

Behind the Play: The World and Works of Nick Rongjun Yu

Claire Conceison

Like the citizens of the bustling city he features prominently in his plays, Shanghai's Yu Rongjun lives life at a dizzying pace.¹ A typical day finds him running most on-the-ground operations at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (SDAC)—the city's largest theatre company, with three state-of-the-art theatres in a high-rise building that also contains rehearsal rooms, offices, gathering spaces for audiences, and rented spaces to generate revenue. Having created SDAC's marketing and publicity strategies as director of both spheres, as well as programming, for several years, Yu oversees a large staff, meets daily with the theatre's top executives, organizes touring productions, facilitates numerous overseas-exchange projects, interacts constantly with the press, has frequent contact with government officials, and serves as the primary liaison with foreign reporters, artists, and patrons. He also happens to be the country's most prolific playwright, having penned three-dozen plays. It is rare to see Yu without a smile on his face, and one wonders how he can maintain this workload without feeling overwhelmed by the stress. A glance at his oeuvre reveals his own fascination with this dynamic in the lives of those all around him—*Behind the Lie* is a case in point. Presumably a compact two-hander in which a police detective interrogates a psychiatrist after the latter's wife is found murdered, Yu explains that the play is really about the relationships that develop between human beings in today's gargantuan cityscapes: "I wanted to write a play about the way urban citizens mutually examine one another, the coldness between people and the way they use each other. Especially in this phase of China's rapid development, people are spiritually empty and impulsive, and in life this kind of mutual close examination constantly shifts and people even switch places sometimes."²

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The author would like to thank Nick Rongjun Yu, as well as Catherine Schuler and Bob Kowkabany from *Theatre Journal*, John Weinstein for serving as an excellent outside reader, and the students in her course "The China Theatre Experiment."

¹Yu Rongjun chose the English name "Nick" when he was in middle school (after American actor Nick Nolte); he is known by the name Nick Yu among foreigners in China and abroad, and uses the official full name of Nick Rongjun Yu for his published work outside of China. This article refers to him by his Chinese name Yu Rongjun.

²Yu Rongjun, personal communication with author, 18 June 2011. For a superb analysis of Chinese urbanization in fiction, film, art, architecture, and urban planning, see Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

China's most produced living playwright, Yu displays an immense range in style and subject matter in his works. What links many of his plays is their investigation of the human condition, both on a level that is universal and in a way that bears the unmistakable marks of his adopted city, Shanghai. Some critics in China have said that Yu's plays would not resonate with Beijing audiences in the way they have been huge box-office hits in the coastal city to its south, but such a claim is debunked by the fact that this past year alone, fifteen of Yu's plays were performed in China, and two-thirds of those were on stages in locations outside of Shanghai. One of them was the first play he ever wrote, *The Asylum Next to Heaven*, which was revived a decade after its premiere and enjoyed a successful run at the Capital Theatre, home of the Beijing People's Art Theatre (fig. 1).

In his 2001 play *Behind the Lie* (first staged in 2003), several traits already present in Yu's dramaturgy converge, and at the same time he characteristically tries something new (new for him, and new for local theatre audiences). We see a continuation of the investigation he started in previous plays—*The Insane Asylum Next to Heaven*, *Last Winter*, and *www.com*—of complex human relationships across gender, class, and generation lines against the backdrop of the increasingly impersonal and technological environment of big-city life. But we also see him shift from the prevailing sentiments of "White Collar Theatre" to a different treatment of issues of marriage, affairs, and family ties—treatment that is darker, more brutal, and, in the words of many who saw the production, "weightier." In the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, plays for "little theatre" spaces with sentimental themes based on the lived experiences of the urban nouveau riche became the popular trend in theatre, especially in Shanghai. As an emerging playwright, Yu initially resisted the categorization of his plays as White Collar, but now recognizes that his early plays—*Last Winter* and *www.com* in particular—were part of this growing trend. Theatre critics who saw *Behind the Lie* noticed its departure from this formula:

