

Early spring of 2021, Yangtze Repertory Theatre, a nonprofit theatre company based in New York City commissioned five playwrights to co-create a virtual program on adapted stories from the 18th century Chinese classic *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling. I joined the team later as a dramaturg, helping these writers develop their new plays. In the final production version, all five plays coincidentally switched the narrative persona from male villagers or scholars from Pu Songling’s original stories to uncanny anomalies—the fox fairies, ghosts, immortals, etc. The original stories are told by a male narrator, while in this contemporary adaptation, playwrights have removed the male narrator, allowing the story to unfold the point of view of the anomalies. I take this artistic choice of switching narrative persona as the creators’ exploration of ambiguous expatriate identities, especially social positionalities as newly-transcultural racial minorities in the U.S. At the same time, this transition of narrative persona is also by itself a political empowering gesture that enables subaltern’s active self-representational talking. In this article, my focus spotlights on both dramatic literature analysis on these finalized projects and my own practice in the producing process, aiming to unfold the significance in the Yangtze Repertory Theatre’s peculiar perspective as “cultural transplants”¹ provided in *Clubhouse* (dir. Chongren Fan, 2021), a series of online performances.

The 18th century Chinese classic *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*) is one of the most popular and celebrated works. Literally translates “recording the strangeness in my studio”, this collection of over four hundred stories is fulfilled with beings of uncanny: freaks, ghosts, fairies and divinities, immortals and talking-deceased, so on and so forth. Most stories are constructed in story-telling fashion, one narrator for each story, who claims his observation is factual. Because this work is compiled by stories Pu Songling collected based on his everyday conversation, he sometimes identifies the narrators, providing their names and their relationships as acquaintances or relatives. In most of the stories, narrators are male commoners like scholars and villagers, while the strange factor being female anomalies such as ghosts and fox-fairies that transform into human form.

Being intrigued by the notion in Pu Songling’s work of collectively telling strange tales in a studio, we named our 2021 production *clubhouse*, with a translated referent of “*Liao Zhai*” that literally means “a studio where people chat”. Additionally, We want to make connections to the heated social media platform “clubhouse” during the pandemic, indicating the social gathering and virtue nature of our production. March 14 was our first gathering. Before this roundtable, five playwrights were commissioned to adapt some from *Strange Tales*’s over four hundred stories into five short, solo-performing plays. In the original email of commission offer it writes: “After a year of total isolation, grieve of loss, and an acute yearning for human connection, we hope this program will bring healing powers to everyone”². At the roundtable, this “acute yearning human connection” was fulfilled—virtually though—all nine of us early-creative-stage team members of *Clubhouse* gathered from all over the United States via zoom.

Besides exchanging cultural and historical significance of *Strange Tales* and how to develop the production, we were more excited about this community what this project bonded: we are all theatre practitioners with similar expatriating experiences between our homelands and the U.S.: most of us were born and raised in Sinophone regions such as Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, before we came to study in the U.S, and thereafter stayed as theatre

¹ In Yangtze Repertory Theatre’s “Core Values”, in “Our Mission — Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America.” Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America. Accessed November 9, 2021. <https://www.yzrep.org/our-mission>.

² Shen, Sally and Fan, Chongren. Email message to commissioned writers. March 1, 2021

Comment [MB1]: Paragraph 1: Introduction to the Yangtze Repertory theater and the project of modernizing stories from the 18th century Chinese classic *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.

Thesis: The creators explore ambiguous expatriate identities by switching the narrative persona from the original male narrator to the anomaly. The transition is a politically empowering gesture that enables the subaltern to actively self-represent.

Commentary on summary: Would it work better if the first paragraph introduced the Yangtze Repertory theater and then the second acted as the thesis paragraph?

Comment [MB2]: Paragraph 2: Background on *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* — how original stories are constructed, what they are about, etc.

Commentary on summary: No governing argument is being made in this paragraph.

Comment [MB3]: Paragraph 3: Connecting *Strange Stories* to today in order to respond to the need for human connection that the pandemic had engendered and overall, investigate the impact of COVID. In addition, the organizers wanted to respond to the heated discussion over the social media platform “Clubhouse.”

