



## Wong, B. D. (b. 1960)

by Claude J. Summers

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The only actor to win the Tony Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Clarence Derwent Award, and the Theater World Award for the same performance, Asian-American actor B. D. Wong came to prominence with his extraordinary performance in the title role of David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988).

While few of his subsequent roles have been as challenging or as celebrated, Wong has since established himself as a talented character actor in film and television, as well as on stage, and as a champion of glbtq causes.

Born Bradley Darrell Wong on October 24, 1960 in San Francisco, Wong is a fourth-generation Chinese-American. He was raised in the San Francisco Bay area. Following high school graduation, he traveled to New York to pursue his dream of becoming an actor.

In New York, he studied acting, accepted dinner theater and summer stock opportunities, appeared in off-Broadway productions and in small television and film roles.

His career did not shift into high gear until he returned to the West Coast as a member of the cast of the Los Angeles production of the Jerry Herman-Harvey Fierstein musical *La Cage aux Folles*. His adeptness at playing a female impersonator prepared him for the lead in *M. Butterfly*.

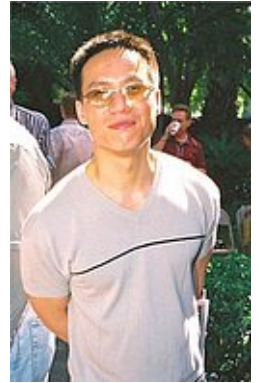
Wong's performance as Song Liling in his Broadway debut was no less than mesmerizing. Playing a male Chinese spy who successfully poses as a woman in a twenty-five year relationship with a French male diplomat, Wong not only convincingly portrayed the fluidity of gender, but also brought to the role a rare humanity and complexity.

He conveyed the racialized stereotype of the Asian man as an emasculated sissy and the Asian woman as a submissive object of desire, while also turning the stereotypes on their heads. In his role as Song, Wong was at once a "Cio-Cio San," or abandoned and exploited lover, and a manipulative spy. He vividly brought to life the themes of sexual and political imperialism and gender fluidity at the heart of Hwang's play.

Wong also gave a highly acclaimed performance as Kico Govantes, the lover of activist Bill Kraus, played by Ian McKellen, in the HBO television production of *And the Band Played On* (1993), the adaptation of Randy Shilts' searing account of the first years of the AIDS epidemic.

He was also memorable in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of gay Singapore playwright Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1995), a play that explores a gay interracial relationship.

Wong co-starred as Margaret Cho's brother in the short-lived ABC situation comedy, *All American Girl* (1994-1995), the first situation comedy on American network television to deal with the Asian-American experience.



B. D. Wong attending a party at the One Institute in Los Angeles in 2004. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele. © Angela Brinskele.

From 1997 until 2002, Wong had a recurring role as a priest in the gritty Australian television series *Oz*, seen on HBO, which was set in a maximum security prison.

In 2002, Wong joined the cast of NBC's *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, playing Dr. George Huang, a forensic psychiatrist. He left the series in July 2011 to join the cast of the short-lived NBC series *Awake*, but returned as a guest star in a *Law and Order: SVU* episode in May 2012.

Wong is a notably versatile actor. Hence, despite the paucity of roles specifically written for Asian Americans, he has kept busy on both the large and small screens.

Wong's film roles have varied from a campy caterer in *The Father of the Bride* (1991) to a geneticist in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and a member of an elite anti-terrorist unit in *Executive Decision* (1996). He was happy to supply the voice of Captain Li Shang in the Disney animated feature *Mulan* (1998) because the story was one Wong had learned as a child from his parents. He repeated the role in the 2004 sequel *Mulan II*.

Wong has also appeared in the off-Broadway production of the Irving Berlin-Moss Hart musical *As Thousands Cheer* (1998) and as Linus in the Broadway revival of the musical *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1999). He has made dozens of guest appearances on television series such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Chicago Hope*, *Sesame Street*, and *The X-Files*.

In 2004, Wong scored in the Roundabout Theatre Company revival of the Stephen Sondheim musical *Pacific Overtures*, about America's 1853 mission to Westernize Japan. In 2008, he starred in the one-man show *Herringbone*, in which he portrayed 11 roles, at the McCarter Theatre at Princeton University. He brought the show to the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego the following year.

Wong directed his first feature length film, *Social Grace*, a comedy about a high-profile interracial romance, which was released in 2005.

Wong has taken seriously his status as one of the few well-known Asian-American actors in Hollywood. He told an interviewer that he is very much connected to his Chinese heritage "but in a very American way." He frequently lectures on diversity issues, particularly on the problem of racial self-hatred and rejection.

Wong also very strongly identifies as a gay man. Hence, he has been a visible presence at AIDS-related charity functions and in gay and lesbian community events, as well as at events sponsored by the Asian Pacific Islander communities.

Wong has appeared at the GLAAD Awards, made promotional spots for the gay and lesbian television newsmagazine *In the Life*, and worked in various ways to further understanding among both Asians and non-Asians, gays and non-gays, about the experience of being both gay and Asian.

In 2003, Wong published a memoir, *Following Foo*, which tells the story of how he and his then-partner, talent agent and television producer Richie Jackson, created their family. They became the fathers of premature twins via a surrogate mother in 1999.

One of the twins, Boaz Dov Wong weighed only 2 pounds, 5 ounces and died quickly. The other twin, Jackson Foo Wong, nicknamed "Chestnut Man," was eight ounces heavier and, after a number of close calls, finally prevailed. The book is an inspirational account of the support he and Jackson received during their ordeal.

Wong and Jackson ended their romantic relationship in 2004. They co-parent their child.

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**Claude J. Summers** is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com). In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.