ON STAGE AT PARK SQUARE THEATRE
February 7, 8, 14, 15, 2017

Study Guide
Music by RICHARD RODGERS;
Lyrics by OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II;
Book by DAVID HENRY HWANG;
Directed by RANDY REYES

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In 1960, after her father is killed, Mei-Li Wu takes the precious flower drum he has given her and emigrates from Mao’s Communist China. She finds herself in San Francisco’s Chinatown where she seeks a former friend of her father’s at his theatre. Trained in opera, Mei-Li hopes to join the company of The Golden Pearl Theatre which hosts a struggling traditional Chinese opera, directed by Chi-Yang Wang. His son and protégé, Ta Wang, wishes to bring the theatre into the modern era through cabaret-style performances that are bringing in larger audiences.

As Mei-Li begins to navigate the American cultural expectations as a young Chinese woman, she encounters numerous definitions of what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be American. Mei-Li meets Linda Low, a Chinese American showgirl who stars in the theatre’s cabaret nights and seeks to find love and to define her own place in America. Just as Linda seeks love, Mei-Li is initially drawn to Ta Wang and hopes he will reciprocate her budding romantic feelings. Although he notices her, he is more interested in Linda Low. Meanwhile, Mei-Li reconnects with Hai-Lung Chao, a new immigrant from China who arrived in the United States on the same boat as Mei-Li and who works in a fortune cookie factory.

Hai-Lung longs to return to Hong Kong because he is disillusioned by his lack of opportunities in America. He is interested in Mei-Li and convinces her to return there with him to be married. He also convinces her to sell her flower drum to raise money for their trip. As Hai-Lung pursues Mei-Li, Ta finds himself more interested in her but believes he has lost his chance to win her.

Meanwhile, Ta’s’s father, Chi-Yang, has given up opera and has begun to produce more cabaret-style nights at the renamed “Club Chop Suey.” Chi-Yang has also created a new nightclub persona for himself named “Sammy Fong.”

Eventually, Mei-Li chooses to remain in America, and in turn, chooses Ta who has understood the value of her flower drum and has rescued it for her. They are married at the theatre, which now ironically features a Chinese opera night headlined by Ta and Mei-Li as well as numerous cabaret nights headlined by Chi-Yang Wang. The theatre enjoys success through its diverse offerings of Chinese and American theatre styles.
Wu Mei-Li is a new immigrant from China in her twenties who has just arrived in San Francisco. Before her father’s imprisonment and death by Chinese Communists, she learned Chinese opera from him. She is alone and looking for help to start her life in a new place by connecting with Wang Chi-Yang, a friend of her dead father.

Wang Chi-Yang is a Chinese opera actor in his fifties who emigrated to San Francisco over 20 years ago. He was a friend of Mei-Li’s father in China. He is widowed, having lost his wife on the trip to America, and has one son who is more modern and American than he. He runs an opera house in Chinatown, performing Chinese opera to almost empty houses.

Wang Ta is the twenty-year-old Chinese born son of Chi-Yang who has grown up in America. He has assimilated to American culture and struggles against his father’s love of traditional Chinese opera. Once a week he produces a modern and much more successful nightclub act at the opera house starring showgirl Linda Low. He would like to be in a relationship with her.

Linda Low is a Chinese American showgirl in her twenties. She is employed by Wang Ta in his nightclub and aspires to become an actress in Hollywood. She hopes to use her talent to become accepted as an American, turning her back on her Chinese heritage. She only dates American men because she believes they raise her status.

Madame Rita Liang is a Chinese American talent agent and opportunist in her forties. She sees the possibilities of marketing a Chinese nightclub in Chinatown to non-Chinese patrons.

Chao Hai-Lung is a new immigrant from China in his twenties who traveled to San Francisco on the same boat as Mei-Li. He is dissatisfied with his life as an immigrant in America and wants to return to Hong Kong. He admires Mei-Li and wants to marry her.

Chin is an old friend of the Wang family. He is a Chinese immigrant in his sixties who has also been in the U.S. for several years. He dispenses advice on love.

Harvard is a Chinese American in his twenties whose parents wish he were a successful professional instead of a Chinese nightclub worker.

Mr. Chong is the Chinese American owner of the On Leock Fortune Cookie Factory where Chao Hai-Lung works.

Mr. Lee is a Chinese American restaurant owner.
“Flower Drum Song Comes Roaring Back to Broadway”

Introduction: This article focuses on why David Henry Hwang revisited Flower Drum Song and adapted it for modern audiences. It also discusses the importance of representation in media.

“To create something new,” says a character in David Henry Hwang’s script for Flower Drum Song, “we must first love what is old.” For Mr. Hwang, this is the guiding philosophy for what is arguably—and controversially—the most radical reinterpretation yet of a Broadway musical.

Flower Drum Song has always held a unique place among the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals. Coming late in their career—after two consecutive, and rare, Broadway flops (Me and Juliet and Pipe Dream) and one hugely successful television musical (Cinderella)—it once held its own against mega-popular hits like Oklahoma! and The King and I. However, as fashions changed so did its fortunes. “Oscar Hammerstein referred to it as their ‘lucky hit,’” Rodgers and Hammerstein President Ted Chapin told the Los Angeles Times. “Unlike the rest of the canon, it didn’t live on with the same kind of force as some of their other musicals.”