Commentary on summary: A claim about this performance needs to be made in the topic sentence of the first paragraph in which it is discussed.

professionals. We shared similar visions, concerns and confusions being the first generation transplants, especially while deliberating on how *Liao Zhai's* contemporary relevance to our shared solitary experience during COVID 19: on top of the helpless feeling of being alone in this country when all our extended families live on the other side of the Pacific, we also constantly dealt with the fear and frustration out of being precautious of how we may get mistreated in public because of the rising xenophobic (Sinophobic in particular) incitement. At the end of that meeting, we were bathed in smiles full of joy and excitement: we felt our longing for finding and/or building a community of new transplants' theatre practitioners was finally fulfilled, at least to certain extent.

Although only two days later, on March 16, the traumatic mass shooting in Atlanta targeting Asian women at spas and massage parlors brought our collective joy into shock with “a lot of emotions—fear, anger, frustration, pain, and possibly, confusion”³, quoted Chongren Fan’s email responding to this event. What is odder and even more painful, is our somewhat non-shocking reaction after such incidents: base on all the harmful stereotypes of Asian, especially of Asian women, we nonetheless knew this is just one additional note onto the continuous intractable history of racial violence.

In a few weeks, we received the first drafts from our playwrights, where the feelings of “fear, anger, frustration, pain and confusion”⁴ pervaded incisively. These five episodes share similar motifs with stories in Pu’s *Strange Tales*: on love and death, sexuality, fertility and illness; but their narrative perspectives are quite distinctive. Unlike the male scholars and villagers in *Strange Tales*, the five episodes in *Clubhouse* are told by the “exotic others” in the original cannon: the fox-fairies (in *Stacy in the States*), the ghosts (in *Ghost Story* and *Day 364. The Scaled Boy*), and the already deceased person (in *my dead husband bought a gun and came for me today* and *Do You Still H8 Me*).

Among the five works, Han Tang’s dramatic poem *Ghost Story* takes on a very explicit point of view from the female ghost’s perspective—:

“A Ghostly existence,
Called upon for necessity and ignored in presence
We were traded, used, raped and killed, and denied records
From daughters, mothers, sisters, and wives
We are boxed into the ideal lady of the evening
Sexualized by men, serving their muses, wallflowers, toys
Sprinkled in their stories as garnishes
And blamed for their sins and evils”⁵

Stefani Kuo’s play *my dead husband bought a gun and came for me today* shares the restless anger yet helpless vulnerability of colored identity. The play starts with an Asian woman just came back from her husband’s funeral. She took off all her clothes and rested in bed while listening to the mourning and crying in a self-helping group full of recently widowed women on the social media platform clubhouse, when she heard a gun click—her late husband brought a gun and came find her. It turned out in the end that she, the narrative persona, was indeed the one being killed in a racial hate crime. Her husband was unable to protect her while she was raped and then murdered, so he brought a gun to her funeral even after she is dead, hoping to protect other people like her if this ever happened again.

³ Fan, Chongren and Shen, Sally. Email message to the production team. Mar. 18, 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Han Tang. *Ghost Stories*. In theatre performance *Clubhouse*, 2021.

Comment [MB4]: Paragraph 4: Background on playwrights adapting the stories into a play, background on production team — everyone is from a Sinophone country with similar experiences of being “stranded” in a foreign country during the pandemic and sharing similar frustrations, confusions, and visions of the future.

Commentary on summary: Switch the order of this and the preceding paragraph (paragraph #3) so that all background information is grouped together. Another way to think about this restructuring choice: the author is moving from more general to more specific information.

Comment [MB5]: Paragraph 5: Impact on the work of the mass shooting in Atlanta targeting Asian women at spas.

Comment [MB6]: Paragraph 6: The first drafts all displayed feelings of fear, anger, frustration, pain and confusion and shared similar motifs with the original including love and death, sexuality, fertility and illness; but their narrative perspectives are quite distinctive.

Commentary on summary: Need more here on the themes that bind the plays together: strangeness, etc.

Comment [MB7]: Paragraph 7: First play, *Ghost Story*, unravels the female ghost’s perspective.

Comment on summary: The author never identified the female ghost’s perspective in the paragraph. And there is no summary or analysis of the play like in the subsequent paragraphs.

Comment [MB8]: Paragraph 8: Summary of *My dead husband*.

Comment on summary: Could use a little bit of analysis here. Like in some of the subsequent paragraphs — should just mention the presence of some of the overarching themes of the project.

