

‘The great Chinese takeaway’: the strange case of absent Orientalism in contemporary British playwriting

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‘The Great Chinese Takeaway’: The Strange Case of Absent Orientalism in Contemporary British Playwriting.

This article is one with modest ambitions. It began with the intention of bringing to light an existing narrative that few had heard. However, I now believe that the narrative has yet to be created because it barely exists. As such, this article has become more a series of preliminary observations that seek to draw attention to a peculiar absence – an absence that runs silently yet troublingly throughout the now familiar historical narratives of post-war British theatre.

There is a general consensus that the real achievement of the new drama after 1956 was to give voice to disenfranchised groups: from the working-class voices that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to the feminist and queer voices of the 1970s and 1980s, the often-declared project was to challenge the mono-cultural view of British life. If the angry young men (and women) achieved anything, it was to signify that new voices existed beyond the drawing rooms and French windows of the London stage and that a previously untapped audience existed for what was called ‘the new drama.’

While several of the voices being heard for the first time came from the indigenous working class, its newest arrivals – namely the experiences of migrant communities – were to become over time incorporated into the new writing being produced by British theatre. The first evidence of this can be found in the so-called ‘Windrush Generation’ from the Caribbean after 1947. From Errol John’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which premièred at the Royal Court in 1958, there has been a continuous (if at times uneven and muted) presence on stage of black British voices. The same has also been true of Asian

immigration – be it the economic migrants from Pakistan after the Second World War or those fleeing persecution such as the Kenyan and Ugandan Asians who came to Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly, by the time that Tara Arts was set up in 1977 British Asian dramatists had become a small but significant presence.

However, the absence I want to discuss arises from a community whose existence barely registers on British life. This is despite being a continuous presence since the eighteenth century, and where presently it represents the third largest ethnic community in the UK. I refer to the group termed *British Born Chinese* (or *BBC*). At present there are an estimated 500,000 BBC living in the UK, who make up just under 1% of its overall population. Between 2001 and 2003, people of Chinese origin were also the fastest growing migrant group in the UK.

Frustrated at the general lack of writing on the subject I emailed a number of prominent figures in British theatre for advice. One of these was the playwright David Edgar, who responded by having “absolutely no idea.”¹ A similar response came from the literary agent Mel Kenyon at Casarotto-Ramsay, who have represented (and continue to represent) some of the most influential British playwrights since the 1950s. Rather than being disheartened, this led me on to consider another approach. Instead of searching for a tradition that did not seem to exist, I now started to think about reasons why such a collective invisibility within British culture might have come about. David Parker sardonically notes in his book *Through Different Eyes* – one of the few studies of the BBC community – that “it is an indictment of British scholarship and race relations politics that perhaps the best way to trace the pattern of post-war Chinese settlement

¹ Email from David Edgar to author, 9 June 2008.

would be [to] track the listings of Chinese restaurants in *The Good Food Guide*” (Parker 62). The academic discipline of Cultural Studies has been similarly myopic, whereby even a seminal article such as Stuart Hall’s “New Ethnicities” (1991) fails to make any reference to the Chinese community. Even more recently, the BBC documentary series *7 Up 2000* that charts the lives of new Britains born in the new millennium, on the one hand earnestly assembled a group of young children to reflect the diversity of the British Isles (even to the point of including a recent migrant family from Eastern Europe), yet singularly failed to include anyone from the Chinese community.

This cultural blindness, while worrying, is partly explained by a number of factors. One of these concerns patterns of migration, whereby there has never been a major influx of Chinese at specific times; whereas mass immigration, say by the Afro-Caribbean community, has marked out distinctive presences in areas such as Notting Hill and Brixton in London, the Chinese community has always been more disparate – settling first around major ports such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff and then moving out further to smaller provincial towns. The nearest the Chinese community ever gets to making itself a visible presence is in the establishment of so-called ‘China Towns’ in major cities such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Yet their existence is in some respects a purely artificial contrivance, more often than not created, it would seem, through the commercial interests of city councils and the Chinese business community rather than any pattern of natural settlement.

Mike Phillips gives some indication of this missing sense of cohesion in the Chinese community by his observation that post-war black British identity has come out of what he calls “a number of historical crises” (27) such as the Notting Hill riots in 1958 and the

murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. Disturbing as such events are, paradoxically they have created some sense of cohesion and shared identity amongst the black community.² Yet, whereas BBC have also experienced racism, this has never become acknowledged as a national event through the media by which their presence could become heightened to the wider British populace.

