

Circus (or *Mah-heih!*)
An Interview-based Play

By Eugenie Chan

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Artist's Statement

In many ways this commission about the effect of changing demographics on the arts and audiences was a kick in the artistic booty. What do I think of changing demographics? In many respects, as a 5th generation ABC, American Born Chinese, I'm as good as white, but not quite. I'm not sure what I represent. I'm entrenched in mainstream America, yet not quite. In short I needed to talk to people – *my people* – a diaspora of ethnic Chinese individuals who now live in this country, newcomers as well as “*long time Ca-la-fons.*” I wanted to know what different generations of Chinese in America – people worlds apart from me in terms of language, birthplace, history and more, thought about the arts. I wanted to ask: As a Chinese, what so you think is beautiful? What is the best thing an artist can create for you? Your children? What kind of cultural legacy can we make that would be meaningful? The responses to these questions would form the basis of a play that would reflect the desires of the people I interviewed.

Working with the belief that people's desires are intrinsically related to their history, I created a series of questions about people's lives in their home countries and their lives here, tailoring them based on what generation of Chinese in America they were. I spoke to relatives, friends, friends of relatives, local business people, and neighbors – a group that made up six generations of living in America. Some lived in urban areas; some in Chinatowns; others in suburbia. They worked in a variety of occupations, from mechanics to screenwriters to health care workers. Recent newcomers I approached wished the project well, but were reluctant to talk about their lives. Their desires deserve expression; I only wish I had had more time to build these relationships.

The interviews themselves were vibrant occasions. Some of them took place at people's homes, some at the workplace. True to the culture, we usually talked over a meal or good snacks. If you're Chinese, you have to have food around. Of the 16 interviews I conducted, nine were in English; seven were in Cantonese. I am thankful for my interviewees' joyful patience and the hilarity we had in trying to understand one another. Before each interview, I described the project, explaining that, with their permission, I would create fictional characters and dialogue based on people's answers, and that I might mix new writing with their verbatim words.

In the end, to create a focused play, I created nine characters -- composites and exaggerations of traits, desires, and characteristics of the real life people I spoke with. To make the stories cohere, I set the play in a circus – a metaphor for ABC life in American – complete with a Ringmaster who reps The Man, of course. I envisioned the characters as immigrant and native-born acrobats who must perform all sorts of gymnastics to survive and flourish in this country. I also included an earnest, but culturally clumsy young ABC playwright, whose job is to create a show out of the acrobats' life stories. This would be the “me” character in this real life-based piece.

One of the happiest outcomes of this project was a reading produced for the interviewees, a reading that was a creative solution to the question of rights, itself a story of cultural difference. As a writer, the standard practice is to secure a written release from an interviewee, such that I could use her response in public performance and publication. This, I felt deeply would run counter to the norms of many of my first generation interviewees, some of whom came from

places where an official document written in legalese was to be feared. I felt I especially could not ask my interviewees for a “don’t sue me” statement, after they had already entrusted me with their stories. One proclaimed, “You can do whatever you want. We trust you because we know your sister.” I could not risk jeopardizing the relationship they had with me or the people who had introduced us. My sister concurred and wryly called the legal document “the white man’s way.” Thankfully, I conferred with a foundation program director and fellow ABC who had grown up in the social life of Chinatown benevolent societies. She confirmed my feelings – that requesting a standard written release that playwrights use in interview-based work would be culturally disruptive and insensitive. And she provided a brilliant solution. She suggested I bring a staged reading to my interviewees. That way they could see what I had done with their words, give me feedback, and confirm their permission in their comments and approval.

The reading was held during lunch at the social service agency where a group of interviewees worked. For those who could not attend, I gave them the play to read. I was nervous, of course. Would they approve? Would they like that I had turned their lives into a “circus”? Well, a great time was had by all. They laughed, they liked the quirks and hijinks of the characters, the use of funny props; they were touched by the stories of longing for home and connection; they laughed at a punch line I wrote in Cantonese. After the play, audience members chatted about the play’s themes; others, I heard days later, would recite key lines. One woman spoke of how moved she was to experience live theatre, with professional actors, and to have the performance at a place and time that accommodated her schedule with work and family.

The project reaffirmed how important it is to speak to the diverse desires of a seemingly homogenous people, of making performance accessible in terms of language, time, venue, and cost. I was fortunate that the actors volunteered their time and talent to perform during their workday. All of the interviewees are working adults with major family responsibilities; some work multiple jobs. It was immensely gratifying to be able to create a piece of theatre and bring it, in this small way, to a community of Americans who don’t normally see theatre because of the intensity of their lives, and because of the ways we producers and artists present live performance.

-- Eugenie Chan

Circus was read at Self Help for the Elderly, San Francisco, on March 18, 2009, with Yoonie Cho, Leon Goertzen, Lisa Kang, Arthur Keng, Wayne Lee, Garth Petal, Michelle Talgarow, Annie Y. Wang, Pearl Wong, and directed by the playwright. The play was commissioned by The San Francisco Foundation and Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund through support from The Wallace Foundation.

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CHARACTERS

In order of appearance

(All characters are Chinese, except for the Ringmaster.)

Ringmaster	30s – 70s, White
Nettie	20s, 3 rd generation ABC, (American Born Chinese), a playwright
Max	50s, 5 th generation ABC, a former fire fighter
Gong	60s, 1 st generation from China, a former Physician
Lena	Late 30s, 1 st generation from China, a former Nurse
Daisy	Late 20s, 1 st generation from China, a new mother, and scheduler.
Gok	40s, 1 st generation from Indonesia, a chef
Mae	80s, 2 nd generation, retired
Joey	A teen, 6 th generation, student

TIME & PLACE

A circus stage. Here & Now.

