

Clubhouse: Stories of Empowered Uncanny Anomalies

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Early in the spring of 2021, the New York City-based Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America (YRT) commissioned five playwrights of Chinese heritage^[1] to adapt stories from Pu Songling’s 18th century Chinese classic *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*), one of the most popular and celebrated works in Sinophone^[2] culture. Later that year, these modern one-act play adaptations were performed together in a virtual program called *Clubhouse* or *Liao Zhai*, a name that means “a studio where people chat” and resonates with the social media platform Clubhouse. Producing such a project, YRT intended to build a network for Asian/American^[3] theatre practitioners and to express a shared reaction of concern, anger, and vulnerability to the long history of anti-Asian violence—from both individuals and political administrations—that has resurged since the COVID–19 pandemic. After providing background on YRT, I discuss the emotions we shared in the creative process, and then provide an analysis of the five adaptations from premodern Chinese literature to the contemporary American stage. Ultimately, I argue that the transition of narrative persona in these adaptations is a subversive and empowering gesture: the playwrights of Chinese heritage identify with the anomalies, return to Chinese theatre traditions, and present a mixture of human world and underworld for the ghost characters to take back their subjectivity and to speak their needs.

With *Clubhouse*, YRT hoped to continue their mission of developing and strengthening a supportive network among Asian/American theatre artists. Founded by Sister Joanna Chan in 1992, YRT has been a “welcoming home” for newly arrived artists, “supporting them to launch their professional careers in NYC.”^[4] In Chan’s words, theatre should be a tool to “promote social well-being in the community.”^[5] Under her leadership, YRT also staged important productions such as the world premiere of *Between Life and Death* by Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian. The company’s social mission continued after Chongren Fan (as artistic director) and Sally Shen (as executive director) took over in 2017. Their works embrace the power of theatre as a live and unmediated public venue, to bond and serve the Asian immigrant community of New York City through providing cultural education, promoting diverse cultural values, and discussing current social issues from the perspective of Asian immigrants. When discussing whom to commission for the *Clubhouse* project, YRT “want[s] to work with writers who are bilingual and US-based, writers who are from our generation and share the same cultural upbringing (Chinese heritage), and writers who are genuinely interested about the concept.”^[6] In the commission offer, the theatre wrote: “After a year of total isolation, grief of loss, and an acute yearning for human connection, we hope this program will bring healing powers to everyone.”^[7] At our first roundtable on March 14, 2021, the “acute yearning for human connection” was satisfied as the nine team members gathered from all over the United States via Zoom, including the producer Sally Shen; the director Chongren Fan; five playwrights Stefani Kuo, Yilong Liu, Livian Yeh, Minghao Tu, and Han Tang; cultural consultant Xiaoyi Huang; and me, the dramaturg. Besides discussing the context of *Strange Tales* and adaptation possibilities, we were excited about this new community with similar expatriate experiences: all of us were born and raised in mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan and later came to study and stay in the US as theatre professionals. At the end of our first meeting, we were awash in smiles: our longing to find

and fortify a community of newly transplanted theatre practitioners had been fulfilled.

Two days later, the traumatic mass shooting in Atlanta targeting Asian women brought our collective joy into “a lot of emotions—fear, anger, frustration, pain, and possibly, confusion.”^[8] What was the most painful, however, was our somewhat unsurprised reaction: based on all the harmful stereotypes of Asians especially with racial fetishization, we knew that this tragedy was one additional note in the long history of racist violence in the United States. Early evidence includes the Page Act of 1875, which “banned the importation of Asian Women, [being] feared to be engaging in prostitution in the country, whether they were or not.”^[9] Throughout the years, the images of “the hypersexual but docile Asian woman really took hold in America.”^[10]

These emotions and histories pervaded our plays. Among the five works, Han Tang’s dramatic poem *Ghost Story* takes on an explicit point of view from the female ghosts:

A Ghostly existence

Called upon for necessity and ignored in presence

We were traded, used, raped and killed, and denied records

[...]