A certain style of play has become the convention in White Collar Theatre, but last night a play was staged at the SDAC salon that opposes the modern attitude, and that is very different from earlier little theatre plays. This is a macho play, contesting all that talk on stage about love and tender feelings, and it presents life's reality in a new original style. Playwright Yu Rongjun beguiles us with a story between two men that questions the value of modern life and focuses on a dilemma people face today: Can one find a new start by saying goodbye to a life that is too much to bear, or is it better to retreat and accept eternal torment in the cage of one's own soul?³

An audience member posting online after seeing a performance wrote: "This is the power of theatre. These days there are too many empty meaningless plays, but with this kind of play, I am transported; I am no longer myself when I leave the theatre."⁴ And the production's Shenzhen-based director Xiong Yuanwei noted: "This is a man's play. Shanghai little theatre plays are chock full of sweet and sticky white collar sentiment . . . a manly, virile, fierce, dignified, anguished play like this has value."⁵

³ "Changing the tender feelings on stage, *Haipai* [Shanghai-style] theatre full of virility (little theatre play *Behind the Lie* opened last night)," *sh.sina.com.cn*, available at <http://sh.sina.com.cn/news/20030307/10236914.shtml>.

⁴ Yu identifies the anonymous posting as being by Gui Ying, a theatre professor at Zhejiang University (*www.china-drama.com* [2003], available at <http://www.tianya.cn/techforum/Content/93/531711.shtml>).

⁵ Xiong Yuanwei, "Director of *Behind the Lie* expounds." ("What's behind the lie?: Director's concept for *Behind the Lie*.") *Drama (Huaju)*, Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, April–May 2003.



Figure 1. A scene from the 2010 restaging of Yu's first play, *The Insane Asylum Next to Heaven* (1998/2001). (Photo: Courtesy of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre.)

What was behind this path-breaking play *Behind the Lie*? Why did Yu Rongjun write it? How was it successfully staged in a political environment that mitigated against it? And how is this play and Yu's work emblematic of the shifting circumstances of theatre in contemporary China?

In 2001, Yu, like many local playwrights, was invited to write a script for *Criminal Unit 803*, a wildly popular radio serial that had aired for over a decade, with many of its stories coming directly from the files of criminal investigation unit 803 in Shanghai. When his six-part installment for the broadcast was warmly received, it led to another commission. He requested interviews with detectives from the unit and access to their files, as well as a visit to their bureau. Above all, he asked to observe the interrogation room they use just after arresting suspects, before all facts of the case are fully known. The room they took him to was in a basement; it had a chair for the suspect and a glass wall that could be seen through from only one side, by those conducting the interrogation. This environment in which a policeman and criminal face off left a deep impression on Yu and became his first inspiration for the piece he would write. Returning home by subway after the site visit and interviews, Yu immediately noticed

a resonance with what he had just experienced: the cold, expressionless faces of passengers riding the subway looked out from their confining boxes with glass windows at those outside and vice versa . . . it all became part of an idea to write about the way people in cities relate to and manipulate one another.

Yu realized it must be a stage drama, not a radio broadcast, and that it should be a play about two men in which the entire dialogue is, significantly, about a woman. As has been noted, on the surface the play is about an interrogation, but “behind the play” is its investigation of the attitude of contemporary urbanites toward one another, and in particular, according to Yu, relations between men and women. He says the real confrontation in the play is not between the police detective and suspect, but between man and woman, with the woman having the upper hand. He considers the woman the victor (even though she is the murder victim) and both men failures, adding that this power imbalance between men and women is another strong impression he had of Shanghai at the time he wrote the play.⁶

A decade ago, when Yu was writing the play and during rehearsals two years later, several of the subjects broached by the pair of characters were too sensitive to stage without severe censorship from municipal officials in the propaganda bureau. This is still the case today. Of the half-dozen plays that have been censored externally at SDAC, most of them are by Yu. These include his translation of *The Vagina Monologues*, which was aborted in 2004 just before its opening due to intervention by the propaganda bureau, as well as last year’s *Das Kapital*, which had to go through several complete rewrites and an exhausting series of discussions with Marxism “experts” before it could be staged.⁷ *Asylum Next to Heaven*, which he started writing in 1996 and completed in 1998, could not be staged until 2001; still, performances were prohibited from being mentioned in all media outlets by an official who attended the dress rehearsal, and it

⁶Yu Rongjun, personal communication with author, 18 June 2011. Yu was still single in 2001, which is a factor in his perception of gender relations in Shanghai then and now. Many of his plays, especially those written while he was still single, include issues of marriage and (in)fideliity.

