

Wesleyan University

The Honors College

sometime, perfect
&
**Becoming Singaporean and Asian:
Performance of Chineseness and Queerness via
Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own***

by

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Xue 1

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Foreword.....	4
<i>sometime, perfect</i>	7
Becoming Singaporean and Asian: Performance of Chineseness and Queerness via Chay Yew's <i>A Language of Their Own</i>	90
Abstract.....	90
Introduction.....	92
Roots or Routes: Where is the Play <i>Really</i> From.....	98
Performing Chineseness through (Trans)localization.....	105
Becoming Asian: Queering the Nation-State.....	114
Conclusion.....	125
Works Cited.....	127

Xue 2

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Xue 3

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Xue 4

Foreword

Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* was the first play I ever read that addresses what it is like to be both Asian and queer. Now usually known as an Asian-American, Chay Yew has an international background that is similar to mine: we both grew up in Asias¹ and studied in the U.S. That is how my interest in transnational studies, critical race studies, queer studies and theater studies began to intersect with one another and culminated in the thesis. It includes both an original play *sometime, perfect* and an essay "Becoming Singaporean and Asian: Performance of Chineseness and Queerness via Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*".

My play is unapologetically Asian, queer and transnational, set in both U.S. and China about a Chinese queer singer-songwriter's quest for love and performance. The research for my essay started with me wondering whether *A Language of Their Own* has been produced outside of the U.S. and whether it had a similar impact overseas. My research and my play are not only connected in their discussions around Chineseness, queerness and transnationality, but I also learned three unique ways of viewing things from my research that have contributed to my playwriting process.

First, relationality.

¹ Inspired Eng-Beng Lim's approach in his book *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, I use the plural "Asias" in my thesis to not only indicate that the geographical term "Asia" was arbitrarily projected by Europeans, but also acknowledge the vast range of cultures, identities, religions, ethnicities, indigeneities in Asian countries.

Xue 5

Minor transnationalism offers a relational approach to view spaces, movements, as well as power. As a Chinese international student studying in the U.S., I could identify as or be identified as part of the minority. However, among Asians or Asian Americans, Chinese are also the majority. In mainland China or Singapore, a Han-Chinese would be considered as one of the “majority”, but in Malaysia or Indonesia, Han Chinese would become one of the “minority” again. Meanwhile, Southeast Asian countries are minoritized in relation to the global powers such as U.S., U.K. or China, but among themselves, Singapore becomes majoritized as a result of its economic power. A relational approach provides more ambiguities in minor-to-minor relations, and adds more nuances to the minority discourse and identity politics. In the play, Chase’s hybrid identity, a queer immigrant from China, creates different socio-political meanings as he crosses the border. While being in the U.S. makes him the ethnic minority and being in China makes him the ethnic majority, his queer identity further complicates this majority-minority politics.

Second, mobility.

Mobility suggests movement across different spaces and identities. In order for a minor transnational network to operate, the ability to move is often the assumption. This means that regardless of whether one is a minority or majority in any given space, there is an element of privilege in being able to move around in the world (willingly). In the play, Chase is a more privileged character because he is able to run away from a repressive system and pursue higher education in the U.S., but Jay who lacks mobility does not have the resources he

Xue 6

needs. However, due to a relational view of their identities, they each have their own advantages respectively. In the end of the play, both characters are able to reconcile their identity as a minority, either Chinese or queer, in each of the spaces they live in.

Third, temporality.

Time is also a significant element in both my essay and my play. For example, Singapore has different time phases in queer movements on stage. Each production of *A Language of Their Own* at different times provides different social-political meanings. In my play, temporality becomes salient because there is a division among the past, the present and the future. The relationship between Wei Ning and Jay changes over time. Lee's attitude towards her son's sexuality also changes over time. Time provides distance, healing, understanding, and change.

Therefore, all of these three elements, relationality, mobility and temporality, suggest an openness that deconstructs the rigidity in today's identity politics and nationalist politics on stage. One question that has been on my mind for at least the past two years is that why theaters in America are always about America, strengthening the particular "American" multiculturalism, liberalism, and nationalism. Especially in an increasingly globalized society, why can't we let go of the nation-state system and truly imagine a community beyond barriers, borders, and boundaries? Because the truth is, there is no border in being Chinese, there is no border in being queer, and there is no border in being human.

Xue 7

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Characters Description:

Chase 24 year old Chinese queer singer-songwriter, based in New York City.

Wei Ning young Chase who used to go by his Chinese name, only exists in the memories of Chase.

Jay high school classmate of Wei Ning, lives in Shanghai, China.

Lee Chase's mother, 58 years old, lives in Shanghai, China.

Notes on styles:

/: interruption

Italicized: with emphasis, or lyrics that meant to be sung when noticed.

CAPS: very loud

(in parentheses): English translation

Notes on casting:

All characters should be played by actors of Chinese descent, which applies to both Han-Chinese and ethnic minorities, in China or part of the Chinese diaspora.

Additional Acknowledgements:

This play does not intend to represent any Asian or queer voices but my own, plus the thoughts that have been racing through my head in bed each night.

Xue 8

ACT 1

SCENE 1

The theater, with a grand piano in the center of stage. No other set on stage. No fancy costume. Minimal lights.

CHASE sits by the piano.

CHASE

Good evening.

Welcome to the theater.

My stage name is Chase.

I'm your performer tonight.

Maybe I have been known as the Chinese singer-songwriter.

The proud "Asian" "queer" artist

Or maybe the one who had found his true love and happiness.

But after everything had happened,

I no longer know how to find the right words to describe... myself.

If you take a moment to just close your eyes.

Close your eyes with me.

Remember the last time you felt you were in love.

Remember the last time you felt truly happy, complete and content.

For some of you, it maybe today, it maybe last week, or it could be a long time ago.

But it was so good, that you would do anything,

to keep it with you,

forever.

That you want to spend your whole life remembering.

Just remembering,

The memory of love.

CHASE glides his fingers on the keys and starts humming. Then shortly, humming into a melody, a phrase, a song.

CHASE (sings)

The memory of Love

In the heat of July

The blue dream

Covering up the sky.

Xue 9

*The lost voices
Chanting in the shadow of cries
The lonely bird
Wearing a suit of disguise
Fly
Fly higher
Fly away
Fly farther*

CHASE continues to play the piano.

CHASE

I lost the person who I love and who used to love me. It's like everything around me keeps moving on and on, but I am back again on a journey of seeking who I am. What am I?

A lonely star that's not bright enough to light up the dark sky.

A drop of water that's not strong enough to stir a ripple in the still pond.

A person who tries to save the world but fails to realize that the world keeps on spinning without his own existence.

Music stops.

An audience member (played by WEI NING) stands up, looking at CHASE.

CHASE looks at him.

Then the audience member (WEI NING) leaves the theater.

CHASE

Why am I even telling you about any of this.

I know you probably don't have time to hear me tell these ... stories.

You will forget them all the next morning.

But I will remember.

It will help me remember.

Because when something ends,

All one has left is memories.

If they don't chase after the memories fast,

They will fade away.

Forever.

So.

If you could.

If you *all* could stay here and hear me out.

Be my audience.

Xue 10

Pretend.
Just for one night.

That's what all of us can do, right?
Pretend to be someone that we're not.
After all, this is all a performance.

JAY suddenly appears, in CHASE's memory.

JAY
Wei Ning, I'm leaving you.

*CHASE takes a deep breath and leans his body towards the piano.
He plays a series of arpeggios with dramatic motions of his arms.*

Then.

We hear bells.

Sound of drone.

Plane landing.

All sounds come together into one heavy noise, then stop.

CHASE *(watches JAY, sings)*
Just fly away, fly away with me.

Xue 11

SCENE 2

CHASE looks up.

A memory of CHASE appears.

The theater is transformed into an old yet majestic house in Shanghai. The grand piano becomes part of the living room, placed right under a fancy chandelier. WEI NING stands by the piano, teaching JAY to sing a phrase that he recently wrote.

CHASE is still sitting on the bench by the piano, watches them, but they can't see CHASE.

WEI NING *(sings)*

Just fly away, fly away with me.

JAY

Just fly away, fly away –

(speaks)

how does the last bit go again?

WEI NING

(sings, to demonstrate)

fly away with me.

(speaks)

It's a G and then an A.

JAY

You're speaking a foreign language to me.

WEI NING

I forgot you don't know how to read music.

JAY

I don't know how to speak proper English either.

WEI NING

But you're getting better!

JAY

Wei Ning, you know, I'm always amazed by your musical talent.

Xue 12

WEI NING

Oh, it's nothing.

JAY

I'm serious.

You are the only person I know who can put notes together into a melody.

It's like weaving various of threads of all colors and textures into a beautiful scarf, or a fluffy and soft blanket.

Do you want to be a musician in the future?

WEI NING

Yes I plan to go to a music school.

JAY

Which one?

WEI NING

Probably Juilliard, Berkeley/... maybe

JAY

In the U.S.?

WEI NING

Yes.

JAY

Any school *here*?

WEI NING

Here in - Shanghai?

JAY

Yes. Here.

WEI NING

Is that where you plan to stay? Here?

JAY

I've always wanted to go to the U.S.

Maybe just for a visit though.

Xue 13

WEI NING

I can stay here with you.

JAY

No.

I don't want to stop you from chasing after your dream.

WEI NINGBut *you* are my dream.**JAY**

Stop.

WEI NING

No I mean it.

WEI NING (*sings*)

*If the whole world is just you and me
I will hold you close against me faithfully
You are my dream and my destiny
I will take care of you until the end*

*WEI NING's face gets very close to JAY's, almost touches his.
They breathe in together and they almost kiss each other.
CHASE is in the light, silently watching them.*

JAY

Did you make up that melody just now?

WEI NING

Yeah.

JAY

That's so cool.
You will be the next Wang Leehom!

WEI NING

Thanks.

Xue 14

JAY

You know, you will be a great character in my story.

WEI NING

What story?

JAY

When I grow up, I want to be a writer, to write stories.

Stories that are untold.

Stories that deserve to be written.

Stories about us.

You and me.

WEI NING

What happens in your stories?

JAY

Ha, just like you, your character will be a musician, a pianist.

Grew up in this majestic house.

Making the most beautiful music in Shanghai.

WEI NING

But who happens to deeply fall in love with you.

A moment.

WEI NING

You know,

You could come with me.

JAY

What?

WEI NING

Jay.

Come to the U.S. with me

We can be a writing duo.

You write the lyrics.

I write the music.

Together, we will write stories.

Xue 15

JAY

I don't know.

(pause)

No I can't.

WEI NING

Why not?

JAY *(a little embarrassed)*

I have this thing with being on a ...

On a plane.

WEI NING

What thing?

JAY

I have this symptom...

It's really weird.

I wish I know how to explain.

I just get very floaty.

WEI NING

Floaty?

JAY

Yeah.

I just feel very disoriented.

WEI NING

You get airsick?

JAY

Yes! That's right!

WEI NING

You've never been on a plane before.

JAY *(exposed)*

What?

Xue 16

WEI NING

I know you can't afford a ticket.

JAY

That's /not true...

WEI NING

You don't have to lie about your financial background.
You know, on your "casio" watch, the logo is spelled wrong.

JAY *(checks his watch)*

Isn't it K-A-S-I-O?

WEI NING

No it starts with a C.

JAY

Sorry my English is bad.

WEI NING

You don't have to be sorry.

JAY is embarrassed.

Pause.

WEI NING

Where did you get this watch?

JAY

The marketplace next to where I live...
It's like a ...
A place with all kinds of fake brands.
You can find really luxurious products like Gucci, Armani for only 30 kuai.

WEI NING

Yeah I've seen those before.
But they always spell their brands wrong.
Like "Gussi", "Armarni", or even "Abidas".

Xue 17

JAY (*tries to laugh awkwardly*)
I guess so.

WEI NING
Sorry I wasn't trying to make fun/ of ...

JAY
No no no.
I didn't think you were.

WEI NING
Okay.

JAY
I'm sorry I lied.

Pause.

WEI NING
No worries.

*WEI NING puts his hand on JAY's face, feels the energy and heat on JAY's body.
Another moment between them.*

WEI NING
I'm so glad you're here.

JAY
I'm glad too.

WEI NING puts his hand down, a little bit worried.

JAY
Is everything okay?

WEI NING is quiet.

JAY
Where are your parents?

Xue 18

WEI NING

They're busy.

JAY

Busy with work?

WEI NING

No.

Busy fighting.

Pause.

JAY

Are ... things okay?

WEI NING

I don't know.

JAY

Have they always been fighting?

WEI NING

Yes

But this time it's... it's pretty bad.

JAY

What happened?

WEI NING

I told them that I'm going to study music in the States.

Well my dad is... so he's the powerhouse of the family. He said as a grown up man, I have to stay here to take care of my mom and the family.

But my mom... of course she wants me to keep her company all the time because I'm the only child, but she says that she doesn't need me or my dad to take care of her.

So they got into a huge fight. My dad blames my mom for being irresponsible. And my mom blames my dad for being too conservative.

This is not their first fight.

I don't think my mom and dad really love one another. You know.

Xue 19

One day they just don't talk to each other at all as if they're having this cold war. And then a week after, all they do is curse at each other. My mom doesn't even want my dad to touch her.
I don't see why they still haven't gotten divorced.