Sexualized by men, serving their muses, wallflowers, toys

Sprinkled in their stories as garnishes

And blamed for their sins and evils.^[11]

Juxtaposing the ghost’s and Asian American women’s identities, Tang articulates the fetishized stereotypes cast upon them and the suffering they have experienced.

Sharing a similar sense of restless anger and helpless vulnerability, Stefani Kuo’s play *my dead husband bought a gun and came for me today* starts with an Asian woman who just returned from her husband’s funeral. While listening to the mourning and crying in a self-help group full of recently widowed women, she hears a gun click; her late husband brought a gun and came to find her. At the end of the play, the audience learns that the narrative persona was the victim of gendered anti-Asian violence—*another* act of gendered anti-Asian violence. As stated above, this should never be examined as an isolated incident—it is one of the many cases in which Asian women are seen as a “temptation [that] leads to murder, [...] because of the gendered racialization of Asian women as villainous temptresses, a paradoxical ‘controlling image’ that renders them sexually desirable [and] a threat to the social order and thereby expendable.”^[12]

Livian Yeh’s piece *Stacy in the States* pushes the notion of the strange into thrilling horror. Pu Songling’s original tale is a young scholar’s bildungsroman of how he eventually passes the imperial-level civic exams with a fox-fairy’s assistance. Yeh turns the beautiful fox-fairy into Stacy, a young girl from Taiwan, who is an impeccable housewife of a seemingly perfect woman and who also works as a social

media influencer, seeing her followers as her “family” (“because I have no family in the States”[\[13\]](#)). But her relationship is full of manipulation and betrayal, and the episode ends with Stacy live-streaming a cooking show in which her hands and face are covered with her husband’s blood.

Yilong Liu’s piece *Do You Still H8 Me* adapts Pu Songling’s *The Forty Strings of Cash*. A newborn child collects money that his father owed him in the previous life, and the child dies as soon as the debt is cleared. Liu focuses on the complex generational relationship, presenting a pregnant Molly, whose unborn baby is her reincarnated mother. Molly hires a psychic for an online exorcism, during which her mother’s spirit talks in Molly’s body.

Day 364. The Scaled Boy by Minghao Tu extends this motif of identity transformation to an extreme. For the entire play, the scaled boy suffers from a strange skin disease and is therefore tightly covered in black fabric from head to toe. He has been painting a perfect skin for himself, hoping to be freed from his disease and pain once he puts on the new skin.

Coincidentally, each contemporary playwright switched the narrative persona from the original male narrator in the 18th century stories to the “exotic others,” i.e. the uncanny anomalies: fox fairies, ghosts, and immortals—reanimated corpses and reincarnated spirits. I interpret this artistic choice as the creators exploring their Asian/American expatriate identity in the US akin to the anomalies in Pu Songling’s original text, the images of Asian/Americans—from characters to casts—are often presented on the American stage as invisible or passive objects, constantly being gazed at, manipulated, and consumed. Angela Pao asks in a review of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2012 production of *The Orphan of Zhao*, a production that triggered backlash over intercultural adaptations and yellowface: “But why is that, whether on stage or in society, East Asians as an ethnic minority are considered uniquely qualified to play their parts silently and make their contributions invisibly? Why should they haunt the peripheries as ghosts rather than occupy center stage as living, speaking human beings?”[\[14\]](#) Concurrently, the ghosts in Chinese culture and Asian/Americans in the racist ideology of yellow peril have terrifying powers gained from the underworld: immortality, sexual seductiveness, and the ability to disguise. Therefore, the transition of narrative persona in all five episodes of *Clubhouse* is a subversive and empowering gesture: by identifying with the anomalies of Chinese theatre traditions, the narrators and expatriate playwrights reclaim their power in both this supernatural world and the anti-Asian world of the US.