⁷SDAC administrators opted to stage Yu’s translation of *The Vagina Monologues* (*Yindao dubai*) after seeing an English-language production of Eve Ensler’s play at the Shanghai American Club. The SDAC production was cancelled at the last minute after a strong negative reaction by a local official who attended the final run-through. It ultimately was the theatre that decided (after hours of meetings and discussions) not to open, because of the potential harm to its future activities. This decision came at great cost, both financial and personal: tickets had already been sold, and the actors, designers, and director had invested a great amount of energy and heart. Director Lei Guohua selected only women to work on the cast and crew, and SDAC had pursued the production as a cooperative venture with local women’s health organizations—a clever strategy to curtail censorship. The dress rehearsal was held just after announcement of the decision to cancel the public run, and by Lei’s account everyone was in tears. Two more “internal” performances were staged in order to videotape the show. It would have been the first public production of the play by a professional theatre troupe in mainland China; the play has been produced by student groups at universities in Shanghai and elsewhere, and Wang Chong later directed the play in Beijing under the title *V Monologues*.

Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* is, of course, a sacred text in China, a cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party’s doctrine. In order to stage a play with this title, a punctuation dot had to be inserted between the two words in the title (*Ziben* and *lun*: 资本·论), in order to distinguish the title of the play from the title of Marx’s famous tome, along with the aforementioned numerous meetings with Marxism scholars and officials, as well as Yu’s repeated rewritings of the script (in 2011, he had to revise it once again in order for it to be performed a year after its premiere). In writing about current obsessions with money, Yu parodied his own theatre company in a comic play-within-a-play structure, taking care to put the economic crisis and its ills in the United States.

could not be restaged again until a decade later in a revised version.⁸ Yu has dodged censors for his entire career and describes it as an amusing, if somewhat aggravating game; in conversations (particularly with foreigners), he often downplays the role of censorship in literature and art in China and makes comparisons to restrictions on artistic expression internationally, which include market forces (fig. 2).

When he spent six weeks at Duke University as an artist-in-residence in spring 2011, Yu was often asked about censorship in China, and those discussions led him to a more nuanced vision, particularly of self-censorship by artists in China that preempts external censorship by officials. *Behind the Lie* is an interesting case in point. At first, Yu did not mention it among his plays that had been censored; but upon further reflection, he explained the internal censoring process that led to its successful staging: with director Xiong Yuanwei, Yu changed the setting of his 2001 play from Shanghai to Latin America, specifically Venezuela. In the 2003 version of the play, the policeman's name is Julio and the doctor is Frank. Frank is from Orinoco and his wife's cousin (with whom she was having sexual relations before they met) is described as a "drug peddler and weapons dealer." When the police detective attempts to witness his son's first day of school but is prevented from doing so by the presence of his ex-wife's new husband, he carries in his shirt pocket a red envelope containing 500 bolivares (the monetary unit of Venezuela), conflating the Chinese tradition of giving children money in red envelopes on special occasions with the foreign currency that locates the play in Venezuela. Xiong made sure to use Latin-themed music as part of his staging, and indicates that the doctor should wear glasses and the policeman should have a beard, common markers of "foreignness" for characters onstage in China.⁹ Publicity materials and media reviews of the play deliberately mention that the story takes place in Latin America. This tactic of resetting a contemporary play in either a historical time period or a distant (and foreign) location to mask social commentary and placate local officials is common in Chinese theatre; perhaps that is why Yu did