JAY

Whoa.

WEI NING

Yeah I don't know how they got together in the first place. Arranged marriage perhaps.
I think they got married without even knowing each other.
It's like they're forced to get married, forced to sleep with each other, forced to have a child, and forced to keep the family together.
Why can't they just realize that they don't have to do this if they don't want to?
Why can't they just do what they want?

JAY

They are just being parents.

WEI NING

Are your parents like this too?

JAY

Well.

My parents don't really fight.
But they never express their love to each other.
They just ...
You know.
Happen to be together.
And live their lives.

WEI NING

I guess my parents are just living their lives too.
But it doesn't really work that way.

JAY

They probably have a lot on their minds.

Xue 20

WEI NING

Like what?

JAY

You?

Maybe they don't want to hurt you.

WEI NING

To be honest, I don't care.

I don't really care if they get a divorce.

I think it's better if they divorce.

JAY

That would be sad for them to hear.

WEI NING

I don't care what they think.

JAY

But they care about you.

WEI NINGAnd all I care about is *you*.**JAY**I don't know if I deserve *that* much attention.**WEI NING**

Of course you do.

*Bang bang bang on the door.**WEI NING and JAY are startled. JAY stands up immediately.***JAY**

Who is it?

WEI NING

No one.

Xue 21

JAY

Wei Ning, are we safe in here?

WEI NING

Yes. I promise we are safe.

LEE

魏宁 (Wei Ning)

魏宁 (Wei Ning)

你在里面吗? (Are you in there?)

*Bang bang bang.***LEE**

快打开门(Open the door)

我知道你在里面(I know you're in there)

魏宁(Wei Ning)

*CHASE still watches them.***LEE**

Just open the door.

Can you hear me!

能听到我吗?

*More bang bang bang.**WEI NING and JAY disappear.*

Xue 22

SCENE 3

The theater.

LEE opens the door of the theater and enters with her luggage.

LEE *(to the audience)*

看到魏宁了吗？(has anyone seen Wei Ning?)

People see Wei Ning here?

LEE keeps walking forward until she spots her son.

They look at each other in a very long silence.

LEE

魏宁(Wei Ning)

CHASE

Mother.

An awkward pause.

Then LEE comes closer to CHASE.

LEE

儿子(Son)

你怎么样啊？(How are you?)

好久都没有见到你了！(I haven't seen you for so long!)

CHASE

I go by Chase now.

LEE

Chase?

为什么叫这么个名字？(Why do you call this name?)

CHASE

It's my stage name.

LEE *(practicing saying the name in different ways, but it sounds weirder each time)*

Chase.

Chase?

Xue 23

Chase.

CHASE

Mom, you are in the middle of my performance.

LEE

What performance?

CHASE

It's a one-man show.

(refer to the audience)

And these people here are all watching me to perform.

LEE

Ah yes. I remember.

That's why I come here.

(look at the audience)

So many people.

CHASE

So what exactly brought you here?

Slight pause.

LEE

Ah... ...

What it can be?

I not want to disturb you.

Just...

Five years.

I not see you.

You fly away.

Fly away from mom.

You fly so long, so far.

Away from home...

CHASE

But mom, you know *this* is where I belong.

Xue 24

LEE

I know.
That why I come here.
To visit you.
And you are here alone.
You need someone take care for you.
Clean your room for you.
Cook for you.

CHASE

Mom.

LEE

Mom make xiaolongbao for you.
Your favorite dumplings.

CHASE

Mom no need.
I'm not hungry.

LEE

Okay.
But what can I do for you?
You must need something.

CHASE

You know,
You have never seen me perform right?

*Pause.***LEE**

No.

CHASE

(to the audience, in a more performative voice)
My lovely audience.
We have a special guest tonight.
My mother.
She will join you as an audience to hear me narrate my stories.

Xue 25

LEE

But Wei Ning, / I come...

CHASE

Mother.

You didn't know your son when he grew up.

Now he's grown.

It's not too late to listen.

LEE finds a seat to sit.

Xue 26

SCENE 4

The house in Shanghai. Return to where we left off at the end of Scene 2.

JAY sees CHASE.

JAY stares at CHASE as if something is not right.

JAY *(to CHASE)*

Tell me who it is.

CHASE is shocked that JAY talks to him.

JAY

Tell me who it is!

WEI NING appears.

WEI NING *(to JAY)*

My mom.

JAY *(to WEI NING)*

Does she know that I'm here?

WEI NING

No.

JAY

Then what if she finds out?

WEI NING

She won't.

JAY

It can happen.

WEI NING

I said, she won't!

JAY

I'm not like you.

Xue 27

Beat.

WEI NING

What do you mean?

JAY

I can't even risk letting my mom know about us.

WEI NING

Hey!

I don't want my family to know either.

JAY

I don't want *anyone* to know.

WEI NING

We can keep it a secret for now.

JAY

I don't like the fact that we're sneaking around.

WEI NING

What?

JAY

The other day, my mom said to me, "you're still young, you should focus on studying, especially the Gao Kao², the college entrance examination is coming up. We need you to get in to a good college, a *top* college".

WEI NING

"And getting into a good college will get you a good job, and then you will get a good wife, a good family who will take care of your parents, then you will have good children who will take care of you."

JAY

Exactly.

² Gao Kao 高考 means College Entrance Examination. It's a really big deal in China. The rest of your life pretty much depends on how much score you get in Gao Kao.

Xue 28

WEI NING

Isn't that boring?

JAY

Yes, but that's what life is.

LEE

Ha! Truth.

*CHASE stares at LEE.***WEI NING**

Is that any different from waiting to die?

JAY

What?

WEI NING

Don't listen to her.

JAY

I got to.

WEI NING

Why?

JAY

Because she's my mom.

LEE (to CHASE)

And you listen to me.

I am your mom too.

CHASE

Shhh.

WEI NING

Why don't you just come with me?

Xue 29

JAY

What?

WEI NING

Let's leave everything behind.

You know parents never truly care about their children.

They're just being selfish because they want their children to take care of them when they get old.

Come to the U.S. with me. Let's ... run away.

JAY

It won't be that easy.

WEI NING

I will pay for the ticket.

JAY

I just told /you

WEI NING

You have airsickness.

JAY

No.

I need to take care of my family.

WEI NING

Don't you want to be with me?

JAY

Yes, but what I'd need is more than just a ticket.

The tuition in America is so expensive.

WEI NING

There are scholarships.

JAY

But I don't know anything about America.

Xue 30

WEI NING

I will help you figure it out.

Let's go to New York.

Let's go breathe the fresh air, embrace the freedom, and celebrate being ourselves.

For who we are.

Beat.

JAY (*assertive*)

You know, maybe things are happening too quickly between us.

WEI NING

Too quickly?

JAY

Maybe we got together on a whim.

WEI NING

A whim.

JAY

Like some kind of a random idea that came to my head, and I was like, "maybe I should try spending time with a guy, just to see how it feels."

WEI NING

You've been just trying things out?

JAY

Do you know Maia?

WEI NING

From grade 10?

JAY

She asked me out the other day.

WEI NING

What did you say?

Xue 31

JAY

I said let me think about it.

WEI NING

Do you even like her?

JAY

I think she's smart.

WEI NING

Then do you like being with me?

JAY

I do.

I don't know sometimes why I have feelings for both guys and girls.

WEI NING

That's normal.

JAY

You don't hate me?

WEI NING

No.

But remember I like you more than anyone else in the world.

JAY

I think /

WEI NING puts his hand on JAY's chest

A loving moment.

JAY can't help kissing WEI NING.

A very long kiss.

CHASE appears from the dark again.

WEI NING

Do you not like that?

CHASE

Do you not like that.

Xue 32

JAY

I just don't know what to do.

WEI NING

It's okay.

JAY

I can't tell my parents about us.

WEI NING

Hey, we can take it slow.

JAY

Yeah.

WEI NING

Do you love me?

JAY

What.

CHASE walks closer to them.

CHASE

Say you love me.

JAY

I don't know if I should.

CHASE is right behind them.

WEI NING

What if we both forget what we should or should not do, just follow the voices of our hearts.

They stare into each other's eyes.

JAY

I think I'm in love with you.

Xue 33

WEI NING

I'm in love with you too.

They kiss again.

JAY

But we got to be careful next time.

WEI NING

I promise.

JAY and WEI NING disappear from CHASE's memory.

Xue 34

SCENE 5

The theater.

CHASE *(sings)*

*If the whole world is just you and me
I will hold you close against me faithfully
You are my dream and my destiny
I will take care of you until the end
We will travel around the world
We will sail across the ocean
We will step to every shore
Cause, you are mine
If the sky is turning grey
If a storm is on its way
No matter what month or day
Hey, I am yours
You said it so
You said you loved me
You said it so
Don't leave me yet
You said it so
You said it*

LEE

How come your songs always too sad. Too depressing.

CHASE

Well, many of the great queer artists are a little bit depressed.
Vincent van Gogh.
Tchaikovsky.
Leslie /Cheung.

LEE

Your songs, not always.

CHASE

How do you know?

Xue 35

LEE

I hear your songs, from the past.

CHASE

But how?

LEE

I follow you for a long time, in the last five years.

CHASE

What?

LEE

I see your early performance on Instagram.

The songs you write before.

They are beautiful.

They are *you*.

CHASE

Well they are no longer me now...

A lot of things have changed since five years ago.

LEE

But you the same.

CHASE

No.

LEE

You the same person.

You just forget.

CHASE

That's not true.

LEE

I show you.

CHASE

How do you show me?

Xue 36

LEE

I tell *you* stories.
When you are born.
When you first walk, first speak, first sing.
Mom know these stories best.

CHASE

I don't want to hear your stories.
The kind of stories that make me feel bad about my decision to leave the family.

*Beat.***LEE**

I know you break up with Jay.

CHASE

How do you know?

LEE

I can tell you hurt.
I know how much he means to you.
You know I always like Jay.

CHASE

No you didn't.

LEE

I like him.

CHASE

But you never wanted him to be in the house.

LEE

Well that's because your ... well that's the past.
I think he is very responsible. Care about his family. Even when he hang with you.
I wish you more like him.

CHASE

Maybe that's why we broke up.

Xue 37

Beat.

LEE

Do he ever tell his parents?
About his ... gay thing?

CHASE

You meant come out.

LEE

Yes.

CHASE

No I don't think so.
I wanted him to,
So that he could just come to the U.S. with me.
But it doesn't really matter anymore.

LEE

You out come to us.
Do you still remember?

CHASE

It's coming out.

LEE

Whatever it is.
Is that also part of your performance?

CHASE

No.

LEE

Why not.

CHASE

Not every queer story has to be about coming out.
It's the same narrative we hear over and over again.
We don't have to tell the same story every time.

Xue 38

It's getting old.

LEE

It might old for you.
Never old for us.
First time I ever hear the word.
Gay.

CHASE

But I *don't* want to talk about that experience.

LEE

Selfish!
These people deserve to know!

CHASE

Do you know how much pain it comes with?
Every night when I close my eyes in bed, I still have vivid memories of that day.
Every single word I said, every single sound I made, every breath I took, and every
reaction you and dad had.
How could I ever forget.
I have tears coming out of my eyes each time when I think about it.

LEE

Then share it to them, to me.
Let it out.
You need to let your pain out.
Then the story will be about joy.
And also... emper... empow... what that word again?
Emperorment?

CHASE

Empowerment.

LEE

Yes
You young people love that word.

CHASE

You know what.

Xue 39

I've grown up.
I don't have to keep thinking about my coming out story.
Be it successful or not.

Beat.

LEE takes out a letter.

CHASE

What is it?

LEE (*reads from the letter*)

Dear mom and dad,
How have you been,

CHASE

What did you find this?

LEE

I know that you've been working hard for me
To have a better life.

CHASE

Stop reading it.

WEI NING appears on stage.

WEI NING

*Dear mom and dad,
How have you been,
I know that you've been working hard for me
To have a better life.*

LEE (*to CHASE*)

You know
We never say it to you.
but ...
We very proud of you for coming out.

Xue 40

SCENE 6*The house.*

WEI NING *(sings from a letter)*
But that's not the life I wanted
Not even a single part of it
There's something that seems missing
In your story

I just want to say it to you
I've always wanted to tell you
I'm gay
I hope that's okay
Dear mom and dad

The house.
JAY appears on stage and watches WEI NING play and sing. They look a bit older than they were in the previous scenes (maybe their hairstyles or clothes look more mature).
CHASE and LEE both watch the memory.

JAY
Wei Ning.
Sorry for interrupting you.
It's a beautifully written song.
But are you actually planning to sing this to your mom and dad?

WEI NING
I don't think I want to hide anymore.
I want to tell them, with pride.

JAY
Pride?

WEI NING
I think it's time.
For me to tell my family.
About me.

JAY
Are you sure this is a good idea?

Xue 41

WEI NING

I have thought about this for a long time. I can't wait any longer.

This is the family that I have been bearing since I was born. The dad who has always been asking me to man up, to take care of the family, to take responsibility, to not cry. The mom who sees me as if I am part of her project.

A "perfect" family.

The family that has been built upon lies and distrust and pretense. Well if no one speaks their truths, then we all make unwilling compromises for a goal that will never be reached.