The original production, though, was a hit indeed, running for 600 performances, making stars of its leads Miyoshi Umeki and Pat Suzuki (landing them on the cover of Time—Suzuki was the first American-born Asian to enjoy such an honor), launching a London production, a U.S. National tour and becoming one of Rodger and Hammerstein’s strongest titles in the summer stock (and Vegas) circuits of the early ’60s. A 1961 movie version, starting Umeki, Nancy Kwan, James Shigeta and Jack Soo, was also a huge hit with profound implications for Asian Americans.

“Flower Drum Song represented a real breakthrough for our parents,” Hwang told Performing Arts. “It portrayed a Chinese American family that was 100% American, and characters who didn’t all speak in accents, who were sympathetic and had romantic relationships—which, by the way, we still don’t see much in movies today.” In a 1996 appraisal for Inside Asian America, journalist Yuan-Kwan Chan observed: “It was the first—and so far, the last—film by a major U.S. studio in which Asians or Pacific Islanders play all the major roles. Revolutionary for its time, it continues to be so in ours.” In Los Angeles Magazine, Nancy Kwan recalled, “This was the first big movie about Asian Americans. They spent money on sets, costumes, dance numbers, and they made money. That all said something important.”

Nevertheless, by the time Hwang was a student at Stanford University in the late ’70s, attitudes towards Flower Drum Song—including his own—had changed. “We were deep into issues of identity politics,” he recalled in an interview with the Daily Breeze. “We were so politically correct, I think I felt a need to demonize Flower Drum Song on principle.” In Performing Arts, he elaborated: “In retrospect, I think the protest was probably necessary. Asian Americans were beginning to write about themselves. We felt a need to repudiate the way non-Asians had written about us. Which meant repudiating Flower Drum Song.”

“But even back then people would, in private, admit that they liked the show. How could they not? For us boomers, it was our first opportunity as kids to see Asian Americans singing and dancing in a Broadway play and Hollywood musical...As a kid I had liked it. As a young man I rejected it. Now I’m trying to reconcile that and find some middle ground.”

CONTINUED...
“Flower Drum Song Comes Roaring Back to Broadway”

The reconciliation began in Siam—specifically, the Siam depicted in the 1996 Tony-winning Broadway revival of *The King and I*. “I really enjoyed it,” Hwang told the [sic] “I started thinking of other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals that I’d like to see again, and that led to *Flower Drum Song*.” He added, “I knew there was a lot to like and a lot not to like.” Revisiting *Flower Drum Song*, he thought, would provide him with “a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with two of the greatest artists of this century,” as he told *Playbill*. “It would be fun to create a new musical using the wonderful score that had been written for the original.”

In 1996, Hwang met with Ted Chapin, Mary Rodgers and the late James Hammerstein to make his case. (Jamie had been a stage manager on the original Broadway show and subsequently directed several productions of *Flower Drum Song*.) At that meeting, Hwang recalled, “I told them I wanted to remain true to the show’s original sensibility and themes, its sense of cockeyed optimism, while giving it more of the dramatic weight the great Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals have. I wanted to write the book that Oscar Hammerstein would have written if he’d been Asian American. Instead of being a tourist’s-eye view of Chinatown, I wanted to write it from the point of view of the inside looking out.”

The rights holders (including Ralph Fields, the son of co-librettist Joseph Fields) liked what they heard from Hwang and decided to say yes. “We went into it understanding that if we were going to go ahead with this experiment,” Chapin told the *Los Angeles Times*, “we had to be open to it.”

After an early draft that was, in Chapin’s words, “totally unproduceable [sic],” Hwang hit his stride with a script he developed in tandem with Director Robert Longbottom and music director David Chase. A new musical began to emerge—one that stayed true to the basic settings and principal characters of *Flower Drum Song* while rearranging those characters and their situations into an almost entirely new plot, an amalgam of Hammerstein, Fields, the original novel C.Y. Lee, and Hwang himself. Its theme, one that runs through much of Hwang’s work, is assimilation. “The issue of assimilation hasn’t dated,” Chapin told *American Theatre*. “In fact it’s very universal. What’s dated is the idea that the height of being American is getting a Thunderbird and a TV set, which is partly what the original show conveyed. Today when you come to America, it’s important to hold on to some of what you brought with you, and David wanted to look into that.”

Vital to this re-telling was the score, kept almost intact. (Two songs were cut and one, “My Best Love,” was restored. One other number, “The Next Time It Happens” from *Pipe Dream*, was interpolated.) “I like our demonic reputation of not wanting to change anything,” Chapin told *Performing Arts*. “It’s a good reputation to have because then, when someone like David comes along with a proposal, we can really surprise people. We’ve allowed more wholesale revisions than we might with any other show,” he added, “because this show may be more caught in its time than Rodgers and Hammerstein’s other works.”

“I didn’t sit down thinking, ‘I need to fix the old *Flower Drum Song*,’” Hwang told *American Theatre*. “I thought, here’s an opportunity to tell a story about assimilation and immigration, but do it in collaboration with Rodgers and Hammerstein, who created this wonderful score around those themes. It meant working with great music that already existed, and trying to make that music flower around a story that would thematically bear out some of their own initial ideas.”
“Flower Drum Song Comes Roaring Back to Broadway”

Discussion Questions:

1. Why was Flower Drum Song important to Hwang and other Asian Americans when it was first produced?

2. Later, what aspects of the original musical did Hwang find problematic? How did he deal with these in his new adaptation?

