

transcript - Exploring Tiger Style, episode 3

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Host: Welcome back to Exploring Tiger Style, a series of conversations hosted by Huntington Manager of Curriculum and Instruction Regine Vital. These insightful talks include perspectives from the playwright, director, actors, local community members, and scholars. This episode is called "No More Projections or Preconceptions: Seeing Yourself and the Many Dimensions of the Asian American Identity.

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Regine Vital: Hi, everyone, I'm Regine Vital. I'm glad you're here. Let's start by having everyone introduce themselves, and say where they're calling in from.

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Mike Lew: Mike Lew, playwright of Tiger Style, coming at you from Brooklyn.

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Francis Jue: Hi, I'm Frances Jue. I'm an actor. I live in New York. I play the dad in Tiger Style and other crusty older guys, and I'm happy to be here.

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Megan Berry: Hi, I'm Megan. I'm a staff member at Huntington, currently working in ticketing services, and also thrilled to be here.

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George Yip: Hi, George Yip, I'm a professor of international business, visiting now at Northeastern University in Boston, recording from western Maine. And I'm a member of the Board of Advisors for Huntington Theatre Company.

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Regine Vital: For this, I kind of really wanted to look at the play. So it's about the immigrant experience, and it's about what that identity and that experience is within the context of the US -- and, you know, within the context of China as well for for Jennifer and Albert Chen. And in Act one, Albert is like raging at mom and dad. And he's so angry about how he was raised. And he says, "you raised us both to be dickless. But why did you train us to be so deferential if it means that Jennifer let her dumb boyfriend treat her like a doormat? And why do I let people treat me like a doormat? Plus, I'm yelling right now. I'm yelling, why are you letting us treat you like doormats?" And this moment in the play, when it happens, it's funny, but there's an edge running through it that makes some of it actually quite sharp through the laughter. It's satirizing a stereotype potentially about Asian people as submissive, deferential, impotent in a way. But it's also stating a clear obstacle. It's not just, you know, Albert's frustration with how he was raised, but it's also about growing up in a world that feels like it refuses to accept you and all the possible ways you can exist. Mike, you've talked about the impetus of this play. Right? Like the expectation of writing the Chinese American experience in a play, because you're Chinese American. And I'm just wondering how these stereotypes and these obstacles that you're satirizing in this play, how have you grappled with them in your career and in your life?

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Mike Lew: Yeah, I mean, I think that with this play, I wanted to address the stereotypes both about Asians and the US. But then also, I think the international characterizations, that Chinese people from China have about people in the U.S., that Americans have about

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Chinese, and through that, carve out something that hasn't been told before on stage. And it's definitely an ongoing consideration for me, because as I think through sort of my own politics and how Asians are perceived, generally, I keep on making new plays that sort of try to crack this. And I think that that's true of a lot of my peers -- from Ma Yi Writers Lab -- that have that have been really poking at this idea and in various refractions.

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Regine Vital: As I open this up to the group, I'm wondering for you, how have you had to negotiate and navigate some of these stereotypes or expectations for yourselves?

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Megan Berry: One immediate kind of gut reaction I just had to that quote is, I think the feeling that when you get kind of clumped into that like Asian-American doormat world, I know for me at least, especially like having often been in, like the super intense academic context, kind of focusing on that like stereotypical like Asian, straight A, Ivy-League-school-like nonsense. We just kind of take it for granted. Like it's not even it's not even questioned the fact that now you're premed, or anything like that. Questions about like, oh, why do you care about this? Why are you doing that? have just been dismissed as irrelevant. Your personal ambitions and opinions don't really fit in because there's already a narrative that people have in place, if that makes sense.