Upbeat circus music. Sound of hijinx in the air. Curtain down. Spotlights sweep over a sign that reads, "CIRCUS, A PLAY FOR YOU AND ME." Enter RINGMASTER.

RINGMASTER

Okay, rehearsal! For the people now! We got a show! Make it good! We all want it! Cha-ching cha ching cha ching. Cash money in da pocketbook! (clearing throat) Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and girls! Fresh off the boat from the far-away land of Cathay...It's the Ama-a-a-zing Fong Family.

A human pyramid of ACROBATS wheel in on a single bicycle, striking a fabulous pose: 3 men and 3 women of all shapes and sizes. One of the women carries her child, baby doll. They are chased by NETTIE, scribbling in a notebook. They circle beneath and around a trapeze, a tightrope and a shrouded statue.

RINGMASTER

Aren't these Chinese All-Stars a wonder! So symmetrical, so strong, so resilient. (to Net) get their story. write it down. make it good. we got a show!

NETTIE (to Acrobats)

Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me.

The Acrobats keep circling; every time they face the audience they smile. Mainly they hang on. Net tries to keep up with the driver.

MAX

Bug off. I gotta job. I gotta bike.

NETTIE

But I need your story. Your story...Excuse me (She keeps this up forever.)

RINGMASTER over Nettie

You know part of their genius is that they hail from the same tiny village of Huey Louie Gooley, right in the shadow of the Great Wall. Huey stands for "honor" in their revered tongue; Louie, for the ancient schmuck who taught them their first back flip; and Gooley, for the delicious sticky rice cakes that attracts foodies the world over, including yours truly. Gooley, get it? Gooley, Gooley. Goo-eeey!

GONG

Stop! Stop! Stop!

Screech. The bicycle stops. The acrobats lurch forward, but hold their pose.

MAX

Whoa, there!

GONG

We are not from Huey Louie Gooley. There is no such name. No such village.

LENA

We are not even related. We are not family.

RINGMASTER

But your contract. It stipulates.

GONG

I am not from an imaginary hamlet. I am from Guangzhou City.

DAISY

Guangzhou City! *Waa!*

LENA/DAISY

Guangzhou, *ho yeh!*

LENA

I myself am from Fujian.

DAISY

I am Hong Kong via Canada.

GOK

Surabaya, Indonesia.

DAISY

Waa!

LENA

Yun neih.

GONG

Yun neih yauh dai bah juhng gwok yun. Dan haih die Yun neih yahn seih zheng dih juhng gwok yun. Tai doh cheen.

NETTIE

Excuse me. Excuse me. Can someone translate? I'm from Walnut Creek.

Redwood City. MAX

Me too. JOEY

My son. MAX

His son. DAISY

Keuih tsai. GONG

So handsome. LENA

Waa! DAISY

Hello. Hello. Hello... *Neih houh.* ACROBATS

They all shake hands and make little intro remarks still on the bike.

NETTIE (writing in notebook)
Um. Excuse me. Excuse me. Could someone translate? I didn't catch the thing about Indonesia. Very interesting. Unique.

MAE
I'm from Stockton. Write that down.

GONG
Stockton?

MAE
America's Salad Bowl. Smack dab in the middle of the Great Central Valley.

RINGMASTER
This won't do. We need a monolith. A public face. A unified homogenous picture for the audience to digest.
Your stunts should go down easy. Rewrite!

NETTIE

Indonesia!

GOK

Jakarta, then Bali. Where the people are so warm and friendly.

DAISY

I love Hong Kong.

LENA

I love Fujian.

GONG

I love Guangzhou.

JOEY

I'd love to know where we are.

RINGMASTER

This is a circus.

MAE

This is America.

RINGMASTER

This is your contract. You have a show to put on. Rewrite!

NETTIE

I know, I know. I'm writing. I'm writing. I just want to make sure it's authentic. And true.

MAX

Can you get the pacing right? I'm getting winded.

DAISY

Make sure some of it is in Cantonese. My English, *aiyahh! Shuen la! Zhenhai cha la!*

LENA

Ngoh yauh hai.

GONG

Me too.

GOK

I'm afraid I'm a Chinese who doesn't speak Chinese.

MAX

Yep, me too.

JOEY

LOL. I like to text.

GOK

Bahasa Malaysia is my home language.

NETTIE

Translation please!

RINGMASTER

On with the show! Peddle!

He cracks his whip. MAX starts to peddle fast.

MAX

The show! The show. Morale is low at the show.

GONG

Hurry! Or we won't get paid. I did not travel across the ocean and give up everything I had so I would not get paid. I was a doctor! And now?

DAISY

My mother and father made me come. I never wanted to. opportunity! They say, "For my daughter."

LENA

At least in China, the work was secure. We always got paid, no matter what.

RINGMASTER

Faster! Faster! Faster!

MAE

I'm retired. What kind of sweatshop is this?

MAX

If I was the boss, the show would be different.

NETTIE

Different? Different how?

GONG

Go.

DAISY/LENA

Go!

RINGMASTER

Around and around the main attraction.

MAX peddles faster & faster following the ringmaster's
whip around the statue

MAE/GONG/LENA/DAISY.

Go! Or we won't get paid.

MAE

This is America. No tickee no washee.

RINGMASTER

Ladies and Gentlemen, freedom rings in this country!

Ringmaster uncovers the statue. It is the Statue of Liberty.

