Western civilizations have a historically complicated relationship with Eastern cultures due to the inherent class struggles that arise from postcolonial conflicts. In his play Madame Butterfly, David Henry Hwang approaches this issue using the romantic relationship of Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat, and Song Liling, a spy for the Chinese government. Under a Marxist lens of literary criticism, the play reveals the influence that socioeconomic conditions have on the ideologies, conversations, and physical spaces that we encounter every day, as well as the constant struggle of negotiating East and West.

Louis Althusser was a French Marxist theoretician who used a less reductive approach to examining the relationship between economics and culture. He and his ideas contributed many new ideas to Marxist criticism, including that of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). Althusser defined ideology as something similar to “a system of representations at the heart of a given ‘society…which makes culture (including literature) a crucial vehicle of the values which underpin the status quo in any society” (Barry 157). In other words, although ideology has a material existence (a song, text, etc.), it is essentially an imaginary representation of an individual’s real relationship to their material conditions; often these ideologies are acted out in the form of rituals, behaviors, and general practices. Individuals generally use ideologies to cope with their existence in an unfair and exploitative society, while the capitalist state and its government uses ideological state apparatuses to mask the individuals’ exploitative relationship with an unequal national economy. Ideology covertly masks our conditions using Althusser’s concept of interpellation, which is somewhat like a ‘call-and-response’ interaction between an individual (an interpellated subject) and an ideology (state apparatus); ideological interpellation can become very complicated because an individual often functions within a competing network of ISAs that both harm and help their condition.

As the play progresses and the characters become more and more involved with each other, they consistently rely on individual ideologies to deal with unfolding events. One instance of this is when Song and Gallimard simultaneously recite “Death with honor/ Is better than life/ Life with dishonor,” which is a line from the death scene of the Madame Butterfly opera that Gallimard observes in the play (15). It’s especially interesting that both Song and Gallimard use this ideology to guide their behavior because it relates to their material conditions in very different ways – though both men are government workers, their socioeconomic class, race, political stance, etc. effects each of them respectively. Gallimard is a French diplomat with ‘postcolonial’ ethnocentric perceptions of foreign cultures, and this condition causes him to romanticize the East. While watching the opera, Gallimard uses this ideology to confirm his stereotypical perspective of the East, because he expects an Asian woman to be devoted, submissive, and self-sacrificing in love. This impacts Gallimard’s sense of trust (and therefore his behaviors) with Butterfly because he never suspects that she’d have a treacherous hidden agenda. Song, however, views this ideological phrase as a representation of the conflict between East and West, because his material existence as a spy for the Chinese government causes him to view the world as a struggle for power and respect. He resultingly uses this ideology to juxtapose East and West and their different cultural approaches to life; Song would rather die with honor than live with dishonor, and he believes that all Western diplomats like Gallimard are leading
dishonorable lives. Because Song is set in opposition to the West, he believes his trickery against Gallimard is honorable; in fact, Song’s ‘death with honor’ ideology runs so deeply that he’ll resort to extreme measures, such as marrying Gallimard, to ensure his success. Both Song and Gallimard use this ideology to justify the material conditions of their own society and to shape their relationships with foreign societies; but their subjective experiences bring them to vastly different conclusions.

In this sense, the state also uses this same ideology to enforce institutional norms and maintain the behavioral status quo; it both perpetuated Western stereotypes like ‘Orientalism’ and reaffirms the punishment for treason. The state imposes this ideology onto its subjects by expressing ideology through public discourse, much like the Madame Butterfly opera that’s described in Hwang’s play. Michael Foucault was another materialist critic who was interested in the fundamentals of socialization among subjects who exist in capitalistic political institutions – he describes the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse in his essay Discipline and Punish, which claims that ‘discourse is not just a way of speaking or writing, but the whole ‘mental set’ and ideology which encloses the members of a given society. It is not singular and monolithic – there is always a multiplicity of discourses – so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in (say) the family as in layers of government’ (Barry 170). Within this system, the distribution of power doesn’t trickle from the top of the social pyramid down to the bottom, but is rather disseminated throughout society. Foucault turns ‘power’ into an ideological strategy which involves the production and distribution of discourse; all oral, written, and visual texts are said to provide its subjects with knowledge about a particular topic, but the public distribution of this ideological ‘knowledge’ then determines how individual subjects will react to the topic in question. Therefore discourse becomes a tool used in the universal quest for power, which is based on the formulation of knowledge.

