

transcript - Exploring Tiger Style! episode 4

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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 Chinatown: Creating Home and the Idea of Place.

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

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Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro: I'm Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro and I'm a playwright. I've written -- I would say half of my plays have had Asian-Americans in them, and the other half not. Because I come from Michigan and where I grew up, I was maybe the one Asian-American in my class from nursery school to my senior year.

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Cynthia Woo: Hi, I'm Cynthia Woo. I'm director of Pao Arts Center. The program is a collaboration between Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center and Bunker Hill Community College. I use she/her pronouns; and today I'm calling in from Boston's Chinatown.

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Michael Hisamoto: Hi there. My name is Michael Hisamoto. I use he/him/his. I'm an actor, a playwright, and a director. I'm currently receiving my MFA at Brown University in their partnership with Trinity Rep, and I was the assistant director on [the 2016 stage production of] Tiger Style.

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Cynthia Yee: Hi, Cynthia Yee, and I am zooming in from Allston, Massachusetts, where I live. I am an educator and a writer. I write a series of stories called Hudson Street Chronicles that's available to scholars and artists who are doing research on Chinatown and want to go beyond what's in the textbook. And they're really coming of age stories. So it's about girls development -- and I thank everybody for having me and Cynthia Woo for referring me. I am very honored to be part of this panel.

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Regine Vital: I am excited to have all of you here. I really wanted to have one of these episodes that was inspired by Chinatown, because one of the big themes that I think that's talked about or thought about in Tiger Style! is an idea of home and how intrinsic that is to identity. People tend to feel a need to be tethered to a place that informs who they are in some way. And I think one of the things that Albert and Jennifer Chen, who are brother and sister in Tiger Style!, are trying to figure out: they're trying to reconcile their sense of self with the culture that they were born into, the place they were born into, which is California, USA, and kind of reconcile that with this faraway place, an idea of China. They're third generation Chinese American. I think that's a lot of what the freedom tour that they go on in the second half of the play is in part about. And if I could start with you, Michael, because you were the assistant director on the 2016 stage production, I'm wondering, as you, the cast, and the production crew were working together, what sorts of conversations did you have regarding the idea of China or about what China means for these two third generation Chinese American adult kids who are in the midst of an existential identity crisis?

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Michael Hisamoto: You know, it's interesting, with Mike's style of writing, I feel like a lot of it is embodied within the text of the play. And so a lot of it was just left alone to live within the words that Mike wrote. But one time that I think it actually came up in a very visceral way was at the very end of the play. In the final moment, we hear Albert sigh in reaction to Jennifer saying, "you know, we are home, this is our home." And one of the things that Mike was being very particular about was that the intention behind that. He wanted it to hold both the kind of resignation to being an outsider, but also holding the acceptance of his family, accepting him at the same time. And so there's like a lot of this weight underneath all the comedy and all the humor that Mike uses. But it's there. And he was very intentional about making sure that that weight underneath it tracked for him.

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Regine Vital: To stick with you for a moment. Michael, how did you see the play tackling this intricate interplay between identity and culture and place in home? And how did you think about it? How did you approach it for yourself? And did you find that you were informing, even though that moment is quite clear in Mike's text -- how where did you find yourself perhaps in forming it from your own perspective?

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Michael Hisamoto: Yeah, for me, it's something that I know really well. I mean, that these two characters are imposing an idealized reality onto this idea of China. And it's the means that they escape the racism and the hardships that they feel here in the U.S. But all of that is endured -- basically only to be disheartened by the reality that they didn't realize what they actually wanted in China. And in my own experience, it's something that I feel often. I'm Japanese American. I was born in Tokyo, and I'm a fifth-generation American. So I'm always holding these two things -- I was born abroad, and yet I'm a fifth-generation American, and my one great love is American theater. But obviously they don't do American theater in Tokyo, and so the place that I've always wanted to live, the culture that I'm used to, the sounds, the way of life, that's Tokyo to me. But at the same time, I can't pursue my great love of American theater there. And so how do we hold these two things of a homesickness for a place that isn't really home, and the feeling that you don't have a place to call home. And I think that these two characters are struggling with that in a multitude of ways, but it manifests itself in this kind of raucous comedy.