LENA/GONG

Wah! Houh daih! Houh daih! Guai gaam leng.

NETTIE

What? What? can you translate?

GOK

La Statue de Liberté. The Frenchmen's gift to a young country.

MAX

Lady Liberty. I want me a piece of her.

DAISY

Hmm! It's not the Great Wall. *Jauh* Okay-la.

NETTIE (writing)

Not the Great Wall.

RINGMASTER (directing Max)

In and out now. Like a flower. Approach Liberty, back off. Approach, retreat. Approach,
retreat. Build tension.

Acrobats mutter ("getting seasick, etc.)

MAX

If it were up to me, things would change.

NETTIE
Change? Change. What would you change?

MAX
First, I'd get me a new bike.

He screeches to a halt. Complaints of "*aiyahh!*, etc" from the acrobats.

DAISY (grabbing baby)
Again? My baby!

GONG
Me-eh gaam mah faan?

RINGMASTER
Go! Go! In, out! In, out!

MAE
Jesus Christ!

JOEY
Daaad!

Gok crosses himself. Ringmaster cracks whip.

RINGMASTER
Momentum is money!

MAX
First, I'd change this cheap-ass Schwinn into something else.

RINGMASTER
What else? The bicycle is perfectly good.

The Acrobats mutter in agreement. (Yeah, yeah, yeah...)

MAE
See what the man has to say.

MAX
I'd change it into a Harley Road King. I'd like me a Hog. (He revs up the bike and takes off with all atop.)

Aiyahh! GONG

Hang on to your hats! MAE

Whooo! This is exciting. DAISY

Thrilling! I'm very interested in the open road. GOK

Daaad. JOEY

What about the baby? LENA

She loves it. *tai keuih gei hoi sum.* DAISY

She loves that wind in her hair. MAE

I'll take you all on a ride. MAX

Where to? NETTIE

The Rocky Mountains. (He pops a wheelie.) Hang on tight! MAX

Gong & Lena scream. Daisy cheers, "Gah yauh." Mae whoops. Gok double crosses the sign of the cross.

Daaad, this is so embarrassing. JOEY

RINGMASTER

This is not allowed. It's not in your contract. You can do back flips, cartwheels, and triple-jointed hand stands, but no wheelies. Absolutely no wheelies. No no no no no!

MAE

Morale is at an all time low.

GONG

We can go on a tour. You need to pay us bonuses.

The Acrobats echo, “Bonuses...”

MAX

Bryce Canyon. Yellowstone. The Grand Tetons. The Rio Grande. And some views you will not believe. Watch out, man! Bonuses!

He charges Ringmaster who shimmies up Liberty.

RINGMASTER

Rewrite! I pay you well.

MAX

We want a cut o’the gross.

RINGMASTER

Never!

MAX

We’re taking a trip! Hittin’ the road!

DAISY

Yay! I want to go to Disneyland. For me and baby.

LENA

Shopping! *Huei tai yeh*. Rodeo Drive. The Great Mall.

GONG

Cheh! Yosemite! Nature!

MAE

New York City! The Bronx is up, and the Battery’s down!

GOK

Manhattan by night!

JOEY

Brooklyn!

LENA

Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

RINGMASTER

You can’t eat freedom. Who will pay you? Where will you sleep?

GOK

We will earn our wages wherever we alight.

GONG

We sleep where we land. We are used to it.

LENA

We are immigrants.

DAISY/LENA/GOK/GONG

Yay! Yay! Yay! Yay!

DAISY

Baby will have more opportunity.

MAX

She'll get a better audience. One who likes different vistas. No more clown shows.

NETTIE

Do you mean to say, no more yellowface?

DAISY

Yellowface?

LENA

What does she mean? Yellowface?

NETTIE

Technically a historical practice wherein the Caucasian performer adopts stereotypical attributes consigned to Asians by the dominant white culture. A legacy of America's colonial, (now-post colonial, but no less virulent) racist society.

ACROBATS except Max

Hmmmm? (rising tone)

MAX

Whitey apes shit. Squints his eyes. Bucks his teeth. Speaks funny. Chinesey. Like, No speakee English, so-sollee.

RINGMASTER

I never made you do that!

GONG

That is a totally other culture. Different from Chinese. Hmmph! Who can relate to that?

MAX

My show would be different. It would be (beat) semi-autobiographical. About someone like me. Me. Me.

MAX steps off the bike, holds it steady and salutes.

Maximillan OwYang, 59 years old. At your service. Write that down.

RINGMASTER

Who'd pay money for that?

One by one, the Acrobats get off the bike.

MAE descending

Me, Mae Kwan, 84.

GOK descending

I, too. Gok Wei Liem, 41.

Mae hits Gok.

MAE

(to Nettie) Write that down. Get'em all. (to Gok) Yours is gonna be good. She likes you best. Indonesia.

NETTIE

I don't like...

GOK bowing

Pleased to meet you.

LENA descending

Me. I have nothing to say. Lena Yim, 38.

GONG nods

But we are here. Gong Wang, 64.

DAISY descending & curtsying

Daisy SooHoo, 29. My baby, Serena, 6 months.

JOEY descending

Oh, Joey OwYang. Really José OwYang.

MAE

José? Sounds deluxe.

ACROBATS but Joey

José.

JOEY

I'm half Portuguese, half Chinese.

DAISY

Ho yeh! Like in Macau. I love Macau. Macau is next to Hong Kong. I love Hong Kong! I miss Hong Kong! I miss Hong Kong so much.