When Gallimard and Song recite the line “Death with honor/ Is better than life/ Life with dishonor,” they are producing, distributing, and acting upon the ideological knowledge in Puccini’s operatic discourse. Foucault observes that an individual’s interpretation of discursive knowledge is circumstantial and subjective, which is reiterated in Hwang’s play;

Gallimard: You were utterly convincing. It’s the first time –
Song: Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you.
Gallimard: No! I was about to say, it’s the first time I’ve seen the beauty of the story.
Song: Really?
Gallimard: Of her death. It’s a…a pure sacrifice. He’s unworthy, but what can she do? She loves him…so much. It’s a very beautiful story.
Song: Well, yes, to a Westerner.
Gallimard: Excuse me?
Song: It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.
Gallimard: Well, I didn’t quite mean…
Song: Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah! – you find it beautiful.
Gallimard: Yes…well…I see your point…
Song: I will never do Butterfly again, monsieur Gallimard. If you wish to see some real theatre, come to the Peking Opera sometime. Expand your mind.

Song walks offstage.
Gallimard: (to audience) So much for protecting her in my big Western arms. (18)
Cultural and ideological differences exert such a large influence over Song and Gallimard’s interpretations of the opera that the disparity is like that between ‘beautiful’ and ‘tragic.’ The assumed power dynamic of this binary relationship is subverted as soon as Song describes the opera’s story to Gallimard from an Asian subject’s point of view. Song produces an oral discourse about the homecoming queen and the Japanese businessman in accordance with his ideology that Western values are dishonorable, and this oral discourse produces new knowledge about the operatic discourse for Gallimard. Thus Song changes Gallimard’s romanticized ideology about Oriental women and gains power over him in doing so, because Song has successfully disseminated his own subaltern ideology to a new subject. The change in Gallimard’s social expectations is observed shortly after, when he says “so much for protecting her in my big Western arms.” This scene makes it clear that Foucault was correct in saying there’s no top-down distribution of power, because Song’s presumably subordinate social status has no effect on her ability to gain power over Gallimard, his ‘superior.’

Part of the reason why Song is assumed to be Gallimard’s subordinate is because Gallimard first meets him in a setting that reinforces Western ideologies about foreign relationships. Karl Marx’s materialist philosophy claims that our consciousness is determined by our material conditions, and he divides society into ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ – the base references production and labor, whereas the superstructure refers to culture and ideas (art, religion, law, etc.). Marx believes that one class has been exploited by another class in every civilized society throughout human history; he also argued that “the exploitation of one social class by another is seen especially in modern industrial capitalism,” which is a force in both Song and Gallimard’s lives (Barry 151). Though Gallimard watches this version of Puccini’s opera in Beijing, he does so from inside a German ambassador’s house, and he’s part of an audience that’s comprised of other Western diplomats and socialites. Because Song is part of the production of the opera (labor realm) that Gallimard is viewing as art (culture realm), Gallimard is automatically placed in a higher social position along the base-superstructure binary. The architectural structure of Hwang’s setting is one of the material conditions that influence Gallimard’s consciousness because it places him in a position of power over ‘the East,’ thusly confirming his Western ideologies of social dominance.

A significant factor in Hwang’s establishment of this relationship is the fact that “we are now within an elegant diplomat’s residence. Song proceeds to play out an abbreviated death scene. Everyone in the room applauds. Song, shyly, takes her bows. Others in the room rush to congratulate her” (15). The German ambassador’s house becomes a microcosm of the West’s historical ideological oppression of the East – Hwang uses architecture and visibility to represent the disciplinary mechanisms that the West imposes on Asian cultures. Song is placed in the center of the room and is surrounded by an upper-class Western audience; once he’s in the spotlight he begins to put on a performative act for his foreign audience, in accordance with their expectations of him. This performance then leads to his death (cultural domination) which is celebrated by those watching (Western postcolonial forces). Architecture is used to portray the ‘panoptic effect,’ which refers to the state that “maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its ‘discursive practices’ which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic” (Barry 170-1). The panoptic (or “all-seeing”) effect uses the gaze as a mechanism of power to control the behaviors of those who fall under its authoritative watch, much like the West does with subordinate cultures and peoples. Hwang’s physical architectural
setting in this scene puts the focus of the gaze on Song (the East), and the spotlight above her increases the visibility of her performative actions.

Works Cited