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Regine Vital: Yeah, absolutely. I'm first generation American, and my family's from Haiti. My parents emigrated to Boston separately, met, and had three kids. And so that kind of push and pull of this place that calls you, and informs so much of you, and the place that you're in. I totally understand that. Cynthia, I'd like to come to you for a minute, because of the Hudson Street Chronicles. I read your piece "If Hudson Street Could Talk" and these little vignettes that you write, which are very alive of these children growing up in Hudson Street and a neighborhood that doesn't quite exist in the way that you knew it as a child. Chinatown is still here, but that particular part doesn't necessarily exist the same way that it was when you were growing up. I believe, you're first generation in the States. So what was that like for you? That is -- what is home versus what you're coming from.

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Cynthia Yee: OK, so as I was trying to gather my thoughts around home/identity, place/

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identity -- and the fact that Hudson Street was destroyed by a highway; I would say that that's the major trauma of my generation. Home is very specific things, its food, its language. I spoke a country dialect growing up. I didn't speak English until second grade -- and it's the holidays. I celebrated Chinese New Year. I celebrated Harvest Moon. I barely celebrated Christmas, but we had the nuns that are doing missionary work in China. So it was kind of Americanization and child rearing practices -- where your mothers, everybody's mothers swore their children. So then you're not odd. Your mother's not considered abusive. And I wrote a story called *Those Secrets* about how my dad, my mother never hit me. It was like a dance between her and me. She would just tap the floor because I was always out late. I was a street child. So these very specific things, aroma, smells, touch, music. I grew up in this little protective bubble called Chinatown and to the outside world -- and I even spoke to an artist who used in her description -- to call it a tenement. I say, 'it is a loaded word.' OK? We didn't consider it tenement. It was originally actually Brahmin housing. How come when people on Beacon Hill live in these houses, they're called row houses to be preserved? But when Chinese immigrant families live in them? Tenements. Tenements, I looked it up, means that you share a living room, kitchen. We didn't share. I mean, everybody had their own apartment -- even though I shared a bedroom with my parents until age 13 when they tore down Hudson Street. So when I talk about Chinatown, you have to remember every community like Chinatown has a history. And has the history of where the people came from, the present people come from communist China, that live in Chinatown. My generation, my parents' generation did not; that generation were farmers, like the Sicilians that went to New York. So let's say, I speak very much for myself and my generation, and I always double check with my generation to say, was it as I remembered it? They say yes. So you grew up with this idea that there's two ways to do everything. More than two ways. There are two languages. Who do you speak what language to? OK, I spoke Chinese to my mother, I spoke English to my father, I spoke English to the nuns and to the teachers. So your brain always operated with different channels.

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Regine Vital: There's like a whole world that I feel like I want to just be in, when you talk about growing up on Hudson Street -- and there's all these, like experiences that you had, and what you just said to me is that, yes, this place is stamped by particular memories and of certain things. And Rosanna, I like to come to you because you're in Harvard Square right now, and you write about a lot of your experiences in Cambridge. And I'm wondering for you, Cambridge is home and what has that been like? How does it compare, if it does at all?

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Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro: Yeah, I was thinking that it depends so much on where you were born, where you were brought up. When you think of Asian-Americans, people think of us as a generic group. I mean, we all look the same to them, but in fact, our fathers and our grandfathers were all killing each other. That's one thing. I mean, there's as much tension between, say, Japanese and Koreans as there is between the French and the Germans; or the English have certain ideas about the French. You know, somehow that's allowed in Europe, but it's not allowed when you think of descendants from various countries in Asia. It was very important for me that I was born in Michigan -- because if I had been born, I was born in way back in nineteen thirty nine, and if I had been born in California, I would have grown up in the internment camps. So that's a huge difference. As I said, I was only one Asian in the class until high school, and I never felt Asian because I was thinking when you sent home --