She bursts into tears. The Acrobats gather round to console her. (Small talk – “Must be the excitement.” “The heat.” Etc.)

NETTIE knocks on MAX's shoulder.

NETTIE

Excuse me. Excuse me, Mr. OwYang. Knock knock knock.

MAX still tending to Daisy

Just a sec.

NETTIE (right in Max's ear)

Mr. OwYang, I take it you're 2nd or 3rd or possibly 4th or even 5th generation American born Chinese since your place of origin is peninsular suburbia. Did you choose to live outside your community?

MAX

Is that a mosquito in my ear?

NETTIE

Or do you consider yourself part of inner city Chinatown subculture? And if so, what aspect of reality would you mirror in your autobiographical show?

LENA

I like happiness. A happy show. No sad shows.

GONG

I like morality. A good social message.

DAISY
Something to inspire is good.

MAE
Faith is good. I believe in my faith.

GOK
As do I. I am a Catholic.

DAISY
I like fantasy. I'm from Hong Kong.

LENA
I like 24.

NETTIE
What's 24?

GONG/DAISY/MAE
24? 24?

LENA
Oh, what is his name. Kiefer Kiefer *maht-yeh ah...*

MAX
Sutherland.

LENA
The detective. He has only 24 hours to catch the killer. Otherwise he is dead.

NETTIE
Can you translate that for me?

LENA
Aiyaah! Read the subtitles like I do. It is exciting!

RINGMASTER
Hah! You'll never get the story straight. Some show!

MAX
I like fire.

GONG
Fire?

Fire. MAX

Fire fire fire! DAISY

Fire! MAX

Aaaagh! My baby! My baby! DAISY

Quick quick-*la*! Run! GOK

The Acrobats scatter as if running from flames.

We need water. I'll get it. I'll get it! I love water. I love being close to it. I'm a lifeguard. JOEY

My arthritis. MAE

Ah pau, Siu sahm lo, ngoh bong sauh. LENA

Fire fire fire! ACROBATS (varied)

I see fire. MAX

Where? RINGMASTER

The fire burning in our souls! Stay low. Evacuate. Women and children, down to the creek! Below the fire line! Over there! Leave your belongings, your purses. This is no time for sentimentality. No time for missing things. Just go! MAX

Don't worry. We are used to leaving things behind. We are immigrants. GONG

The women huddle low.

MAX to Nettie

You! Stand there. (to GOK and JOEY) You two, start digging. It's a fire break. Joey, back him up.

NETTIE

What am I supposed to do?

Max throws his hands up and looks at Acrobats; looks at Nettie.

ALL but Nettie

(Beat.) Write!

She writes as he speaks.

MAX

I'm Max OwYang and I'm 20 years old. This is my story. We are fighting a fire. Some a-hole was out today riding his Harley. Some day tripper. Grass is so dry this time of year, catches on fire from the heat of his tailpipe. The thing just blows, wind picks up, here we are. Digging a break. Foreman's yelling, "Dig deep! Dig, Kimo Sabe, Dig, Big Chief!" You know why? Those guys, all white, never seen a real live Asian before. Think I'm an Indian. Kimo Sabe. Wooo woooo. Even got my own crew of Indian juvees to look after cause of the skin color. Who cares? You gotta prove yourself by your work, twice over. Then they'll accept you. Dig! Nothing to it – I got ten gallons of water on my back, been at it for 12 hours, it's a thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Dig! I got Indian kids doing men's work, can't see, can't breath, lungs are filling with smoke, and we are burning. Dig! No one's going to sleep tonight, if you wanna live. Skin is cracking from the heat, lips are pus-ing and blistering. We are drinking the sweat and blood of our own viscera. Wind shifts. Fire crowns. And she's coming, she's coming! "Evacuate to first fallback," Foreman yells. We run. We run. The fire explodes! Then I'm under. I'm under. I didn't know if I was dead or alive. I just open my eyes. People started picking themselves up. People I'd never seen. A coupla Black crews. Never seen them before. Usually it's all white, except for us Indians. Then I saw him. I looked up. It was another Chinese guy. I'd never seen one before fightin' a fire. We looked at each other, didn't say a thing. Look said it all: Who are you? Hey, what 're you doing here? Then he vanished. I thought I had seen my own ghost. It was definitely weird. Stranger things happen. Some white guy walks up to me later, "You know how I made it through? Got an amulet." Pulls out this long braid of human hair from a little pouch. "My girlfriend's, when she was alive." All I could think of was:

MAX

This is some crazy shit. Where is my ghost now? Protect me, Brother, from the crazy white man now.

GOK

Ohhh...

The other Acrobats follow suit, shaking their heads, etc.

RINGMASTER

Is that a true story? Or are you just trying to shake us up?

NETTIE

A shake-up about now might be good.

GONG

The *gwailo* is a totally different culture. Let's not talk about that now.

MAX

I have seen some things. I have seen some things.

DAISY

I like happy things.

RINGMASTER

The show!

DAISY

I love to play mah jong. Mah jong is when my friends and family get together. A show? Who has time? I work, I do all the scheduling around here, I make sure everyone gets an appointment. I make sure everything is on time. I feed my staff peanuts to make them happy.

JOEY

Like elephants at the zoo.

DAISY

To make them happy. When I go home, I love to *dah mah jeuhk*. I love the sound. Come. Come play. I love the sound of the tiles.

Gok, Lena, Daisy & gong gather as if to shuffle mah jong tiles.

GOK

I'm not very good at this. I'm not very skilled at gambling.

DAISY

Mah jong is not gambling. It is art.