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Francis Jue: This is such a huge topic because you could I could relate this to my career as an actor, where being typed is just part of the business and how people like me who are Asian are typed in different ways than other people, because there are assumptions made about me, because I happen to be Asian. And how images of Asians in media, on stage, on television, in films, even in the news, are often seen through a lens that doesn't give Asians the full range of humanity that other people might. And then I could also relate it to how I grew up, and how the tiger parenting that I experienced was very much like the kind of parenting that a lot of other kids who are people of color or immigrants had to experience. The kinds of talks that my parents had with me are very similar to the kinds of talks, "the talk" that African-American families have to have with their children in order to survive, and in order to have a chance of success. But one of the things that all of those different worlds have in common is this idea that we have to be aware of how we're being perceived by a mainstream culture, a mainstream race, a mainstream language. I mean, all of those things we have to be aware of, in addition to trying to figure out who we are individually and as part of something larger. And the first reaction I have is "who knows what's authentically Chinese or Chinese-American, or white American, or you know," and the whole idea of authenticity to me is such a questionable thing. And yet we have to try to find a way to become our authentic selves. And I think that one of the ways that Asian kids, kids of color are put at a disadvantage is that they are constantly being told they have to be aware of how they're being perceived as much as, if not more so, than paying attention to their own feelings and their own innate identity and their own attachments, their own likes and dislikes -- it becomes kind of schizophrenic. And it's taken me a long time. I'm, you know, fifty seven now. And I think it was when I first did this play four or five years ago, when I was already in my 50s, that I began to be able to articulate that there were so many times I was prioritizing how I was being perceived over my own opinions and my own feelings -- and really, it's when I started to pay attention to that, that I think I started to realize more of my potential, both as an actor and as a human being.

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Regine Vital: George, you sort of have like two ways to talk about this. As you were saying when we were introducing ourselves, that you're an ABC, Asian, British, no American, British, Chinese, which is the alphabet identity. I love it. And it made me actually think of an anecdote you told me or that's how you were saying when you were in England, people would meet you and ask if you are a restaurant worker. And now that you're in the States, people ask you, are you a doctor? And so you've been navigating and kind of traveling to these two different perceptions in the West -- we're very different countries, England and America, but, you know, quite knit. Yet these two very different ways of being kind of approached by that Western white monolith in a way. How have you had to negotiate those two things?

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George Yip: Oh, yeah. I mean, when I first went to England from Hong Kong at the age of 10, I was extremely sensitive to the fact that we were the first and only non-white family in the small town. And I had to do everything better than the English white kids. And of course, it's been impossible to get away from that. But the older I get, the more I just do what I want to do. And my wife accuses me of pulling out whichever identity American, British or Chinese., I want use to get away with something. So now I'm happy with it. Now for the more general audience that's going listen to this, there's solid academic research, Professor Hofstadter and others that show, for example, that explain why Chinese Americans don't become leaders in organizations, because Americans have pretty much the highest individualism score and Chinese culture is about the lowest. So in America, you have to be individualistic, and promote yourself. Chinese culture is the opposite of that. And in fact, it's no coincidence that Indian Americans have been much more successful in organizations. The next vice president Kamala Harris, the next Republican candidate for president Nikki Haley, the CEOs of Microsoft and Google, the current and next deans of Harvard Business School, are all Indian Americans. They're not Chinese Americans. It's a definite disadvantage. But my kind of advice to my students and to the audience here is "don't treat an individual as being the same as the average," because individuals are a mix and in fact, they behave differently at different times. And America is in a way more open to that. Although, you know, like right now I'm in Maine where nearly everybody else is white. So a bit more sensitive to the fact. My favorite American experience is that when I was a professor at UCLA, I was in a meeting with staff, faculty and some corporate clients. There were about seven of us in the room. And I looked up, and suddenly I realized that everyone in there was Chinese. Again, be aware of the average differences, but think about the individual both yourself, and when you are running an organization, relate to people as they are.

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Regine Vital: There are two threads from the answer so far that I kind of want to explore. So I'm going to I'm thinking of like the idea of the model minority, which it's a myth, right? But it's also it's got some roots in it that are about putting different ethnic groups in the United States, pitting them against each other, really in order to kind of keep them oppressed. But what I'm thinking about, as you said, this is Jennifer and Albert in the play, they've both excelled in many ways, but they feel like this high level of success academically and in career -- I mean, Jennifer is a doctor -- has somehow like held them back. I'm wondering about what that conflict looks like, the pressure of that to succeed, to excel, the expectation of it. So you look up, George, and there's like a room of ethnic Asian-Americans and you didn't

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think about it. And I wonder if it's because, well, you were expected to be there, like you were expected to all kind of be at this level. So I'm wondering if you felt the pressure of that to be a model minority with how you operate within society.