(pause)

But today will be different. I will take off the mask that I've been wearing. I will reveal who I am. Who I really am.

They raised me as their heterosexual son, someone who they hope to marry someone, have children and pass their genes on and on forever. Well. It doesn't work that way, at least not for me. They failed because they are not even happy living with each other, and I will fail too because I'm in love with you.

(Pause)

You know, I don't understand why we have to maintain this fake idea of family, like it is something that will never change. Well it is time to change.

Are you with me?

JAY

What do you think they might say?

WEI NING

I don't know.

But I'm ready to face.

Whatever they say,

I want to start opening up a new relationship with my parents, that is about transparency and honesty.

I want to take back control of what I am and what I will be.

I want them to listen, and hopefully accept this new version of me.

JAY

Will you tell your parents about us?

WEI NING

Xue 42

No.

JAY

I'm just a little /worried.

WEI NING

No one will know.

Trust me.

JAY

I've been sleeping over at your house.

WEI NING

I assure you.

They won't know about us.

JAY

They will have doubts.

WEI NING

I promise.

Beat.

JAY

I am truly proud of you.

WEI NING

It's all because of you.

I will not have done this without you.

JAY

You know, in the Gao Kao English test, there was a question about tense.

They asked us to make a sentence with *will have been*.

Future perfect.

Perfect comes from Latin, it just means completion.

Things are only perfect when they are complete.

And they can only be complete in the future.

Xue 43

WEI NING

What sentence did you make?

JAY

We will have achieved our dream before we die.

WEI NING

Well that's very optimistic.

JAY

Of course. As long as we keep chasing, keep going, keep working hard.
No matter where we are now, one day, our dreams will come true.
And that'd be perfect.

WEI NING

But nothing is really perfect because if you look at the things around you, nothing is really complete. Families, marriages, relationships.
Everything has a gap inside engulfing the sense of completion that we try to achieve.
So we can only try to complete it, but it will never be complete.

JAY

But I know it will.
Some time.
Some where.
In the future.
(Pause)
Trust me.

WEI NING

I hope it will be perfect tomorrow.

JAY

I'm sure it will.

They kiss.

WEI NING lays his arm around JAY's shoulder. They both lie on the mattress and look up to the ceiling.

With tenderness and sweetness.

They close their eyes, into their sleep.

Xue 44

CHASE appears and plays the piano. Peacefully and calmly. With love.

With CHASE continuing to play the piano, while the lights on CHASE stay on, the majestic house becomes dark.

Then slowly sun light squeezes into the room in the morning. We see WEI NING getting up from the bed, but JAY is already gone. WEI NING has made up his mind.

He makes his way to the door.

He opens.

WEI NING

Mom and Dad.

I have something to say.

Lights off on WEI NING.

LEE stands up in the audience, looking at CHASE from afar. The three of them are in a beautiful formation – LEE looking at CHASE looking at WEI NING.

WEI NING appears on stage again, speaks while CHASE plays the piano.

WEI NING

爸妈,

(Mom and Dad).

有一件事情我一直都想告诉你们,

(I have something that I've always wanted to tell you)

我很早之前就想告诉你们了

(Since a long time ago)

可是一直没有勇气 and 机会,

(But I haven't had the courage and the chance)

我不想再隐藏下去了。

(I don't want to hide it any longer)

我只是想让你们了解我真实的自己。

(I just want the two of you to start to get to know who I really am)

我是同性恋,

(I am gay)

我知道这个可能,

(I know this is probably...)

Xue 45

不在你们的价值观范围之内。

(Beyond your belief system)

但是,

(But)

我一出生就是这样的,

(I was born this way)

无法改变。

(I can't change the way I am)

我只是想让我未来的生活幸福、快乐、自由。

(I just want my future to be happy and free)

我, 就是我。

(I am what I am)

Lights off on WEI NING.

CHASE continues to play, non-stop. As if nothing in the world continues other than his music.

LEE

(comes to closer to CHASE, worried.)

Chase.

Chase!

CHASE doesn't see her, he keeps playing the music.

LEE touches CHASE, moves CHASE, tries to get CHASE's attention, but regardless of what she does, CHASE still doesn't see her.

LEE

Chase!!!

CHASE stops the music.

A very long silence.

Xue 46

SCENE 7*The theater.***CHASE**

Are you ashamed of me?

LEE

Why do you say that?

CHASE

You're ashamed of your son.

LEE

No how could /I..

CHASE

Then why did you try to evoke my pain from the past? This show is supposed to be about how Jay and I fell in love so I could...

But why did you want me to remember the *pain*?*(They interrupt each other in the next bit of dialogue)***LEE**

No. I want you to know that /I am.

CHASE

What is it?

LEE

I just want you to be /happy.

CHASE

Why are you here?

Why are you messing around with my life?

LEE

Because ...

CHASE

Xue 47

Tell me.

LEE

Because I want you to come *home* with me.

Beat.

CHASE

There it is.

(pause)

I thought we're done with it.

I thought you changed.

I thought you understood that THIS IS MY HOME.

I don't know how many times/ I have to explain.

LEE

It's your father.

CHASE

I don't want to hear anything about my father.

LEE

Chase you not know how much your father and I miss you.

I miss not see you every day.

I miss not hear your voice every day.

Your father too.

Five years passed.

Can you come back to us?

CHASE

Back?

Back to the pretense?

The lies?

To not being myself?

LEE

No that's not what I mean.

(pause)

We,

So close back then.

Xue 48

CHASE

But that wasn't me.

*(pause)*I had to *pretend* to be close with you.*Beat.***LEE**

No.

CHASE

You made assumptions about me.

LEE

No remind me.

CHASE

You wanted me straight.

Heterosexual.

Like a man.

LEE

Can you stop bring it up?

CHASE

Just admit it.

You *preferred* me straight.**LEE**

What are you talking about?

CHASE

Don't lie to me.

Just say it.

You wanted me to change.

LEE

No.

Xue 49

CHASE
SAY IT!

Beat.
A very long pause.
LEE takes a very deep breath.

LEE
Yes.
(pause)
I did.
(Another pause)
How couldn't I?
Your dad and I want you fit the norm.
I never know I hurt you.

CHASE
But you did.

LEE
But not what I want from you anymore now.

CHASE
It's too late.

LEE
Your dad...
he change his mind also.

CHASE
That's not possible.

LEE
Trust me.
He change his mind also.

Beat.

CHASE
Remember what he said /to me?

Xue 50

LEE

They all past.
Let them stay past?

CHASE

Remember?

LEE

No need/ talk about...

CHASE

"Man up,"
"Stop crying like a little girl,"
"It's your responsibility to be strong, and to protect the family."
"Why are you still goddamn crying? Don't you know that other people call you a
sissy boy?"
"Sissy boy!"
"You're sick!"
"SICK!"

A very long silence.

CHASE

You didn't stop him.

Pause.

LEE

I know.

Another very uncomfortably long silence.

LEE

The world that your father and I used to live...
We never know this thing existed... I mean we hear about it on the news or gossips
around the neighbors, but we not know anyone in our life who is Gay.
So when you first tell us, it is beyond our minds.
You know...
It is beyond our entire belief system.

Xue 51

And then,
After your walk away.
Your father and I are lost.
We love you so much, but the fact that we not really know who you are drive us
crazy.
We not know how to fall asleep...
We not know how to eat...
We not even know how to breathe...
Knowing our beloved only child is not a part of our lives any more...
Knowing that we have lost you, disappointed you, and hurt you.

(Pause)

There is indeed a lot of anger, in the first two years.
Each time when I bring you up and maybe trying to reach you, he just start to
curse, curse, and scream and yell.
He breaks so many things in the house.
He say a lot of *horrible*, horrible things.
He then go to his study room and smoke.
Smoke all day.
Sometimes over twenty cigarettes one day.
In the end, we stop talking to each other any more.
I don't love your dad.
He don't love me.
It's better for me to live on my own.

But then,
Three months ago,
He diagnose.
Lung disease.
Doctor says the inner wall of his lung not working anymore.
The fresh air can't enter his body when he breath.

CHASE

Emphysema?

LEE

Yes

The doctor say it may progress to lung cancer.

Xue 52

I visit him again at hospital last month.
He change.
His hair fall.
His wrinkle grow.
Lying there, he's so weak, so small.
Then,
He lie on hospital bed and grab my hands, in tears.
He look at me in the eyes
He breath rapidly and tell me:
"No matter what, must find Wei Ning.
Must find Wei Ning."

Pause.

You see.
Your father not a perfect man.
He take control many things, *many* things, including a huge part of my life.
But it take courage for someone to say those things.
Especially when they are, when they know they might lose their life.
Your father love you very much.

CHASE

How is he now?

LEE

He won't be fully recovered any time soon.
But he just go back to work last week.
It will make him feel better.

CHASE

I'm glad to hear that.
I will make some time to visit him.

LEE

But Chase.

CHASE

I just said that I will make time.

LEE

Xue 53

He realize the mistake he has made.
He say he wants to see you.
Talk to you.
Now.

CHASE
He does,
or you do?

Beat.

LEE
Yes, I do too.

CHASE
Of course you do.

LEE
Chase, why don't you hear what I'm saying?

CHASE
I don't want to go back because I'm tired of pretending.

Slight pause.

LEE
You know you still pretend /now.

CHASE
You don't know me.

LEE
Chase, listen!
Take a break.
Just for a little while.
Go home.

CHASE
No.
This is my home.

Xue 54

LEE

Your *home*, this is *not*.

CHASE

Home is where the heart is.
And my heart belongs here.

LEE

But...

But I...

But I *gave* you your heart.

I gave you everything you have!

You are *mine*!

Mine!

Mine!

Mine!

(Pause).

How come you never do what I say?

Mother knows the best for you.

These people here.

They not know who you are.

They not know what you want.

CHASE

Because I don't want to be *trapped* by my very own mother.

LEE gasps.

LEE

Chase!

I *order* you.

I *require* you.

Go home!

A very long silence.

LEE *(in tears)*

Xue 55

If you not ... not follow,
I... I... *forbidden* you sing.
I *burn* your concert.
I *cut* your wings.
So you never fly away.
NEVER FLY AWAY.
(pause)
From me.

Another silence.

LEE
Chase.

Silence.

LEE
Maybe,
You change.
Maybe,
You don't need me.
Fly.
Fly *higher*.

LEE makes her way to the exit door. She looks at her son again. CHASE doesn't look back but only stares at the piano.

LEE
You not know how I live through these years without you.

LEE leaves.
CHASE looks up, in tears. But she's gone.

CHASE
Mom...

Blackout.

Xue 56

INTERMISSION

*The house lights are on.
5 minutes of break.*

*Then LEE comes on stage with her luggage while the house lights are still on.
LEE makes eye contact with the audience.*

LEE

Hi

Hi

Hello

...

Nice to meet you!

And you?

From China.

And you?

Oh my name is Lee.

And you?

Sorry.

I'm Wei Ning of mother.

No no no.

I am the mother of Wei Ning.

Last name?

Hmm.

Oh surname!

Chou.

Wei Ning Chou.

He a singer.

Yes to visit him.

I not have address.

He in New York City.

I told you he a singer!

Artist.

Xue 57

I'm his mother.
First time in America.
First time.
No
First time.
I not have address.
Not see him five years.
FIVE!
Can you let me pass?
No.
No his address.
But *my* address.
210 Grand street.
Yes Chinatown.

I told you no his address!
Told you not see him five years!
I not know!
I not know!

I miss my son!
I *want* to see my son!
I *need* to see my son!
Let me pass.
Officer.
Officer!
PLEASE!

(silence)

I'm sorry.

LEE exits.
End of intermission.
House lights off.

Xue 58

ACT II

SCENE 8

The theater.

Lights on CHASE.

CHASE *(sings to the audience)*

*My father lifted me up in the air
I touched his nose and I grabbed his hair
He scrubbed his face against my baby chin
I felt the uneven surface of his skin*

He said.

*"I can't wait for you to become a man
I can't wait for you to become a man
I can't wait for you to become a man"*

I've always felt like I'm less of a man

*My mother controlled what I do and what I wear
I followed her rules and I endured her care
If she's a doctor I'm her emergency patient
If she's a designer I'm her own creation*

She said.

*"I can't wait for you to become a man
I can't wait for you to become a man
I can't wait for you to become a man"*

I've always felt like I'm a part of her plan

I've always felt like I'm a part of their plan

As CHASE continues to play the piano, the stage becomes dark.

Xue 59

SCENE 9*Lights on.**The house.**This time the house looks more empty and spacious. There are suitcases left open on the floor.***JAY**

I will have finished my masters degree in the U.S. ten years from now.

WEI NING

I will have hosted my own concert ten years from now.

JAY

I will have published a full length novel.

WEI NING

I will have become famous and toured across the world.

JAY

We will have been engaged, or maybe even married.

WEI NING

We will have adopted children and formed a family of our own.

JAY

Your parents will have accepted you and moved to the U.S. with us.

WEI NING

What?

Do you want them to move in with us?

JAY

If that's what you want.

WEI NING

I don't know.

JAY

Sorry I didn't mean to bring it up.

Xue 60

WEI NING

It's okay.

JAY

So how are you?