GONG

I don't play.

DAISY

Aiyaah! Seih ah! Mouh gaam no fun.

NETTIE

How do you play? What's that circle mean? What's that flower symbolize? Can you translate that for me?

LENA

Aiyaah, poong!

They *poong* loudly. Like a car crash.

DAISY

Poong!

GOK

I fold.

GONG

Poong!

The sigh.

MAX

Morale is low. Morale is low.

RINGMASTER

You'll never win at that game.

LENA

Aiyaah! Who can win here? I don't understand. When I come to this country, I don't understand a lot of things. I come when I am 16. I did not want to. I am from Fujian. But my father, mother, they apply. So I am here. everything is so different from China. When I first come here, I take a class about raising children. To help being a new parent. The teacher is even a Chinese. She tell us a famous story about Hung To and the *leih guo*, the pear.

MAE

Pear. P-E-A-R. Write that down.

LENA

The story goes... *Hung To*, please (she points to Joey). *Hung To* is the youngest boy in his family.

JOEY (sitting before her and mimicing what she describes)

Is this right?

LENA

Yes. He comes from a big family. Many brothers and sisters. He is asked one day, "Nah, Hung To, you see all these pears? Nah! Which pear do you want? *Hung To, keui taih...*

GONG

Hung To, he looks and thinks.

LENA

Keui lum hah. Keui lo tsuei sai ge leih guo.

GONG

He takes the smallest one.

JOEY

Okay. (He does.)

LENA

Yauh yahn mahn keui. Hung To, deem gai neih gan tsuei sai ge leih guo?

GONG whispering

Hung To, why do you pick the smallest pear?

JOEY

I don't know. I just felt like it.

LENA

Ngoh tsui saih. Go go, jiejie tsui dai, suoyi ngoh gan tsuei sai ge leih guo.

JOEY

I have an older brother, an older sister, I am the youngest, so I chose the smallest.

LENA

Of course you pick the smallest. You are a Chinese. But you know what my teacher said. She say...

JOEY

I think Hung To is stupid! He should pick the biggest pear since he got first choice.

RINGMASTER

That's right!

MAX

Now that's American. That's the white man for you. Me me me me me. Screw everyone else. I thought I taught you better, Joey.

LENA

It is not Joey's fault. At least he chooses a pear. If I ask my daughter, born here, hah! – *Keuih im leih*. All she say is...

NETTIE interrupting

Speak English! I can't understand you! Speak English. Everyone does. This is America.
(Whoops! Sorry.)

LENA

Write a story about the generation gap. Side by side, the first generation next to the second. We can't communicate to each other. We need to learn – Older generation from the younger. Younger from the older. Go!

Gong and Daisy stand up. Daisy walks her doll daughter.

GONG

Oh, your daughter is all grown up now.

DAISY

She's okay-la.

GONG

No, she is so smart. She is going to Stanford.

DAISY

A lucky break. They need a girl for their quota. They must have make a mistake.

GONG

But she's a doctor now.

DAISY

Doctor, doctor. She is only an oncologist. She just take a look at tumors, and that's it. She is not a surgeon.

Nettie takes the dolls hand, walks her next to Daisy.

NETTIE as Serena

(Whimpering like a baby.) I am Serena. I am smart. I am a doctor. I go to Stanford just like you want me to. I am a specialist in neonatal cancers. You are hurting my feelings.

DAISY

Your feelings? Don't talk back to your elders? Who came to this country to sacrifice for you? You are so ungrateful.

NETTIE

I am ungrateful? I studied so hard for this. You are the ungrateful one, Mommy.

DAISY

Ngoh ungrateful. Ngoh senghyaht tzo gong, wahn neih hohkfai.

GONG

Aiyaah! I don't think either one of you is right.

NETTIE

Speak English!

DAISY

Speak English! Speak English! *Jauh haih ngoh* biggest challenge! How can I? *Yingmahn yingmahn yingmahn...* (Repeating.)

NETTIE over Daisy's voice

Speak English! Speak English! Speak English! (Repeating.)

RINGMASTER

Oh my god. What kind of show is this?

Daisy sits on the doll baby to finally shut her up.

GONG

Excuse me. I don't think you should sit on your daughter. She is very lovely.

DAISY

Lovely? She is ugly now!

RINGMASTER

I'll say.

Baby pops up and begins pulling Daisy by the hand across the stage crying.

NETTIE

Waaah waah...

LENA

Aiyahh! Diem tsuen? You see what I mean. We don't know what to do.

MAX

Maybe we should get back on the bike.

MAE

Maybe you should talk to each other.

GOK

Maybe you should try saying one nice thing to each other.

GONG

Tell her proud you are. You know. Deep down.

GOK

Tell her how happy you are with her.

DAISY

Tell her how proud I am? Tell her how happy I am with her? *Keihsaht ngoh houh* proud, *houh* happy. *Danhaih zhen im houh yisi* show off. That would invite the gossip of my neighbor.

NETTIE

Waaah waah... (Continuing to cry.)

MAX

Better than that.

DAISY

Okay, okay, Baby. I am...(Quiet. Cry.) I am...(Quiet. Cry.) (Quiet. Cry.) I am... (Quiet. Cry.) So (Quiet. Cry.) so so so so (Quiet. Cry.) ... proud of you.

Baby stops crying

NETTIE

Hmmm? (rising tone)

DAISY

So very very proud of you. You graduate. You are a doctor. But I don't care if you a doctor or a lawyer...

NETTIE

Hmmm? (rising tone)

DAISY whispering

I am so proud you are my daughter.

