WRITERS MOSAIC

The Power of 'Jia' (家): Writing family and British Chinese identity – and the Royal Court Theatre

Jingan Young

> See that. That's blood. And not just any blood. That's Byron blood. Now, listen to me, now, and listen good, because this is important... Remember the blood. The blood. — *Jerusalem*, Jez Butterworth, Act III

Introduction

Over the last few months, I have been struggling to write a pivotal scene in a television script in which my protagonist, a British-born Chinese widower, is forced to confront not only the alleged absence, according to his family, of a 'public' display of grief for his deceased wife, but the growing pressures surrounding both his role in the family business and his bitter loathing for it. Despite having managed the business for decades under his somewhat ineffectual father, this role is put into jeopardy by his father's sudden decision not to name him as a successor, but instead to pass the mantle onto a cousin from China whom the son has met only once, over twenty-five years ago. The scene is set during the Ching Ming Festival, which is known as 'sweeping the graves day', where families gather, pay their respects and burn offerings to those who have died. In the scene, I aimed to include several expositional 'reveals': the uncovering of family secrets, the protagonist's true, negative feelings towards his family's

overbearing judgements, and some nuances of tradition in the culture which have never before been displayed on British screens.

The story should feel familiar. From Aeschylus to Shakespeare to Chekhov to Miller, the dramatisation of family dynamics has evolved throughout history, from stage to screen, but its primary elements have remained the same. The story of family is an ample backcloth for commercial television drama, and even in today's big-budget, high-concept, streaming world, 'family' remains a relatively risk-free subject, perhaps making for even more resonant and topical content in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the mid 2000s, we were bombarded with family TV shows, in all genres, like the hip hop dynasty drama *Empire* (2015-18), the life of a Korean Canadian family, *Kim's Convenience* (2015-present), or the biting, rich-people-behaving-badly satire *Succession* (2018-present). These shows present their own unique contexts and communities, but at the heart of them, they share the seductive ingredients we all know and love: the struggle to distinguish one's individual identity, the power dynamics within families, and inter-generational fracture.

Throughout the writing of my script, a comedy-drama, the challenge was not simply to 'be entertaining' but to incorporate cultural nuance alongside broader brush strokes regarding British stereotypes of East and South East Asians. Most importantly, it was imperative that it be a good old-fashioned universal story about family, feasting, love and friendship. It became clear, however, during the painstaking redrafting process, that there were several issues with the pivotal scene of confrontation and its place within the overall architecture of the script. What was its purpose? Was it simply filling a gap in British television's depiction of East Asian traditional life? Was this climactic moment, which staged the family's suppressed anxieties, conveyed too soon? Was its situational specificity a by-product of my own

training as a playwright, in that it all played out in one place, a form of ‘living room’ drama?

I needed to look at the origins of my fascination with staging family dynamics, and at the connection to my own upbringing in a diverse, former British colony, Hong Kong. Further to that, in an effort to understand this persistent fixation, I now need look back at a period which defined both a new writing landscape in British theatre (which continues to filter into television), and my career, specifically my training as part of the Royal Court Theatre’s Young Writer’s programme and the subsequent impact of that on my work. I was twenty years old and had only been living in Britain as a student for a year. I had seen my first ‘straight’ play a few months before at the National Theatre. It was a strange and exciting time. One Royal Court production in particular, Jez Butterworth’s hit play *Jerusalem* (2009), successfully incorporated what I feel to be the mythical and realist themes that have continued to inspire my work today.

British Chinese dynamics?

I often grapple with that old chestnut: the fear of repeating myself thematically. Throughout my career, issues surrounding family, migration and assimilation continue to permeate my work. Born ‘third culture’ – born, that is, in a country to ‘new immigrant’ parents, under British rule, I enthusiastically admit that I am driven to forensic examination of how identities are formed as a legacy of cultural imports and communities which intersect. My upbringing was a hodgepodge of TV re-runs of *EastEnders*, red post boxes, Delhi street food and suffocatingly loud Chinese New Year banquets.

In my script, 'being Chinese' is also a way of looking at 'being British'; it's the negotiation between these states of being that produces the conflicted state of mind of the character.