3. One of the changes in Hwang’s adaptation of Flower Drum Song is that Mei-Li is no longer a mail order bride, but a woman fleeing Maoist China. Why might Hwang have made this change? Explain.

4. Why is it important for people of color to create art that is made by them about themselves? Why is it important for people of color to adapt art made about them by others? Consider Flower Drum Song in your answer.

Article Source: http://www.rnh.com/show/37/Flower-Drum-Song-Hwang-Version#shows-history
Historical Timelines: Of Chinese American and Asian American Experiences

**1800-1850**

1830s  Chinese sailors and peddlers visit New York.

1844  United States and China sign a treaty of “peace, amity, and commerce.”

1847  Yung Wing and two other Chinese students arrive in U.S. for schooling.

1848  Gold is discovered in California and a gold rush begins.

1850s  Chinese migrate to Gold Mountain. The first Asians to migrate to the U.S are the Chinese in the mid-19th century to work in the gold mines and railroads.

1850  People vs. Hall goes to the California Supreme Court. This appealed murder case established that Chinese in the U.S. have no rights to testify against white citizens. The ruling freed Hall, a white man, from the conviction and death sentence for killing Ling Sing, a Chinese man. Three Chinese had testified to the murder.

1850  Chinese American population in U.S. is about 4,000 out of a population of 23.2 million. Chinese in California form associations for mutual protection.

**1852-1900**

1860  The Chinese American population in U.S. is 34,933 out of total population of 31.4 million.

1865  The Central Pacific Railroad recruits Chinese workers to build a transcontinental railroad.

1868  The first transcontinental railroad is completed.

1870  The Chinese American population in U.S. is 63,199 out of a total population of 38.5 million.

1871  Anti-Chinese violence erupts in Los Angeles and other cities. Such violence continues throughout the decade.

1882  Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

1890  Chinese American population in U.S. is 107,488 out of a total population of 62.9 million.

1898  In Wong Kim v. U.S., courts rule that anyone born in the U.S. is a citizen.

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Historical Timelines:
Of Chinese American and Asian American Experiences

1901-1950

1906  An earthquake destroys all records in San Francisco, including immigration records.

1910  The Chinese American population in U.S. is 94,414 out of a total population of 92.2 million.
      The Angel Island Immigration Station opens to process potential Asian immigrants.

1914-1918  World War I breaks out, and the United States goes to war. Despite discrimination against Asian Americans, many choose to serve in the war and are awarded naturalization for their service.

1917  The Immigration Act of 1917 is enacted during World War I, restricting immigration from anyone born in a geographically defined “Asian Barred Zone” except for Japanese and Filipinos. The Gentlemen’s Agreement already had restricted immigration of Japanese. The Philippines was an American colony and so its citizens were American nationals.

1930  The Chinese American population in U.S. is 101,159 out of a total of population of 123.2 million.

1932  Anna May Wong, at the height of her career, stars with Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*.

1941  The U.S. declares war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. China is now an ally of the U.S.

1942  Japanese internment begins. On March 18, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt creates the War Relocation Authority that forcefully moved Japanese Americans to internment camps. But even with discrimination, many first-generation Japanese Americans joined the U.S. military.

1943  Congress repeals all Chinese exclusion laws, grants Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens, and allows 105 Chinese to immigrate to the U.S. each year.

1945  World War II ends with the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

1950  The Chinese American population in U.S. is 150,005 out of 151,325,798.

1951-2012

1952  The Immigration and Nationality Act is passed. This act upholds the national origins quota system, which limits the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. annually by country. It ends the Asian exclusion from immigrating to the U.S. and creates a preference system which determines eligibility by skill sets and family ties to the U.S.

1965  A new Immigration Act effectively removes racial bias from America’s immigration laws.

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Historical Timelines:  
Of Chinese American and Asian American Experiences

1970  The Chinese American population of the U.S. is 237,292 out of 179,323,175.

1976  The American physicist Samuel Ting wins the Nobel Prize in Physics.

1982  Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, is killed by two white Americans. Chin’s killers are sentenced only to probation and a fine of $3,000 plus court fees.

1982  Maya Lin (at the age of 21) submits the winning design for the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial.

1987  *Time Magazine* publishes a cover article entitled “The New Whiz Kids.” Many Chinese Americans express a concern about a “model minority” stereotype.

1990  The Chinese American population of the U.S. is 1,645,472 out of 248,709,873 (1% of the population).

1996  Dr. David Ho is named *Time Magazine’s* Man of the Year for his research into HIV/AIDS.

1999  Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwan-born U.S. Citizen working as a physicist in the weapons section of the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratories, is arrested on charges of spying for China. He spends 278 days in solitary confinement before being released with an apology from a U.S. District Judge.

2000  The Chinese American population of the U.S. is 2,879,636 out of 281,431,904 (1% of the population).

2012  Asians surpass Hispanics as the largest group of new immigrants in the U.S. A record 18.2 million Asians are recorded to be living in the U.S. (5% of the population), making them the fastest-growing racial group in the country.

