

“Always You Can Talk to Us”: A Reader’s Theatre Script

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Abstract: This paper presents a Reader's Theatre Script co-produced by six Chinese-Canadian youths that highlights some of the challenges faced by Chinese-Canadian students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also includes the participants' individual reflections on the scripting process and how it helped them make sense of both their personal and shared experiences. The script explores themes such as the stigma surrounding mental health in Asian communities, intergenerational trauma, cultural and generational differences between parent and child, and the model minority myth.

Key words: Readers Theatre, youth, identity, arts-based research, mental health stigma, intergenerational trauma, model minority myth.

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Introduction

We are a group of six Chinese-Canadian youths tasked with producing a Reader's Theatre (RT) script about our identity as Asian-Canadian youths in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We started the RT process by getting to know each other better by sharing our individual experiences during the pandemic and finding commonalities among them that could serve as the overarching themes of our script. We decided to include themes of academic pressure, stigma surrounding mental health, the model minority myth, generational and cultural tensions between Chinese immigrant parents and their Canadian-born children, and the challenge of balancing one's ethnic and cultural identity with Western/Canadian socialisation.

These themes highlight the struggles faced by Chinese-Canadian youth that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For many of us, undergoing lockdown with our families forced us to confront problems and have difficult conversations (e.g., intergenerational trauma, filial piety, and mental health) that would have otherwise been swept under the rug. In order to have these difficult conversations, we have to challenge and overcome the model minority myth which stereotypes Asian students as naturally high-achieving and disciplined, because it reinforces that asking for help is shameful and a burden to others. The pandemic exposed contradictions of the model minority myth. While Asian-Canadian youths were still expected to excel in school and maintain their successful image, they were also scapegoated for the pandemic, facing increased racism and violence. Some may have seen academic success as a shield, believing that achievement leads to respect and security, however others experienced a world where Asians are still discriminated against despite their success. By incorporating these story beats—a small significant moment in a story that represents a change, event or discovery that moves the plot forward—in our script, we are deepening our understanding of the roots of trauma and destigmatizing conversations about mental health in Asian communities, thus paving the way for healing.

The Context

Our script follows a university student named Jennifer, also known by her Chinese name Jialing. Normally a high-achieving student, she struggles academically after the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Her stress worsens under her parents' constant micromanagement, and the isolation from her friends leads to depression. Encouraged by her friend Amanda, Jennifer decides to suggest therapy during dinner with her parents. However, her attempt at conversation quickly spirals into an argument as she and her parents struggle to overcome their generational and cultural differences.

In order to put together this script, we made several drafts and tested different scenes and dialogue to see what would best capture the aforementioned themes. Our best effort to showcase the generational and cultural differences between characters was to have Jennifer's parents speak in "broken English". The language barrier is intended to show how nuanced conversations get lost in translation, contributing to misunderstanding and further division. There is also a narrator in our script to help clarify what is happening in each scene.

Characters and Roles (listed in the order they appear in the script)

- **Narrator:** Not a character, but someone in charge of setting the scenes.
- **Amanda:** Jennifer's Caucasian friend from the same university who means well but doesn't really understand why Jennifer's parents are so strict or how stigmatised mental health is in the Asian community.
- **Jennifer (Chinese name: Jialing):** A Chinese-Canadian university student struggling with her mental health. The daughter of "Ma" and "Ba".
- **Ma:** Jennifer's mom who is worried about her daughter's grades and feels that Jennifer is wasting the money and opportunities they've invested in her. "Ma" is how we say mother in Mandarin Chinese.
- **Ba:** Jennifer's dad who is also concerned about his daughter's grades and feels that

her friends are a bad influence on her. He doesn't like that Jennifer has discussed their family's difficulties with an "outsider" like Amanda who doesn't understand Chinese values. "Ba" is how we say father in Mandarin Chinese.

The Script - "Always You Can Talk to Us"

SCENE 1: Jennifer's Bedroom

Narrator: Jennifer is a Chinese-Canadian university student struggling with her mental health. Her best friend, Amanda, is Caucasian and they attend the same university. Jennifer calls Amanda during a depressive episode, hoping to receive some comfort. The phone rings twice before Amanda picks up.

Amanda: "Hello?"

Jennifer: [*In a tired, depressed tone*] "Hey..."