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George Yip: As I said when I was younger, I absolutely had to get the top grade because my mother did that to me as well. And unfortunately, we had rankings for every subject. So I had to come first out of thirty in every subject. If I came second in one subject, that's what she focused on. As I said, as I've got older, it doesn't matter. Now actually I had a really interesting experience in recent years. I spent five years as a professor in China, and there I was seen more as a foreigner than as a Chinese. But because, you know, I have a yellow face, they could also accept me more. I was very interested in bridging those two things, being a professor in China. But, you know, I'm like Francis, I'm old enough now. It's like, 'I don't care. I'm just me. I do what I want.'

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Francis Jue: I want to know, George, does it feel the same to be asked by strangers whether you work in a kitchen or are a delivery person, or -- as opposed to somebody asking you if you are a doctor?

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George Yip: Of course, it's nice to be asked if you're a doctor, although the best one was a neighbor who asked if I was -- she said "You're so polite, I thought you were a professor of Chinese poetry," as opposed to a professor of business. So that's that's the nicest misconception.

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Francis Jue: Yeah. I just find that fascinating because, you know, as somebody who is supposed to be playing characters all the time, I become really acutely aware how much whenever I'm encountered either on stage or in person, I am seen as a representative. And not just an individual. So, you know, if I go into a room and I'm meeting lots of different people, and I meet, you know, a white person, I don't assume that they represent all of Europe. And yet when I enter a room, there are people who look at me for signifiers of what being Chinese is or what being Asian is. And the same goes for when when I do a play. I'm very conscious sometimes of audiences coming, and it becomes a cultural experience. They see whatever play I'm in as a representation of what all Asian people are like, as opposed to what these characters are like. And that's one of the brilliant things I think about Mike Lew's play is that it's very self-consciously presenting people who are aware that however they represent themselves is how other people looking at them are going to see all of China. And it's like, what do I know of China? I don't know anything I don't even know about, you know, most Chinese Americans. I just know my experience. And that's just, that's a really difficult thing to crack. I think, is to get people to see us as, you know, just individuals.

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George Yip: But to be fair, this happens wherever you are a minority. In Mike's play, when they go to China, everyone considers them to be representing Americans.

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Francis Jue: So truly, they assume that they are innately Chinese, and so will be accepted there as Chinese.

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George Yip: The Chinese are also territorial.

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Francis Jue: Yes, Chinese are just as territorial as we are here about what it means to be Chinese.

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Regine Vital: Yeah, I it's making me think of -- So for George and Megan, my family's from Haiti to this day. Every now and again, my own parents will joke. "Well, you're not really Haitian." "What do you mean Mom and dad?" "Well, you were born in America. You're so American. And if you go to the island, they're going to know." So part of what it is is this kind of idea of what it means to be Chinese. In America, you can see the play's trying to confront these ideas of what it is to be Chinese, like what is China, what does it mean to be Chinese in either of these two places, whether it's in America or it's in China? Mike, you've talked about this before, but I'm wondering if you could just give us a little bit more. So for you, one of the things you're trying to do with this play is commenting on an idea of what it is to be Chinese, but also an idea of what China is. And so in your own experience, and as you were working on the play, how do you think of that? You know what China is, what it means to be from there.

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Mike Lew: If you're going to nail me to a thesis for the play, it's just sort of like every family is a culture unto itself. And so your perceptions around your relationship to country or your relationship to other people that are like ethnically 'your' people is going to trace back to your family how you were raised in those values. But I think that for Asian-American artwork or for really, artwork that is from any marginalized group, there's a lot of pressure that's put on every individual work as though it's going to be representative of the entirety of that people's experiences and of people's personal experiences. So I find a lot of like people who will come to my plays and be like that doesn't that's not reflective of like, you know, how I grew up. And therefore it's not true. And it's true that it's not true to them because it's not their family. Right. And so I think that what I'm playing with when I am presenting these kind of funhouse mirror versions of both China and Irvine is that our tether to culture, like the base unit of it is just our family. And so then -- and everybody's family is different. So then everybody's experience of culture is different and and then that in turn messes you up.

