Tiger Style!

WRITTEN BY MIKE LEW
DIRECTED BY BRIAN BALCOM

STUDY GUIDE
Dear School Partners,

Welcome to the 2022/23 Season!
We’re thrilled to have you and your students join us for Mike Lew’s whimsical satire, "Tiger Style!"

In a world filled with racial stereotypes, how can one defy society’s expectations if their country won’t let them? Lew’s play addresses this question by examining the Asian American experience through the eyes of fictional sibling duo, Albert and Jenny Chen. One struggles to advocate for themselves in the workplace while the other is an overachiever in search of validation from others. For third-generation Chinese Americans who graduated from Harvard, surely they’re smart enough to figure out why they’re struggling to live as confident, carefree adults. But who’s responsible for their unhappiness? Who placed these high expectations on them in the first place? What if the “tiger parenting” applied in their youth has failed to provide them with useful life skills?

"Tiger Style!" uses clever dialogue and humorous extremes to challenge the audience to really think about how cultural biases have a tendency to pigeonhole minorities and undermine their individual experiences. We invite you and your students to use this study guide to dive deeper into the themes explored in the show. This guide is comprised of dramaturgical resources, classroom activities, and behind the scenes interviews with members of the production team.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share this provocative piece of work with you. We hope it’s ideas will lead to engaging discussions and inspire your students to learn more.

Warmly,
WT Education

Study Guide Contributors: Tyra Bullock, Kristin Hammargren, Michelle N. Huang, Bobby Kennedy, Jeremy Pesigan, and Stanton Long
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The play begins as Chinese American brother and sister Jennifer and Albert Chen realize that a childhood of rigorous academic achievement has not led them to the fulfilling lives they were promised. Albert, a computer programmer, is passed up for a promotion by his boss who favors his more “relatable” white coworker Russ the Bus. Russ calls Albert “Albro” and regularly asks Albert to cover for him at work. Meanwhile, Jennifer, a Harvard-educated doctor gets broken up with by her loafer boyfriend of three years, Reggie, which throws off the highly detailed timetable she has in place for her life. According to Reggie, Jennifer is not “fun” enough and he was expecting her to be more “exotic.” Commiserating in their apartment, the siblings decide it’s their parents’ fault that their hard work did not lead to the promised success and satisfaction. When they drive to their house to demand an apology, they find their parents less than sympathetic. Still seeking a reason for their failures, Jennifer and Albert decide to “go full Western,” and fully claim the American side of their Chinese American identity. Albert loses his job after he confronts his boss and Jennifer is frustrated after she fails to speed through therapy. Convinced the answer to their problems is still out there, Jennifer and Albert opt to “go full Eastern” and head to China.
ACT 2

Things in China quickly turn awry when Albert throws away all of their money and their US passports. The Chinese Government comes to the rescue and offers them jobs, housing, and a matchmaker for Jennifer. Their long-lost Cousin Chen appears and warns them not to trust the government. On his first day as a computer hacker, Albert is asked to shut down the power grids of three major American cities. He refuses and is thrown in jail. Jennifer is at first thrilled by the Matchmaker’s sophisticated matchmaking software but becomes alarmed when she discovers they won’t take into account things like personality or personal preferences. When her wedding is scheduled for later that week, she attempts to delete her profile from the government database and is thrown in jail alongside Albert. A government party official visits them in jail and tells them he will release them if they play “the most beautiful possible sonata.” Excited that their years of classical music training may finally have a practical application, Jennifer and Albert play and reconnect with their past shared accomplishments. The party official isn’t impressed and sentences them to prison camp. Cousin Chen frees Jennifer and Albert and provides them with Chinese passports to leave China. Back at airport customs in California, Jennifer and Albert reunite with their parents and face a difficult decision.
MEET THE PLAYERS
Two actors play the central characters of Albert and Jennifer Chen.

AURORA ADACHI-WINTER
Jennifer Chen:
A high-achieving, extremely organized, Harvard-educated oncologist (doctor who studies and treats cancer). Studied classical piano as a child.