After everything that has happened?

WEI NING

Slightly better.

My mom and dad still pretend that I didn't come out to them.

But as soon as I bring it up,

My dad just yells at me.

JAY

Hey don't think about it anymore.

WEI NING

I can't

I can only stop thinking about the kind of repressive family I'm in, if I get out of here.

JAY

Did you tell them?

That you're leaving.

WEI NING

No.

JAY

Maybe at least tell your mom?

WEI NING

Maybe.

JAY

Write them a note.

They will worry about you.

Xue 61

WEI NING

I don't care.

JAY

Trust me.

Give them some time.

They will come around.

*Silence.***JAY**

Your parents will have come around in the future.

WEI NING

But how far is the future from now, exactly?

JAY

It could be near, could be far.

It could also be just a blink away.

WEI NING

But we don't know for sure when it is coming, right?

JAY

Not necessarily.

Like I know for a fact that I will receive my Gao Kao score by tomorrow morning.

But on the other hand, I also don't really know how long it will take for me to actually publish my first story.

WEI NING

What can we do other than waiting?

JAY

I guess just focus on what's present, what's real?

WEI NING

You're real.

JAY

The test score will also be real.

Xue 62

Whichever school I attend, whatever path I go, everything depends on this test score.

I can't go abroad with you, so this is my only chance to pursue my dream.

WEI NING

You got this.

I believe in you.

JAY

I just ...

I really want to go to a college.

All those years of seemingly pointless preparations and studying are for this moment.

For this score.

WEI NING

I'm sure you will,

We will find out together.

JAY

Maybe I ...

Maybe I *will* write songs with you.

I want to form a songwriting team with you.

Together.

WEI NING

That would be amazing.

JAY

I'll major in English literature, creative writing or something.

WEI NING

Yes.

JAY

And then I will get a fellowship in the U.S.

So I could move in with you.

WEI NING

Yes you will.

Xue 63

*They look at each other again, and then the suitcases on the floor.
They both know they don't have much time left for each other.*

JAY

So

Are you all packed for tomorrow?

WEI NING

Just one more thing.

JAY

What is that?

WEI NING

You.

(looks at JAY)

Can I pack you with me?

JAY

You know I can't leave with you now.

WEI NING

But I don't know how to leave without you.

JAY

I'll come and visit. I promise.

I'll take part time jobs while studying in college.

I'm gonna save enough money to cover flights, hotels, and visa,/ I also need a passport.

WEI NING

You know you don't have to.

I can pay for you.

JAY

But that's *your* money.

WEI NING

So?

Xue 64

JAY

How can you make a living as an artist?

WEI NING

You don't believe me?

JAY

No I do.

But this time you are no longer relying on your family.

WEI NING

I have a scholarship.

And I will work hard.

I will buy you the real CASIO watch.

JAY

Thank you.

But I need to work as hard as you do too.

One day.

We will both be free.

WEI NING

I can't wait for it to come.

JAY

I don't know exactly when.

But,

Sometime in the future.

WEI NING

Soon enough

JAY

Perfect.

WEI NING holds JAY's hands and kisses his cheek.

WEI NING

Jay, is it okay if we just spend the rest of night with each other and nothing else?

Xue 65

JAY nods and smiles.

WEI NING

No leaving.
No Gao Kao score.
Just you and me.
You,
And,
Me.
Here and now.

CHASE (*watches*)

Perfect.

They hold each other, tight, so tight that they will never let each other go.

They look at each other in the eyes and smile.

No tears.

Just smiles.

They keep holding each other.

CHASE

On that morning, five years ago, Jay got his Gao Kao test score.
He was this close to his dream of becoming a writer, a lyricist, an artist.
But he was 10 points behind.
Just 10 points behind.
10 points means that there were over 10 thousand people ahead of him.
And it means that he couldn't get into any school that he liked.
Instead of going to a college, he went to a vocational school to become a factory worker.
So that he could get a job, feed himself and his family.
He still kept on writing, on his own, but just on his own.
He shared his stories with me, from time to time, especially the one about the musician playing the piano.
He said that he hoped to find a place to publish it, sometime in the future.

Well, on that same morning,
I left Shanghai for good.
I got a full-ride scholarship for a music school in New York.

Xue 66

But I did not tell my parents about it.
I cut contact with them.
I never came home.
I never even called them.
Or wrote to them.

I graduated last year and became a professional singer-songwriter.
I did not make enough money to buy his ticket to come here to visit.
But Jay paid on his own and attended my commencement ceremony last year.
That was the first time I saw him after...
Well after that morning.
Everything has changed since that morning.

Lights off.
WEI NING exits.

Xue 67

SCENE 10*Lights on.**It's CHASE holding JAY now, same position as the end of the last scene with WEI NING and JAY.***CHASE**

Jay would move to New York 4 years later.

We'd write songs together during the days, and have concerts occasionally in the evenings.

On the weekends, we'd have picnic in Central Park and see operas at the Lincoln Center.

We'd also try out all the Chinese restaurants in Manhattan and figure out which one is the best.

We'd get green cards and become official New Yorkers.

We'd both be winning music awards or nominations.

We'd make enough money to buy a house in Long Island.

We'd adopt a kid and live there happy ever after.

No worries.

No sadness.

Just each other.

(to JAY)

Don't you think so, Jay?

*JAY breaks off from CHASE, and exits the theater.***CHASE**

Don't you think so, Jay?

Wouldn't it be nice?

Jay,

JAY!

(pause)

Only if I could hold you once again.

JAY *(Off stage)*

Only if you can see who I really am.

CHASE

What?

Xue 68

JAY (with adult clothing) comes back.

JAY
Stop.

CHASE
What are you doing here?

JAY
What are *you* doing here.

CHASE
You...
You're supposed to stay in my memory.

JAY walks closer to him.

CHASE
You're not supposed to be here.

JAY
And you're not supposed to be here either.
Why are *you* here?

CHASE
I'm...
I'm telling my stories.
You're supposed to be an image, an idea, a character in my show.

JAY
That's not true.

CHASE
You are not even real.

JAY
I'm just as real as you are.

CHASE
Shut up.

Xue 69

JAY *(walks towards him)*

Touch me.

Feel me.

I'm real.

CHASE

SHUT THE FUCK UP!

Get off from me.

Get out of my show, get out of my life!

JAY

Look at me.

CHASE looks up.

Pause.

CHASE

This is not real

...

Isn't it?

JAY holds his face.

JAY

Hey... look.

I'm breathing with you now.

They stare at each other for a moment. Their position is similar to where WEI NING and JAY's were in the end of SCENE 4.

JAY

Tell me.

CHASE

What?

JAY

Why are you doing this?

Xue 70

CHASE

I want to be content.

JAY

I want you to be content.
But you are lying.

CHASE

I still love you.
That's not a lie.

JAY

You love *me*?
Or the person in your memory?

CHASE

That's the "you" I want.
Who used to belong to me.
(Pause)
The "you" in the present is *dead*.

JAY

Dead?

CHASE

You live or die, has nothing to do with me anymore.

Silence.

JAY

You know Wei Ning,
I still care about you, everyday.
I still think of you and what we've been through, together.

CHASE

It doesn't matter anymore.

JAY

It does.

Xue 71

CHASE

At least I still have stories to write, I still have songs to sing, and I still have an audience to watch me perform. They will understand my struggle, my pain, and they will lift me up and they will catch me when I fall.

JAY

Wei Ning.

CHASE

It's Chase.

JAY

This is not a show.

It's *life*.

CHASE

What do you know.

Everything has to do with putting up a show.

JAY

The more you perform, the more you cover things up.

CHASE

Don't I have the *choice* to believe/ what I want to believe?

JAY

BECAUSE NOT EVERYTHING IS ABOUT YOU!

All this time you just care about your happiness...

I understand if you don't care about me after what happened between us...

But your mom...

CHASE

What about my mom? Did my mom send you here?

JAY

It doesn't matter.

Don't run away from your truth any more.

Long silence.

Xue 72

JAY changes into his costume for the next scene.

CHASE

What?

What are you doing?

JAY

If I had become a writer, this would be my first chapter.

And you don't have to believe it's real.

After all, it's just a show.

Xue 73

SCENE 11*Lights shift.**It's a memory of JAY. We've never seen this before.**A busy street in NYC.***JAY**

Wei Ning?

Wei Ning, where are we going next?

Wei Ning, there're so many people here.

Yes, I met your friends already yesterday.

Can you walk a little bit slower?

I'm trying to catch up with you here...

(car horns)

You know, I like New York City, all the skyscrapers and neon lights.

But it's just a little bit too busy for us, don't you think so?

(another car horns)

Hey Wei Ning, if you could still hear me.

You know I've never been to such a big city...

People are not so friendly here.

Did I tell you,

Yesterday when I got the hot dog for us,

The man yelled at me:

"GO BACK TO CHINA"

I know that I'm not from here.

But what does that have anything to do with anyone?

Are you sure this is the place that we want to stay forever?

(police car sirens)

Wei Ning?

Are you still there?

There are so many people in the front.

I think I'm beginning to lose you.

Xue 74

(subway noise, the tempo of JAY's speech grows)

Hey I'm looking for Wei Ning?
Chinese man, a singer, young, tall, like me.

Hey hey!
Sorry, Wei Ning, where do I find him?
Oh... Where do I find him?
Wei Ning!
Chinese man, a singer, young, tall, like me...
Sorry...

Excuse me?
Do you speak Chinese?
I look for Wei Ning.
Wei Ning I'm looking...
Wei Ning.
Chinese man, a singer, young...

(more breathless, more in a hurry)

Do you speak Chinese?
Can you help me find Wei Ning?
Wei Ning.
Chinese man, a singer.

Hello?
Wei Ning.
Chinese man,

你会说中文吗？(do you speak Chinese?)
我在找一个人！(I'm looking for someone)

(desperate)

Anyone?
Wei Ning.
Like me.

(silence)

Xue 75

(sings)

Just fly away, fly away with me.

WEI NING appears.

WEI NING *(hopeful)*

Just wait for another year, Jay.

Once I obtain a green card in the U.S., you can move over here, and you don't have to worry about being gay, about your mom, about anything at all. You can move here with me. We can get married, adopt a kid. Isn't that what we wanted?

I'm making progress. Last week, I was speaking to an immigration attorney, and she said that I could potentially apply for a special talent residency in the next season. She's putting me in touch with someone who might be able to sponsor me. See? Everything's working out!

Just one more year, okay?

JAY

I'm seeing Maia.

WEI NING

What?

JAY

I'm dating Maia.

WEI NING

What do you mean?

JAY

Last week, she came over for dinner. I invited her over. Afterwards, we hung out in my room, and I started to get to know her better.

WEI NING

Didn't you invite her to fool your mom?

JAY

Yes, initially.

But as soon as Maia came in and sat with us. I noticed that my mom smiled. It was the first time, actually, the first time that I saw her smile. We chatted over the dinner table, and suddenly I just felt a sense of unity that I haven't experienced for

Xue 76

a long time, especially when my dad hasn't been home. Then I was thinking, Maia could save this broken family. That'd make mom happy and that'd make me happy.

WEI NING

That is a lie.

JAY

Oh come on! Can't you be happy for me for one second?

You always get to fly away, you have your stupid American dream, but I've got to face what's in front of me, the reality that I will never be able to run away from. Well, you know what? I'm content here. Fuck you!

Wei Ning, I loved you, and I think what we had is the most special thing in the world. But I can't just keep counting on you to take me out of here. I'm struggling with speaking English. I'm struggling with assimilating to the American culture. I can't just leave my life as a Chinese in China for 20 years, and then start everything new again in America. I don't have any friends or relatives there. I don't even know how to get groceries or pay bills.

I know you're gonna say how China is a repressive country that pretends people like us don't exist. But you know what? That's not true. Just last month, I was exposed to the vibrant queer community in Shanghai. I joined a volunteer group, actually Maia introduced me to the group. She's pretty supportive about LGBTQ issue too. I wish you could be there... you'd have loved what they're doing. Anyways...

You know, my mom is currently taking three jobs. She has to take care of me and my alcoholic father. She's already doing so much more than she can handle. After I got back from the trip, I experienced the most horrifying time of my life. The day after I got home, my dad was drunk again, and my mom...

My mom had a heart attack.

She was hospitalized for three weeks. I freaked out because I didn't know what to do without my mom, because she used to be the person who was taking care of everything. I had to cook dinner for myself and my dad, and I had to visit my mom at the hospital every day and night.

I mean, those weeks were tough and I went through them, but I wouldn't know how to do that again.

Xue 77

Especially after coming back from the hospital, my mom's not as strong as before.
She needs me now more than ever. The family needs me home.
I can't just walk away from them, like you.

I mean I could,
(briefly thinks about what that would be like)

But I can't.

It breaks my heart to hurt my mom even more.
I know she sometimes micro-manages what I do and where I go, but it's not that bad, as long as we are still breathing and surviving together. As long as it makes her happy and proud of her son. I don't have any regret.

I can't write songs about it or talk about it freely like you do.
I know it's going to be a constant struggle to live with my family who doesn't know.

But I *choose* to stay here.
I choose not to come out.
I choose not to tear my family apart.
I choose not to walk away from my family for good.
I choose not to pursue my dream to be with you forever.
Just to keep my family together.
Keep it together.