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Megan Berry: One thought that this play made me think about -- and part of what Regine and I had talked about at some point -- is also I think you get these very like monolithic, very old stereotypes of like 'the Far East.' 'This is Asia.' Regardless of the cultural specificity of, again, like the unit of a family, the unit of a region, the unit of like a specific neighborhood in a specific city. Speaking to myself, I'm sort of messy, where like ethnically, I'm half Chinese. In terms of relatives who are living in Asia, I have some family in Japan, et cetera, et cetera. I found it really fascinating how people in America, especially like really love to play that like typing game, "trying to categorize you" game, because again, I'm in the muddy place where it's like, in some situations I'm very white passing, which is a privilege in itself. Back when you would go to a bar, and someone would hit on you in a bar, which seems unimaginable in COVID times now, somehow the people think is the great entry way into a conversation is the like, "Let me guess, like, are you like part Korean, or is it like part Taiwanese, or like what is

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it?" I've come to a point usually where like whatever they'll say, I'll be like, 'oh my God, you've got it. How do you know? Wow, you're just so good at this.' And they get really into like, oh my God. Like, I went there's this, like, restaurant on my street that's like really authentic, like, do you know the like owners there?

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Regine Vital: Because we can't get away from it, if we're talking about immigration, we're talking about identity. Inevitably, we're talking about politics. And what that means. You know, relations with China and America are -- for a while now, they've been contentious and they're quite specific. And that affects how people think about China. Right. And think about Chinese folks. And also in covid times particularly a lot of that has gotten much more pronounced. The first significant anti-immigration law was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, you know, white people feeling like their jobs were being taken away by people from China when like the population, actually, of Chinese people in America was actually quite small. How that parallels to how we think about immigration from south of the border, and how that is like a connection point. But also, again, how there's this kind of string of animosity towards a group of people who've been here for a really long time. And for whatever reason, we've just not yet accepted them as part of the crew, part of the fabric of this country. Thinking of what Alberg specifically -- when he's upset with his parents, not just in the first act, but also later on, and wondering what's been the point? You know, what are we what are we fighting for and remaining here? Do you know for yourselves what is the point as first generation, or second generation, or third generation folks living in this country? I mean, Mike, you're laughing.

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Mike Lew: That's dark

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Regine Vital: So I want to start with you. I know. It's a dark question. Yeah. Well, let's start with the darkness, and maybe there's a bit of light because there's a part two to this question. But let's let's see where you go with the dark.

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Mike Lew: [laughing] What's the point? I mean, I don't know what the point is. I think that I'm just like -- I'm trying to piece through some things, and like, I threw up a play that has like -- that tries to march through that. And then I'm going to throw up more, that march through this and some other things that I just put one foot in front of the other. I don't know. I don't know what the point is, really.

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Francis Jue: I love that the play isn't resolved and tied in a bow at the end. You know, the first time I was invited back to my high school to give a talk on race, and the title of the day was "How We Solved Racism." And I got up there, and I was just like, I haven't solved racism. Yeah, I've had some success. I've been on Broadway, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, whatever. But that all still exists. I mean, that's just -- I mean, and I can see how frustrating that is, especially to younger generations who, you know, have looked to their parents to fix the world. And they inherit stuff that suddenly when they're old enough to realize, is pretty shitty. I don't mean to keep centering the people who are oppressing me. My job is not always to fix them. My job is to make me the best person I can be and to fulfil my potential

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and to explore my story to its full depth -- so that's part of what I'm so proud of Tiger Style for doing. Both for Mike, I'm proud of him, for having written it and then getting it produced multiple times. I'm proud of having been asked to do it and to learn from that. And I continue to learn from the play even after all this all these years.

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George Yip: So I think to be fair -- America, more than any country except for Canada, is more open to incomers from other countries. It is easier to become an American than say it is to become British, which is one of the reasons why I ended up here. My children were born here, my grandfather and I've just finished writing my childhood memoirs, entitled *Becoming British*, and concluding I didn't get all the way. Because in European countries, you cannot become fully that. In America, you can get close and partly it depends on where you are -- and it's easier in California than in Maine, etc.. And then, of course, there's the exception of the terrible historical and continued experience of African-Americans. But for many incomers, it is possible to become an American, even if you're a hyphenated American, Italian-American or Chinese-American. And we've seen over the generations that people do become more and more accepted, even Chinese. So now we have Andrew Yang ran for president, and people took him seriously. And we now have Michelle Wu running for mayor of Boston. And people are saying --I mean, at the peak of the COVID crisis, I thought one of my neighbors here, whom I hadn't met before, looked at me pretty strangely, but maybe that was my perception rather than him. That was at the height of the COVID crisis. And I was this Chinese guy you haven't seen before, walking around, you know, "breathing while Chinese" through the COVID crisis, as the saying goes.