Sources:

**Chinese:** PBS Bill Moyers’ Becoming American: The Chinese Experience Timeline  
[http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ce_timeline.html](http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ce_timeline.html)

**Asian Americans:** U.S. Immigration’s Asian American History Timeline  
[https://www.us-immigration.com/asian-american-history-timeline/](https://www.us-immigration.com/asian-american-history-timeline/)

Compiled by Craig Farmer, Perpich Center for Arts Education
“How Racism Created America’s Chinatowns”
By Braden Goyette of The Huffington Post

Last month [October 2014], a San Francisco tour guide was caught in a racist rant about the city’s Chinatown, berating residents for “eating turtles and frogs” and for not assimilating into American culture.

There’s an irony to these grievances, considering that Chinatowns in the U.S. sprang up in large part because of anti-Chinese racism, and because of legal barriers that prevented assimilation.

At their height, there were dozens of Chinatowns, in big metro areas like Los Angeles and Chicago and in smaller cities like Cleveland and Oklahoma City. You might think of these neighborhoods as places to eat dim sum and buy knickknacks, but the reasons they initially formed are much more complex—and political.

**Chinese immigrants congregated together in part because of intense anti-Chinese attacks.**

Seeking economic opportunity during the Gold Rush and the building of the transcontinental railroad, the first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1800s. The first Chinatowns sprang up on the West Coast and were, at the start, much like ethnic settlements founded by European immigrant groups.

These immigrants were paid lower wages than white workers, who then blamed Chinese laborers for driving down pay and taking away jobs. After the railroad was completed and white laborers in other industries began to fear for their jobs, anti-Chinese attacks increased, including beatings, arson and murder.

In Rock Springs, Wyoming, 150 armed white miners drove Chinese immigrants out of town in 1885 by setting fire to their homes and businesses and murdering 28 people. No one was charged in the massacre. It was hardly an isolated incident; 153 anti-Chinese riots erupted throughout the American West in the 1870s and 1880s, with some of the worst episodes of violence in Denver, Los Angeles, Seattle and Tacoma, Washington.
“How Racism Created America’s Chinatowns”
By Braden Goyette of The Huffington Post

Many Chinese immigrants moved east to escape the attacks, explains Beatrice Chen, public programs director for the Museum of Chinese in America, located in New York. “That’s really how Chinatowns on the East Coast got their start,” she tells The Huffington Post. At the same time, Chinese immigrants who remained on the West Coast sought safety in numbers in the Chinatowns there.

The Exclusion Act of 1882 created significant legal barriers to Chinese immigrants’ assimilation. Around the turn of the century, politicians played into white workers’ anxieties, pointing the finger at Chinese immigrants for economic hardship and labeling them fundamentally incapable of assimilation into U.S. society.

In 1877, a congressional committee heard testimony that the Chinese “are a perpetual, unchanging, and unchangeable alien element that can never become homogenous; that their civilization is demoralizing and degrading to our people; that they degrade and dishonor labor; and they can never become citizens.”

Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, barring Chinese immigrants who were already in the U.S. from becoming citizens and restricting new immigration from China. The law marked the first time that the U.S. restricted immigration explicitly on the basis of race.

Along with the Exclusion Act’s renewal in 1892, Congress required all Chinese-Americans—including U.S.-born citizens—to carry photo ID at all times or risk arrest and deportation.

In response to exclusion, community organizations in Chinatown provided services to immigrants who weren’t protected by the benefits of American citizenship. “I think of them as sort of the first social service agencies for the Chinese,” Chen says. “That’s why you see a lot of informal networks and associations within Chinatowns in the United States.”

In San Francisco’s Chinatown, for example, The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association provided legal representation, organized a private watchmen patrol for the neighborhood and offered health services.

Housing and labor discrimination kept Chinese immigrants from being able to live and work outside of Chinatown.
During the exclusion era, it was difficult for Chinese immigrants to find a place to live outside of Chinatown. “In the broadest strokes, Chinatowns were products of extreme forms of racial segregation,” explains Ellen D. Wu, a history professor at Indiana University Bloomington and author of The Color Of Success: Asian Americans And The Origins Of The Model Minority. “Beginning in the late 19th century and really through the 1940s and ’50s, there was what we can call a regime of Asian exclusion: a web of laws and social practices and ideas designed to shut out Asians completely from American life.”

“That’s really how Chinatowns came into being,” Wu adds, “not how we think about them now, as a fun place to get a meal or buy some tchotchkes, but as a way to contain a very threatening population in American life.”

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Several Western states passed laws that prohibited Chinese immigrants from owning property. In Manhattan’s Chinatown, Chen says, some Italian immigrants sold buildings to the Chinese, but it was difficult to find white landlords who would sell to them on other parts of the island.

Chinese immigrants also were barred from most industries, aside from the hand-laundry and restaurant businesses. “It strengthened Chinatown that whites basically refused to work with the Chinese,” says Peter Kwong, a professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College in New York. “Chinese immigrants had to find work through self-employment.”

**Today, Chinese immigrants are being pushed out of Chinatowns by gentrification—but migration persists.** After the garment industry declined in the 1990s and gentrification set in, Chinese immigrants were priced out of old Chinatowns. That trend continues. “Chinatowns in many parts of the United States are disappearing,” Kwong says. “Many Chinatowns became very desirable real estate, and for a variety of reasons, they disappeared or become simply tourist destinations. San Francisco’s old Chinatown is pretty much that.”

A 2014 report from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, a civil rights group, criticized local governments in New York, Boston and Philadelphia for promoting rezoning and development projects that accelerated gentrification.

