Notes by Christine Mok, *Snow in Midsummer* Production Dramaturg

Jessica Ko (Dou Yi)

Snow in Midsummer

U.S. PREMIERE

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, based on the classical Chinese drama *The Injustice to Dou Yi That Moved Heaven and Earth* by Guan Hanqing

Directed by Justin Audibert

Who's Who

Dou Yi
A young widow of New Harmony who sells handicrafts. She is accused of murder and executed.

Master Zhang
Deceased patriarch. An army official who owned the factories of New Harmony, he was a famous singer and was often on tour.

Handsome Zhang
His son. Fashionable, entrepreneurial. Freed from his ties to New Harmony by the factory's imminent sale, he proposes to his love and makes plans to move out of the drought-ridden town.

Nurse Wong
Proprietress of a local bar. Formerly Handsome Zhang's nursemaid, now his staunch supporter.

Rocket Wu
Handsome's fiancé. He would like to move somewhere cosmopolitan and verdant.

Tianyun Lin
A.k.a. Boss Lin, the newest owner of the factories in New Harmony after she buys them from Handsome. A self-made woman and mother.

Fei-Fei Lin
Her six-year-old daughter. Adopted.

Workers Chen, Fang, Huang and **Zhou**
Factory workers. Frequent patrons of Nurse Wong's bar.

Doctor Lu and **Judge Wu**
Members of the professional-managerial class of New Harmony.

Mother Cai
Blind masseuse. Both Dou Yi's adoptive mother and her mother-in-law.

Ox-Head and Horse-Face
Figures from Chinese Buddhism who escort the souls of the dead to the underworld.

The Story

Dou Yi, a young widow, is accused of a murder that she did not commit. At her execution, she vows to prove her innocence and prophesies ecological disaster.

Three years later, New Harmony is ravaged by drought and plagued by locusts. Still, the bars are open and the factory workers eat, drink and gossip, because someone new has come into town: Tianyun Lin, a self-made businesswoman, who arrives to buy New Harmony's ailing factories from Handsome Zhang.

Handsome cannot wait to leave town and marry his lover, Rocket Wu. With so much change and possibility, who cares that it is Ghost Month, when the boundary between the living and the dead is thin, and it is inauspicious to embark on new ventures that might attract the attention of restless spirits. No one follows the old ways in New China, though maybe they should.

When her daughter, Fei-Fei, becomes a conduit for Dou Yi's vengeful ghost, Tianyun must solve past and present mysteries to expose the injustices Dou Yi suffered before her curse destroys every living thing.

The Golden Age of Chinese Drama

Snow in Midsummer is a contemporary adaptation of a canonical Chinese drama, *Dou E Yuan*, a beloved play from the Yuan dynasty. Though millennia of recorded theatre history prior to the Yuan dynasty exists—with Chinese actors, even today, tracing their craft to the famous Pear Orchard Conservatory established during the Tang dynasty (618–907)—Yuan drama is considered the golden age of Chinese theatre. Within the span of a century, some of the greatest works of classical Chinese drama were written and produced. Today, more than 160 plays, known as *zaju*, from this era are extant. *Zaju* flourished under Mongolian rule and especially during the reign of Kublai Khan (1260–1294), becoming the dominant dramatic form, thus taking on the name of the dynasty, Yuan drama.

When Mongols invaded and conquered China, they unified north and south, connecting people and cultures through trade and empire across Asia, Eurasia and Europe. The Yuan dynasty was an era of unprecedented cultural and artistic advances in a variety of fields, including poetry, theatre, painting, mathematics and medicine. While many enjoyed peace and prosperity, educated Han Chinese elite found their social and political power greatly diminished under the Mongols. The civil-service examinations that had determined court positions and organized bureaucratic imperial life were abolished. Displaced Confucian scholar-officials turned to the arts, especially poetry and playwriting, to make a living and seek glory.

With the Confucian literati joining theatrical troupes as playwrights, the plays fused a new narrative tradition with older musical performance practices to create Yuan drama: popular variety plays with songs, dance, monologues, farce and probably acrobatics. Yuan playwrights found inspiration in literary tales, histories from earlier dynasties, and popular tales passed through oral traditions that imparted Confucian values. Yuan drama mixed both high and low culture, reflecting the literary aspirations of their authors, without neglecting the entertaining high jinks that their non-elite audiences demanded. The plays are full of romance, adventure and the supernatural. Enough plays deal with the criminal justice system to suggest that the exiled scholar-playwrights wove critiques of their diminished experience under Mongolian rule into plays that grappled with morality and injustice.