CHRISTOPHER THOMAS POW
Albert Chen:
Jennifer’s brother and roommate who works as a computer programmer at a software company in Irvine, California. A former concert cellist.
MEET THE PLAYERS

Three actors play a variety of different parts throughout the show.
Mike Lew’s plays include "Teenage Dick" (Donmar Warehouse, Wooly Mammoth, Ma-Yi at the Public, and Artists Rep productions; Public Studio, O’Neill, OSF workshops), 'Tiger Style!' (Olney, Huntington, La Jolla Playhouse, and Alliance productions; O’Neill and CTG workshops), "Bike America" (Ma-Yi and Alliance productions), microcrisis (Ma-Yi, InterAct, and Next Act productions), "Moustache Guys", and the book to the musical "Bhangin’ It" (Richard Rodgers Award; La Jolla Playhouse, Jerome Robbins Project Springboard and Rhinebeck Writers Retreat "Triple R" workshops). He is a Tony voter, Dramatists Guild Council member, and resident of New Dramatists. He is a Mellon Foundation Playwright in Residence at Ma-Yi and former La Jolla Playhouse Artist-in-Residence (both with Rehana Lew Mirza). Honors include Lark Venturous and NYFA fellowships and the Kleban, PEN Emerging Playwright, Lanford Wilson, Helen Merrill, Heideman, and Kendeda awards. He is former co-director of Ma-Yi Writers Lab, the largest collective of Asian-American playwrights in the country.
Model Minority

The term “model minority” is commonly understood as referring to Asian Americans who have attained a high degree of educational and professional success in comparison to other races or immigrant groups. The concept traces back to white sociologist William Petersen’s 1966 New York Times article “Success story: Japanese American style,” which discusses Japanese American achievement in the years after internment. Petersen and many other writers of his time both explicitly and implicitly used Asian Americans as a “wedge” group to malign Black Americans, who at the time were seeking enfranchisement through the Civil Rights Movement.

Another important and overlooked context for the transformation of Asian Americans from yellow peril to model minority is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Commonly referred to as the 1965 Immigration Act, this law reversed years of anti-Asian immigration policy by 1) lifting previous geographical restrictions; and 2) prioritizing professionals and scientists deemed highly-skilled, as well as immediate family members of immigrants already in the United States. The implementation of these changes has since produced a domestic population of educated Asian American immigrants with a higher percentage of college graduates compared to both their country of origin and the United States—for example, 4% of people living in China have college degrees, but approximately 51% of Chinese emigrants to the U.S. do. (An important exception to this immigration pattern in the latter half of the twentieth century is refugees of the Vietnam War.) Despite frequent misattribution to Asian cultural values and even genetics, it is important to remember that any “truth” of the model minority must take into account the broader history of racial discrimination and immigration policies in the United States.

From the Playwright:

“Tiger Style! came out of wanting to talk about my version of Chinese-American culture but from a perspective that felt true to me; I wanted to address and rebuff those expectations (and stereotypes) and try to move the conversation about Asian-Americans forward.”
– Mike Lew
WORLD OF THE PLAY

Tiger Parenting

Thrust into the national spotlight in 2011 by a Wall Street Journal excerpt from Yale law professor Amy Chua’s memoir Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, the stereotype of tiger parenting is commonly understood as exacting high expectations and achievement from children through harsh or strict methods that some view as “tough love” and others view as cruel. Chua writes, “the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they’re capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away,” before gleefully recounting how she ruled her daughters with an iron fist, refused any grade less than an A, forbade sleepovers and dating, and forced them to practice piano and violin for hours on end. This authoritarian parenting style is associated most strongly with Chinese (and Chinese American) families, as opposed to other ethnic groups. However, psychology studies have found that not only is tiger parenting not a common parenting profile among Chinese Americans, the best developmental outcomes for children of all racial and ethnic groups comes from supportive parenting. In fact, authoritarian attitudes to parenting can lead to the achievement/adjustment paradox, whereby high levels of academic success are not accompanied by gains in mental health. For Asian Americans specifically, the internalization of narrow notions of success and failure can lead to young people who don’t perform at an elite level feeling like “bad Asians.” Finally, the trope’s outsized popularity with white Americans is often used to reinforce the idea that racism can be overcome through family values and individual hard work.

From the Playwright:

“I feel like a lot of the discourse and think pieces around Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother were over-reactions based in stereotypes. I mean somewhat understandably given that Professor Chua was trying to provoke. But just the gut responses were so overblown, like ‘All Asians hate their parents and all Asians raised this way commit suicide!’”