NETTIE

Oh Mommy. (Baby kisses Daisy.) I am so proud to be your daughter. I am sorry I insult your language. I am sorry to insult you. I am so proud of you and grateful. You come to this country to improve my life. Thank you. thank you.

LENA

Oh, the younger people need praise. As do we elders in our heart. This is a happy story. I like it. A+

NETTIE

Thank you.

RINGMASTER

Who'd pay money to see that?

Me. MAX
The other Acrobats follow suit with a string of “Me’s.”

Me! I like to travel. GONG
Gong scrambles up the Ringmaster’s ladder.

Boo! He jumps off. She pursues him.
RINGMASTER feebly cracking whip

I’ll fire you! GONG
Don’t make me cry. Life is so difficult. Give me a passport and I can go wherever I like.
American passport is best. I can go to England, I can go to Singapore. I can go wherever.

You can’t go to Cuba. RINGMASTER

Who wants to go to Cuba? GONG

Cuba yauh haih gongchang. LENA

Translate please. NETTIE

Cuba is like China. LENA

The Communists. DAISY

It’s not that China is bad. The freedom is not so good. (to Ringmaster) Jump!
He jumps onto the trapeze and hangs there.

I like an open door.

She knocks on NETTIE's head.

GONG

Hello. What I mean is that in China, everything is the backdoor. Write that down.

DAISY

Ahh, Guangzhou hauhmoon.

Gong arranges everyone in a circle. She grabs a stool and sits at center.

RINGMASTER (still hanging)

Hello.

GONG

Hello. (to Acrobats) You want a job. Backdoor. You want to go to school. Backdoor. You want to go to university. You test and test and test. In June, the students test; in August, the parents test.

JOEY

The parents test?

GONG

Mommy, daddy, everyone tests.

RINGMASTER

This is a test.

GONG

Even if you do good, you are so smart, score highest, still – back door. Mommy, Daddy must talk to their friends to get you in. If you have no friends – over! Maybe you give money, maybe presents – a bottle of cognac, some fancy cigarette.

RINGMASTER (hanging)

I've got cigarettes.

GONG

I don't do that. I'm a doctor. (to Ring) Get down! (He does.)

RINGMASTER

Slavedriver.

GONG

I come here when I am 39 for my children.

LENA

In China you are a medical doctor.

RINGMASTER

I need a doctor.

GONG

I treat women. And here. Here. Don't talk about that. Here I have to change. Here. I become a helper. I hold up other people. (She grabs her stool and walks out of the circle to Ring.) I support. (She gives him the stool.) Sit. (She takes off his hat, pulls a comb out of her pocket and combs his hair.) I feed people, give the bath, make sure they stay clean and healthy. In China, my salary is good. Here it is okay. (She plops the hat back on him firmly.)

RINGMASTER

All right already.

GONG rejoining Acrobats

Here, I live okay. Here, I get paid for all the hours I work. Not in China. Here, is okay. I like the freedom. In China I have to say, No! No no no! No! to joining the Party. No! to find other people to join the party. No! to people who ask you to do special favor. No! to all the universities where you have to pay money for a worthless diploma. All they want is your money. No! to the backdoor. No! to criticizing anybody. Or else you go to jail. You say No! to survive. You have to. No! No! No! No! You write a story where people can say, Yes! Yes! to fairness, equality, freedom. A story at the end of the day, at the end of a life, where I can sit in a circle with my children, my family, my friends and know that -- Yes! My hard work -- Because I am a good worker, because I am fair, because I am kind -- will be worthwhile to my family. That they will not suffer because of the back door. You write a story that is moral. Not too much crying, I can't stand tears dripping forever. Not too silly, if you only laugh, then you forget about everything. Yes! Something moral. Something that I can say, Yes! to. I will die satisfied knowing that I have lived a moral life.

She sits at center. Closes her eyes.

MAX

Joey, bow your head.

MAE praying

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

GOK

In the name of the father, the mother, the holy...

GONG opening eyes

I don't think that is exactly what I mean, but if this is the kind of thing that teaches Americans to be moral, okay.

MAE to Nettie

Have you been writing this down?

GOK

I'd like to share my faith. I am a Catholic.

Ringmaster throws his hands up in the air and makes a sound of objection.

GONG

Shh!

GOK

And I have been so blessed by everyone I have met. I am so fortunate. You know in Indonesia...

Ring waves away the comment/

MAE

Indonesia. Write that down.

GOK

In Indonesia, the Chinese are not liked by the native Indonesians. I feel the resentment. I can understand. The Chinese are 4% of the population, but control the wealth and business. You know why? Years ago, when Suharto was the president -- really the dictator -- he invited the Chinese into the business sector. But he limited their endeavors so that they could *only* do business. Chinese schools were closed, Chinese restaurants shut down. You could not speak Chinese. You could not join the government or the police. In the major economic crises of the 60s and late 90s, the Chinese became scapegoats. There were many killings and rapes. Really, there were larger forces at play in the Asian economic collapses. (I think George Soros may have had something to do with that. He invested heavily in Asia.) But the Chinese were blamed in Indonesia. That is why I left. Back in Jakarta, I was a law student who wanted to fight for the poor, but I soon learned that the Indonesian law is, how should I say, very flexible. Everyone in the government is so corrupt. You even have to pay the police to get a crime reported. So I switched and studied hotel and culinary management in Bali and here I am.

MAE

We found you on a cruise ship.

GOK

Where I cooked 7 days a week.

ACROBATS

Ooh...

GOK

Five seatings a day, on the Holland America.