Amanda: [*Concerned*] "You sound rough. What's up?"

Jennifer: "Yeah, sorry. I—look, um, what'd you get on the bio-chem test?"

Amanda: "A '70'. My parents were thrilled cause I'm finally passing. Why, what'd you get?"

Jennifer: "I got an '89' and—"

Amanda: "What? My parents would throw a party if that was me!"

Jennifer: [*Frustrated*] "Well, it's not good enough for my parents. I need at least a 95'."

Amanda: "Hey, you're still one of the top-scorers in the class. You could stop working for the rest of the semester and still pass the course."

Jennifer: [*Sighing sadly*] "It's not just about passing, I don't want to disappoint my parents. They pay for my tuition! I'd be wasting their hard-earned money. I have to do better. Plus, my scholarship is on the line. I can't lose that. That'll make them even more disappointed in me."

Amanda: "Aren't you being too hard on yourself? Maybe you need a break... academics and grades aren't everything. You're gonna burn yourself out."

Jennifer: [*Sighing deeply on the verge of breakdown*] "... you don't get it. Everything's harder now that

school's online and my parents are practically breathing down my neck, micromanaging every little thing I do. I can't even study in peace."

Amanda: [*Comforting Jennifer in a joking tone*] "It sounds like you need therapy. [Pause, thinking] Actually... no, but like seriously."

Jennifer: "I don't know, Amanda. Therapy's expensive and I don't want to burden my parents with any more costs. And they don't even believe mental health is a 'real' thing."

Amanda: "Mental health is totally a real thing! You know, a friend of mine recently tried out therapy and it seemed to work wonders for them. Maybe you should give it a try! And why don't you get your parents to join you as well? That way, they can learn more about what mental health is and help you through it. I just don't think the way you're handling things right now is healthy."

Jennifer: "Well, how am I supposed to bring it up to my parents? They think therapy's a source of embarrassment and that it would bring shame to our family."

Amanda: [*Reassuring tone*] "Come on, this could potentially work out for you and your family! I know you got this, Jennifer. We live in different times now; therapy isn't as taboo as you think."

Jennifer: [*Sighing tersely*] "Fine, I'll try convincing them. What's the email?"

Narrator: Amanda gives Jennifer the therapist's email, and Jennifer thanks her. The first scene ends.

End Scene

SCENE 2: Dining Room

Narrator: In the second scene, Jennifer and her parents are having dinner in the dining room. Jennifer is hesitant to bring up her idea to her parents, and she stalls and pokes her food while thinking about the best way to approach the conversation.

Jennifer: "Ma, Ba, I wanted to talk to you—"

Ma: [*Cutting her off*] "Lingling, how was your test?"

Jennifer: "It was alright. I knew how to answer all the questions and—"

Ba: *[Cutting her off]* “Grade, Jialing. What you get?”

Narrator: Jennifer’s confidence falls. She looks down at her food.

Jennifer: “I... I got an A”

Narrator: Jennifer’s parents stop eating and the room goes silent.

Ba: “What percentage, Jialing?”

Jennifer: *[Nervous tone]* “89, but I feel—”

Ba: *[Upset]* “Only 89? What mistake? 11 percent you failing Jialing!”

Ma: *[Sighing disappointedly]* “Why, Jialing? Ba and I working very hard. Your tuition very costly! *[Raising her voice]* Why you waste it? Maybe we have to work harder harder and we both die early.”

Ba: “Mama is right. And you scholarship. You want lose it and we pay more? We so much work and ask little back.”

Ma: “You no appreciate our support? You make me cry—”

Jennifer: *[Reaching her breaking point, raises her voice]* “Support? Mama, do you know how hard I’ve been working? You don’t understand. You don’t understand *anything*. I did my best, but that’s never enough for you. I do everything I can to get the perfect grades you want. I’ve missed my friends’ birthdays, skipped hangouts, and just stayed trapped in a library, and now my room, *all the time*, just to maintain my GPA. And—”

Ba: *[Cutting her off]* “You think we get ‘birthday, hangout, freedom’, Jia? *[Scoffs]* You know how many grateful to be you? Mama and me starve, no home in China. You have home, food, water, and love from us. Everyone dying, live on street...” *[Shakes head]*.

Ma: “Your cousin here alone. Parent back in China. She take care *everything* herself. Me and Baba help you. You not alone. How come still you do worse than her?”