– Mike Lew
A social identity is a group usually defined by some physical, social, and mental characteristics of an individual. For example, a person’s race, ethnicity, or gender could be a social group you identify with. In “Tiger Style!” we witness instances where their social identities directly impact their everyday life. For this activity, we’ll explore the Essential Question: How do I see myself as an individual when others see me as part of a collective?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: INDIVIDUAL VS COMMUNITY**

**Step One:** Fill in the identity wheel.

**Step Two:** On the social identity wheel, place a ★ on the top THREE sections that represent how others may see you.

**Step Three:** On the social identity wheel, place a *** around the top THREE sections that represent how you see yourself.
Step Four: Reflection Questions:

- Consider the selections you made in Steps Two and Three. How do the two compare? Did you notice any crossover? Were they completely different?

- Are there any communities you belong to that aren’t listed on this worksheet? If so, please write them below. (Ex: sports team, club/organization, fan base, etc.)

- Reread the quote above from the Director of "Tiger Style!" Brian Balcom. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Be sure to use specific examples to support your argument.

Step Five:

Use a pair of scissors to cut out your identity wheel. With your teacher’s permission, find a place in the classroom to put this sheet on display. Take time observing the identity wheels made by your peers. What do you notice? Do you have any curiosities about their work? In what ways might we see ourselves as individuals while also belonging to a larger community?
The set designer, also known as the scenic designer, is the member of the production team responsible for creating the scenery for a staged performance. Their job is to visually stimulate the audience and immerse them in the world of the story.

Set Designer, Lauren N. Nichols, sat down with WT Education to share a bit about her process of designing the set for "Tiger Style!"
We got the opportunity to watch the final dress for "Tiger Style!" a few nights ago and the set looks amazing! After reading the script for the first time, how did you decide what you wanted the set to look like?

Initially I was flooded with so many ideas after reading the play. It’s such a good story, but there are so many locations and so many transitions, so I was stumped on where to begin. I started with the basics of including the non-negotiable items (of each place) into my sketches. I knew that I wanted China to not only look different from our adventures in the United States, but I wanted it to feel different. That concept alone became the driving force. How can the set develop into a new set for Act 2 that sparks new energy, without taking away from the storyline itself, but adding to it?

In what ways is the set an extension of the characters and their journey? How do the other members in Production work in tandem with this element of the show?

The set is a translation of their experiences. We start with a unified structure composed of clean lines which represents the routine that they have found themselves absorbed into as part of their daily lives, and over the course of the show the set alters into a new shape with columns opening, and new elements replacing old elements. We never leave everything behind, but we feel the set transition into a more unbalanced, overwhelming version of what it once was. Similar to the characters’ experiences- my set takes a journey of its own. After an extensive research process I was able to combine 2 images into one set - a building facade, and a traditional Chinese archway, with the set shifting from one to the other. The different scenes take place with modifications to where things are positioned.

If it’s never been mentioned before, scenery looks terrible when unlit, and like many other productions this set needed light to make a bold statement. The color combinations that lighting designer Lee Fiskness showcases in the panels are such a strong storytelling element alone, that without it- the excitement and energy shown by the actors would be lost in a dull theatre space. This set needed assistance across multiple departments, and it came out as great as it did because we were all a part of the development process.
"Tiger Style!" has been produced at other companies such as the Huntington Theatre Company or TheatreSquared. Are you ever influenced by a set designed in a previous production of the same show?

I rarely look at other designs until I have solidified something of my own. Makes it easier to come up with more original ideas.

What kind of program and/or software do you use to create your work?

I draft in AutoCAD, but most of the 3D modeling was done in SketchUp and rendered in Unreal Engine; also use Photoshop to explore color palettes.

What excites you the most about your job?

No two days are the same. I don't have to pick the kind of artist that I have to be. One day I get to be a graphic designer, one day an architect, and one day a modelmaker. It's never the same, and getting the chance to create a world that makes the audience forget about everything else is the reason why I do this.

What advice would you give to someone interested in pursuing a career in set design?

When starting out, just find a way to be involved. Being a working creative has its challenges, but speaking to someone who has traveled that path before will lead you to the best information. It's a career that builds on learned experiences so it does not happen if you don't do it. It's pretty simple - find a way to get your hands dirty.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: LIFE WITH THE CHENS

Materials needed:
- OPTION 1: Laptop or tablet
- OPTION 2: Art materials for a collage
  (magazines, construction paper, coloring supplies)

Step One:
In a small group, read the passage from pages 26-27 when Albert and Jenny arrive at their parent’s house for dinner. As you read, write down any descriptive words that tell you more about the characters or the world they live in.