Guan Hanqing

Of the dramatists working during this time, Guan Hanqing (ca. 1245–ca. 1322) is the best known. He is the first playwright listed in *A Register of Ghosts,* a record of poets and playwrights, published in 1330. He was a prolific writer, playing a large role in theatrical innovation and the cultural boom of a decisive historical age. His writings moved from the popular stage into canonical literature, both of which maintained cultural and aesthetic significance over the ages. Guan is often acknowledged in Western texts as "China's Shakespeare." Considering that Guan preceded Shakespeare by more than 300 years, Shakespeare may be Brittania's Guan Hanqing. Either trained for a life in medicine or a practicing court physician, he lived in Yen-Ching, the site of modern-day Beijing. He began writing plays in 1260 and wrote more than 60, 18 of which have survived. These extant works are now exemplary forms of classical Chinese drama, with a robust history of revival and adaption. His best-known play is *Dou E Yuan, or The Injustice to Dou Yi that Moved Heaven and Earth*, the source play for Cowhig's *Snow in Midsummer*.

Selected Chinese Dynasties and Periods

Yuan Dynasty	1279–1368
Ming Dynasty	1368–1644
Qing Dynasty	1644–1912
Republic	1912–1949
People's Republic	1949–

NEW HARMONY

Snow in Midsummer is set in the fictional New Harmony, a remote factory town in Jiangsu Province, on the east coast of China. Jiangsu today is a major industrial center with a number of economic development zones that have helped boost GDP, setting China on a path toward becoming the world's largest economy.

In the play, Tianyun Lin begins her bootstrapping in Shenzhen, the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as a migrant worker who moves up from assembly worker to owner of a faux flower empire. Now she is poised to purchase New Harmony's factories.

These development zones are special areas exempt from certain laws and regulations to encourage foreign investment and boost economic growth.

While SEZs, especially Shenzhen, are heralded as economic successes, enriching foreign investors and the PRC, their wealth and progress have notoriously come at the expense of workers. Most are migrant "zone" workers who labor and live under a double-edged sword of both capitalist exploitation and state repression.

RSC AND CHINA

Before its U.S. debut at OSF, *Snow in Midsummer* premiered in February 2017 at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, Shakespeare's birthplace. Commissioned and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Cowhig's adaptation is the first production in the RSC's Chinese Translations Project, a cultural-exchange program that brings Chinese classics to a new audience.

The Chinese Translations Project draws a lineage between Shakespeare and works written in China that were performed or adapted within Shakespeare's lifetime (1564–1616) in the Yuan, Song, Tang and Ming dynasties—exceptionally rich periods in Chinese artistic and cultural history. With research on more than 45 classical Chinese titles nominated by scholars, academics, theatremakers, playwrights and translators from across the world, the RSC has matched translators and academics with playwrights. For *Snow in Midsummer*, Cowhig worked with translator Gigi Chang, creating her adaptation from Chang's literal translation of Guan Hanqing's play.

A model for global theatre, this project also activates

Dou E Yuan tells the tale of Dou E, who, as a girl, is given by her father, a poor Confucian scholar-in-training, to Mistress Cai as payment for a debt. Dou E grows up and marries Cai's son, though she is soon a widow. When a client tries to strangle Mistress Cai instead of paying off his debt, she is rescued by Old Zhang and his son, Donkey. Both Zhangs try to force the women to marry them. Dou E refuses because she is faithful to her deceased husband. Donkey concocts a plan to poison Cai, assuming that Dou E will marry him with Cai out of the picture. Old Zhang accidentally drinks the poison and dies. Donkey accuses Dou E of murder and presents her with a choice: marry him or be arrested. She still refuses him and is brought before the Prefect. Dou E and Cai are tortured, and Dou E falsely admits to the crime to spare her mother-in-law more pain. When Dou E is sentenced to death, she foretells supernatural and natural events that move heaven and earth. These include snow in midsummer and a three-year drought. Three years later, her father returns as a court-appointed scholar-official. It is only when she appears to him as a ghost, and tells her tale of woe, that her father avenges her.