The history of the British Empire comes into play, too. With the notable exception of Hong Kong, the BBC population is not drawn from its former colonies. This has particularly been the case with Chinese migration since the 1990s, where populations not exclusively drawn from Southern China (where historically the British had a long-established presence) have settled in the UK. Whereas the sense of ‘otherness’ in post-war Afro-Caribbean and Asian diasporas was mitigated by a shared cultural relationship between their homeland, the ‘Mother Country’ and their identities as colonized subjects, such distinctions are missing from BBC communities. This perhaps explains why other black and Asian writers have not only managed to access and utilize British theatre far sooner: while grossly simplifying matters, such groups were perhaps already conversant with its traditions. By contrast, Chinese theatre is thus twice removed from British sensibilities, not only by virtue of its concentration on spectacle and physical movement dominating narrative, but narrative itself being derived from a completely different mythic base.

Several useful examples that serve to illustrate some of these issues come from Yellow Earth’s recent production, *Running the Silk Road* (2008). Established in 1995, Yellow Earth provides an outlet for South-East Asian performance in the UK. *Running the Silk*

² The murder of Stephen Lawrence was also the subject for the play (and later television adaptation) *The Colour of Justice* (1999), while debates about black youth and knife crime informed Debbie Tucker Green’s *Random* (2008).

Road, a play about a group of friends who travel to the Olympics via the Silk Road, undertook a successful national tour, culminating in performances at London's Barbican. The promotional flyer describes the play as a coming together of a contemporary story with "magical and timeless myths performed using the spectacularly acrobatic, whirling excitement that is the Beijing Opera Theatre."³

The writer of *Running the Silk Road* is Paul Sirret, a non-Chinese writer. While such attention to ethnic origin might sound uncomfortably essentialist, for the purposes of this article it becomes significant when one considers that Yellow Earth decided to commission Sirrett for a project in which traditional Chinese theatre plays such an integral part. It also serves to illustrate the dearth of BBC dramatists in the UK.

In an interview I conducted in June 2008 with David Tshe Ka-Shing, at the time Yellow Earth's Artistic Director, he recounted an interesting story of a bid made to the National Lottery to fund *Running the Silk Road* that serves to illustrate how much of the unfamiliar is excluded from British culture. Part of Yellow Earth's rationale for financial assistance came from their plan to lead education workshops in schools based around the Chinese myths that are explored in the play. The bid was finally rejected by the National Lottery on the grounds that Chinese myths do not constitute any part of British life. With Greek myth forming the basis of western theatre, it would have been interesting to see if Yellow Earth would have met with a similar response if an application had been made with the *Oresteia* as its subject.

Still the most well known example of a writer attempting to explore the experiences of the Chinese in Britain is Timothy Mo's novel *Sour Sweet* (1982), yet this example also reveals something significant in the corresponding failure to find any such comparative

³ Yellow Earth, *Running the Silk Road*. Promotional flyer, 2008.

work in theatre. While Elaine Yee Lin Ho comments that “for many readers in Britain the novel was a way into a world or a parallel space which they vaguely knew existed but was as alien as the distant colony of Hong Kong itself” (Ho 50), the irony is that Mo himself is a writer whose experience of Britain comes from a dual remove: born in Hong Kong, his experience of Britishness is also highly selective. Not only does Mo acknowledge, “I know nothing about Chinese culture” and “I’m a Brit,” but his identity itself needs to be qualified by pointing out that he belongs somewhere within a background that includes not only being mixed race, but spending his first ten years growing up as a colonial subject in Hong Kong, followed by a quintessentially privileged English establishment upbringing by way of public school and Oxford University. Yet despite all this, *Sour Sweet* has somehow become a definitive narrative for what Peter Lewis, writing in 1982, saw as articulating “modern England and a largely self-contained and alien world functioning within it” (Lewis 21).

In British theatre, the voice of the anglicized Chinese writer of colonial background dominating over BBC voices is even more commonplace. For example, initiatives set up by Yellow Earth such as *Yellow Ink* and *Yellow Voices*, which have sought to promote British-born South-East Asian writers, have found singularly little success in finding BBC dramatists. Instead, a number of those taking advantage of these awards have come from writers such as Simon Wu and Liya Wu, who are Hong Kong and Taiwanese-born respectively: their plays mainly reflect and draw upon a relationship to their homeland rather than any experience of living in Britain. Now, while there is nothing worse than a commentator grumbling about the work people *should* be writing, even Ben Yeogh, the one BBC writer that *Yellow Voices* has so far managed to find, while British-born like

Timothy Mo, also comes from a similarly narrow anglicized background: educated at Westminster School, Cambridge and Harvard. And thus Yeogh is also far removed from the experiences of most BBC Chinese. Moreover, Yeogh's work to date has shown little evidence of wanting to articulate his British/Chinese identity. For instance, with the exception of his play *Yellow Gentleman* (2006), which looks in part at its central protagonist's experiences in London as a young man, Yeogh's work so far has ranged from the self-explanatory *Lost in Peru* (2006) to his recent adaptation of a fourteenth-century Japanese Noh play *Nakamitsu* (2007) at the Gate Theatre.