Livian Ye's piece *Stacy in the States* pushes the notion of strange into horror and thriller. Pu Songling's original tale is a young scholar's Bildungsroman, presenting how he works hard and eventually passes the imperial-level civic exams with a fox-fairy's assistance. Ye makes the beautiful fox-fairy into Stacy, a young girl that moved from Taiwan, falls in love with a seemingly perfect man in the States. Besides being an impeccable housewife, she is also a vlogger. She addresses her followers as family ("because I have no family in the States"), and talks to them about every single detail in her life. But her life is not as shiny as it looks. When her real abusive relationship with manipulation and betrayal finally falls apart, this episode ends with Stacy's live streaming show—while her husband's blood covering her hands and face.

Yilong Liu's piece *Do You Still H8 Me* adapts from strange story *The Forty Strings of Cash*, which a newborn child collects money that his father owed him in his previous life, who dies as soon as the debt is clear. Liu makes the narrative persona coexisting with multi-identities: it is a homosexual woman, Molly, who is pregnant with her reincarnated mother. She hired a psychic to perform an online exorcism, but failed with her mother's spirit taken over Molly's body.

If the abovementioned works explore the ambiguity of identity, *Day 364. The Scaled Boy* by Mingtao Tu extended this motif of identity transformation to an extreme. In the entire play, the protagonist was covered in black, from head to toe; even his face was tightly wrapped. He didn't talk, either—the script voicing out of a tape player, which the boy listens everyday when he sketches. He was painting a perfect skin for himself, allowing him to be freed from his disguise and pain.

These artistic choices of switching narrative persona to make the anomalies speak for themselves present an emblematic case of racial experience in the States. If the narrating educated male commoners in Pu Songling's collection represented the majority, the uncanny anomalies are the objects constantly being gazed, consumed and manipulated. By transparently presenting the ongoing stress and restless self-doubting of anomalies, taking these figures as protagonists makes significant contribution to empower the uncanny strange racial others on stage.

More importantly, the political weight of bringing cross-national cultural-transplants and together creating such production is by itself an action from a peculiar perspective as "cultural transplants". As Dorinne Kondo puts in her analyze of *Doughball*, that "Seeing theater and performance of, by, and about Asian Americans [...] has among its potential effects the empowering of other Asian Americans."⁶ *Clubhouse* shares such empowering effects among Asian Americans, especially among the expatriates—the Asians in American. To bring togetherness in theatre has always been a mission of Yangtze Repertory Theatre. Founded in 1992 by Maryknoll Sister Joanna Chan, YRT has been provided resources as a "welcoming home" for newly landed artists, "whose work is not readily seen in the U.S. and supported them to launch their professional careers in NYC"⁷. Gao Xingjian, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in Literature was among these artists, who showed his only full-scale presentations of Gao's works in the U.S. at YRT. This mission continued when Chongren Fan (as artistic director) and Sally Shen (as executive director) took YRT over in 2017. As expedites, they continued YRT's legacy of helping and voicing for artists of color, at the same time offered a bridge between minority

Comment [MB9]: Paragraph 9: Summary of *Stacy in the States* a play that explores the idea of "strangeness" into horror and thriller.

Comment [MB10]: Paragraph 10: Summary of *Do You Still H8 Me*; the narrative persona coexists with multiple identities.

Comment on summary: Could use a little bit of analysis here. Like in the subsequent paragraphs — should just mention the presence of some of the overarching themes of the project.

Comment [MB11]: Paragraph 11: Summary of *Day 364. The Scaled Boy*. Like the other plays it explores the ambiguity of identity but it pushes it further.

Comment on summary: The author did not mention that all of the plays identify the ambiguity of identity. This might be something to emphasize in the revised draft. This is particularly relevant because "ambiguity of identity" appears to be the analytical work done in this paragraph and it is one of the overarching themes of all of the plays.

Comment [MB12]: Paragraph 12: By changing the point of view from the original stories to the plays from male narrator to the voice of the anomaly, it is emblematic of the racial experience in America. By making this switch, the anomalies/racial others can present the stress and self-doubting of the immigrant and this empowers them.

Comment on summary: This paragraph might work better if it comes before all of the summaries of the plays because it neatly analyzes all of the plays and draws out the themes that all of these plays share. And that way, when the author mentions the themes within each play that are shared by the other plays, readers will be keyed in already.

⁶ Kondo, Dorinne K. *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*. New York: Routledge Press, 1997. Page 205

⁷ "Our Story — Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America." Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America. Accessed November 9, 2021. <https://www.yzrep.org/our-story>.

artists and diverse audience. In an interview they said, that they didn't limit themselves to only presenting Chinese/Asian stories; instead, they tried to tell stories from diverse traditions and people with their thinking as cultural transplants, to "see the world through a contemporary Chinese lens". They have been trying to find stories that are specific yet inclusive, enabling every audience to identify with and connect to certain elements in the play⁸.