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home to me in college towns, I was in Ann Arbor from the time I was born through high school. And then I came to Cambridge, and then I went to Berkeley and Stanford, and then I came back to Cambridge and have lived here for about 50 years. So my home is the American college town and that's very liberal. It's not in my day, not particularly race conscious, because at Radcliffe I was one of three Asians in a class of 250, which is a very different quota. Now when it's twenty three percent or something at Harvard three, it was very common in my day because I have a friend my age who was at Bennington and was one of three and I have another friend. She went to Mount Holyoke and she was one of three. So things were so, so different. When one thinks of writing Asian-American, what that means, it means so, so many things. And my feeling is that, I mean, I always tend to write Asian-American stories when there's something horrible happening. For instance, like the China virus, that kind of thing immediately sets off something in you, and you have to write about it, or the internment camps. I've written about them in three plays, even though I haven't -- I didn't experience it. So I think they're always in America. There's always something that can come up that will implicate all of us. And that's when especially it's important for all of us to think about it, write about it. But I don't think that people should push us into writing just about Asian-American stuff, because in my case, the knowledge is different from the case of somebody living in Chinatown or living on the West Coast. I think you should write on whatever moves you.

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Regine Vital: Absolutely. And Mike says this and want to in a previous episode, you know, he was talking about the impetus for the play and how people were like, 'when are you going to write the Chinese American story?' And he was like, 'do I have to?' And he talks about what's worth writing is something that moves you. And the things that stand the test of time is material that moves you and feels true. And he specifically says finding home is one of those really big things that is worth writing about. Cynthia Qoo, I would like to move to you, because it actually -- in all three comments that we've heard so far from Michael, Cynthia and Rosanna about what is home, what makes home. If you could talk a little bit about your work with Pao Arts Center under the stewardship of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center and in partnership with Bunker Hill Community College, the way that this organization operates within Chinatown, and how a lot of the work you do is is actually I think about homemaking -- and I don't mean homemaking, like let's put an apron on and bake. I mean making a home, making a place that is vibrant and thriving for the people who live there.

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Cynthia Woo: There's so many directions that I can go. I'm trying to find a way to start. I think I'll start by saying -- maybe I'll start with a personal connection of home and how Pao Arts Center as Chinatown's first cultural space that exists in this format of where we are on the edge of Chinatown with five thousand square feet, with theater and galleries, how I find home. I am a West Coast Asian. I am from Los Angeles, and I grew up there, and I moved to Boston in 2012 to pursue my graduate degree like many others. And somehow it's almost ten years later and I'm still here. And definitely I have my roots here, because when I think of home and when I first came here, one of the first things that I noticed is growing up in a place that was, you know, my high school had like forty percent Asian population. So I never really -- the opposite of Rosanna's feeling like the only Asian in class -- I was like, that's that was my existence. So when I came to Boston and went to school, I was -- I also found that sometimes I was the only Asian in a very different experience. And I think for me, I started

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working at Pao Arts Center when we opened in 2017, and then I suddenly found that, wow, I do have a community actually working to set up a center that was supporting Asian Pacific Islander viewpoints, having a space to share work, whether it's performances or on the wall, connecting with Asian artists helped me reconnect to something that I didn't really even realize I have lost in a way. So I think about how having a space where you can even just see your own experiences, and artists that look more similar to you and in some cases have shared experiences is also very important. You know, Rossana talked about this also the idea that we're not a monolith. And so even as a space that exists to support Asian Pacific Islander viewpoints and perspectives, that's a really complex issue, even for an organization or a program that's supposed to support this, quote unquote, target population. Right. But on the other hand, the same token, having this opportunity to provide just different viewpoints also allows for us to find commonalities. In some ways. I think arts and culture is really important because it also does provide an opportunity to connect and tell your stories together. So whether those are differences or similarities. I'm actually thinking about one of the projects that's ongoing; we launched this Love Letters to Boston Chinatown project after covid broke out last March, and we solicited community letters about their feelings towards Chinatown. And there was a range of responses, some that are residents of Chinatown, some people who are Chinese. I was struck by one letter; it was written by a Filipina who wrote that she came from the South and came to Boston hoping to find more community in some ways. And she was drawn to Chinatown, because she could find familiar ingredients. She is not Chinese, but for other Asian identities, Chinatown in many ways still provides a sense of comfort or familiarity or a place where they can find their own community as well.