“Chinatowns are turning into a sanitized ethnic playground for the rich to satisfy their exotic appetite for a dim sum and fortune cookie fix,” Andrew Leong, co-author of the report, tells the BBC.

But Chinese immigrants are still flocking to Chinatowns in large numbers, fleeing poverty, or religious or political persecution. Since the 1980s, an influx of undocumented immigrants from China’s Fujian province has expanded New York’s Chinatown eastward.

When a ship named the Golden Venture ran aground off of Queens in 1993, carrying nearly 300 undocumented migrants, it provided a tragic illustration of the extreme lengths people will go to reach American shores.

The informal networks in Chinatown—some of which draw their lineage from the Exclusion era—allow undocumented immigrants to get a foothold after arrival. But sometimes they can also keep them stuck there.

“For most Fuzhounese immigrants [from the Fujian province of China], Chinatown is the first stop in America,” Guest wrote in *City Limits* magazine in 2003. “Here they connect with family, housing and jobs. But while Chinatown is a gateway, for many Fuzhounese it is also a trap, an ethnic enclave manufactured by the neighborhood’s Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking economic and political elites to keep them isolated and easy to exploit.”

**Source:**
According to the Brookings Institute, U.S. Census data indicates that Asians in America are living throughout the United States instead of staying in ethnic communities where we have seen traditional Chinatowns. The map below shows their findings about Asian populations in urban areas throughout the country.

Source: William H. Frey analysis, *Diversity Explosion*
Asians in America: Areas of Concentration and Destinations

Discussion Questions:

1. The previous article examines Chinatowns in the United States from their inception to the present. However, the map of Asian Concentration Areas (previous page) is based upon 2010 census data about a much larger group of self-identified Asians of which Chinese Americans are only a subset. Why is this distinction important for interpreting the map?

2. Identify some of the new Asian destinations. What might be possible explanations for the popularity of these locations?

3. Where might the concentrations of Asians be if the map was based on census data from the mid 1800s? You may refer to the timeline on pages 9-11 for additional information.

4. Is this dispersion of Asians in the 21st century United States surprising or not? Do you think other immigrant groups are also dispersed throughout the country? How could you find out whether your assumptions are correct or not?

Immigration Card for C.Y. Lee, original author of *Flower Drum Song*

Compiled by Jill Tammen, Hudson High School, retired
Chinese Opera and Flower Drum Song

The Roles in Chinese Opera

The roots of Chinese opera originated in the Zhou Dynasty (319-359 A.D.) and fully developed into its current form during the Song Dynasty (960-1271 A.D.). A highly stylized form of theatre, it relies on archetypes and skilled performers to bring to life complex stories, many based on myth and legend.

There are four main categories of acting roles, each of which has character subtypes. The sheng, a featured male role, is often a scholar or military character. There is also the dan, a female role played either by a man or woman, that offers the performer a chance to show off their grace, and sometimes, athleticism. One aspect that the dan performer must master is the shuixiu or “water sleeves” that are a part of many female costumes. Another male role, the jing, or “painted face,” shows off the power of the actor’s voice and forceful presence. Finally, the chou is a clown meant to bring humor to the performance.

Chinese opera also relies on musical instruments that have been used for centuries, one of the most recognizable being the gong that signals the beginning of a performance. Training for opera begins at a young age, usually 10 years old, but can start as young as 7 or 8 years; it is rigorous and relentless. Opera is one of the treasured artistic legacies of Chinese culture.
The Role of Opera in *Flower Drum Song*

In *Flower Drum Song*, opera plays an important role to the setting and to the lives of the characters. The Chinatown of *Flower Drum Song* has The Golden Pearl Theatre and introduces us to the characters of Wang Chi-Yang and his son, Wang Ta. While Wang Chi-Yang attempts to hold onto the old traditions of authentic opera, his son Ta is more concerned with modernization (and what will help bring an audience to the theatre.) Eventually, Ta’s father sees the ingenuity of his son’s attempts to modernize and ushers in a new era of a nightclub style music and dance which puts people into the seats.

While seemingly different genres, opera and cabaret share the same over-the-top theatrical style in costumes and spectacle. Mei-Li, a recent émigré from China, has been trained in opera by her father. She brings this training with her to America to make contact with Wang.

A Timeless Tradition

Just as opera has upheld the traditions of the past, so it has been preserved and adapted to make it a timeless art form. *Flower Drum Song* shows the struggle not only between what it is to be Chinese and American, but also what it is to respect the past while also moving forward with new traditions.

*By Alexandra Howes, Twin Cities Academy*
Exploring Contemporary Chinese Artists and *Flower Drum Song*

To the Teacher: This activity is designed to introduce students to two short films (15 minutes each) about Contemporary Chinese artists. The questions following each film are designed to allow students to more deeply understand and reflect on the role of the Chinese and American cultural collision in *Flower Drum Song*. The activity can be completed in a single 45 – 55 minute class period.

Disciplines: This activity could be used in the following areas of study: Theatre, Social Studies, Literary Arts, and Studio Arts.

Instructions:
1. Print or post the questions for students provided below.
2. Go to the [art21](http://www.pbs.org/art21/) website.
3. Click on artists.
4. Scroll down and click on the artist’s name. (You may need to use the scroll bar to get to the artist’s segment.)
5. View the video together. (Alternatively have students view the videos independently at individual computers.)
6. Have students write their responses to the questions.
7. After the students have answered the questions regarding each of the artists, you may want to ask them which artist’s work reflects the artist’s Chinese culture the most and which uses a fusion of cultures to create their art.