***Jerusalem* and the Royal Court Theatre**

Jerusalem by Jez Butterworth opened at the Royal Court in July 2009 before transferring to the West End in 2010 and later Broadway. It is about 'barnstorming braggart' Johnny 'Rooster' Byron, an ex-motorcycle daredevil, drug dealer to a bunch of teenage misfits living out in a Wiltshire wood. Critics observed that the play 'seized the public's imagination' because of its 'unforgiving attitude towards Englishness'.[1] Set in the village of Flintock's annual fair during St. George's Day, and running just over two and a half hours, the play is a combination of the epic and mythic, the political and personal. Its main driver is the council officials who wish to evict Johnny from his caravan in order to build model homes. Incidentally, the middle-class characters (from the local council) are the villains our anti-hero must defeat; they provide comic representations of bureaucracy. Johnny is both member of his community *and* in exile. Perhaps writer Butterworth agrees with sociologist David Cheal that 'a family is whatever people define it to be in their ongoing social interactions'?[2] Johnny is anyway used as a device to relay the playwright's nostalgia for folkloric England as well as his assault on its parochial attitudes towards the 'other'. Butterworth once compared theatres to 'churches' and aptly uses Johnny as 'preacher' or Pied Piper to his adoring young fans (both on and off the stage), emphasising both the power of theatrical oration and his own

[1] Charlotte Higgins. 'Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*: a vision of Englishness I'll happily sign up to.' *The Guardian.* 12 Feb. 2010. Web. 3 Jul. 2013.

[2] David Cheal. *Families in Today's World: A Comparative Approach.* New York: Routledge, 2008.

ambivalence towards it, that is, towards its power to control and manipulate. His speeches waver between colloquial riffs and pieces of poetry. When Johnny speaks of his 'Byron' lineage, he (also) speaks of England:

> He says 'A Byron boy comes with three things. A cloak and a dagger, and his own teeth. He comes fully equipped. He doesn't need nothing. And when he dies, he lies in the ground like a lump of granite. He don't rot. There's Byron boys buried all over this land, lying in the ground as fresh as the day they were planted.' (*Jerusalem*, 49).

The challenge to English culture is two-fold. Johnny supports inter-generational conflict and facilitates it through degeneration (by supplying alcohol and drugs to teenagers). Does Butterworth believe the future of English identity to be in crisis? Johnny is clearly in a conflicted state of mind. Is he therefore the monster that must be slain on St. George's Day? Or is he the anti-hero who must nevertheless be saved?

There are distinct parallels between *Jerusalem* and my own British Chinese story set in London, in which the main character both resists and adheres to specific notions of traditional identity whilst also promoting the dismantling of them by taking revenge for not being given the company and ultimately alienating himself from his family. He becomes an anti-hero within a web of his own making. However, unlike the tragic ending of *Jerusalem*, the trajectory of my character is one of redemption and renewed understanding of his own background. My story sees the world and its dramatic possibilities through a British and Chinese lens. But the residue of *Jerusalem* and other Royal Court offerings on family remain a vital part of my own practice.

Conclusion

The unrelenting fascination for family in all its guises, dysfunction and complexities will always have a home. As long as there are such alliances, networks and hierarchies within the modern world there will always be a thrill for dramatists in spinning a good story from them. We can be certain that in our struggle and need to define the family – 'Jia' in Chinese – the dramas, in the words of André Green, will have the 'psychoanalyst delighted'.[3]

Jingan Young

Jingan writes for stage and screen. Her feature film *No 2 Daughter*, a British East and South East Asian (BESEA)-led romcom, is in development with Greenacre films. She is part of the inaugural Sky Studios Comedy/Birmingham Rep scheme, mentored by Meera Syal, and recently completed the Channel 4 Screenwriting Scheme 2021. She is also writing for CBeebies.

For over a decade, she produced new writing from BESEA writers, under the title 'Foreign Goods', with her company Pokfulam Rd Productions. Jingan spearheaded the publication of *Foreign Goods* (Oberon Books, 2018), the first collection of plays by BESEA authors in the UK, with a foreword by David Henry Hwang.

Her book *Soho on Screen*, on London's Soho will be published in May 2022 by Berghahn Books.

[3] André Green. *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy.* Trans. by Alan Sheridan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979: 8-9.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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