While the depictions of anomalies in Chinese literature suggest fear of the unknown underworld, ghost figures in classical Chinese theatre always take the center stage, appearing in a solid form no different from that of living human beings. Having been a popular subject matter in Chinese literary history, the anomalies in the specific genre called *zhi guai* (literally meaning “records of anomalies”) often cater to a desire for exotic novelty. As Robert Ford Campany puts it in *Strange Writing*, “anomaly is inherently a matter of the discrimination of kinds or domains of objects, beings or states, and of the boundaries between them. On the face of it, the anomalous is that which is taken by an observer or speaker as crossing some boundary.”[\[15\]](#) The English word “strange” can refer to three related Chinese words, *guai*, *yi*, and *qi*.[\[16\]](#) When the YRT artists translated *yi* in Pu Songling’s work to “strange” in English, this word positioned the “anomalies” as a discriminated-against other who resides outside of a social *normality*. These dynamics of literally and metaphorically estranging Asian/Americans reflect anti-Asian racism and representation on the American stage. Asian people are often portrayed as ghosts and fantasy figures—being “othered” and excluded from the reality and normality of American society. Figured as pollutants, as the “yellow peril,” they wield threatening powers. They constitute both an “abjective

matter”—in the words of Julia Kristeva and Karen Shimakawa—as well as an exotic other.^[17]

In contrast to Orientalist images, the Chinese classical stage granted anomalies subjectivity and certainty. They usually have clear purposes for remaining in the human world after death, either to seek social justice (as in *Snow in Midsummer*) or to continue a forbidden true-love relationship (as in *The Peony Pavilion*). Moreover, from costume to movement, these anomalies look no different from other human characters. They can even make their request at court, the very place that requires legitimacy in identity. Similar to Jessica Nakamura’s analysis of ghosts and the underworld in noh theatre, the Chinese classical stage “brings the spirit or nonhuman into visibility, [...] offers a mode of recognizing the nonhuman [...], includ[ing] listening to its perspective and needs.”^[18] The playwrights of *Clubhouse* returned to traditional Chinese theatre, identified themselves with the anomalies, and empowered the anomalies to take back their subjectivity as storytellers, thus making their needs visible. As Han Tang wrote, “From ancient cultures we came / Exuding wisdom and Grace / Landing in the West / Announcing our existence / Claiming our space our rights our legacy.”^[19]

Although this Chinese tradition of anomalies affirms the identities of these characters and, by extension, the expatriate playwrights, the authors do not have firm footholds in either their Sinophone culture of origin or the American cultural space in which they live. For all five playwrights, the ambiguous space between these two sides is marked by feelings of detachment and disconnection. In *Do You H8 Me*, Molly has been cut off from her family of origin for years. In both *Stacy in the States* and *my dead husband bought a gun and came for me today*, communities exist only on social media platforms and are thus abstract and virtual. Due to the plays being solo pieces performed online with modest filming resources, there was not enough material support to present homes with crowds at locales overseas realistically. Another issue is that these projects were developed in reaction to anti-Asian violence, and hence, their motifs ascribe more weight to identity exploration and self-reflection.

Finally, I would like to propose an additional factor that shaped these adaptations toward uncanny anomalies: artists of Chinese heritage tend to avoid explicit portrayals of their culture because of rising Sinophobia in the States. As a dramaturg and a scholar from China, I have noticed that often, when I compose creative or scholarly work about my homeland, I seek an “appropriate” positionality. I constantly wonder how I can voice my real Chinese experience without worrying that I will be accused of being “brain-washed” when my story presents a positive image of China. When my work critiques Chinese policies and systems, I worry that it will be decontextualized, misinterpreted, and manipulated into another superficial spectacle of “yellow peril.” I believe this struggle and everlasting concern are quite common among Chinese scholars and artists.