⁸ *Asylum Next to Heaven* (*Tiantang gebi you fengren yuan*) was too sensitive to be produced, because it tackled so many social issues (including education, medical practices, systematic policies, traditional culture, foreign relations, police procedures), and because of its satirical style. *Asylum* features a large cast of characters taking on imaginary identities, including government officials and historical figures like Li Bai and Hitler, and the play questions whether the mentally ill and the "sane" are not, in fact, reversed in terms of their stability and logic. After Yu's first two plays (both collaborations with actor/director Yin Zhusheng) were commercially successful hits for SDAC, managing director Yang Shaolin asked him for another script. It was at this point (late 2000) that Yu handed over *Asylum*, which Yin had already read and was eager to direct. Yang indicated that he did not understand the play and that it should not be produced, but Yin insisted on its merits, and Yang capitulated, acknowledging the success and profit of Yu and Yin's previous two collaborations. A municipal official from the propaganda office of the Chinese Communist Party came to the dress rehearsal of *Asylum* and was offended by what he perceived as a personal slight suggested in the play's depiction of government officials; he was also concerned about the number of societal issues depicted in the play. He subsequently contacted all media organs (newspapers, radio, television) and instructed them to provide no publicity for the play. The media blackout was intended to prevent the play's success, but instead it led to increased word-of-mouth and high ticket sales (twelve performances in the large proscenium theatre, with full houses of mostly young audiences). Even so, the play was deemed by the playwright himself and the theatre company to be too risky to restage in the political climate since its premiere, and it was only restaged after a decade had passed, in a revised version with a new cast.

⁹ For further discussion of this and other practices of representing foreign characters in Chinese plays, see Claire Conceison, *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).



Figure 2. Publicity photo of Nick Rongjun Yu for his most recent play, *Das Kapital* (2010). (Photo: Courtesy of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre.)

not initially recognize it as a form of political (self-)censorship. In the case of *Behind the Lie*, the strategy was so successful that some audience members believed Yu's play was an adaptation of a Venezuelan novel.

Even so, the more universal themes of relations between men and women and of how human interactions are affected by urbanization—themes that Yu saw as so particular to Shanghai—come through strongly in the revised text:

DOCTOR: When she was not beside me, I couldn't sleep. You know, she made me stay in this city, this heartless city. She's all I had. She was everything to me. . . .

POLICEMAN: . . . In this city, the seduction and dignity of women has always been exaggerated.

DOCTOR: In this city?

POLICEMAN: Yes. This city is like a honeycomb: the women are the queen bees and unless the men want to become busy worker bees, they can only buzz around like drones—their only purpose in life is to mate with the queen bee; their dignity relies entirely on throwing themselves into the arms of a woman. . . .

DOCTOR: In this city with its forest of skyscrapers, I was all alone.¹⁰

Why was it necessary for the play to be reset outside of Shanghai, and outside of China altogether? In preparation for the playwright's arrival as a guest artist at Duke, my students read seven plays by Yu available in English translation, including *Behind the Lie*, and discussed elements that are sensitive in the play.¹¹ Along with violent crime, marital infidelity, sexually explicit content, and incest between the woman and her cousin, it is precarious in China to stage a policeman, who is seen as an extension of the government.¹² If a police officer (or army officer) appears in a play, television, or film, he is supposed to be a hero—or, at worst, should be redeemed after falling from grace or justly punished if not rehabilitated. In this play, the policeman is weak and morally corrupt; he hides “behind the lie” by concealing the truth; and justice for the crime is not delivered at the conclusion of the play. Furthermore, the entire play is the enactment of an interrogation, obviously a taboo subject in China. Any of these factors would raise a red flag in the eyes of an official seeing the characters embodied by live actors performing for live audiences in a large city like Shanghai. In short, a leader in the local propaganda bureau is likely to see a direct link between himself and the policeman onstage . . . unless the policeman's name is Julio and his story takes place in Venezuela (fig. 3).

The story revolves around a crime of passion, and the success of staging the play depends upon the building of suspense provided by the structure of the text, as well as by the rapport between the actors playing the two characters.¹³ Late plot twists include the revelation that the policeman was the lover of the doctor's deceased wife, and that one of them is in fact the killer, but the other will end up imprisoned for the crime. Along the way, details about their estranged relationships with their children

¹⁰ Yu Rongjun, *Behind the Lie* (2003 revised text), pages 337, 346–7, and 360. (The play is reprinted in its entirety following this introduction; these page numbers correspond to *Theatre Journal's* pagination of the reprint.)