Usually in theatre and literature works that encounter performative of diaspora or cross-culture, a notion of seeking affirmative home/culture is inevitably mentioned as an urgent issue, whether claiming America as home, or making place of origin as a diasporic and utopian home. In *Clubhouse*, the idea of home represents itself in a form of everlasting detachment and disconnection, rather than linger on to one affirmative side. In *Do You H8 Me*, Molly has been cut off from her mom and family of origin several years ago—she does not even know her mother's death. Her childhood home was only presented in her memory in a rather imaginative manner. Abstract virtual communities are presented in both *Stacy in the States* and *my dead husband bought a gun and came back for me*: In *Stacy*, an ideal community is made out of her social media followers that she calls "my family", while *my dead husband* opens the scene with collective crying out of her cellphone, where several newly-widowed women mourning at a self-help group on clubhouse. No explicit description of real home or community of origin is represented here, leaving only problematic images portrayed abstract and fragile.

An obvious reason of such portrayal might due to the limitation of its solo-performance form with limited filming condition, which restrains presentation of real homes or communities with crowd at overseas locale. Another fact is that these projects were developed around late March to early April of 2021, when writers struggled with the aftermath and ongoing Asian hate crimes, so that their motifs laid more weight on identity exploration and self-reflection. Nevertheless, I would also like to propose here, that this tendency of being seemingly evasive of direct touch on home of origin, in another word, its Sinophone context, is indeed a result of the ongoing Sinophobic environment in the States. As a dramaturg and a scholar from China, very often when I compose creative or scholarly work about my homeland, I constantly found myself in a place of seeking for an "appropriate" positionality as well as artistic expression: how do I tell my real Chinese experience in a neutral voice without being worried of either being accused of "brain-washed", if my story present a positive image; or on the other hand, my concerning voice may eventually being misinterpreted and manipulated into another superficial evil-dragon wholeness of spectacle? I believe this struggle and everlasting concern we need to explore and entangle is quite common among Chinese scholars and artists.

Such concern and struggle didn't happen in our creating process of *Clubhouse* at all. From the first time we gathered at the zoom roundtable, we had been celebrating our group of cultural transplants as a warm and bonding community. It was a decision we made to use Mandarin as our lingua franca. It was such a rare and treasured experience, for the first time in a working environment that we were able to use our mother tongue. Using our most fluent language made it easier to talk about our perpetual homesick of our families overseas; Our solitude in quarantine; Our fear in this Sinophobic environment; and the same summer nights in childhood when our grandparents read us Pu Song Ling's *Strange Tales* as bedtime stories. Bonding such community continues Yangtze Repertory Theatre's legacy to "provide a

Comment [MB13]: Paragraph 13: The project empowers Asian expatriates because it brings them together it has political weight because it empowers them. Then a long background of the Yangtze Repertory Theater.

Comments on summary: There are two different ideas in this paragraph. Break the paragraph up to reflect the two different ideas.

Comment [MB14]: Paragraph 14: Usually works that revolves around notions of diaspora or cross-culture find characters urgently seeking affirmative home/culture. But here the idea of home represents itself as a form of everlasting detachment and disconnection.

Comment [MB15]: Paragraph 15: Various reasons for this including the limits of this production where every play is a one-person act, projects were developed at the beginning of the pandemic when everyone — particularly expats — felt disassociated from everything; and my idea which is that there is a constant tension in creating works about my Sinophonic culture: how do I talk about real Chinese experiences without being accused of being "brain-washed" or my work being misinterpreted as falling into the trite categorization of dragons and spectacles often associated with Chinese—influenced art.

Comments on summary: Break this paragraph up.

⁸ Fan, Chongren and Shen, Sally. Interview by Bindi Kang. Personal Interview. Online (lark), Nov.1.2021.

welcoming home for newly-landing artists”⁹, as well as “see the world through a contemporary Chinese [expatriate’s] eyes”. Moreover, making *Clubhouse* in current sociopolitical regime is an impelling political act: It freed us—the expatriates, the anomalies, the strange racial others—to speak and defend for ourselves.

Comment [MB16]: Paragraph 16: We did not have these fears when making this project, we talked in our native tongue and the experience freed us to speak and defend ourselves.

⁹ "Our Story — Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America." Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America. Accessed November 9, 2021. <https://www.yzrep.org/our-story>.