(pause)

I'm sorry.

You and I are from different worlds and will end up being in different worlds.

You run fast.

I can't always chase after you.

Suddenly everything is quiet.
Lights off on CHASE and JAY.

Xue 78

SCENE 12*Lights on.**It's not the house in Shanghai nor the theater in New York. It's a different space. We don't know where it is.**WEI NING appears next to CHASE, and whispers to him.***WEI NING**

Chase, it's time.

CHASE

What?

WEI NING

When can you let go?

CHASE

Let go?

WEI NING

It's time to let go.

*JAY appears.***JAY**

Let me go.

CHASE

But it's unfair.

That we have to part.

That *you* have to part.**WEI NING**

It's time to grow.

JAY

Live without me

Or the shadow of me.

Xue 79

WEI NING

You must learn to grow.

CHASE

I don't know if I can/

WEI NING

There are still moments that you can cherish.

JAY

Memories.

WEI NING

Photos.

WEI NING

Note cards

WEI NING

Songs.

JAY

Songs that you wrote for me.

Songs that you *were* writing for me.**CHASE**

I still am

I'm trying to heal.

JAY

But it's not healing.

It's making you suffer.

WEI NING

It has caused you more pain.

CHASE

It's how I'm remembering you.

I just... I'm afraid...

Xue 80

JAY

What are you afraid of?

WEI NING

What are you exactly afraid of?

CHASE

I..

I'm...

I'm afraid...

(pause)

afraid...

that I will forget you.

Forget,

what I learned from you.

Forget,

what I felt from you.

Forget your face.

Your words.

Your breaths.

Yours.

(Pause)

Everything yours.

WEI NING

But you can't remember them all.

JAYYou *won't* remember them all.**CHASE**

I want to relive every single moment that I spent with you.

To re-remember and re-create all the joy, wonder, and happiness.

Moments of all kinds of feelings that we experienced

You and I experienced, together.

Xue 81

WEI NING

But that joy has passed.
Where is your joy now?

CHASE

I don't care. If I can just hold on to it a little bit longer.

JAY

But I am not here.

JAY disappears.

CHASE

What?

WEI NING

He is gone.

CHASE

That's not possible. He's still here. He was *right* here.

WEI NING

You know.
He's never come here.
That's just an image you created.

CHASE

But wait...
I still want to...
Kiss him again, sing with him again, and hold him in my arms again.
I wish he were still...
(Pause.)
I wish it didn't end this way.

WEI NING

You can't change the past, Chase.
You can only face what's in front of you.

CHASE looks up. The house lights are on.

Xue 82

CHASE

In front of me?

WEI NING

People.

People who are breathing, living with you here and now.

CHASE looks at the audience.

CHASE

Here and now.

WEI NING

And those who still care about you.

Lights on LEE.

CHASE

But what about... what about him?

Lights on JAY. JAY stands on the opposite side of LEE.

JAY *(as he walks closer to him)*

Chase.

I'll be here.

I'll always be here for you.

You don't have to worry about me.

I will always be here watching you, just like how I watched you playing the piano and writing songs, and watched you watching me.

CHASE looks at both of them.

A very very long pause.

CHASE looks up at the audiences.

CHASE

So ...

I was lost.

I couldn't find any word in my mind, because suddenly words don't have meanings anymore.

Xue 83

(looks at JAY).

In the moment, just looking at him, looking at him, staring into his eyes, I remembered all those stories between him and me once again, all those years of confusion, doubt and shame all came back to me in front of my eyes vividly. Those times that I was once and once again heartbroken, those times that I felt defeated by the trap of my own identities, those times that I had to stand up again from struggles after struggles and kept moving on in this never-ending cycle, chasing the dream, the ideal future, the true love that I thought that I was supposed to have. But now, it seems the perfect time to finally come to terms with this relationship, to conclude the story that he and I once had, and to say goodbye to the boy that I used to be.

CHASE touches JAY's face one last time.

CHASE *(to JAY)*

I will always remember you.

WEI NING brings LEE closer to CHASE.

WEI NING

Chase, now it's time for you two to speak.

CHASE

I don't know what to...

WEI NING

Remember what's real.

LEE

I... not know what to say also...

WEI NING

Just say what you feel.

CHASE

What I feel?

LEE

Feelings always too confusing...

Xue 84

They are unspeakable.

WEI NING

Both of you.

Just close your eyes.

Try to listen to what it is that you want each other to know.

LEE and CHASE close their eyes.

LEE/CHASE

I feel...

CHASE

I want to say...

(struggling)

I guess...

I've forgiven you...

I've actually forgiven you for a long time...

But you... came here... I just don't know how to face you again ...

After all these years of being absent from your life.

LEE

I know.

They both open their eyes.

LEE

Our family is broken.

And has been broken for a long time.

Maybe just like you said...

Things can never be complete.

They can never be fixed.

And I can't keep you with me forever.

CHASE

Maybe...

Maybe we don't have to pursue that sense of completion.

Xue 85

We can just happen to be there for each other and play a role in each other's life.

LEE

I know we not have the "perfect" mother-son relationship.

But...

you are *always* my son.

And you are *always* the person I'm proudest of.

CHASE

And you are *always* my mother.

LEE

Chase...

I'm...

I'm sorr... I'm sorry.

CHASE

It's okay

Mom.

CHASE turns to LEE and holds her hand, and then looks back to JAY.

CHASE

I'm letting him go now.

WEI NING goes to JAY, and holds his hand.

WEI NING walks away with JAY. CHASE and LEE watch them walking away, in tears.

WEI NING and JAY disappear, eventually.

And they won't come back again.

LEE

I know it hard.

But it will be okay.

You will be okay.

CHASE

Mom.

LEE

Yes?

Xue 86

CHASE

Thank you for being here for me.

LEE

Of course.

CHASE

And um...

Do you mind if I keep writing sad songs?

LEE

As long as you're happy.

Xue 87

SCENE 13

The theater.

A solo light on CHASE sitting by a piano.

CHASE

As the night becomes the day.

As the show comes to an end.

There is one last story to tell.

A story that deeply affects me as a person and my career as an artist.

A story that I will always hold onto as a reminder of my past and my memory.

A story that teaches me to have faith in moving on to the future.

CHASE shifts his body and faces the piano.

In the beginning of twentieth century, one of the most elite Chinese families, the Chou family in the colonial Shanghai, received an unusual gift, a grand piano, manufactured by the very first piano factory in China, the Shanghai Piano Company, from a mysterious Englishman, who fell in love with the youngest daughter of the family, Hua Chou. The Englishman whose given name is unknown, was often referred as The Master.

CHASE begins to play simple chords on the piano. As he narrates the story, the tempo grows.

CHASE

She learned to play the piano and to make the most beautiful sounds in the colonial quarter.

Lights on JAY (young), writing on a piece of paper, while other characters narrate the story.

WEI NING appears.

WEI NING

Each year, the family hosted a series of piano concerts featuring Hua Chou in their house and invited their relatives, neighbors, artists, and even diplomats to witness her talent, including The Master. One day, when The Master came by to the house to visit Hua Chou, he revealed his true gender – a woman pretending to be a man. She proposed to marry Hua Chou. Though it was a chaotic time in Shanghai, Hua Chou felt happy, content and complete.

Xue 88

LEE appears.

LEE

The Chou family objected their marriage and forced Hua to break up with The Master, as they found out about The Master's gender. They locked Hua in her room and banned The Master from entering the house ever again. The Master at first tried to write to Hua but each time the letter was denied by the guards of the family. Then gradually The Master disappeared from the eyes of the colonial quarter. Hua became deeply depressed without The Master in her life. Since then, Hua had never ceased to play the grand piano in her room, every day and night, as they say, music never stopped for a second in the house of Chou.

CHASE

People say, traumatized by the breakup, Hua Chou played the grand piano for healing, to release her desire to return to the previous joyful days. The grand piano created a connection between the past and the present, and offered her a pathway to relive the memories of the past. And in the end, Hua Chou became her past self in her memories.

Because, only in her memories, she could be together with The Master forever, happy, content and complete.

WEI NING

In 1937, World War Two began. China was bombed by the invading Japanese navies. The house of the Chou family was on fire. Everything was burned into ashes, including Hua Chou. Everything, except for the piano. Though entirely made of woods, it magically stayed intact during the fire. Rumors say, the unrestful spirit of Hua protected the grand piano .

LEE

As time has gone by, the tale of Hua Chou became widely known in Shanghai today. But no one can prove it actually happened. The Chou family put the grand piano on display in the center of their newly renovated house, but no one has ever played it ever after, as they fear:

JAY looks up at WEI NING, LEE and CHASE

JAY

Those broken and lost will be stuck in the liminal space between the past and the present forever.

Xue 89

CHASE, WEI NING & LEE (*follows*)

Those broken and lost will be stuck in the liminal space between the past and the present forever.

JAY lifts his pen.

WEI NING and LEE disappear.

Lights only on CHASE and JAY.

CHASE looks at JAY from afar.

CHASE

Written at sometime, somewhere.

CHASE exits the theater.

JAY looks up.

He folds the paper, puts it in an envelop and seals it.

He leaves the envelop at the center of the floor.

He exits.

Black out.

END OF PLAY.

**Becoming Singaporean and Asian: Performance of Chineseness and
Queerness via Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own***

Abstract

The productions of Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore in 2006 and 2012 pose a new question to the paradox of national and transnational forces. As a departure from the dominance of vertical analysis, the framework of minor transnationalism raised by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih examines the relationships among the margins. I examine the play in Singapore with a relational approach that focuses on the lateral relationships between the minoritized spaces of Asian America and Singapore. I first follow the routes of the playwright and the play to locate the Singaporean stagings and translations in their transnational trajectory, then examine how a (trans)localized Chinese identity and a (trans)nationalized queer movement were formed, and therefore investigate the question of how national and transnational forces engage with one another in Singapore. I find the productions of *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore reflect the concurrence and interdependence of becoming Singaporean and becoming Asian. The multiplicities of (trans)national and (trans)local movements of the productions to and among Asias suggest a Chinese queer identity that is transferable among the Sinophone spaces without assimilating into or resisting against the British colonial legacies and American cultural dominance. This new framework offers a departure from the vertical view of

Xue 91

transnationalism, highlighting the unique and complex voices of transnational
Asias today.

Introduction

Singapore was formerly colonized by the U.K. and is now often known as the global Asia, where its national interest intersects with transnational forces from the West³. On one hand, with rows after rows of shopping malls on Orchard Street, the futuristic skyscrapers in the financial district, and big commercial Broadway musicals constantly playing at Marina Bay Sands Theatre, Singapore is hugely impacted by the globalization of capitalism: imports of Western luxury goods, architecture, and entertainment. On the other hand, the city state operates with a soft authoritarian⁴ political system and a strong government censorship that scrutinizes each national and international cultural flow. If we adopt a hierarchical structure to view Singapore in opposition to the British colonialism and American cultural dominance, it appears that national and transnational forces are at odds against each other in claiming and shaping Singapore.

However, in this essay, I will utilize the productions of Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore in 2006 and 2012 to pose a new question to the paradoxical relationship between national and transnational forces. Born in Singapore, now based in the U.S., playwright and director Chay Yew has been moving horizontally between Singapore and Asian America. His play, *A Language of Their Own*, featuring four gay male characters living in the U.S.,

³ I use "West" and "Western" in this essay to refer to American and European countries.

⁴ "Soft Authoritarian" is referred as "a political system in which there are minimal components of democracy such as elections and political parties but, as a consequence of rapid modernization, state control of the economy and an emphasis on export-driven growth, basic social and political rights are often compromised (Nasir and Turner, 339).

explores “how friends or lovers can bridge ethnic and HIV status differences and create a community by creating a verbal and physical ‘language of their own’” (Haas, 157). The play centers around a relationship between a Chinese immigrant Oscar and an American-born Chinese Ming: after Oscar’s diagnosis of HIV, the couple departs and each begins a new relationship, with Oscar seeing a Filipino student Daniel and Ming seeing a white American Robert. Different from Asian American or queer theater canons that often victimize minority experiences, Chay Yew normalizes their supposed minority identities to embody the everyday in-betweenness and hybridity of Asian/Asian American queer lives.

In addition to the content of the play, the production trajectory also does not follow a typical Western capitalist movement. The play was first developed through Mark Taper Theatre in L.A. and then gained national attention with New York performance in 1995 at the Public Theater⁵, directed by Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen. Initially banned in Singapore, the play moved back with the Singaporean premiere in 2006, a Mandarin revival in 2012, both directed by Casey Lim. The play also traveled to Malaysia (various years: 2003, 2013, 2017), Hong Kong (2015) and Taiwan (2017, in Mandarin). The movement of the play to Singapore and other laterally minorized spaces suggests a mutual ownership of the play by both Asias and Asian America.

While a hierarchical view dominates the existing framework of understanding diasporic and transnational movements, Chay Yew and his play

⁵ The Public Theater is an off-Broadway not-for-profit theater organization in Downtown NYC.