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Regine Vital: That's really lovely, and actually it makes total sense. I'm thinking about something that Rosanna just said and how it connects. So at the Huntington Avenue Theater emblazoned above the stage is a line from Shakespeare. It says above the stage 'to hold, as twere, the mirror up to nature.' I feel like in this sort of story, when we're figuring out home, where I belong, where I'm from, how that place reflects myself back to me or doesn't. This feels like a paradox for me. Whenever I -- like Michael, I love theater. I'm an actor as well. I love performing. But whenever I'm in a theater, I'm so, so insanely aware of how much of what I come from is not necessarily present in that space. And so I'm thinking about responsibility, whether it's as an artist, whether it's a somebody working to provide certain community services, or provide an artistic space so that community's culture and art is preserved. And I know, as I said, we should not feel the burden of telling these stories.

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Speaker 12: But I'm guess I'm wondering what happens if we don't.

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Cynthia Yee: It's an interesting question. I'm kind of thinking a lot about this question of where I come from and where I came home. And I was born in Tokyo, but I also grew up in Singapore and then also Irvine, California, which is the setting of the play. I came from a place of everyone looked like me for the majority of my formative years. And then even in Irvine, Irvine is a 50 percent Asian-American population or Asian/Asian-American population, because there's also non-citizens that live in Irvine. So coming to Boston was this weird experience of, you know, I thought it would be a place of culture, it's the place, the first library of these great colleges. And then I came here and found how segregated each of the communities was. And part of me was having trouble distinguishing for a long time. Is this

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because I'm studying theater, and the theater program is a majority white program? And so the experience that I'm having of Boston is a very white experience of Boston because of the theater program -- or is that just Boston itself? And so it's been a very difficult process of really trying to decide, like what is my experience as an Asian-American in Boston studying theater, and then what is my experience as just an Asian-American in Boston? And I think those two things are actually really separate. And so it kind of goes back to that: how do we hold these two things at the same time? But the way that I found it is there is a community I mean, I think I know everyone on this call. I've been in the same room as everyone in this call previously. We have these opportunities to meet and have an exchange of ideas and to be in community with one another, like the work that Cynthia Woo does with the Pao Arts Center. I'm a huge fan, and I love Chinatown. I go there for my food all the time. And so there are a little places where it's like, this isn't what I'm used to. This is different than home because it feels like I'm going to like a little pocket. But once you actually find that little pocket, it's like a little slice of home that feels good.

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Regine Vital: Cynthia Yee, if you would.

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Cynthia Yee: Well, I think it's sort of a personal journey. I'm definitely a child of Chinatown and also a child of the 60s, the civil rights movement. And Chinatown's not a place where you're supposed to be protesting against the elders, OK? But which all the organizations, including Pao, were founded by my peers, my generation -- they did not exist when I was a child, and it's so wonderful, and it brings everybody in. And I think the thing about whether you should write about it, I had to leave Chinatown. They were doing outreach from Brookline. They didn't have enough Asian teachers. So they reached out, and one of the school committee members happens to be Chinese American. And she said, I need to skim the creme de la creme out of the Boston public schools, but Brookline needs you. And I took the job. And now in my retirement, I write, I'm able to have some perspective on my childhood in Chinatown -- with a lens that's not just a Chinatown lens. And I think it's important to be a witness to your peoples, the people that nurture you, that fed you, that taught you, that maybe they swore at you, but they swore at you with love. I feel that it's important for me to resurrect all the wonderful things about my childhood in a way that's understandable to people of many cultures, to touch people of many cultures. So I grew up with two realities. I learned, and that's my story is about, how a child can learn about two realities, one for the white world and one for the Chinese world. And there's something to be said for that.