¹¹ Eight of Yu's plays have been translated into English, but only one (*Cry to Heaven*) has been published before now (in *Asian Theatre Journal* 26, no. 1 [2009], trans. Shiao-ling Yu). I am currently editing an anthology of Yu's plays that will include *Behind the Lie*, *www.com* (2000, about marriage and the Internet, trans. Wu Zhuhong), *Heartquake* (2008, about the Sichuan earthquake, trans. Rachel Henson), *Das Kapital* (2010, trans. Yangyang Guo), and *Asylum Next to Heaven* (2010 version, trans. Eric Le Yang). Yu's 2008 play *Dust to Dust* (not yet translated) might also be included. His other plays that have been translated into English though will not be included in the anthology are *Drift* (2007, about transnational migration between Shanghai and Singapore, a joint project with Singapore director/trans. Kok Heng Leun), *Perfume* (2003, about relationship and sexuality issues and cross-cultural romance, trans. Yanting Wu and Mina Choi), and *The Taste of Cappuccino* (2002, about a middle-aged woman's experience of loss and regret, trans. unknown).

¹² Indeed, while not at liberty to discuss the sensitivity of depicting a policeman onstage, Chen Dalian, a director in Fujian, notes in his reflections on the play: “The status of the characters in the play is very interesting. One is a psychiatrist who cures people's mental abnormalities, while the other is a policeman who represents the government machine and public rights” (Chen, “After reading *Behind the Lie*” [unpublished document]).

¹³ In the original production, the policeman was played by Wei Chunguang, then a recent graduate of the Shanghai Theatre Academy, and the doctor was played by Yin Zhusheng, who had graduated from the academy a decade earlier to become one of the most critically acclaimed and popular actors on the Shanghai stage. Having spent more time in recent years directing plays and acting in television dramas, Yin's return to the stage in *Behind the Lie* was highly anticipated, and his performance merited extensive discussion in critical reviews and audience online postings. See, for instance, the review after opening night cited in note 3 above (“Changing the tender feelings on stage”), and fan online postings at www.china-drama.com (<http://www.tianya.cn/techforum/Content/93/531711.shtml>).



Figure 3. The Policeman accuses the Doctor in Yu's 2003 play *Behind the Lie*. (Photo: Courtesy of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre.)

through divorce and death add depth to the psychology of the two characters and the relationship between them. Xiong deflects discussion of the content of the play in favor of its themes and his approach to staging it. He reports that Yu added the line "What's behind the lie?" in his second revision of the text, and that the line became the key to the director's interpretation of the play and development of his production concept. He discusses Yu's unique language (incorporating humor as well as pathos) and the significance of lighting in the play (the use of a "curtain of light" to represent the glass wall, for instance), as well as the symbolism of the sound effects (water dripping from pipes, pouring from a faucet, and stagnating in a well in the floor representing the monotony of life, among other meanings).¹⁴ Yu explains that within the larger context of the "cat-and-mouse game" between the policeman and the doctor, each scene in the play has a distinct theme: examining someone, being examined, waiting, anticipating, pondering, confronting, accepting, forgiving.¹⁵ Xiong emphasizes the significance of the choice to place the audience on only one side in the small theatre setting, and

¹⁴Xiong, "Director of *Behind the Lie* expounds."

¹⁵Yu Rongjun, "On *Behind the Lie* and Reality," in *The Insane Asylum Next to Heaven: The Collected Plays of Yu Rongjun* (Shanghai: Jingxiu Wenzhang Publishing House, 2008).

the creation of a “neutral, genuine setting” (*yimian guanzhong, zhongxing shijing*). He explains that, ironically, the key to creating this naturalistic environment was the use of the *xieyi* aesthetic, and, in particular, two concepts from traditional Chinese opera: “symmetry” and “one table, two chairs.”