But we did not have to face such concerns and struggles during the creation of *Clubhouse*. Because of our similar expatriate identity, we were free from self-censorship. It was indeed a rare experience that we used Mandarin, our mother tongue, as our primary language despite the professional environment in the US.^[20] It was also rare for me as a dramaturg to be free from the laborious work of avoiding misrepresentation and misinterpretation. This made our *Clubhouse* experience a treasured one. Bonding through theatre has always been a mission of the YRT. It is a compelling political act in our sociopolitical moment. It freed us—the expatriates, the anomalies, the strange racial others—to collectively take back our subjectivity and to speak, defend, and celebrate ourselves on the American stage.

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[1] “Writers of Chinese heritage” is the expression that our production team developed after careful consideration, intended to focus on the culture shared by all participants.

[2] The term “Sinophone” in this essay refers to “Chinese/Sinitic Language” in linguistic practice and literature tradition, regardless of the political mapping as suggested in Shu-mei Shih’s critique, which casts sinophone literature as the writing in “Sinistic-language communities and their expressions [...] on the margins of nations and nationalness in the internal colonies and other minority communities in China as well as outside it” because “present day China largely inherited and consolidated in a continuous colonial project.” See Shih Shu-mei, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (May 2011): 709-718. This article does not intend to overlook existing geo-political tensions but emphasizes a collectivity with a group of Asian/Americans out of a shared literary cannon and a popular cultural phenomenon.

[3] Inspired by Dylan Rodríguez’s article, I use the term “Asian/American” to refer to people racialized as “Asian” in the US. I avoid using terms such as new immigrant or first-generation because they imply residency, political, and national identity statuses that I do not intend. I believe our shared intercultural and diasporic experiences are more important than our political identities (even though permanent residency and citizenship are crucial to most new expatriating artists). See Dylan Rodríguez, “The ‘Asian Exception’ and the Scramble for Legibility: Toward an Abolitionist Approach to Anti-Asian Violence,” *Society & Space*, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-asian-exception-and-the-scramble-for-legibility-toward-an-abolitionist-approach-to-anti-asian-violence>.

[4] “Our Story — Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America.” Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America, <https://www.yzrep.org/our-story> (accessed 9 November 2021).

[5] Esther K. Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104, 110.

[6] Sally Shen, interview by author, email, 24 March 2022.

[7] Sally Shen and Chongren Fan, Email message to commissioned writers, 1 March 2021.

[8] Chongren Fan and Sally Shen, Email message to the production team, 19 March 2021.

[9] Rachel Ramirez, “The History of Fetishizing Asian Women,” *Vox*, last modified 19 March 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22338807/asian-fetish-racism-atlanta-shooting>.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Han Tang, *Ghost Stories*, in *Clubhouse*, dir. Chongren Fan, Yangtze Repertory Theatre, 2021.

[12] Maria C. Hwang and Rhacel S. Parreñas, “The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Tempresses.” *Gender & Society* 35, no. 4 (2021), 567-576. Concept of “controlling image” is cited from Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

[13] Livian Yeh, *Stacy in the States* in *Clubhouse*, dir. Chongren Fan, Yangtze Repertory Theatre, 2021.

[14] Angela Pao, “The Red and the Purple: Reflections on the Intercultural Imagination and Multicultural Casting,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24, no. 4 (2014): 467-474.

[15] Robert F. Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 2.

[16] In Chinese: *guai??yi??qi?*.

[17] See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de L'horreur (English)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[18] Jessica Nakamura, “Against the Flows of Theory: Expanding the Ghost with Japanese No,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 151-169.

[19] Han Tang, *Ghost Stories*, in *Clubhouse*, dir. Chongren Fan, Yangtze Repertory Theatre, 2021.

[20] Interestingly, there were moments when we couldn't find the correct word in Chinese, and so we had to switch to English. Our expatriate identity is confirmed in bilingual conversations: we fluently speak Mandarin in everyday settings, while English as our professional language is also integral to our experience.

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