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Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro: I think it's very important for me and for probably others, even more so, to respond to these periodic waves of racism that come across this country. I mean, we've been at war in Japan and Korea and Vietnam, and we're often perceived as the enemy. So I think it's important for everyone to write about this, to protest and so on. Things are very different now. I mean, we're lucky now that there are so many good Asian actors here. There are two Asian American theater groups that are very strong. There's so many things now that encourage you to do this. Now, in my day, I put on a internment camp play -- and I think it was 1988. And the thing is that the nuclear family in the internment camp, the father was Jewish, the mother was Portuguese, the daughter was Italian, and the son was black. That was the number of Asian actors that were in town back then. When I wanted to submit

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something to the Magic Theater for an Asian-American festival. First they thought, 'well, no,' because it's a play about a Latin American dictatorship. The way they saw that was to make all the Latin Americans Asians. So it's very strange. The American ambassador and all the Americans were white, all the diplomats -- and all the people in Latin America were Asian. And then the reviewer said, 'well, I guess she must know what she's talking about because she's married to a Latin American.' And so, you know, I mean, things are so different then that one didn't feel very encouraged to write on these subjects. But now I think there's no excuse. And it's so important always to do this.

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Regine Vital: There's this way in which that is such a multicultural, multi-ethnic cast. But also. No, that's not how that's supposed to work. That's such -- it's so interesting. And Cynthia, you're not necessarily coming to this conversation as an artist, but I think as a cultural arts organization that I think probably feels that responsibility as part of their mission. How are you thinking about this? What happens if there is no Pao Arts center? I don't want to think about that. But what happens if there isn't?

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Cynthia Yee: There wasn't.

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Cynthia Yee: There wasn't, right. [laughter] I want to think more of the question: what happens if we don't have the ability to tell the stories of this community? And I think I want to draw back more and talk a little bit about why we were founded and how Chinatown plays a pivotal role, to lots of individuals in this Boston area. You know, it's an area where people can receive services in their home languages, and feel comfortable, and communicate clearly. It's a cultural hub, even if you're not Chinese, even if you don't live in Chinatown, a lot of people feel connected. And what does that mean? What is the health implications of that? What is the importance of belonging to a community and finding a place where you feel not like an outsider, or more like home? So thinking about that, like what happens if Chinatown is threatened, which we all know, like many neighborhoods in Boston, you know, we have gentrification, displacement, now resurrection of racism against the community due to the pandemic, covid-19 pandemic. So what happens if these stories are lost, or what happens with these connections aren't able to be formed. And I think the beautiful thing about Pao Arts Center, why we really exist, why it's a partnership between organizations that aren't cultural organizations. You know, Asian Community Development Corporation, as a developer, recognizing the importance of arts and culture. Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center is a social service agency. You know, Bunker Hill as an education institution. Our South Cove community health center as a health organization. Why we all think that this is so vital to Chinatown is because there is a basic understanding that arts and culture are essential to a person's well-being. You can't have a strong family. You can't have a strong individual without a strong neighborhood. And arts and culture plays such a huge part in all of these facets to create strength.

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Regine Vital: You had said this earlier, actually, Michael, about that line that Jennifer, she looks at Albert and she says, 'regardless of what anyone else thinks, look around you, Albert. We're home. This is our home.' I think everything that we've talked about today is speaks directly to that. And especially that those closing points from Cynthia. Oh, gosh, this was so

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great. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for bringing your perspectives and your experiences and your talents and skills to this conversation.

00:26:37

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 Cynthia Woo, Michael Hisamoto, Cynthia Yee, and Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro. 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://HuntingtonTheatreDotOrg). If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us wherever you found this series. Thank you so much for listening.