A Language of Their Own offer an exception to the assumed hierarchy. As Asias gain more economic and political power at the global stage, the vibrant flows, exchanges, and movements to Asias and among Asias deserve more attention. I apply a new approach “minor transnationalism” raised by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, as a departure from the dominance of a vertical analysis. Instead of being posited “in opposition to the dominant discourse”, i.e. assimilation to or resistance against westernization, “relationships among different margins”, i.e. Asian America and Southeast Asia, become the center of analysis (2). Lionnet and Shih adopt an analogy of the musical minor key, “an introspective and mournful tone different from the more triumphant ‘major’ key” to describe the melancholic nature of minor transnationalism - with “the traumas of colonial, imperial, and global hegemonies as well as the affective dimensions of transcolonial solidarities” (21). In this essay, I specifically examine the 2006 and 2012 Singaporean productions of *A Language of Their Own* with the relational approach of minor transnationalism to focus on the lateral circulation of the play from one minoritized space to the next, specifically from Asian America to Singapore.

While minor transnationalism is an emerging mode of analysis in transnational studies⁶, it had few intersections with queer studies and theater studies. Eng-Beng Lim’s deployment of “minor transnationalism” in his book *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* is one of the

⁶ While globalization implies a movement of cultural homogeneity, transnational studies focuses on the complex identities and cultures beyond the nation-states.

first academic instances that offers a relational approach to view Singapore's LGBTQ theaters as a "glocal-queering"⁷ phenomenon, echoing the global queering movement but unique to Singapore locally. Yet, to better understand the particular positioning of the play *A Language of Their Own*, I place Eng-Beng Lim's practice of minor transnationalism in Singaporean theaters along with the interviews I conducted with the creative team - directors Casey Lim (2006 and 2012) and Ong Keng Sen (1995), the producers Chiu Chien Seen (2006 and 2012) and Low Kee Hong (2012). With first-person accounts and a lateral framework, I first follow the routes of the playwright and the play to locate the Singaporean stagings and translations in their transnational trajectory, then examine how a (trans)localized⁸ Chinese identity and a (trans)nationalized queer movement were formed in Singapore, and therefore investigate the question how transnational and national forces engage with each other in Singapore.

I find the productions of *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore reflect the concurrence and interdependence of becoming⁹ Singaporean and becoming Asian. While "becoming Singaporean" refers to a process of nationalization and localization of the play, "becoming Asian" refers to Singapore's cultural policy of Asian Confucianism as well as translocalization of the play to move beyond Singapore and onto other minor Chinese queer

⁷ I will expand the concept of "glocal-queering" in Chapter 3.

⁸ I use the parentheses to indicate the concurrence and indispensability of local and transnational forces.

⁹ "Becoming" indicates a sense of motion towards a place but can never reach there. The play is becoming Singaporean and Asian, but can never fully be Singaporean or Asian, because it is always in motion to somewhere in a global society.

spaces in Asias. Thus, both transnational and national forces coexist and depend on each other indispensably in performing Chineseness and queerness.

In the first chapter: *Roots or Routes: Where is the Play Really From*, I find that the movements of both the playwright Chay Yew and his play *A Language of Their Own* follow a transnational network among Singapore, British East Asia and Asian America. Through a visualization of two opposing trajectories: while the playwright was becoming American, the play was moving away from the U.S., becoming Singaporean and Asian, I find that the U.S. “is not, no longer is, or has never been the final destination” of transnational movements (Lim, xiv). In the second chapter *Performing Chineseness through (Trans)localization*, I investigate the extent of localization of *A Language of Their Own* from Asian America to Chinese Singaporean communities. Through translations and restagings of *A Language of Their Own*, the “Chineseness” is being contested and politicized, localized and translocalized simultaneously. In the third chapter *Becoming Asian: Queering the Nation-State*, I explore the queer politics around the productions of *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore. Locating the play within the nationalized queer movements from 1990 to the present day, I argue that the productions of the play engage in mutual cooptation with the state’s “Asian” values, in order for more representation of LGBTQ experiences to happen on stage.

Xue 97

While my focus is on the Singaporean productions of *A Language of Their Own*, the minor transnational network continues with Asias, especially among minoritized Chinese communities outside of mainland China. The multiplicities of (trans)national and (trans)local movements of the productions to and among Asias suggest a Chinese queer identity that is transferable among the Sinophone spaces without assimilating into or resisting against the British colonial legacies and American cultural dominance. This new framework offers a departure from the vertical view of transnationalism, highlighting the independent, unique and complex voices of minor transnational Asias today.

Roots or Routes: Where is the Play *Really* From

An origin of a play usually refers to both the physical space and the social/cultural context of its development. For *A Language of Their Own*, it was first conceived at Mark Taper Theatre in L.A. in 1994, and after a reading at New York, it was produced at the Public Theater as its first major production. One could regard the U.S. as the original locale of the play, but then the play's development and productions at multiple locations would be ignored. Instead of considering the roots of the playwright and the play, I propose to study the routes because they allow more possibilities of opening up, intertwining as well as merging national spaces that are seemingly unbreakable. To follow the circulation of Chay Yew and the development of his play *A Language of Their Own* beyond America allows a more fluid understanding of Yew's hybrid identities and opens up the scope of investigation. Thus, I find that as the playwright was becoming American, *A Language of Their Own* was also becoming Asian. The visualization of the playwright's and the play's routes captures a transnational Chinese queer network with Asias and the U.S. as two oppositional ends that the play and the playwright gravitate towards respectively.

Amanda Rogers highlighted the notion of the transnational network among Asian America, British East Asia and Singapore in her book *Performing Asian Transnationalisms*. She argued that networks convey "a sense of directionality, fluidity and multi-locationality" and "are often driven by individual careers, artists impulses and social relationships to forge lateral

connections” (23, 43). Rogers’ theory illustrates Chay Yew’s early career in multiple national spaces. Born and grew up in Singapore, Chay Yew came to the U.S. to attend college. He later returned to Singapore after graduation and produced his first play *As If He Hears* in 1988. Then, he moved to the U.K. and adapted his film thesis into a new play *Porcelain* commissioned by Mu-Lan Theatre¹⁰ in 1992. After receiving a green card from the U.S., he moved there and produced *A Language of Their Own* in 1995. Thus, Chay Yew’s early career in the U.S., U.K. and Singapore follows a transnational network that Rogers suggested.

In tracing the playwright’s trajectory from Singapore to the U.S., I believe what contributed to the formation of a minor transnational network among the Singapore, Asian America and British East Asia are the malleability and minorization of Chay Yew’s identity. First, Chay Yew’s identity malleates according to the spaces he lived in. In the late 80s and early 90s, there was an emergence of Asian consciousness both in the U.K. and the U.S.. Singaporean artist Glen Goei, the founder of Mu-Lan Theatre, the first British East Asian theater company in the U.K, invited Chay Yew to be the playwright-in-residence in 1988, During the time, Yew wrote *Porcelain* based off on his senior thesis from Boston University and changed the locale from Boston to London. After the premiere at London Fringe, the play was then transferred to the Royal Court, as a direct response to Royal Court’s diversity initiative to

¹⁰ Mu-Lan Theatre is the first British East Asian theater company in the U.K. but became defunct after its funding was cut by the London Arts Board in 2002 (Thorpe, 195)

Xue 100

increase its British Asian audience (Rogers, 205). Asian theater scholar Ashley Thorpe calls *Porcelain* as “the most successful of all of Mu-Lan’s projects and, without doubt, the most successful of any BEA (British East Asian) production so far” as a result of its intersection on race, sexuality and class (207). Thus, though Chay Yew was only in the U.K. for a short amount of time, the establishment of British East Asian identity and the success of Chay Yew’s play *Porcelain* are inseparable with each other.

On the other hand, Chay Yew’s *A Language of Their Own*, developed after he came back to the U.S. from London, is also considered as a revolutionary act for Asian American theater. The theater critic at *New York Times* Vincent Canby reviewed the play positively - “*A Language of Their Own*’ is a meditation on love in a chronicle not only of gay love in the age of AIDS, but also of gay love among ethnic outsiders in the age of AIDS”.

According to Ong Keng Sen, the play was produced both as a challenge to the heteronormativity of Asian American theater canon such as David Henry Hwang and Frank Chin, and also as a result of multicultural and diversity initiative to increase Asian American representations.

It was less visible. Chay’s play was one of the first that spoke off Asians who are also gay. In that sense, he was rewriting David Henry Hwang, which was in a way the heteronormative Asian man. The stories of *FOB*, *Railroad* [*The Dance and the Railroad*]. It was very problematic. Chay was responding a lot to that, even *M. Butterfly*. We were also in a season at the Public Theater where we were the ‘dim sum slot’ of that year, I’d always

Xue 101

laugh that we were the 'dim sum slot' that year. ... The way in which George Wolfe curated the season was that, there would be a Latino play, there'd be an Asian play, there'd be a Black play, there'd be a White work. We got the 'dim sum slot'. (Ong)

Instead of victimizing Asian American queer experiences, the play was produced in concurrence of the third wave of Asian American theater in which race is no longer at the center of the story. Speaking for four different voices - two Chinese American, one Filipino, one White, it became part of the third-wave narrative as it no longer presents race and sexuality as homogenizing factors. By diversifying Asian American narratives on stage, *A Language of Their Own* troubles the first two waves of Asian American theater canon and explores various experiences of the particular intersection of Asian and gay male sexualities.

While Yew's multifaceted identities are adaptable into different nations, they are also minoritized because they evoke tensions and struggles against the major forces of white supremacy and homophobia. When he auditioned for a play in college in the U.S., he was rejected by the professor "summarily because he was Asian" (Swarns). When he held audition for his senior thesis in Boston, many Asian American actors walked away from the project because of the fear around the play's homoerotic content. When he came back to Singapore after college, he wrote one of the first plays in Singapore that explores themes of AIDS, *As If He Hears*, commissioned by

TheatreWorks¹¹. However, with government censorship, Chay Yew had to hetero-sexualize one of the characters to meet the state requirement. Chay Yew's identity as a queer and Chinese man makes him a minoritized figure in all three locations along the transnational network. At the same time, his minoritized identity along with a trend in ethnic theater consciousness in the U.K. and the U.S. also enabled him to adapt into different spaces quickly and strategically.

While the playwright moved from Singapore to the U.S., his play *A Language of Their Own* had an opposite direction of flows, away from the U.S. Before investigating the timeline of the productions of the play, I include its predecessors including *Porcelain* and *As If He Hears* into the discussions to examine the relations among these three plays. I find that both *Porcelain* and *As If He Hears* paved the paths for the development of the story of *A Language of Their Own*. First, "As If He Hears revolves around a heterosexual businessman who contracts HIV on a trip to Thailand and the help he receives from a gay Malaysian social worker when he discovers his HIV-status" (McFarland). Thus, the relationship between Daniel as a helper and Oscar as an HIV positive man in *A Language of Their Own* can be traced back to the protagonists in *As If He Hears*. Moreover, *A Language of Their Own* embodies a similarly visceral, violent exploration of love and passion between gay men to *Porcelain's*. Though *Porcelain* explores violence resulted from white

¹¹ TheatreWorks is an independent and international theater organization in Singapore, founded in 1985. Ong Keng Sen has led the company from 1988 to the present day.

supremacy, *A Language of Their Own* explores primarily the inter-ethnic conflict between Oscar and Ming. One could say that perhaps *A Language of Their Own* became known as “the Porcelain” or “the *As If He Hears*” in the U.S. All three plays are representatives of Yew’s works in each region and have broken down pre-conceptions for respectively Singaporean, British East Asian, as well as Asian American queer theater scenes. His stories simultaneously represent a minoritized Chinese queer male identity that is flexible, malleable and open-ended among different spaces.

Similar to Yew’s minoritized yet fluid identity, the play *A Language of Their Own* also embodied mobility and flexibility in traveling among minor spaces. After the New York premiere of *A Language of Their Own* in 1995, there was an effort from Ong Keng Sen to include this play into the 1995-1996 season of TheatreWorks in Singapore. But as a result of government censorship, the play didn’t transfer to Singapore until 2006, when Casey Lim directed the play through CheckPoint Theatre. Robin Loon, a theater scholar who attended the 2006 production then translated the play into Mandarin, produced by Singapore Arts Festival (SAF) under the executive directorship of Low Kee Hong in 2012. Yet, all these movements back to Singapore occurred after Chay Yew moved to the U.S. Therefore, despite the fact that U.S. is Chay Yew’s destination of migration, his artistic flows continued to move beyond his physical locale. The play’s gradual acceptance by Singaporean theater and the playwright’s journey to the U.S. visualize a beautiful divergence. While the Public Theater premiere of the play is a success for Yew’s career in the U.S., it

Xue 104

also marks a turning point for the play to follow an almost opposite path from his. It becomes a Singaporean narrative and also an Asian one as the play rippled to Chinese queer communities in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Therefore, using routes instead of roots to trace the playwright and the play's genesis visualizes the directionalities of movements over time and across spaces. It captures two oppositional directions that the playwright and the play each gravitates towards respectively - U.S. and Asias within the network of Chinese queer minorities. While the playwright moved to the U.S., his works continued to travel along the minor transnational routes. They not only moved beyond the borders of nation-states but also formed a network of communities among minorities, relational to the U.S.'s and U.K.'s cultural dominance and postcolonial influence.