Step Two:
Share the information you wrote down with your peers. Consider the following:
- What are some things you learned about the characters from the play?
- How do Albert and Jenny’s emotions compare to that of their parents?
- What key phrases are mentioned that provide context for the lifestyle of the Chen’s?
- Are there any furniture or design elements mentioned by the playwright?
- How do you imagine the Chen’s home to look on the outside (exterior)? What about the inside (interior)?

Step Three:
In our interview with Lauren N. Nichols, we learned that “the set is a translation of their experiences.” A designer must use the script and their research to inspire their ideas for the set. With your group, create a vision board for the design of the Chen’s home. You may do this as a collage or as a digital presentation.

Suggested programs include: Google Slides, Jamboard, or Prezi.

Step Four:
Share your vision board with the class! Be sure to explain your group’s research process.
Shenzhen, China

Shenzhen is a city in the South of China and borders Hong Kong to the south. Shenzhen has grown from a city of 350,000 people to a city of 17.5 million since being designated as the first “special economic zone” in 1980. In order to attract more foreign investment to the country, the paramount leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, launched the Open and Reform Policy in 1979. As part of the policy, foreign companies receive special tax benefits and preferential treatment in special economic zones. Some of those benefits include reduced income tax, duty-free exports, and lowered import tariffs.

The high-tech industry, including manufacturing, makes up a third of Shenzhen’s GDP. Some of the most well-known companies that produce in Shenzhen are Huawei, the world’s largest telecommunications manufacturer; Tencent, a highly valued Internet giant; DJI (Da Jiang), a drone manufacturer; Oppo, a consumer electronics company; Ping An, a global insurance and financial technology company; and most infamously, Foxconn, which manufacturers electronics.

Foxconn is a Taiwanese owned company and the largest private employer in China, producing electronics for BlackBerry, iPad, iPhone, iPod, Kindle, Nintendo, Nokia, Sony, Google Pixel, Dell, and Hewlett-Packard. They have a campus in Longhua Town, Shenzhen that contains factories, a grocery store, swimming pools, a bank, restaurants, a bookstore, a hospital, its own television network, and dormitories for workers. It is sometimes referred to as Foxconn City. The campus gained notoriety in 2010 after a series of suicide attempts due to the difficult working conditions. Many workers work up to 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. Though overtime hours are regulated by law, many workers reported that companies do not follow the rules and workers work up to triple the overtime limit of 36 hours a month.
BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Satire

Satire is a genre where humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule are employed to expose human vice, folly, abuse or shortcoming. The critiques are often political and are sometimes charged with the intent to inspire social reform. It is often used to confront something obscure, or difficult to address directly. As a genre, audiences can expect literary devices like irony, hyperbole, understatement, and allegory.

Satire dates back to the ancient Greeks and Roman plays but is highly topical, changing based on the current political moment. Lysistrata is an early example of such satire, where the titular character convinces the women of Greece to withhold sex from the men to stop the Peloponnesian War. Another historical example of satire is Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal, an essay published in 1729 where Swift proposes that they solve the problem of Irish poverty by fattening up Irish children, butchering them, and serving them to English landlords. A more contemporary example is Writer’s Theatre’s 2016 production of Death of a Streetcar Named Virginia Woolf by Tim Sniffen which satirizes the state of American theatre. This was a co-production with The Second City who employs satire in many of their shows. Other non-theatre examples of satire include Saturday Night Live, The Onion, and political cartoons.

From the Playwright:

"I've always felt satire was the scariest, most brutal way to get to the heart of a political problem – to lay the hypocrisies bare and imagine how we might attempt to rebuild. Humor's the only way I know how to write a political play. [...] With a political comedy – for whatever reason even if you've been laughing a ton – you leave the theater with this bitter aftertaste that follows you home, and I love that.”

– Mike Lew, 2019

From the Director:

"While the playwright grounds these characters [...] in reality, in things that we can all identify with, he pushes them over the edge in terms of how they get what they want and how they attack each other and how much they need from each other. And so the size of the characters grows exponentially. They're not quite cartoonish, they're not quite caricatures. They are living, breathing real people but they are bigger than we expect and they go further than we expect.”

– Brian Balcom
Timeline of Chinese Immigration to the U.S.

1838: Following the discovery of gold in California, a large wave of Chinese people immigrate to the West Coast.

1858: California legally prohibits Chinese and “Mongolian” immigration. After the Gold Rush ended in 1855, California government officials were likely concerned about the population of Chinese immigrants who now worked as farm, industrial, or railroad laborers.