Because the Yuan stage used minimal formal scenery and props and had a more boisterous audience than is usual today, the play relies on prose to narrate onstage action and the passage of time. For contemporary audiences, *Dou E Yuan* feels repetitive, with characters telling the audience again (and again) who they are and what has happened, even as they also set the audience up for what is about to happen. While this repetitive quality is a function of the form, theatre scholar Evan Darwin Winet explains the dramaturgical consequences of playing with time: "[T]he sketch of past and present acquires an almost ceremonial clarity of presentation. It is the outline of moral illustration, but it is also the outline of a tragedy at once individual, social, and —in the face of death—cosmological."

In the fourth act of Guan Hanqing's play, Dou E appears as a ghost and informs the audience that she has been waiting impatiently for revenge. In the moment that her father declines her case, she enters to demand justice and a promise of protection for Cai. While Dou E's filial piety and the way she cares for Cai reveal the play's Confucian values, it also demonstrates the limits of Confucian divine justice (*yi*), with not one "bad" judge, but two. Dou E must become an active agent in her own redemption and intercede in the world of the living. While the wrongs that she endures stem from her vulnerability as a woman (both as a girl and a young widow), at her death and after, Dou E demands justice at the individual, societal and cosmological level—and gets it. Dou E is part of a lineage in Chinese literature of phantom heroines.

A modern ghost

Snow in Midsummer's Dou Yi, as Cowhig spells it, is a phantom heroine for a new age. In Cowhig's adaptation, the playwright builds upon Guan's Dou E, adds tropes from contemporary Hollywood and Japanese horror films, and draws upon long-standing Chinese spiritual traditions. Because the afterlife plays such a large part in Chinese religious and spiritual life, drama and literature feature a rich variety of ghosts and spirits. Beliefs about ghosts are closely tied to ancestor worship and then inflected by religious syncretism, which combines Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. According to this syncretic belief system, *Diyu* is the land of the dead, or "hell," which is presided over by King Yama or a decentralized passel of judges. Before Ox-Head and Horse-Face, the guardians of the underworld, bring the newly dead to Yama for sentencing, souls linger at the Home Gazing Terrace to view the world of the living. Upon judgment, these souls are relocated to different levels. At each level, spirits atone for past sins, like the souls of Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*, except here, they are in preparation for reincarnation.

Ghosts do find their way out, especially during the seventh lunar month, which is Hungry Ghost month. From mid-August into September in southern China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, it is believed that the gates of hell unseal and the dead return to the world of the living. Temple gates are opened to welcome ghosts, who seek food and entertainment, causing mischief and even malevolence. Roaming spirits come in two types: those who are cared for, with descendants

IKIN YUM © RSC

Katie Leung as Dou Yi and Colin Ryan as Handsome Zhang in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of *Snow in Midsummer*.

who burn paper offerings at temples, and those who are not, hungry ghosts with no living descendants. There are a number of superstitions to ensure that one does not catch the attention of hungry ghosts. People delay starting businesses, buying property, having surgeries or getting married during ghost month. On the final day of the month, lanterns are released over water to guide spirits back to their realm. The now-closed temple gates represent the physical barrier between the living and the dead.

Old and New China

The rise of China is shaping up to be one of the greatest dramas of the 21st century. Today, the U.S. and China are neck and neck in a race for global power. Who will be the number-one economic superpower on the world stage? From barely a statistical rounding error in 1978, with less than 1 percent of global trade to its name, China is now one of the world's leading economies. China's economic ascendance has reverberated across the world and radically transformed the country. The environmental, social and cultural impact of these changes has set "old" China on a collision course with "new" China. *Snow in Midsummer* offers us a view into this rapidly changing contemporary China and the effects of global capitalism through the lens of classical drama to bring the natural and human into focus.

