia. The article encouraged American audiences to believe that Asian culture is only skin deep and easily shed, and that it was the “nice” thing to do. What Rodgers and Hammerstein were trying to embed in the musical

was their philosophy that people of all skins were not different, East and West can get together with a little adjustment, and that “Orientals” deal with romantic love too. Umeki and Suzuki, the two female leads, looking like sisters, were on the cover of *Time* magazine titled “Broadway: The Girls on Grant Avenue,” and the story would center on “universal harmony.” The cover story depicts the “East-West love” that surrounds *Flower Drum Song* to be no accident, and it explains how Rodgers and Hammerstein have reached “an almost Oriental serenity in an otherwise hectic and often squalid business.” And of course, Rodgers and Hammerstein did not forget to comment on the “family feeling” of themselves as the father figure, which would attribute to the image of R&H as a brand.

To stimulate more press releases, the press representatives arranged an advance ticket sales campaign to show that they are conscientious about the issues of the world. Hammerstein was actively involved in theatrical and charitable committees, and his beliefs were reflected in the benefit shows of *Flower Drum Song*, however, these charitable events were part of the advance ticket sales campaign and was publicized as much as the production. *The New York Times* had an article on *Flower Drum Song*'s February 6th performance to benefit a school. There was a publicity shot of three ladies with one holding a pencil and a pen going over plans for the benefit. Numerous *New York Times* articles announcing *Flower Drum Song*'s benefit performances can be found. An article to benefit Woman's Hospital to aid child shelter has a publicity shot of two nurses, again with a pen and paper in hand with a caption that says “...meet at Carlton House to discuss the benefit, which will be held at the Dec. 19

performance of Flower Drum Song.” It mentions that the proceeds will go to the Museum of the City of New York, and to aid an adoption agency.¹²⁾ The benefit performances would be publicized as early as three months before the actual Broadway performance. Ironically, the charitable benefit performances were all published by *New York Times*, and there were publicity shots with uncredited text. The text and images of the articles of the benefit performances reflect the media management of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

4. *Flower Drum Song’s* Broadway Debut

Rodgers and Hammerstein had structured the pre-performance publicity so well that even with the mixed reviews, ticket sales did not falter; their strategy of presenting the show as a light-hearted, romantic musical comedy with the underlying theme of “universal harmony” had worked. However, as time went by, the reviews seemed to be less favorable of *Flower Drum Song*, and critics started

12) The articles are all in the *New York Times* with uncredited text. See “Feb 6 Fete to Assist in Scarborough: Flower Drum Song’ to Benefit Country Day Unit There,” *New York Times* 4 Nov. 1958; “‘Flower Drum Song’ to Aid Child Shelter,” *New York Times* 7 Oct. 1958; “Benefit Planned at Show Dec. 19 For a Hospital: ‘Flower Drum Song’ to Aid Work of Woman’s Institution Here,” *New York Times* 27 Sept. 1958; “2 Theatre Fetes Will Be Benefits for City Museum: Parties Set at Dec. 10 and Jan. 2 Showings of ‘Flower Drum Song’,” *New York Times* 28 Sept. 1958. For more articles on the advance ticket sales campaign see “Tickets Available at Theatre Fete To Aid Exchange: ‘Flower Drum Song’ on Jan. 6 Be Benefit for Women’s Group,” *New York Times* 30 Dec. 1958; “Plans Advanced for fete to Aid Adoption Agency: State Charities Aid Unit to Get Proceeds of Dec. 8 ‘Flower Drum Song’,” *New York Times* 23 Nov. 1958; “‘Flower Drum Song’ Sets Benefit Feb. 26,” *New York Times* 6 Jan. 1959.

to doubt the authenticity of the Asian American theme, and with the movie version, *Flower Drum Song* never made it back to Broadway until the 2002 adaptation, which was rewritten by David Henry Hwang.

On the opening night of December 1958, the seven renowned theatre critics in New York sat down at the newly renovated St. James Theatre and watched the *Flower Drum Song* make its Broadway debut. Due to the pre-performance advertisement, the show had already attracted considerable advance sales, and they were very well received at the Boston tryouts. The next day, out of the seven major New York newspaper theatre critics, five of them gave positive reviews, one mixed and one negative.¹³⁾ However, comments of concern and disappointment resounded as well; Atkinson thought “it does not have the vitality of ‘South Pacific’ or ‘The King and I.’... [It] is not one of their master works,” and the harshest among the critics was Watts, who blatantly enthused, “with all its Oriental exoticism, it is astonishingly lacking in distinction.” He went on saying that “an air of Broadway brashness dominates the delicacy of the romance, giving ‘The Flower Drum Song’ the quality of a good, routine musical comedy of the conventional school, instead of the imaginative freshness we have come to expect of the authors of ‘South Pacific’ and ‘Carousel.’” Watts ended with the statement:

13) “‘The Flower Drum Song’ Big Hit,” *Daily Mirror* 2 Dec. 1958; “‘Flower Drum Song’ Filled With Tunes, Color and Sweet Romance,” *Daily News* 2 Dec. 1958; “Theatre: Oriental Musical,” *New York Times* 2 Dec. 1958; “Sumptuous ‘Flower Drum Song’ Creates a Dance Fan’s Dream,” *New York World-Telegram and The Sun* 2 Dec. 1958; “Musical by R&H Garners a Posy,” *Journal American* 2 Dec. 1958; “First Night Report ‘Flower Drum Song,’” *Herald Tribune* 2 Dec. 1958; “The Rodgers & Hammerstein Show,” *New York Post* 2 Dec. 1958.