ACROBATS

Ahhh...

GOK

The crew was all Filipino Indonesian. The officers, Dutch.

ACROBATS

Hisssss....

GOK

We cooked breakfast, brunch, lunch, two seatings of formal dinner & the midnight buffet.

He begins to serve the Acrobats.

Gulf shrimp on brioche, artichoke-asparagus quiche, saffron lobster bisque, coriander-cruste prime rib, langoustine con funghi, rack of lamb with mint, and Baked Alaska for two. It is wonderful for the guests. We got a few minutes off for our own lunch. Looking back, it is like slave labor. But I was young, I saw the world that way. Still I believe the most beautiful thing in the world is to create a meal for you. I love to cook. Food is a mind-opening experience. It is difficult to be Chinese in Indonesia, a Muslim world. I love pork! Pork pork pork pork pork. What can I say? I am a Chinese.

They all SIGH in agreement.

Here, in America, I feel so at ease. Here there are so many Asians, so many different types of Asians and other people. For the first time I can be myself. A Chinese who doesn't speak Chinese. Whose homeland is Indonesia, whose nation is the United States. Sadly, I have no direct link with China. The most beautiful show we can create is simple. If I see a smile on your face, or yours, or yours. That is the greatest gift of all.

MAE

Write that down. A smile.

All the Acrobats smile.

RINGMASTER

This is so much schmaltz.

Max jumps back on the bike and aims for Ring.

MAX

You gotta move to improve.

Whoa!

RINGMASTER

Max gives chase to Ring.

MAX

Indonesia to San Fran.

RINGMASTER

Whoa!

MAX

Guangzhou to the Excelsior.

RINGMASTER

Whoa!

MAX

Hong Kong to Castro Valley. Keep the show thrummin'. Gotta keep flowin'. Up up up.

RINGMASTER

I need my whip!

MAE

You need a whipping.

Ring climbs on Liberty.

JOEY

LOL. 'sup. Can you tell I'm rolling my eyes. OMG. IMO. My dad is freaking out. GR8. FYI, he gets like this because we always have to move, one place to another. He fixes things. He does all the mechanical stuff around here. He used to be an aircraft mechanic. But you know what happened to that business.

ACROBATS

Zoooom. (they mimic nose-diving.)

JOEY

So back to stunts. NP. LOL. W/E.

NETTIE

Excuse me, can you translate.

GONG

For me too.

GOK

And me.

MAE

All of us.

JOEY

OMG oh-my-god. WDYT what-do-you-think. L8R late-er. I don't know why we're jumping around like this. Running here, running there. Pretending to be this, pretending to be that. Make a movie about real life. A documentary. About the sunrise, the sunset. That's pretty. About someone like me.

MAX

Me me me me me.

RINGMASTER

Yeah, what about me?

JOEY

LOL. Me. Kinda mixed. Happa Chinese White. But I'm not really white. Portuguese isn't really white. It's confusing. I like old things. I like going to China.

GONG

You been to China?

LENA

China.

DAISY

Have you been to Hong Kong?

GONG

Why, you are lucky.

GOK

I have never been to China.

LENA

You must go.

DAISY

I love Hong Kong.

NETTIE

Excuse me. What does W/8 mean?

GONG

Aiyahh!

JOEY

The Yangtze River is cool. I like seeing all the old villages on the sides of the hills, all crumbling. With the little farms next to it. I like that a lot. But it's sad, knowing that it's all gonna be drowned for the dam. The Three Gorges.

GONG

Cheunggong Saamgaap.

ACROBATS

Ahhh.

MAE

China is hot. Hotter than Stockton.

GONG

Yes it is.

LENA

Who could live there again?

GONG/LENA

Not me.

JOEY

Yeah, my shirt was pasted on me when I was there. I was so sweaty.

MAX

Joey.

JOEY

Oh, sorry. TMI. I like the old stuff. I like seeing how people act when I'm in China. I can relate. Everyone is obsessed with food there. We had 10 courses all the time. My aunt took pictures. We ate *jook* for breakfast. My dad loves *jook*. That's really Chinese. Chinese people like to eat. Portuguese people like to eat too. Portuguese people like to dance. My mom likes to dance. Me? (He rolls his eyes.) I know you can make a documentary about a kid who likes to swim – I'm a lifeguard – and it's his birthday and his parents give him this party and his mom and his friends ask him to dance, but he can't, or it's like this (He makes awkward chicken moves) but he tries 'cause he knows it means a lot to his mom that he dances cause that's fun and Portuguese and he likes his parents, so he dives into the pool to escape and not embarrass himself or his family, (He dives.) I think that's Chinese, and he swims (He swims across the circle.) and he likes it and he forgets about school (He flips over, backstrokes, then floats.) and all his

homework and the good college he's supposed to go to get a good job, or else. So he swims all the way to Antarctica. (He breaks out of the circle.) Ha ha. LOL. That's a really dumb story. Sounds like an adult's version of a kid's life.

NETTIE scribbling like always

An adult's version of a kid's life... Hey, is that an insult?

JOEY

Make a movie about other kids around the world. Anywhere. Africa, China, Portugal. Show how they live. Show what they do with their family. I know that's old fashioned. I don't care. I like it. I like my family. That's the Chinese Portuguese part of me. The American part is kinda more selfish. Show *other* people's lives.

NETTIE

Was I just insulted?

ALL ACROBATS except MAX

No.

MAX

Maybe.

NETTIE

Hey!