Pollution

Snow in Midsummer is set in the fictional New Harmony, a factory town—the very backbone of China's economic rise—that is suffering from environmental disaster. Just as the speed and scale of China's rapid rise to become a global economic power is unprecedented, so too is the scope and severity of China's pollution problem. Much of China's economic growth derives from both urbanization and industrial growth from coal, and each has had major environmental consequences. China holds the top position in world carbon emissions. The air quality of major cities consistently fails to meet international standards, such that life expectancy north of the Huai River, located midway between the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, is 5.5 years lower than in the south because of air pollution. In December 2015, the Asian Development Bank approved a $300 million loan to address the smog problem in and around Beijing, home to more than 100 million people. Another major problem is the lack of water; almost two-thirds of China's roughly 660

collaboration at the local level by bringing to the RSC new and diverse artists and audiences. The project is committed to commissioning playwrights of Chinese descent from the UK and around the world, like Cowhig, and forging connections between the RSC and UK-based theatremakers of East Asian heritage. Besides the proposed four productions produced by the RSC and 10 newly commissioned translations, the initiative will also create a digital archive, with a goal toward publication, making the translations available to a wider public readership and accessible for development by other theatres.

The Chinese Translations Project is just one part of a larger initiative promoting international cultural, artistic and educational cross-exchange with China. The Shakespeare Folio Project is a decade-long translation project dedicated to producing new Chinese translations of Shakespeare's plays for performance. The Chinese Translations Project and the Shakespeare Folio Project will culminate in 2023, the 400th anniversary of the publication of the First Folio.

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG

Playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig was born in Philadelphia and raised in Northern Virginia, Okinawa, Taipei and Beijing. She draws on her peripatetic childhood to craft theatrical worlds that reveal connections between people, places, events and encounters, exposing the ties that bind the local with the global.

Produced nationally and internationally and garnering numerous awards, her works possess a depth and ethics rare among playwrights of her generation. With each play, she provides an unflinching look at the consequences of human actions and an abiding interest in power and politics. Her plays, while steeped in sorrow and loss, are equally invested in recovery and reparation, whether she is writing about the legacy of Guantánamo Bay in *Lidless* or the cost of the American dream exported by Chinese translations of popular self-help books in *The World of Extreme Happiness*, which, like *Snow in Midsummer*, is set in a factory town in China. In an interview with *American Theatre* magazine, speaking about *The World of Extreme Happiness*, Cowhig says, "what I'm really interested in is complicating every side of

IKIN YUM © RSC

Katie Leung as Dou Yi in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of *Snow in Midsummer.*

cities suffer from water shortages. The blatant costs to land and people have prompted a number of policy changes; efforts to curb air pollution have resulted in the decline in coal consumption and a fall in emissions in 2015—the first time in 15 years. In 2017, China recommitted to the Paris Climate Agreement with pledges on decreasing carbon dioxide emissions, implementing non-fossil fuels and active reforestation, to be achieved by 2030.

China's environmental woes are not only the product of modern China, but also stem from an inherited history of attitudes about human sovereignty and nature. From emperors to Chairman Mao, China's institutional role in protecting the environment, according to Elizabeth Economy in *The River Runs Black: Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, was "strictly personal," with the moral responsibility for protection resting in the hands of the national leader and regional administrators. Thus, it was highly idiosyncratic and dependent upon inclined individuals in higher office. The general populace, writes Economy, "played virtually no role as advocate." Instead, they were at the mercy of their leaders and Mother Nature. Indeed, the earliest migrations from China to the United States were not only prompted by the California Gold Rush, earning America the nickname of "Gold Mountain," but also a series of natural disasters such as droughts, storms, earthquakes, floods, plagues and famines that struck southern China in the early 19th century, first prompting people to migrate from rural areas to the city, and then to the United States and across the globe.

Organ transplant

Another issue that is caught between traditional and modern China, which *Snow in Midsummer* asks us to attend to, is the ethics around organ harvesting and transplant. The debate over China's use of executed prisoners' organs for transplant was literally laid bare in the traveling art exhibition of preserved and dissected human bodies, *Body Worlds*, when it was revealed that some of the bodies and parts acquired for the exhibit were from executed Chinese prisoners. The debate around organ harvesting and transplant that this practice provoked underscores questions about ethics, human rights and an unsavory market that makes the sale of human organs and matter so profitable. China's reliance on executed prisoners for organ donation is not only political—whereby the state has complete control over condemned people's lives—but also cultural. Confucianism and Buddhism have shaped and inflected cultural values, persevering today even though the practice of religion was prohibited during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. With organ donation and transplant, these older mores rub uncomfortably up against a modern, and increasingly global, medical system.