But what bothered me through most of the evening was that despite the charming people in the cast, there seemed an odd minimum of charm, a quality rarely missing from the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein or from the Chinese temperament. Perhaps the show relied too heavily on the fact of Chinese charm and the atmosphere was pseudo Chinese... But “The Flower Drum Song” is minor Rodgers and Hammerstein. (“Two”)

Despite the mixed reviews, *Flower Drum Song* was a financial success; the show ran for 600 performances, toured America for a year and a half, made its London premiere, and was produced into a film in 1961. According to *Variety* magazine, it was almost always a full house and sales remained strong: a weekly profit of \$13,000 was made, which paid 200% profit on its \$300,000 investment by the tour.¹⁴ The New York critics did not give raving reviews, but it was a respectable success in that it was a box office hit. Rodgers and Hammerstein took advantage of the commercial attention every way they could—they invited celebrities, made sure the media was talking about the show, and offered magazines like *Life* with multi-pages photo publicity, and the review essentially advocated for the show (“Mark”).

5. *Flower Drum Song’s* Politics

Flower Drum Song became the most problematic of the Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals, and it is important to situate the show

14) “Legitimate: ‘Drum Song’ Pays another \$100,000; 200% Net so Far,” *Variety* 5 Jul. 1961: 55; “Legitimate: ‘Drum Song’ Hits \$500,000 Profit,” *Variety* 9 Nov. 1960: 63.

within a broader cultural context. In the 1950s, there was a “theatrical fad” of “oriental” shows featuring likeable Asian characters, and Asian Americans were portrayed as model minorities as envisioned by the mainstream Anglo-Americans. There were positive outcomes for the Asian American actors and writers of the period too; *Flower Drum Song* provided the Asian American actors to play major roles on Broadway, and it eventually led to the formation of the East West Players and other theatre companies.¹⁵⁾ *Flower Drum Song* had inspired many Asian performers to pursue a career in theatre and they were willing to play along the conflation of the different oriental ethnicities because it gave them employment and popularity. The Asian Americans took advantage of the opportunity, and it is due to this exposure to the public that they were able to build the foundation of Asian American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s attempt to captivate the critics failed, and what started out as an innocuous attempt, the show ended up facing critical challenges and was labeled as a musical writing the Orient to fit its own needs.

The New York critics did not think of *Flower Drum Song* as one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s best pieces. Other than Watts, who was the only critic to point out the pseudo Chinese atmosphere, most critics like McClain and Kerr noted that the faces of non-Oriental characters did not matter because they were “engaging” and “pleasant.” Then came Kenneth Tynan’s review of *The New Yorker*

15) East West Players was established in 1965 ‘to create a venue for demonstrating their acting abilities to Hollywood producers and non-Asian audiences and for improving their image as actors.’ They thought this exposure would bring them better roles. See E. Lee, 26-29.

on December 13, 1958, which accused the show as “a world of woozy song,” and as “a stale Broadway confection wrapped up in spurious Chinese trimmings.” With his review, harsh criticism on the show started to build up and exude into the public. Tynan’s review pinpoints an important observation in that it was the first to address the ignorance of the creators on Asian American culture. He believed that Rodgers and Hammerstein had patronized the repetitiveness of the three Oriental shows—*South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Flower Drum Song*—and that their attitude toward exotic peoples had not changed. Tynan proclaims:

It seems to have worried neither Mr. Rodgers nor Mr. Hammerstein very much that the behavior of wartorn Pacific Islanders and nineteenth-century Siamese might be slightly different from that of Chinese residents of present-day California, where *Flower Drum Song* is fictionally sung. So little, indeed, has it worried them that they have entrusted the principal female roles to Japanese actresses. The assumption, which may be justified, is that the audience will not notice the difference. (Green 625)

Tynan was bold in that he was the first to criticize the show’s addressing of the Chinese American culture upfront, and he was the first critic that seemed unaffected by Rodgers’ and Hammerstein’s pre-performance advertisement strategies. With the civil rights movement in the 1960s, more Americans began to perceive race differently, and when the film version was produced in 1961, it became the subject of criticism for its shallow pseudo-Chinese stereotypes and its white view of the Chinese American culture. Even in the London premiere, most critics and audiences were outraged for the show’s improper

depiction of the Chinese culture. Harold Hobson of *The Christian Science Monitor* and *London Sunday Times*, recalls how the “audience as a whole felt in the piece a displeasing arrogance. It seemed that the Chinese characters were being treated almost as if they were freaks” (“The Arts”). The very tactic that Rodgers and Hammerstein had used to promote the show backfired at them as being labeled a racist musical, and it became impossible to stage the show.