MAE

Oh, honey, don't sweat it. Young kids today. (to Joey) Love you, young man. (to Nettie) Figure this. Nobody knows what life was like back in the old days. We old timers grew up in the Depression. We Chinese born here in America. My brothers and sister and I grew up in a Chinese ghetto in Stockton, but we were happy. Happy. We didn't have any money. But neither did anyone else. Our parents sent us all over the place just to put food in our mouths. I was sent to Newcastle. That's a one-horse town, nothing there except for *nien-go lo Gwan*, another Kwan, a lady from the same village as my dad, she married a Newcastle man, so my father felt responsible for her happiness. He sent me there because she had no children. What's a woman without children? I'm talking about the very old days in the 20s. There was nothing in Newcastle, no other women, no children. There was nothing to do. Just sit in the kitchen, watching *lo Gwan* be sad, sitting there staring out the window. I cried all day long. And that one-room schoolhouse there set me back a whole half grade. My father brought me back. That aunt shot herself dead. She was so sad. A woman without other women. There's a tragedy. (Beat.) It was the Depression. No one had anything. But we knew how to make do. Our blouses and skirts, Mom would make them out of flour sacks. The top would say "50 lbs," the bottom would say, "King Arthur." Our shoes, we kids all knew how to put cardboard in them when we got holes. Everyone did. That was your only pair of shoes for the year, if you had any. I know what. You make a musical about the Depression. About Chinese kids back then, singing and dancing in shoes with holes and card board soles. That'll make a good sound. Tap tap tap, cardboard. A chorus line of we Chinese kids. Tap tap tap. String some rubber bands around a

box for the guitar, like the way we used to do. Plunk plunk plunk. Write the songs in English and Cantonese. And *Toisan!* Figure that. Everyone would come see it. A 5, a 6, a 7 – 8!

All the Acrobats start singing and dancing (something like “Tomorrow” from *Annie*) in *Toisan*.

RINGMASTER

It’s different. I’ll give you that.

MAE

It’s happy. Don’t put in the part where no one sold us houses after the War. Even though my husband was a GI in Normandy *and* the Philippines. Don’t put that in. that part when the real estate agent in Stockton says, “I fought on the front with you, but I will not sell a home to you.” Uncle Tommy nearly lost his life in that damn war and couldn’t buy a home! Don’t put that in. That’s not a musical. No sad endings.

RINGMASTER

I agree with you on that. Kills ticket sales. No sad endings.

MAE

No sad endings.

NETTIE

No sad endings.

DAISY

I agree. I understand. I get so mad. So many sad endings. So much sacrifice. I don’t want so much sacrifice. I don’t mind for me. But for my daughter. No. I want her to be free in a different way. I want her to get a good job, find a good husband. Someone I hope who speaks some Chinese so I can talk to him. But what I really want – I want her to be free inside. I know I will be free inside when I retire to Hong Kong. That is my home, my country. I am a Cantonese. My daughter, she will not be free there. Hong Kong – China – too hard for her. Too dirty, she say. People squatting on the street just to eat. So I want her to be free on her own. Inside. No sacrifice. I want her to feel like I feel when I ball room dance. I take lessons to make my life here better. I love to waltz. When I waltz I feel like I am gliding on ice. No more pressures. No more obligation. No more sacrifice. In ball room dancing, I am free to make contact with my partner. We are free to touch – in a friendly way. We encourage each other. We say nice things. In ballroom dancing, we are free to be direct. Chinese culture can be difficult because we are indirect with our feelings. I feel so beautiful dancing. Like Cinderella. I am more confident. Perhaps someday I will show my daughter my dancing and perform for her. Dancing is very freeing. I want my daughter to feel like she is always dancing. I want her to feel like she is always ballroom dancing inside. Mommy, she will say, “I can glide, I can waltz. I am so beautiful. I am free free free. Maybe you will join me.”

She asks Nettie.

NETTIE

I am writing. I can't dance.

LENA

Stop writing. Dancing no need to translate.

NETTIE

But I am a writer. Nettie Lee, 27, playwright. Walnut Creek. 5'2" one hundred twenty five pounds.

GOK

Will you join me?

MAE (intimating)

Indonesia...

NETTIE

I am all left feet.

DAISY

No matter. Look. (She swings her baby into a waltz.) Even a baby can do it.

GONG to MAX

(Motioning him to join her.) You. Don't run over me with your motorcycle.

MAX

I would never think of it.

MAE

Joey.

JOEY

Oh no.

MAX

Come on, Joe.

JOEY

O-kaaaay.

The Acrobats begin to dance.

DAISY

See, this is better than soap opera on the internet. (Motioning to Lena.) Come. (Lena joins her and the baby.)

I will try. LENA

Try. GOK to Nettie

O-kaaaay. What if I don't like it? NETTIE

What if you do? GOK

Wheee! We are free. DAISY

Free. GOK

Free. MAX

Kinda sorta. JOEY

Aw, you like it. I like it. MAE

See how mother and daughter are so happy now. LENA

Yes yes yes yes yes! GONG

Gotta keep moving... MAX

Isn't anyone going to ask me to dance? RINGMASTER

Only if you follow our steps. GONG

He jumps off Liberty. And dances solo, with the Acrobats.

RINGMASTER

Hey, maybe we could do a reality show? You know, Dancing with the Diaspora. Mamboing with Migrants. Or Cha-cha-cha-ing with the Chinese.

DAISY

Dance dance! Be free, be free!

The Acrobats join in, waltzing and drowning out Ring's lame suggestions.

ACROBATS

Free free free...!

(DAISY underneath)

Whee whee whee...!

END OF PLAY

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