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Megan Berry: My first reaction to the 'what was the point?' It was just acknowledging I was like, wow, whatever hopes my grandparents had when they came here, like if the end result was me, something went terribly wrong. Like I was -- I was doing so great for so long, again, like premed, classical piano, like blah blah. And then at some point I decided to work in theater. So something went terribly, terribly wrong. But I think if we're going for light at the end of a tunnel, I do think it's interesting that especially when thinking about my mother and her experience, she is she's a biologist and was basically making pretty big headway in terms of women in science in like a time when it was hard to be very hard to be a woman in science, especially an Asian-American woman in science. So her attitude to a lot of things is basically like, I have to be impeccable. There are only so many ways I can occupy space in the world, and I need to follow that track. And I do find the fact that, you know, I as the following generation can simply feel like there are more paths in the world that I can imagine myself occupying, even if I understand that they're going to come with different challenges and so on. I think that's it's slow change, but it's pretty exciting change.

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George Yip: No, Megan, the fact that you've chosen a low risk, sorry, low-pay, high-risk career in the theatre, and that means that you're fully assimilated into America.

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Megan Berry: I know, right.

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George Yip: That is the proof of your assimilation.

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Megan Berry: Mm hmm.

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Regine Vital: That's amazing, because I think we started off in a dark place. I'm sorry, Mike, that you had to go first with the darkness. But I think we ended up in a quite lovely place of light. I often say to folks, the moment that I figured out, 'yes, I am Haitian American and that's a great thing' was the moment that I finally felt like myself -- because I am a better American, because I am Haitian. Do you feel a similar way or feel like the possibility to feel that way as Americans, but because of like the heritage that you come from?

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Mike Lew: Yeah, absolutely. But it's also it's the only thing I know, so.

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Megan Berry: Yeah, I think it's like I think I spent a long time where I was supposed to be pushed into, like in the play where it's either 'full Western' or 'full Chinese,' it's kind of like, OK, so you potentially have the capacity to just be a white person in the world. My old babysitter used to, like, pinch my nose to make it like pointier and more European -- and like people would be like, 'oh yeah, just make sure to keep your eyes wide when you smile. And like, no one will be able to tell.' Either that or it's kind of like, 'oh, are you going to, you know, like learn the language and like live with your family in other countries for a while' and so on and like commit to that. And I think just realizing that, like, it's OK not to actually choose has been very liberating. And I'm like this has been an important part of my heritage that has informed my lived experience, and I don't need to only choose one side of it.

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Regine Vital: I love that. Thank you. George, and then Francis.

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George Yip: It means that I can cope with more different situations. But on the other hand, it means I'm not totally comfortable in any one place. That's the price.

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Francis Jue: This question reminds me of when I first came out to my family and I remember one of my sisters asking me very sincerely whether if I could choose, would I be straight. I very quickly answered no, because I wouldn't be me. And I think that there are advantages to straddling different worlds -- I think I'm a more empathetic person because of it, I think that my focus on service in whatever endeavor I'm involved in -- being an actor can appear and often is to be really narcissistic. But my whole focus for the last 40 years of my life has been about service, about relationships with audiences, and really giving myself over to plays to the desires of a playwright. I don't know how I would be, how I would know to do that if I weren't both Chinese and American and gay, you know, all of those things that that make up me. And, you know, hearing Megan's response also reminds me how my answers to all of these questions keep changing over time. And that's great, because they should you know, you're you're a different person. The world is a different place tomorrow, and next year, and 10 years from now. So I think that by the time we reach a generation where we get to have the right to choose and the capacity to choose at any given time, that's -- that truly I agree with George is success.

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Regine Vital: Amazing. Thank you so much for that conversation. Thank you so much for being as open and candid and generous with your time, with your experience, and with your insight. It's truly, truly special. And this was great. Thank you. I'm so happy right now.

00:30:11

Francis Jue: Thank you, Regine.

00:30:16

Megan Berry: Thank you

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Host: Thank you for listening to this episode of Exploring Tiger Style, hosted by Huntington Manager of Curriculum and Instruction Regine Vital. Exploring Tiger style is sound engineered by Valentin Frank. This episode features Mike Lew, Francis Jue, Megan Berry and George Yip. To hear the Tiger Style audio play and more of Exploring Tiger Style - and to donate in support of programs like these - visit [Huntington Theatre dot org](http://HuntingtonTheatre.org). If you enjoy Exploring Tiger Style, please follow us wherever you found this series. Thanks for listening.