By Craig Farmer, The Perpich Center for Arts Education
Ai Weiwei (go to 36:00) Viewing Time: 15 minutes

1. Chinese opera is a thematic focus of *Flower Drum Song*. Opera, just like any other performing art form, is collaborative. According to two of his studio assistants, how does Weiwei approach collaboration with others?

2. Another focus of *Flower Drum Song* is the relationship between Wang Ta and his father Wang Chi-Yang. What kind of artist was Weiwei’s father? Did his father’s art affect Weiwei’s art? How do Wang Ta and Wang Chi-Yang influence each other’s artistic choices?

3. Wang Chi-Yang changes his opinion about the artistic relevance of his son’s nightclub show. Take notes on Weiwei’s thoughts about being an artist and the character of his art: do his ideas shed any light on the artistic choices you saw the characters make in *Flower Drum Song*?
Cao Fei (go to 39:00) Viewing Time: 15 Minutes

4. All of the Chinese American immigrants in Flower Drum Song bring some of their Chinese culture with them to America. What kind of American culture does Fei believe has influenced Chinese youth culture?

5. Perhaps Wang Ta will look back on his career as a nightclub producer and compare his early work with his current work. How does Fei look at her early work?

6. The rich tradition of Chinese opera costumes plays an important role in Flower Drum Song. How does Fei present Cosplay costumes in her films? (Cosplay: “the practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga and anime”)
Exploring Contemporary Chinese Artists and *Flower Drum Song*:
Student Handout

7. At a point in the plot, the female lead Wu Mei-Li works in a fortune cookie factory. If she were a part of Fei’s *Whose Utopia*, 2006, what would she do in the factory?

8. Is Fei’s development of “China Tracy” and “RMB City” in *Second Life* similar to how theatre professionals create characters and sets? Why or why not?
Tossing Lines
A Pre-play Class Activity

Objective:
To familiarize students with the play by working with lines spoken in the play and based on these excerpts to elicit predictions and discussion about the play’s conflict and characters. This activity helps students form questions, gain insight, and build excitement for seeing these lines spoken in the play. This activity serves the students best if completed before they attend the play.

Time allotted:
20-30 minutes

Materials:
Tennis ball or hackey-sack
Fifteen slips of paper, cut from Tossing Lines on the following page

Procedure:
Cut and distribute the slips of paper (see the following page) to fifteen volunteers. Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to memorize (or prepare a dramatic reading of their line with no memorization). Have these fifteen students form a circle and give one student the ball. After students speak a line, they toss the ball to another student who speaks their assigned line. Students toss ball throughout the circle until all lines have been heard a few times. Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out the best way to perform the lines.

Optional:
Re-assign lines within the group (or other students in classroom) and continue for another round.

Free-writing/Discussion:
After lines have been tossed and in preparation for discussion, allow students five minutes to free-write their ideas and questions about the content of the play. The following questions may be used to guide free-write and/or discussion.

1. Can you predict which themes may be portrayed in this production based on the lines you’ve heard?
   What might be the central conflict? Which lines support your ideas?
2. In what period do you think the play is set?
3. What cultural references can you identify?
4. Which lines might be from songs? Why do you think so?


Compiled by Cheryl Hornstein, Freelance Theatre and Music Educator
### Tossing Lines

**A Pre-play Class Activity: Quotes from the Play**

**To the Teacher:**
Cut these apart and distribute to students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A hundred million miracles are happening every day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I finally spot the American coastline, my lungs will be filled with the sweet breath of freedom.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First you do the mincing walk, then the stupid pose, then the nauseating giggle. Got it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes you seem 100% Chinese. Then a moment later, you become 100% American.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to tell my son: the Americans will never accept him in their country.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Europeans were still living in caves, our ancestors were already being fabulous.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The more you dream, the more miracles you see.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create something new, we must first love what is old.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese should live where they can be proud to be Chinese.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People losing hope, giving up their dream—it happens every day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A man cannot love others until he learns to love himself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe I make you feel proud to be you. But you always make me feel ashamed to be me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And nothing in this country buys respect like money.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to Club Chop Suey where East meets West.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m just some foolish refugee.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Compiled by Cheryl Hornstein, Freelance Theatre and Music Educator**
Objective: By examining how groups of people are presented in the play, students will develop an understanding of stereotypes. They will determine if individual characters represent a stereotypical person, or if the stereotype does not hold true.

BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY

Define the Word “Stereotype”

1. An unfair belief that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same
2. A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing
3. A standard, conventional image, received idea, or cliché
4. A person or thing that conforms to a stereotypical image

Introduce Three of the Main Characters (You may want to refer students to the Character Descriptions page.)

1. Mei-Li: an inexperienced, new immigrant looking for a place to fit in
2. Wang Chi-Yang: an older, Chinese opera actor looking to hold on to all that he remembers from Chinese theater
3. Wang Ta: Chi-Yang’s Chinese American son, looking to throw away all that is old and to create something new in America

Read the Scene Below

MEI-LI. Ta, Sometimes you seem 100 percent Chinese. Then a moment later, you become 100 percent American.

TA. So what does that make me? 100 percent nothing?

MEI-LI. No. I think you are . . .100 percent both.