Performing Chineseness through (Trans)localization

In this chapter, I investigate the extent of localization of *A Language of Their Own* and the process of transferring a Chinese identity from Asian America to Singapore. While the term “Chineseness” implies a homogeneity that encompasses all peoples from China and their diaspora, Chinese communities in both Asian America and Singapore are of the margins of “Chineseness” because of each of their particular diasporic identities. I first explore an overview of the Chinese identity in both diasporic locations, and then discuss two instances of localizations of the play in Singapore, with Checkpoint Theater in English (2006) and with Singapore Arts Festival in Mandarin (2012). The framework of minor transnationalism is salient because the productions of *A Language of Their Own* embody a (trans)local movement among the diasporic Chinese communities along the minor network, and how each “Chineseness” differs from one another at each minor space. I argue, through translations and restagings of *A Language of Their Own*, the homogeneity of “Chineseness” is being contested and politicized, localized and translocalized.

While both Chinese Americans and Chinese Singaporeans have hybrid yet similar cultural identities - with the homeland and the host land, they have a unique history of immigration respectively. As one of the first Asian ethnic groups that settled to the U.S., Chinese Americans were exploited, oppressed, and excluded for the foundation of White America as contract laborers for the Gold Rush and for building the transcontinental railroad. After the

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, more middle-class professional Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China, and Southeast Asia migrated to the U.S., resulting in a class discrepancy among Asian Americans today. They now make up more than 25% of the Asian American population and slightly over 1% in the entire U.S. population.

On the other side of the world, few trades and migrations from ancient China took place in Singapore starting from the 12th century, but major waves of migration happened after the British colonized present-day Malaysia and Singapore (British Malaya). Starting from early 19th century, Chinese immigrants started to enter the trading port from both Malaysia as Peranakans¹², followed by immigration from Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other southern parts of China. The Chinese ethnic community is multilingual, with various linguistic backgrounds, including Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese and Mandarin, etc. Nowadays, the Chinese Singaporeans make up over 75% of the population in Singapore as the ethnic majority. Though both Chinese Americans and Chinese Singaporeans are minoritized in relation to British colonialism, American capitalism as well as the rise of China, Chinese Singaporeans are majoritized in relation to the Indian (9%) and Malay (13%) population in Singapore. The relationality in minority politics of being Chinese in Asian America and Singapore becomes critical in the following analysis on how the play was transferred to both audiences.

¹² Chinese settlers who entered Malaysia and their descendants, culturally Chinese and Malay.

Xue 107

When Casey Lim directed *A Language of Their Own* in 2006, despite casting an ethnically Chinese actor to play the Filipino character Daniel, he did not make further change on any of the characters' background as Americans, nor the play's setting in the U.S.. While Chay Yew was referred as an Asian American rather than Singaporean, his play received a homecoming welcome in Singapore as Ng commented that the play was a "strikingly moving performance for anyone" and "doubly for those of us who are gay and Asian". The discrepancy between the imported identity of the play and its positive reception in Singapore is relevant in that though little localization was done, the play could still speak to a majority-Chinese audience in Singapore. Perhaps garnering positive reviews and reputations from the U.S. made the play more appealing to the local audience, or the release of the 11-year ban from Singapore government grabbed more attention in its production. However, I suggest that the key to the transfer of the play without much localization was a result of the shared diasporic experiences between Chinese Americans and Chinese Singaporeans.

In the play, the protagonists Ming and Oscar represent two common strokes of Chinese diaspora. While Oscar moved to the U.S as a Chinese immigrant, trying to blend in with the hostland despite tension and disconnection, Ming was born in the U.S. and grew up without much connection to Chinese cultures and languages, representing an immigrant figure that loses their ties to the homeland. "The only thing that truly binds us together is being Chinese. The only thing that pits us against each other is

being Chinese” (Yew 132). In Chay Yew’s beautifully poetic writing, what becomes at stake is the tension between the assumption for homogeneity and the reality of heterogeneity of Chinese identities: while the former refers to Chineseness as the common notion of one’s ethnicity, the latter refers to the particularity of their Chinese experiences that differs from each other. Without much localization, the tension between a recent Chinese immigrant and a second-generation Chinese American, as well as each of their tensions with hostland and homeland are transferable to the Singaporean context. The diasporic experiences create a connecting point for the trans-pacific performance of Chinese identities, and also in large for the formation of a diasporic Chinese minor transnational dynamic in both regions.

Utilizing English as the primary language of the text with various accents is also transferable between the Chinese diasporic community in Singapore and the Chinese diasporic community in the U.S.. Though many Chinese Singaporeans speak English, they come from diverse language backgrounds at home, with the elder generations speaking Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew, etc., similar to those of Chinese Americans. Under the British colonial rule, the use of English was first brought over to Singapore as the primary means for trade. In postcolonial Singapore, with the official language being multilingual - English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil, English is still the primary language of communication, especially among different ethnic groups in Singapore. In the production of the play in the U.S., Ming and Oscar speak English with different accents, which originally

represented their extent of assimilation into the major American culture. Here in Singapore, though the “predominant” culture is actually Chinese, English as a language is a legacy of colonialism. Chinese Singaporeans had to adopt a new language as Chinese immigrants also did in the U.S.. Therefore, the Singapore production in 2006 with actors speaking English with various accents gestures towards a solidarity between the two diasporic spaces, a shared identity that exists only with the minor transnational context.

Though little localization was done when the play was first put up in 2006, the 2012 production at Singapore Arts Festival (SAF)¹³ had more drastic changes from the original production in New York in 1995. For one, the play was performed in Mandarin, translated by theater scholar Robin Loon. The translation of the title - 男男自语¹⁴ (literal translation: male-male self talk) suggests a poetic framing of “how people deal with themselves and their loves/partners” and the translation of the play to Mandarin also “maintained the certain rhythm and musicality” of the original English text (Low). In addition to the language, another change is that all characters in the play including Daniel and Robert are played by actors of Chinese descent. While perspectives from the Filipino and Caucasian ethnicities are no longer present in the play, with a 4-character all-Chinese cast, the nuances and heterogeneity

¹³ Singapore Arts Festival (SAF) was an annual festival in Singapore that started in 1977. It has been as Singapore International Festival of the Arts (SIFA) in 2014, under the directorship of Ong Keng Sen.

¹⁴ I'd like to acknowledge that I did not acquire a Chinese text of the translated play from Robin Loon due to a shortage of time, but my evidences were provided through interviews with the creative team of the play in Singapore - director Casey Lim and producer Chiu Chien Seen.

Xue 110

of Chineseness are discussed in greater details in this version. I will utilize two examples to illustrate how the Mandarin version of the play contests the homogenous notion of Chineseness via the Mandarin language's tension with the English subtitles, and the character Robert's accented Mandarin.

While the spoken texts are mostly in Mandarin, the team projected some selected lines and stage directions of the play in English onto the backdrop. The English subtitles served as a simplified translation for non-Mandarin speakers in the audience, and were also written to describe the characters' movements according to the script, though the actors on stage follow a more confessional theater style without much movements (see figure 1 below).



Figure 1: *A Language of Their Own* at SIFA 2012

The dynamic of hearing Mandarin acoustically and seeing English visually represents the local tension in Singapore between English and Mandarin. While English became the common language to communicate across cultural background, in the 70s and 80s, "the government launched a 'Speak Mandarin'

Xue 111

campaign that was – and still is – aggressively promoted to the Chinese community” to challenge Singapore’s over-reliance on English (Peterson, 57-58). Ironically, Mandarin is culturally foreign to most Chinese Singaporeans, as they speak Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, or one than one or two languages at home. Appearing to create a sense of nostalgia with “the homeland” for Chinese diasporic communities, the campaign was both read as a political tool for the government to align themselves with mainland China and as an effort of essentializing Chineseness as a homogenous entity. Hearing Mandarin and reading English engage with the Mandarin campaign critically, visualizing the tension of speaking Mandarin as a Chinese Singaporean.

In addition, the notion of Chinese as a homogenous identity is further problematized by having Robert’s character played by an ethnically Chinese actor who speaks little Mandarin. While Robert’s lines are mostly spoken in English in the 2012 production, his last monologue is delivered in Mandarin “very badly” (C. Lim).

“In the beginning of our relationship, we learned each other’s language. Like overeager babies. Mouthing unintelligible gaggles and sounds. Unable to articulate. Clumsily tripping on words. Falling into abject frustration. But once we found the common language. Each action and deed, every word and sentence was a joy, and a excitement. A tingling of sense. A radiant discovery.” (Yew, 216)

While the play dramatizes the analogy between being in a relationship and learning a new language, delivering this text in Mandarin literally

Xue 112

performs the act of “learning each other’s language” (Yew). Edward McDonald coins learning Chinese with becoming Sinophone as “an active development of a Chinese-speaking identity”. If the prerequisite of “turning Chinese” is the ability to speak the language successfully, then Robert’s inability to speak fluent Mandarin in his last monologue is a failed attempt of performing the Chinese identity (McDonald). Then the question to ask is, how is a Chinese identity defined? As China develops a monolingual approach, spreading Mandarin as the official and dominant language across the whole country, “Chinese”, becomes “misused to equate language with nationality and ethnicity, and official monolingualism has disregarded and suppressed linguistic heterogeneity” (Shih, 714). Therefore, Robert’s disfluency in Chinese questions the very standard of how we today decide what and who are counted as Chinese. His “look” as Chinese and his inability to speak Chinese highlight the tension towards the homogenous standard of Chineseness.

Therefore, the 2006 production in English transfers a diasporic Chinese experience with little localizations, but the 2012 production with the Chinese translation puts the play directly in dialogue with the Chinese identity; both productions challenge Chineseness as a homogenous concept. As Casey Lim mentioned in the interview, he focused more on the “internal struggle with being Chinese”, as there is always tension of not being Chinese enough, regardless of which language one speaks. The productions in 2006 and 2012 explore the concept of Sinophone, a minoritized network of cultural production “on the margins of China and Chineseness”, defined by Shu-mei

Shih (710). Singapore as a unique site for the production of *A Language of Their Own* is not only relational to the Western hemisphere, but also relational to the rise of China.

The play through various extents of localization indicates some resistance against the China-centrism and China's geopolitical power, but it also provides a gateway to connect with other Sinophone regions that are in a similar position to Singapore. In fact, the play had its first production in Malaysia in the Actors Studio in 2003, predating the first Singapore production. Afterwards, it was produced twice more by Richard Chua in both 2013 and 2017 with all-Chinese cast in Theatrex Asia in Malaysia after Chua saw the production at Checkpoint Theatre in Singapore in 2006. In addition, the play was performed in Taiwan at National Taiwan University in Mandarin, and in Hong Kong at the Fringe Club in English in 2015 and 2016, both with different teams. The creative team in Singapore today, Casey Lim and Chiu Chien Seen also plan to bring the translated play again to Hong Kong, Taiwan and other Sinophone regions. Circulating *A Language of Their Own* in queer Chinese communities outside of mainland China contests the homogenous standard of Chineseness, and forms a translocal solidarity relational to the global powers.

Becoming Asian: Queering the Nation-State

In the island nation Singapore, despite the fact that male homosexuality remains criminalized today, its queer theater scene is full of vibrancy. If I compare Singapore state policies with regard to the queer liberation movement in the U.S., it is very easy to correlate the city state with conservatism, queerphobia, and even backwardness in contrast to the U.S.'s recent gay marriage legalization. However, with a more horizontal approach, I suggest to view Singapore theater scene from below¹⁵, relational to the Western influence (liberal or conservative), with individual theater artists as the protagonists and their active participation of bringing *A Language of Their Own* from Asian America to Singapore to queer the nation-state.

In this chapter, I will locate *A Language of Their Own* in the timeline of Singaporean LGBTQ movements on stage. The first attempt by Ong Keng Sen in 1995 occurred during a conservative phase in response to the first boom of queer acts in the early 90s; the 2006 production was during a more progressive period of queer theater, leading with Alfian Sa'at as the nationally and internationally known queer playwright, yet 2012 production marks a time of religious backlash. By looking at the queer politics around the productions of *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore, I argue that despite some confrontations, Singaporean artists engage with the nation-state in mutual cooptation to include this play as part of the nationalistic "Asian" narrative.

¹⁵ A horizontal view that explores the relationships among the margins.

Xue 115

Before going through each phase of queer theater movement in Singapore, I explore how “Asian Confucian values”¹⁶ are framed in conjunction with the nationalist identity of Singapore. Since independence, Singapore government has positioned itself against the West with the cultural policy of Confucianism. As a nation that prioritizes on the stability of society and nationhood, it has deemed queerness as a threat to the heteronormative nuclear family, the foundation of the nation according to Confucianism.

To achieve these “Asian” values, Singapore perpetually portrays homosexuality as a negative, alternative lifestyle outside of the norm, by managing and scrutinizing all arts through the licensing and classification unit at Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) (Peterson, 29). The legal code for IMDA in 2014 states that censorship “serves to protect the young while enabling adults to make informed viewing choices”, it advises against content that is insensitive towards “racial harmony and religious harmony”, “prevailing standards of morality and decency”, and prohibits content that undermines “public order, national security and/or stability” (IMDA Classification Code). Thus, under the banner of protecting the nation and society following “Asian Confucian values”, the code enables the licensing and classification process to be subjective, and in the hands of the governmental officials which in turn allows arbitrary prohibitions, including censorship of portrayal of diverse sexual orientations.