Filial piety, a key principle of Confucianism, is one of the primary impediments to organ donation. The focus on intergenerational duty instructs children to obey their parents, serve them diligently, bury them whole and intact and worship them afterward. These tight familial ties also make the donation of one's body parts to a stranger seem anathema. Even though there are not explicit injunctions against organ donation—and the life-saving power and compassion that organ donation provides is valued highly by both Confucianism and Buddhism—the cultural and spiritual pressure to preserve the integrity of the dead persists.

Girlhood among ghosts

China is haunted by the customs and practices of the past. Playwright Cowhig has witnessed these changes firsthand and provides a window into the ongoing shifts and tensions. In an interview and profile in *Tank Magazine*, Cowhig pinpoints her interest in writing plays about China to her own background: "I lived in China from 1996 to 2001 (age 13 to 18), and Taiwan from 1994 to 1996. My mother is from rural Taiwan; her parents were both farmers and her brothers are all businessmen, some of whom work in China. And my father is a U.S. diplomat who worked in China. So honestly, it's just the stuff I grew up surrounded by, ideas and people I was exposed to over a lifetime of going back and forth between Asia and the U.S."

The Chinese/American experience of going back and forth that Cowhig experienced builds on generations of work by Asian American playwrights, poets and novelists. One of the most famous American writers of Chinese descent, Maxine Hong Kingston, titled her critically acclaimed autobiographical novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Kingston's protagonist must navigate between two worlds: the America to which her parents have emigrated, a place full of white "ghosts," and the China of her mother's stories, a place haunted by ghosts of the past who have been silenced. For *Snow in Midsummer,* Cowhig asks her audience also to move through two worlds, contemporary China and classical China, both of which are rife with ghosts. In the same *Tank* profile, Cowhig explains that "because Chinese writers who try to write about social or political truths are often punished by the government, because there aren't many plays about contemporary China, and because there aren't very meaty roles for Asian actors in the U.S. or the UK, by writing a few plays on China I can address multiple 'gaps' at once." Such reflection on "old" and "new," as well as the possibilities for bridging these divides, is integral to Cowhig's commitment to writing about China outside of the country, as a member of the diaspora. She provides a window into a rapidly changing world where the space between here and there, the U.S. and China, overlaps.

Playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig

Further Reading/Listening

- Giovanni Arrighi. *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century*. Contextualizes China's emergence as a global, political, and economic power in a reading of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

- Lei Liang, *Yuan*. A saxophone quartet based on a passage in Guan Hanqing's play that follows the intonations and lyrical contours of the Chinese text. Listen to Lei Liang, *Milou*, or: https://soundcloud.com/prism-quartet/yuan-by-lei-laing

- Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio: Eerie and Fantastic Chinese Stories of the Supernatural*. A collection of supernatural folktales, compiled in the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty by a failed scholar.

- Liao Yiwu. *The Corpse Walker.* A chronicle of the generation and class left behind in the race for a new China, based on interviews conducted over 11 years. Liao Yiwu is the subject and inspiration for Cowhig's play *Go On Living*.

- Judith T. Zeitlin. *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature.* Rich overview of the literary and cultural roots of the Chinese ghost tradition that calls attention to the centrality of the representation of female ghosts.

the story—telling a story that is very much about all the things we're seeing in the headlines but telling it through the lens of trauma and recovery, through the efforts of multiple generations of people who are trying to construct meaningful lives."

The World of Extreme Happiness is the first of a trilogy of plays that explore the consequences of global capitalism on marginalized people and communities. While Cowhig returns to the contemporary Chinese factory town in *Snow in Midsummer*, the second play in the trilogy, she juxtaposes not only the historical with the contemporary, adapting the 13th-century play to the China of today, but the mythological with the ecological: "It seems to me like the most important story of our time—the impact of global capitalism on vulnerable populations/ecologies."

Cowhig received an MFA in Writing from the James A. Michener Center for Writers at University of Texas, Austin, and a certificate in ensemble-based physical theatre from the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre. She is head of the playwriting concentration at the University of California, Santa Barbara.