This last, somewhat arbitrary use of a Chinese writer to translate a Japanese drama also says something about the random interchangeability in which South East Asian theatre is treated in Britain. To some extent, *Yellow Earth* has itself become caught up in this vague and amorphous sense of 'Asianness' by aligning itself to a very broad range of performers: for example, its current group of writers who form the Yellow Voices scheme includes the Japanese performance artist Kauko Hohki. Therefore, while this policy is to be welcomed in terms of broadly promoting South East Asian drama, the work produced by BBC playwrights becomes less prioritized as a consequence.

Towards the end of my interview with David Tshe Ka-Shing, the issue of institutional racism was brought up. Tshe Ka-Shing cited the 2001 adaptation of the Young Vic's *Monkey! A Tale from China*, where despite a few tokenistic Chinese actors playing minor roles, the production employed a Caucasian cast, writer (Colin Teevan) and director (Mick Gordon). Tshe Ka-Shing also made mention of the same company's recent production of Brecht's *The Good Soul of Szechuan* (2008), where despite giving it a Chinese setting, its director and cast again were all non-Chinese: adding insult to injury

was the decision for its actors to depict Chinese characters. This ‘yellowing up’ prompted one BBC, Zhang Jin Yao, to write on the *This is London* website:

Okay, it is now the 21st Century and the Young Vic still insists on using white performers to play Chinese despite the numbers of talented British East Asian performers who do not get casting consideration due to institutional racism, snobbery and general low regard. I’m all for colourless casting but the playing stage is simply not level in this respect. [...] If these plays were based on Black or South Asian characters I doubt that the Young Vic would be so keen to minstrel up actors of the wrong ethnicity. It would at least use mixed-race performers to ‘appease’ both sides of the argument. [...] No wonder mainstream theatre remains the preserve of white middle class-minded people (Yao)

Productions such as *Monkey! A Tale from China* also give a discernable feeling that British theatre’s concerns lie firmly in a one-way traffic towards the East rather than an interest in the experiences of its own indigenous Chinese community. While theatre seems happy to accommodate productions such as *Running the Silk Road*, or adaptations of classical and popular novels such as *Wild Swans*, this work still operates in almost neo-colonialist terms whereby China is still seen as somehow ‘mysterious’ and ‘exotic.’

Conversely, it is perhaps too easy to blame theatre institutions in the UK for being narrow and parochial in their representation of the Chinese community. If British theatre has failed to engage in a conversation with its third largest ethnic community, then equally a similar neglect has emerged from the Chinese side. David Tshe Ka-Shing sees this coming about through a cultural trait of deference to authority resulting in figures

from the BBC community not coming forward to establish their presence in terms of bidding for arts funding.

However, there are also encouraging signs that things are beginning to change and that a small number of BBC and expatriate writers are beginning to emerge. The success of Xiaolu Guo's novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), which charts the experiences of a young Chinese migrant woman in London, as well as recent collaborations between Yellow Earth and the Soho Theatre in London are evidence that literary agents and theatres are now slowly realizing the artistic potential of the Chinese in Britain.

Yet at the same time, I cannot help thinking that somehow an important narrative has been irretrievably lost through the collective failure of British theatre and the Chinese community to connect with each other. Writing in the 1997 collection *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain*, James Watson predicted that a new Anglo-Chinese generation would emerge with a completely different identity from their parents. Whereas these changes in outlook have found themselves written onto the stage by black playwrights, from the differences between first and second generations in Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking* (1988), to current debates in the black community expressed in debbie tucker green's *Random* (2008), such generational differences in the BBC community have singularly failed to be articulated on stage. If Stuart Hall's assertion that "identity is formed at that point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history" (Hall 44) **one could argue that** such stories from the BBC community are missing, at least in terms of dissemination through theatre writing. Whether this has been self-willed by the BBC's failure to assimilate or whether

institutions such as British theatre have failed to recognize this particular community it is difficult to say; yet the persistence of this singularly glaring absence at the turn of the second millennial decade is both perplexing and of concern for the BBC community and theatres such as the Royal Court, Birmingham's Repertory Theatre or the Manchester Royal Exchange that purport to represent the spectrum of British experience.

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