TA. Is that possible?

Discuss

1. In this short scene from Flower Drum Song, what do the characters mean by Chinese? American? Are these stereotypes?
2. Are there any aspects of the stereotypes that have some basis in fact?
Stereotypes: Real, Perceived, or Debunked?

Pre and Post-play Activities

BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY, CONTINUED...

Write

In the play some of the characters are called Chinese, some are called Chinese American, and some are called American. What is the difference? How do you distinguish between the three terms? Write your answer down and save it until after you’ve seen the play.

DURING THE PLAY

1. As you watch the play, notice the different Chinese women characters. In what way do these women support or refute stereotypes?
2. How are Americans represented in the play? Is there a difference between how Chinese Americans are shown as compared to other Americans?

AFTER THE PLAY

1. How did your perception of each character change throughout the play? In what ways did the characters embody stereotypes? In what ways did they debunk them?
2. What does the following quotation imply? “Nothing in this country buys respect like money.” What culture (or cultures) does the quotation refer to? Support your answer.
3. Revisit what you wrote before the play. Did your answers to these post-play questions differ from your original pre-play written response? Explain.

By Cheryl Hornstein, Freelance Theatre & Music Educator
Text Analysis
Student Activities & Discussion

Activity One: Read and Discuss

Choose 3 students to read the scene on pages 28 and 29 aloud from their seats. Then discuss the questions.

1. From what you have read in this scene, explain how each character feels about the old and the new.
2. How does Ta feel about everything from his father’s past in China?
3. How does Mei-Li feel about what she remembers of her father and her past in China? How are their perceptions different?
4. What can you tell about Ta’s relationship to his father, Wang?

Activity Two: Read on your Feet and Discuss

Choose 3 different students and read the scene again including Wang’s entrance and exit. Place Ta and Mei-Li next to each other in front of the class. When Wang enters, he should separate the two younger characters by moving in between them. Ta and Mei-Li should then move further apart. Reread the scene and then discuss the questions.

1. How does minimal staging enhance the scene?
2. How does Wang feel about the Nightclub Night? Ta tells him, “You’re jealous!” Do you think this is true? What is Wang jealous about?
3. What does Mei-Li mean when she says, “To create something new we must first love what is old”?
4. Does Mei-Li like the Nightclub Night? How do you know?
5. Ta wasn’t old enough to remember his parents performing together in China, but Mei-Li shares what her father said about their performances. Why hasn’t Ta heard about this before? Does hearing about it change his attitude towards this ancient form of theatre?

By Cheryl Hornstein, Freelance Theatre & Music Educator
What You Need to Know
In this scene Wang reacts to Ta’s Nightclub Night at the Theatre. Mei-Li, Ta and Wang discuss the value of what is old and what is new.

**Act I, Scene 5**

**WANG.** Demons begone! Demons begone!

**TA.** Dad! Why are you doing this?

**WANG.** Why? Because I finally came to see your Nightclub Night.

**TA.** What’d you think of the show?

**WANG.** To think my own son created this travesty!

**TA.** Yeah, I’m the director. And you’re jealous.

**WANG.** Jealous?

**TA.** You heard something tonight that you haven’t heard in twenty years: the sound of applause.

**WANG.** Pah! Anyone can get white demons to applaud. All you have to do is put a Chinese girl onstage and take away her clothes.

**MEI-LI.** Master Wang, my father told me that when he first put women in the opera, you defended him. That you told the traditionalists, “Times have changed.”

**WANG.** Well, now they have changed too much! *Pause* This disgrace you call “Night Club”- is over. *(WANG exits.)*

**TA.** Soon as you think you’re onto something great, it all comes crashing down around you.

**MEI-LI.** Ta, I want to show you something *(She produces her flower drum.)*

**TA.** A flower drum?

**MEI-LI.** As a child, my father was sent to sing for money in the streets. He was told to use this drum for begging. But he used it instead...for wishing.

**TA.** So you’ve had it since you were a kid?

CONTINUED...
MEI-LI. My father was arrested by the Communists – and died in prison. Before he went away, he whispered to me, “Take this drum, Daughter – and never stop dreaming. For the more you dream, the more miracles you will see.”

TA. My mother died on the boat, coming to America. I was only two. And Dad never really talked much about her.

MEI-LI. My father saw them perform many times.

TA. Really? Were they good together?

MEI-LI. Their most famous performance was in “The Flower Boat Maiden.” Father said watching them was like seeing that opera for the first time, back when it was new.

TA. Must’ve been tough to breathe life into those corny old stories. “The love of a maiden turns a humble scholar into a god.” Sounds credible to me.

MEI-LI. Ta, the Flower Boat Maiden does not turn the scholar into a god. He has always been a god. Only he has forgotten that he came originally from heaven.

TA. So somehow – what? – she figures out his secret identity?

MEI-LI. She loves him. And that is enough. When he looks into her eyes, he realizes...that he has always been something more. You know the story –

ALONG THE HWANG HO VALLEY,
WHERE YOUNG MEN WALK AND DREAM-
A FLOWER BOAT WITH SINGING GIRLS
CAME DRIFTING DOWN THE STREAM.
I SAW THE FACE OF ONLY ONE
COME DRIFTING DOWN THE STREAM...
YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL,
SMALL AND SHY...

TA. I’ve never heard it that way before.