In adopting *xieyi*, Xiong follows in the footsteps of the theory’s pioneer Huang Zuolin (1906–94), who continually sought integration of the realist techniques of Stanislavski with the *Verfremdungseffekt* of Brecht and the Chinese opera aesthetic of Mei Lanfang.¹⁶ Huang Zuolin, who was fluent in English, was unsatisfied with attempts to translate the term as, for example, “intrinsicism,” “essentialism,” “imagism,” or “ideographic.” The term, like Brecht’s, should remain untranslated, which also links it to its origins in the aesthetics of Chinese traditional painting. In performance practice, *xieyi* involves the fusion of traditional Chinese performance techniques with Western methods, often including the incorporation of stylized movement and/or minimalist staging aesthetics. The latter is apparent in Xiong’s use of one table, two chairs, which is the conventional *mise en scène* of a Chinese classical opera (*xiqu*) performance. In *Behind the Lie*, the opera curtain becomes the “curtain of light” and the table and two chairs are established as the sole set elements for the doctor and policeman, which, when used effectively, Xiong describes as “magical.”¹⁷ As he notes, the incorporation of the *xieyi* aesthetic in the lighting (namely, the minimal use of light, no color added, with the curtain of light suggesting a glass wall, along with other subtle lighting used to illuminate the symbolic water elements in the play) and the use of symmetry (in the arrangement of the table and chairs and in blocking the embodied confrontation that persists between the doctor and the policeman) create an atmosphere that, although spare, feels emotionally compressed to the audience and sustains tension in the play: “it should feel like an oppressive, stifling, flooded room. This kind of stark realism in a small theatre setting is a striking vision and is rare in China.”¹⁸ (fig. 4).

In reading the English translation of *Behind the Lie*—here published for the first time—one should imagine not only this *xieyi* environment crafted by the playwright and director, but also the variety of other contexts into which the play can be transposed. As a two-character play with minimal set requirements (if any), it is transferable to a multitude of settings and circumstances. The aforementioned Latin American references can be deleted and other cultural references substituted, or none at all. In spite of Yu’s own intentions, the play is open to a variety of psychological, gender, political, and social interpretations; it is up to each reader, director, actor, designer, and audience member to decide what is “behind the lie,” but hopefully this peek at the inspiration, sociopolitical context, and creative choices behind the play as it was

¹⁶ For more on Huang Zuolin and *xieyi* (pronounced “shyeh-yee”), see Conceison, *Significant Other*, 69–71, 250–51; William Sun, in *Drama in the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Constantine Tung et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 137–50; Huang Zuolin, *Drama Review* 38, no. 2 (1994), and in *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1990). In Chinese, see Huang Zuolin, *Wo yu xieyi xiju guan* (My *xieyi* concept of theatre) (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 1990).

¹⁷ In 2000, Hong Kong’s Danny Yung invited twelve prominent performance artists from throughout Asia to create original works using one table and two chairs in a fascinating experimental project called *Journey to the East*. See Rossella Ferrari, “Journey(s) to the East—Travels, Trajectories, and Transnational Chinese Theatre(s),” *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 351–66.

¹⁸ For more of Xiong’s discussion of his 2003 production, including his use of symmetry (*duicheng mei*) and one table, two chairs (*yizhuo liangyi*), see Xiong, “Director of *Behind the Lie* expounds.”



Figure 4. A scene from *Behind the Lie* showing its *xieyi* aesthetic in the use of the classical Chinese opera convention of “one table and two chairs” (2003). (Photo: Courtesy of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre.)

written by Yu in 2001 and directed by Xiong in 2003 is of value in introducing the rich work and dynamic world of Yu.