1882: Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which halts Chinese laborer immigration for 10 years and denies Chinese people from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. This is the first time a piece of legislation banned the immigration of a specific race or ethnicity.

1892: The Geary Act extends the Chinese Exclusion Act for another 10 years and requires all Chinese residents to carry permits.

1904: Congress makes the Chinese Exclusion Act indefinite. Law enforcement officials arrest 250 allegedly illegal Chinese immigrants without search warrants.

1906: An earthquake destroys all immigration records in San Francisco. This opens the opportunity for a new surge of Chinese immigrants. These “paper sons” could now claim, with the loss of official records, that they were U.S. citizens and had the right to bring family members to America. The U.S. government creates the Bureau of Immigration.

1924: The Asian Exclusion Act, which is part of the Immigration Act of 1924, excludes all Asian laborer immigrants from entering into the United States. The U.S. Border Patrol is created, as an agency under the Department of Labor, to regulate Chinese immigration to the United States across the U.S.-Mexico border.

1943: Congress repeals all Chinese exclusion laws, grants Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens, and allows 105 Chinese to immigrate to the US each year. China and the United States become World War II allies against Japan. The U.S. Army drafts over 20 percent of Chinese men living in the United States.

1952: The Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization Act revokes the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924. A small number of Asians are also allowed to immigrate to the United States and are given citizenship status.

1953: The Refugee Relief Act offers unlimited immigrant visas to Chinese refugees.

1965: A new immigration act effectively removes racial bias from America’s immigration laws.

1970-2000: Chicago saw a rise in Chinese population during the 1970’s, with communities forming in Chinatown and around Argyle Street on the city’s north side. During the 1980s and 1990s, social organizations formed to provide support services to these communities like counseling, training, and education.

2016: Irvine became the largest city in the continental United States with Asian Americans making up the largest racial/ethnic group. 45.7% of the city’s 272,694 residents are Asian American and about one third of those residents are Chinese American.
Sound Designer Forrest Gregor uses pop music to give the play a contemporary feel and communicate personality traits and states of being of the characters. When Russ the Bus is promoted, Celebrate! by Kool and the Gang plays in the background. Albert invokes the Green Day song American Idiot when he decides to change his approach to life. You might say that in those moments those songs are their “Anthems,” a song that expresses something central about who they are and empowers them.

Is there a song you would consider your personal anthem? Why?
My Personal Anthem is... ______________________________________________________________
Because... __________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Steal a lyric or a phrase from that song and create your own song. Write a few lyrics for the new song. (Think about what you wrote in the “Because” section above.)

Title: ________________________________________________________________________________

Lyrics:
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jennifer and Albert, and many children of immigrants in America, live in between two cultures. Are there any parts of your identity that you feel pulled between? How has that affected you throughout your life?

2. What do you think a parent’s responsibility is to their children? What about children to their parents?

3. In an interview, "Tiger Style!" director Brian Balcom said, “Everyone has had a moment where they felt they needed to break free from expectations and preconceptions, from their neighbor, from their friends, from their parents, from strangers on the street, and from themselves.” In what ways did the preconceptions and expectations of others influence the lives of the characters? What expectations, either internal or external, have played a role in your life?

4. With this play, playwright Mike Lew “wanted to address and rebuff those expectations (and stereotypes) and try to move the conversation about Asian-Americans forward.” How does the high satire of "Tiger Style!" do both of those things?

5. In what ways did the design and music in the play enhance the storytelling?

6. If you were Jennifer and Albert at the beginning of the play, what would you do differently? Why?

7. What do you think Jennifer and Albert’s relationship with their parents will be in the future?

8. If you were Jennifer and Albert at the end of the play, which name would you choose? Why?
WORKS CITED

Model Minority & Tiger Parenting


“Cheryan and Bodenhausen.


Satire, Shenzhen, & Chinese Immigration


Dijst, Martin, Marco Helbich and Min Yang, “Mental Health among Migrants in Shenzhen, China.” 27 November 2018.


For more things to watch and read, check out our Audience Guide!
SET THE STAGE
A workshop series for teens exploring all things THEATRE

11/12  THEATRE IN COMMUNITY
12/3  PLAYWRITING & ADAPTATION
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2/25  DESIGN
3/18  SHAKESPEARE & STAGE COMBAT
4/15  GLOBAL THEATRE

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