MEI-LI. My father always said, to create something new, we must first love what is old. Now sing it with your heart.
Charting the Immigration Experience

In *Flower Drum Song*, characters emigrate for different reasons and, once in the United States, respond very differently to being uprooted to a new land and starting a new life. Consider how Wu Mei-Li and Wang Chi-Yang respond differently to their new lives in America. Use the third column to describe how another immigrant with whom you are familiar has responded to similar situations. The third column may be based upon someone else’s experiences that you’ve seen, heard, or read about, or may be based upon your own personal experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason(s) for coming to America</th>
<th>Wu Mei-Li</th>
<th>Wang Chi-Yang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex.: Her father was killed by Communists, and he sent her to find freedom in America.</td>
<td>Ex: Chinese opera was being shut down by the Communists. He moved here so he could continue to perform.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Response(s) to new American customs | | |
|-------------------------------------| | |

| Obstacles and hardships faced by them once in America | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------| | |

| Source(s) of strength when facing challenges as an immigrant | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------| | |

| Customs and traditions they continued to practice from their homeland | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------| | |

| Prejudice or stereotyping experienced by them | | |
|-----------------------------------------------| | |

| People and things that made their new life easier | | |
|--------------------------------------------------| | |
ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

Post-play Discussion Questions

Characters

1. Who is/are the protagonist(s)? What makes them the central character(s) of the play?

2. Which characters change the most during the play? In what ways? Are these changes positive or negative? What lessons do they learn?

3. The three women in the play, Mei-Li, Linda, and Rita, are quite different from each other. Which woman is the most compelling? The most realistic? The most true to herself?

4. Which male character is the most compelling? Explain.

5. Which characters strike you as the most stereotypical? Why might the playwright have chosen to use such stereotypes instead of creating more complex characters?

6. Chao Hai-Lung serves as a foil to Wu Mei-Li. How is his presence in the play important for the development of her character? In what ways is his response to America totally different than hers? What does she learn about herself because she knows and dates him?

The Immigrant Experience

7. The story takes place in China and in San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1960. How does that setting date it? What might be different if it were set today?

8. The Chinese in this play are emigrating to escape Chinese communist rule and its limits on freedom. What other reasons cause people to leave everything they know to start a new life in a foreign land?

9. What other places serve as ethnic communities like the Chinatown portrayed in the play? Are there any neighborhoods you know that are predominantly one immigrant group or nationality? What are the advantages of living in such communities? Are there disadvantages of living in such a community? If so, what are they?

10. Could anything cause you to emigrate from the United States? If so, what? If you were choosing to emigrate, what would you look for in a new home?

11. What examples of racism are present in the play? Is racism an inevitable experience for immigrants? Which immigrant groups may have experienced more racial stereotyping than others?

12. When is assimilation absolutely necessary? When is retaining cultural identity more important? How can these be balanced?

CONTINUED...
Post-play Discussion Questions

13. What qualities in a person make assimilation easier? What qualities make it harder for them?

14. Is Chao Hai-Lung a failure for returning to Hong Kong, or is he a realist? Explain.

15. What are the characteristics of communities that are welcoming to immigrants? What are the characteristics of communities that are less welcoming?

16. Is there something you would like to see your community do to welcome and help immigrants to the United States? Explain.

17. When children of immigrants assimilate into a new American culture, tensions can arise with their parents. This type of clash occurs between Ta and his father over the performances in the opera house. What other struggles between new American ways and traditional Chinese ways are present in the play?

18. What other tensions can come up between children and their immigrant parents that are not portrayed in the play?

Old Versus New

19. Are the tensions between the old and the new treated realistically in the play? Explain.

20. At the end of the play Ta and Chi-Yang have reversed their attitudes toward performing traditional Chinese opera. Is this believable?

21. What causes young people to want to learn more about their cultural heritage? What encourages new immigrants to embrace aspects of American culture?
Post-play Discussion Questions

Gender Roles

22. How do we see the characters display power? Do they portray different kinds of power? Which characters have more power, the men or the women?

23. Is this play sexist? If so, explain how women and men are portrayed that demonstrates sexism. If not, explain how men and women are portrayed in ways that respect their genders without stereotyping them.

24. Why does Mei-Li decide to stay with Ta? What has he demonstrated to her to make her willing to give up the idea of returning to Hong Kong?

25. As the play ends, Ta and Mei-Li have begun a new relationship as have Chi-Yang and Rita. What are your predictions for the future of these relationships?

Symbols and Motifs

26. What is the significance of Mei-Li’s flower drum? To her? To her father? To Ta?

27. Mei-Li can gracefully perform the Chinese water sleeves and Linda cannot. Why is this significant?

28. How does the Opera House serve as a symbol of the new American environment in which these characters are living?

29. The musical numbers were retained from the original production. Do you think any of the songs should have been changed? What would you have liked to see? Explain.

30. The music of Flower Drum Song is western in style and often pointedly American. How does this affect the play? Why do you think the composer and lyricist chose not to include any music in the style of Chinese opera?

31. Why might the title of the play be Flower Drum Song and not The Flower Drum?

Compiled by Jill Tammen, Hudson High School, retired
Educational Programs at Park Square Theatre are Funded in Part by:


To Our Teachers,

Thank you for giving the gift of theatre to your students, and the gift of your students to our theatre.

Yours sincerely,

The Staff at Park Square Theatre

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