While at Duke, Yu began writing a new play, tentatively titled *The File* (*Dang'an*), that bears striking similarities to *Behind the Lie*: a play for two actors, in which one character shows the other secret records kept on file about him during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹ Once again, risky content combines universal human themes with specifically Chinese conditions, framed by compelling psychological factors. In terms of the broader context of contemporary Chinese and Asian theatre, Yu identifies the unique contribution of his works, such as *Lie* and *File*, in their reflections of the realities of contemporary urban life. A play like *Behind the Lie* is uncommon, in that it works against several dominant trends. Most contemporary Chinese plays are either, on the one hand, comedies or plot-driven pieces telling a story or, on the other, avant-garde experiments resisting conventional realism. *Behind the Lie* is neither: it paradoxically adopts a naturalistic approach within a *xieyi* production concept, and likewise presents absurd circumstances in a logical fashion; it is spare and simple, while also being complex. And it goes to the heart of fundamental problems in current Chinese society,

¹⁹ Yu was unaware of British author Timothy Garton Ash's 1998 book *The File*, which explores the records kept about him (Ash) by the East German Stasi during the 1980s. Also relevant is *File Zero* (*Ling Dang'an*), a 1994 performance piece directed by Mou Sen and featuring Wu Wenguang, based upon a poem of the same name by Yu Jian.

while being influenced by writers like Harold Pinter, whose concerns temporally and geographically are quite elsewhere.²⁰

Yu acknowledges that he is drawn to Pinter, and even wrote his 2008 play *Dust to Dust* as “homage” to the British playwright. One of my students who read *Behind the Lie* noticed its parallels to *Sleuth* and *Mountain Language*, which also feature a few characters “trapped in a psychological crisis and physical limited space.”²¹ Others appreciated the rich territory for actors provided by the psychological complexity of the two characters, their parallelism and irony, and the play’s surprise elements and suspense that continuously build. One student compared *Lie* and Yu’s other works to “an iceberg: there is so much more underneath than what appears to be on the surface,” adding that the play could also be a “perfect Western blockbuster.” These young American readers identified the central themes of the play in terms uncannily similar to those Yu himself would later use: that monotony and predictable routines can lead to insanity; that things are frequently not as they appear; and that the two seemingly different men in the play are, in the words of one student, “bizarrely connected . . . almost kindred souls, one choosing physical freedom with internal captivity, and the other strangely freer in his physical imprisonment. . . . While imprisoned in different ways, they are also simultaneously liberated.”

This tension between entrapment and liberation was something one undergraduate related to personally in facing a choice between academic tracks in pre-med and theatre:

More so than the murder, I was disturbed by the parallel stories told by the Doctor and the Policeman about feeling dead in their own lives, doing the same repetitive, monotonous activities over and over again until they die. I am afraid of this fate, of being trapped in a life without meaning, without excitement or sense of self-fulfillment. Sometimes, I don’t know if I will be happiest becoming a doctor, and giving up acting. I tell myself that medicine is a safer, more reliable lifestyle, and a fulfilling one as well, but science just doesn’t ignite my interest like theater does. Some days, I’m afraid I’m doing pre-med just to satisfy my parents and I wonder if I’ll even like medicine at all. I like the idea of saving lives, and I like biology, particularly the study of anatomy, and I know that I will become a good doctor . . . but sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be as happy being a doctor as I could be acting.

When Yu Rongjun wrote *Behind the Lie* he was speaking to Shanghai urbanites and had no idea he was also speaking to suburban college students in North Carolina. Ironically, this student is facing the same predicament Yu himself faced when he left his job at a hospital after only one day and chose a life in the theatre. China’s most influential modern writer, Lu Xun (1881–1936), faced this same dilemma in 1904 in Japan, when he abruptly abandoned his medical studies after being shown an image of apathetic Chinese onlookers witnessing the execution of one of their countrymen. Lu was convinced it was not medicine, but literature, that could heal China’s illness. In that same tradition, Yu’s physical rehabilitation training from college is now channeled toward using theatre to treat the social and psychological symptoms of the dizzying shifts of capital, technology, and human relationships in Shanghai and beyond.

²⁰ Reflections about *Behind the Lie* in this broader context of contemporary Chinese and Asian theatre are drawn from the author’s conversations with Yu about the play and an e-mail exchange on 29 July 2011.

²¹ Quotations and paraphrases by students come from their brief response papers submitted on 9 February 2011 after reading *Behind the Lie* in English. *Sleuth* is a 2007 film with a screenplay written by Pinter based on the 1970 stage play by Anthony Shaffer, and *Mountain Language* is a 1988 one-act play by Pinter.