There are several detrimental factors that attribute to *Flower Drum Song* as a racist musical. According to Esther Kim Lee, Umeki had “fulfilled [the audiences] expectations of a “real” Asian woman, one who is coy feminine and polite.” She continues her assertion that this conflation of different “oriental” ethnicities was the norm back in the 1950s, and a clear example would be Umeki and Pat Suzuki on the cover of the *Time* magazine with the cover story pounding on the two Japanese ladies as “the embodiment of the ancient, universal Chinese principles of Yang and Yin—the opposite of active and passive, sun and shadow, fire and water” (21). Bruce McConachie states that the musicals—*South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *Flower Drum Song*—allowed Americans “to cloak their racism as benevolence and their lust for power as entitlement” (397). He disagrees that the Oriental musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, pursued the “universal harmony” as their underlying theme, but asserts that Rodgers and Hammerstein had continued the traditional double standard regarding cast and race in that they allowed a variety of actors to play the “oriental” roles (393). He goes on saying that Rodgers and Hammerstein gave the major characters an outward superficial image, and an inside that the Tonkinese, Siameses, and

American Chinese are just like “us,” so that the audiences believed it was the universal norm.

Building on to Tynan, E. Lee and McConachie, I assert that Rodgers and Hammerstein were ignorant to believe that it was plausible for Asian performers to represent different Asian cultures while it would have caused a problem for Asians to play white roles. As long as they looked Asian and satisfied the white American’s preconception of Asian stereotypes, it did not matter. Actors and actresses who were African American, Hawaiian, Caucasian and Japanese played the Chinese American characters. Their idea of promoting “universal harmony” would hypothetically bring the East and West together. Nonetheless, they were missing out on the cultural significance of Japanese portraying Chinese people. China had been under Japanese imperialistic rule during World War II, and the Chinese people would have considered it offensive to see a Japanese actress walking and talking like a Japanese lady while portraying herself as Chinese.

“Chop Suey,” a song sung by Juanita Hall in Act I Scene 5, was inserted to depict the assimilation of diverse America, and the chorus suddenly breaks into the different American dance styles that were popular during its time and on Broadway, like the square dance and the waltz—the Chinatown community performs Western dance routines, which is emblematic of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s philosophy of “universal harmony” (Rodgers et al. 60-64). It is as if the Chinese characters have assimilated into the American culture and that was their identity. Rather than a depiction of diverse America, “Chop Suey” is an American invention to fit the American taste of

Broadway just as the music was westernized with touches of Asianness. The “oriental” musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein provided these images and gave reassurance to the American people to justify themselves as humanists. Rodgers admits in his statement that his music is “oriental” on the outside but American in the inside; he compared his approach to the Oriental musicals to the way an American painter like Grant Wood might put his impressions of Bangkok on canvas. Rodgers admits that for *King and I*, his score is “oriental” on the outside, but depicted through the eyes of an American artist to appeal to American audiences (Rodgers 74), and that is exactly what he did for *Flower Drum Song*. The show received mixed reviews and became Rodgers and Hammerstein’s most controversial show. While they aimed to fashion the show with postwar concerns in American society, it brought the opposite effect—the creators failed to articulate socio-political context leavened with commercial appeal.

The American musical theatre took a step closer into the mainstream of scholarship beginning of the 1990s. A growing number of biographies, articles, and critical studies have been emerging in the field. In the midst of changes in society wrought by the civil rights movement and classic liberalism, Rodgers and Hammerstein sought to respond with new content, new styles, and new modes of production, and it is indisputable that they played key roles in developing American musical theatre. More scholarly endeavors on how the creators as the R&H brand, changed the dynamics of audience reception in musical theatre need to be evaluated. Through the investigation of the media management of Rodgers and Hammerstein,

critics' reviews, and audience reception, I have tried to situate Rodgers and Hammerstein as a brand of American paternalism for shaping the American audience in a new light to demonstrate the developing interest in multiple directions of American musical theatre scholarship, and I hope to offer a new perspective in the American musical theatre.

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Abstract

R&H Brand: Breeding of American Paternalism and the Inception of *Flower Drum Song*

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Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals of the golden era of Broadway musical theatre have been analyzed for its musical conventions and rich historical context. While recent musical theatre scholarship has investigated *Flower Drum Song*'s musical and socio-political contexts fruitfully, such studies have not reflected sufficiently on the inception of the show and Rodgers and Hammerstein as a brand. This study combines methodologies from musicology, sociology, and performance studies including extensive archival research on how the all-American R&H brand contributed to the genesis of *Flower Drum Song*, and the real story behind why the most American producers of Broadway musical theater came to create an Asian American musical. This essay ultimately demonstrates the inception of *Flower Drum Song*, and how the R&H brand encapsulates American paternalism—as America emerged as the international super power in the late 1950s—to illuminate a new dimension of American Broadway musical theatre.

Key Words

Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, *Flower Drum Song*, musical theatre, Broadway