¹⁶ Five shared values are: 1) Nation before community and society above self, 2) Family as the basic unit of society, 3) Community support and respect for the individual, 4) Consensus, not conflict, and 5) Racial and religious harmony (Singapore Parliament).

Before Ong Keng Sen attempted to direct *A Language of Their Own* in 1995, there was a progressive phase for Singaporean queer artists in the early 90s, started off with the production *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang staged by TheatreWorks in the state-sponsored 1990 Singapore Arts Festival. As the first Asian American play on Broadway, *M. Butterfly* intends to subvert orientalism and Western imperialism by telling the story of a French diplomat having an affair with a Chinese opera singer Song Liling, but only to discover she was a man and a spy. Instead of categorizing *M. Butterfly* as a Western, liberal force that interrupted Singapore's state system, it was a force coming from another minoritized space, allowing an uninterrupted continuity "between Asian cultural nationalism and Asian American minority discourse" (Lye, 265). "Opening the door for transvestite characters to appear on the Singaporean stage", this transnational incidence set precedence as one of the first homoerotic presentations on stage (Peterson, 141).

Since the production of *M. Butterfly*, Singapore artists have continued to test the limits of acceptability, worked around with the state's neoliberal agenda to become the leading art center in Asias with the trend of global capitalism, and produced more plays¹⁷ with explicit queer identities in a period with relative freedom (Rogers, 197). On the government side, "as long as the radical politics of homosexuality and transgenderism are contained within its appropriate public spheres of entertainment and arts and carefully calibrated for target audience consumption, it is then permitted to exist"

¹⁷ For example, Ovidia Yu's *Imagine* and Elder Sister's *Akka*

Xue 117

(Chan, 32). Therefore, Singapore Arts Festival, TheatreWorks along with Asian American artists permeated into the state's Asian conservative policy yet cooperated with its new capitalist agenda of becoming an art center in the global Asias.

However, when Ong Keng Sen planned to further test the limit of censorship and to direct *A Language of Their Own* in the 1995-1996 season of TheatreWorks, it was denied as a result of right-wing Singaporeans' backlash. Peterson argues that the clampdown on "alternative" sexuality onstage quickly took place in 1994 and 1995, "after a short-lived boom of queer culture in Singapore (during 1990)" (149). Tay Eng Soon advised local playwrights against a public and explicit discussion of sexuality, "sensitive to the moral values and sentiments of the majority of Singaporeans" (149). Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong also spoke that homosexuality is a sign of Western decline and is an affront of "Asian" values (Wang, 67). *A Language of Their Own*, a play that naturalizes homosexual experiences, was thus denied for approval. Therefore, in a period of right-wing conservatism in Singapore politics, Ong Keng Sen was not able to put up the play in the conservative state of Singapore.

The periodic dynamic continued with a more open period in the turn of the century. Alfian Sa'at, one of the most established and prolific contemporary writers in Singapore created a "groundbreaking gay male theatrical production", *Asian Boys Trilogy* in 2002 (E. Lim, 384). Sa'at fused different folktales and stories from Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures into

telling what it means to be gay in a multicultural Singapore. A global-queering movement is incomplete to view Sa'at's play, because it is an narrower perspective of how "emancipatory and often glamorized Western gay culture that is transforming the rest of the world", dominated by the global English language, the Euro-American gay lens, and capitalism (383, 404). Eng-Beng Lim suggested that it was rather "a glocalqueer optic" that "configures an inter-Asian diasporic framework that produces new models of cross-cultural understanding about queer sexuality" (387). Speaking the same national narratives of Asian multiculturalism, Sa'at claimed queer expression as part of the nationalist and local identity of being a Singaporean.

Following the queer-friendly period in Singapore theater scene, director Casey Lim and producer Chiu Chien Seen took the risks and staged *A Language of Their Own* through Checkpoint Theatre in 2006. While it was during a time with more relative freedom, the production team of *A Language of Their Own* had been confronted with some resistance from government officials of IMDA. At first, they confronted Casey Lim's ways of staging queer intimacy and asked him to find alternative ways instead of showing kissing between two men (C. Lim).

In order to avoid either antagonizing against IMDA or self-censoring the intimate moments, Casey Lim and Chiu Chien Seen found a way to bypass the licensing unit and have the production featured as part of the Esplanade's Studio Season, one of the few venues exempt from obtaining a license through IMDA. Yet, as a pushback by the state, they didn't receive any funding from the

Xue 119

National Arts Council. In a small yet expensive country like Singapore, without funding from National Arts Council, it is hard to pull alternative sources to sponsor the events (Ong). In this case, when censorship is intertwined with funding, it is easy for the government to deny their act of censorship - "we [the government] are not censoring you, we just won't support you" (Ong). While the team had to initiate their own campaign to raise money for the production, without the burden of censorship, they pushed the boundary of queer content on stage even further with very intimate and sexually alluded scenes (C. Lim). "One of which is when Ming visits the bathhouse for a night of wild sex, with Oscar masturbating quietly on the side, moaning as Ming penetrates the other" (Chua). The play received audiences' praise and positive critic reviews as it did not shy away from any homosexual content. Therefore, in the end, the artists had to bypass the state power, putting up this play in 2006 eight years after the ban as a groundbreaking event without much interference of censorship.

Six years after, the cultural landscape of Singapore in 2012, the time of the Mandarin production, has shifted drastically from that of the 2006 production. To better understand the convoluted relationships and dynamics between Singaporean artists and state control, I use the phenomenon of Pink Dot, a non-profit LGBTQ movement in Singapore, to illustrate how performance of activism is cooperated with the state's "Asian" Confucianist and nationalist rhetoric. Pink Dot SG has organized annual rallies and gatherings since 2009 to support Singapore LGBTQ communities. Initially funded by foreign companies and inspired by Pride Parade, "Pink Dot is an

Xue 120

attempt by the oppressed (LGBTQ Singaporeans) to demonstrate their compatibility with mainstream values, rather than challenging them” (Ng, 238). It intentionally does not create antagonism against the government, but rather speaks their language of “Confucianism” such as family, stability as opposed to protest and unrest. Tan argues that “Pink Dot exemplifies the constant negotiation with the state that characterizes Singaporean national belonging” (972). Wang also argues that Pink Dot is an “apolitical political campaign” that was “couched within the state’s dominant rhetoric of a conservative Asian society predicated on a cohesive family structure” and imbricated in “neoliberal corporatization” (76). Pink Dot SG and the Singaporean state engage in mutual cooptation, negotiating with each other, on one hand to preserve a space for LGBTQ activism in Singapore, and on the other to ensure “Asian Confucian values” as the foundation of the state.

While Pink Dot SG movement has been growing each year and gained national attention, its instability was exposed when anti-LGBT religious fundamental organizations’ backlash became more vocal than ever. The recent state support on gay rights has strained the cordial relationship between Singapore’s Christian community with the state, and as a pushback, the evangelical Christians responded with a hostage takeover of AWARE in 2009 (Association of Women for Action and Research) which led to a national controversy (Chang, 206). “Since its [Pink Dot SG] inception, there has been no advances in laws, and barely any in terms of policy... Conversely, there has

Xue 121

been a rise in the visibility of homophobic movements [such as the AWARE saga], often positioned as a direct response to Pink Dot” (Ng, 239).

Similar to the performance of queer activism of Pink Dot SG, the Mandarin production of *A language of Their Own* continued reflecting the problematized and complicated contemporary relationship between the state and the artists. I argue that the festival and the state also engaged in a similar mutual cooptation which made queer content permeable at a state-run festival. Produced by Singapore Arts Festival (SAF) with the exemption of licensing application, the translated play *Nan Nan Zi Yu* (男男自语) opened at the same studio six years after the English production. The festival’s proximity to the government created many advantages for the seasonal planning. Low Kee Hong, the artistic director of the festival in 2012 even referred himself as “the government”, deciding what goes up and what fulfills key performance indicators, expectations imposed by the state. Low Kee Hong didn’t need to apply for permit or seek for approval as he had the autonomous power to decide. Though he still needed to present the season to a board of directors and government officials, strategically he was able to work alongside with the government by speaking their language (Low). Similar to Pink Dot SG, the Mandarin production of *A Language of Their Own* through SAF is a result of cooperation between the festival and the national state.

While the translation of the play into Mandarin (2012) drew a closer line with the nationalist politics of being “Asian”, the staging of the play implicitly displayed tension and negotiation with government censorship.

Xue 122

While the actors were speaking the lines in Mandarin, the stage directions in English were simultaneously projected on the screen, “to reflect the movements of the characters as written by Chay Yew” (C. Lim). However, the actors on stage didn’t actually act according to the stage directions; in other words, the actors didn’t kiss, they didn’t touch, in contrast to the projected subtitles. As Casey Lim states, “the licensing rules and regulations play a part in stimulating this artistic choice”. The style of confessional theater without physical contact among actors created and visualized tensions with homoeroticism in the script, implicitly revealing the role of government censorship to the audience. Thus, though it was coopted as part of the government cultural scheme, *Nan Nan Zi Yu* illustrated the artists’ dissatisfaction of the current political climate through their artistic choices on stage.

From 1990 to now, Singapore theater scene has become more vibrant than ever, and Singaporean artists have been strategically cooperating with the government during each of the four periods. The productions of *A Language of Their Own* were becoming more “Asian” in order for the artists to achieve their artistic goals within the state-operating system. Mutual cooptation may not be the perfect solution for both ends, but it involves less risk than direct confrontation. However, over the long run, direct confrontation cannot be avoided in the broken system between the artists and the state. In a similar way how Pink Dot SG received religious backlash, the festival also went through a volatile transition period when Ong Keng Sen, the

Xue 123

artistic director of the newly branded SIFA (Singapore International Festival of Arts), refused to maintain the status quo. As a result, the government decided to call off the festival's exemption from licensing unit. Like most other theater organizations, each show produced by SIFA now needs to go through IMDA and apply for a permit to perform. Being no longer part of the governmental protective system, SIFA has more limitations in what they can control because "they are trapped in this bureaucracy" of government censorship (Low). As a result, when Ong Keng Sen left the festival in 2017, he openly denounced the censorship system and revealed that SIFA was not truly independent because of government censorship (Nanda). Therefore, despite the fact that mutual cooptation involves less risks, it does not hold stability over the long run, as pushbacks begin to accumulate and eventually lead to direct confrontation.

Though the current period is more pessimistic for queer artists in Singapore, it is too important to unpack and distinguish the forces that have caused today's conservatism: what is local, what is national, what is minor transnational, and what is pure Western dominance. While the state adopts "Asian Confucianism" as its primary cultural policy, Eng-Beng Lim argues that "there's nothing particularly 'Asian'" about either the British colonial Section 377A that resulted Singapore in criminalizing against male homosexuality, or the Christian evangelical fundamental group with support coming from the U.S. (135). The term "Asian" becomes flexible and ambiguous because it can be manipulated by the state for its both neoliberal and conservative interests. It

Xue 124

could be appropriated to build a global art center or to maintain its national stability; it could also be utilized towards inter-Asian queer awakening or the rising religious voices. What is “Asian” becomes closely interdependent upon the national discourse and vice versa. Throughout the timeline, we witnessed how artists had to work along with the government in mutual cooptation despite some confrontation. However, while it could achieve progressive movement in the short term, the periodic nature reveals fragility and instability of the system in the long run.

Conclusion

The framework of minor transnationalism offers a relational approach to understanding the performance of Chineseness and queerness in Singapore via Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*, beyond the binary of national and transnational forces. I argue that the productions of *A Language of Their Own* in Singapore reflect simultaneous processes of becoming Singaporean and becoming Asian. First, the visualization of the play moving towards Singapore and Asias in contrast to the playwright's movement the U.S., draws a poetic contrast of each end of the transnational network. Second, I examine the extent of localization of the play in Singapore and its relation to Chineseness. On one hand, The play became localized through restagings and translations, and on the other hand, translocalized through reproducing a marginal Chinese identity that is transferable among Sinophone regions outside of mainland China. Lastly, I locate the productions of play in the timeline of queer theater movements in Singapore and I find that Singaporean artists work along with the nationalist "Asian" values to engage with the representation of queer identities on stage strategically, despite some confrontations. Thus, the productions of *A Language of Their Own* reflect a movement towards a local, national Singaporean identity, and at the same time become a transnational and translocal force, moving beyond Singapore to continue the minor transnational network in Asias. Transnational and national movements depend on each other, amalgamating into one force to further complicate the

Xue 126

discourses of transnational studies, queer studies, theater studies and critical race studies.

With minor transnationalism, we view minoritized spaces like Singapore as more autonomous entities without being assimilation to or resistance against the U.K. colonial history and U.S. cultural dominance, but rather with other minoritized spaces to form a transcolonial solidarity. As Asias become more economically and culturally independent, it is important to shift the focus and examine the complex theater movements to Asias and among Asias that have been impacting and will continue impacting today's minority politics. With more complex and layered identities that intersect with race and sexuality, we ought to build connections beyond national borders, seek for more ambiguities and nuances, and embrace the multiplicities of human truths.

Xue 127

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Xue 128

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