Jennifer: *[In an angry raised voice]* “She doesn’t have two people barging into her room every day! She doesn’t have to deal with you breathing down her neck! Nothing I do will ever be good enough and it—I

can’t handle it anymore. Even if I ran away or killed myself you wouldn’t care for my feelings still. You’d still be comparing me in disappointment.”

Narrator: Jennifer’s parents go silent, stunned at their daughter’s response.

Ma: “Lingling... I—I didn’t know you—”

Jennifer: *[Choking up]* “Yeah, you don’t know me at all. I was stupid for thinking you’d understand. You know what I wanted? I wanted to tell you things but you make it so hard for me. I need to talk to someone, I feel so overwhelmed...”

Ba: “You have Ma and me. Always you can talk to us! Why you want tell people our family struggle? This you friend Emily? *tsk tsk* I knew she baaaaad girl, I always say it. She make you bad thinking. She not like us. Canada not care family. Chinese care family always.”

Jennifer: “No, Baba. Emily moved in 9th grade. It’s Amanda, she listens much more than you do. *[Deep breath, vulnerable]* I’m telling you I *need* help. Honestly, I think we need help as a family. Ma, Ba, we are so different. You grew up in a different time, in a different culture, I think we need to try therapy. Or at least, let me try.”

Ma: “Therapy? Shen me?” *(English Translation: What’s that?)*

Jennifer: “In therapy, we’ll meet with a therapist online to talk about mental health. The therapist can tell you more about what mental health is, why it’s important, and how it affects me. I want to improve my mental health and well-being, and therapy can help a lot.”

Ba: “How much cost? We have no—”

Jennifer: “It’s free, Ba.”

Ma: “What about school?”

Jennifer: “We can figure that out too, with a therapist.”

Narrator: Jennifer’s parents look at each other and exchange a mutual look of understanding and agreement.

Ma: “Okay, Jialing. I no understand perfect, but I try. Ba?”

Ba: “Not hurt to try.”

Narrator: Jennifer is relieved that her parents have agreed to her idea and will join her therapy session. During the session, they slowly but eventually learn more about mental health and come to understand Jennifer’s feelings and struggles. Over time, Jennifer’s mental health improves, and she develops a stronger bond with her parents.

End Scene

Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have brought families closer physically, it may have inadvertently separated them more mentally. We hoped to shed light on the youth experiencing difficulties navigating those troubling times and into post-COVID times. Ultimately, love exists between Chinese immigrant parents and their Canadian-born children, but cultural and generational differences create barriers to understanding and communication. For Jennifer, her parents’ high academic expectations feel overwhelming, making her feel like nothing she does is ever good enough. She struggles with stress and depression but finds it difficult to express her emotions to them. On the other hand, her parents see academic success as a way to secure a better future, believing that their sacrifices should be met with gratitude and hard work. They fail to recognize the toll their expectations take on Jennifer’s mental health. Balancing traditional Chinese values with Western norms can be highly difficult as neither side fully understands the other’s language or cultural perspective. We want to emphasize the need for open conversations about mental health, support, and the importance of seeing each other’s struggles with empathy rather than judgment.

Personal Reflections on the RT Process

Overall, our group felt that the RT process was a cathartic experience that allowed us to bond over shared experiences, vent our frustrations, and consider perspectives we had not previously thought of regarding our identity as Chinese-Canadian youths

in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are the personal reflections of individual members:

Sophia Van

The RT process was a safe and creative outlet for me to explore otherwise painful and triggering themes. The characters, story, and dialogue are fictional yet relatable. Writing the different characters, especially the parents, made me understand my own parents better and consider different perspectives on the mental health and model minority discussion in the Asian community.

Sarah-Mei Chen

RT allowed me to unpack my experiences, providing depth and meaning to the tensions that arise in my household, which are usually hidden from the public view. I understood myself better as a Chinese person in a Canadian society and found it helpful in navigating, as well as embracing, these two intertwining cultures. Through the main character, Jennifer, I was able to be vulnerable in our discussions as it served as a veil that allowed me to express myself more freely.

Jayden Ing-Nikkel

Using the medium of RT to express emotion and talk about a difficult and very real situation was something I had never done before. Although a very delicate topic for some, RT managed to create an atmosphere most welcoming to everybody participating in the experience, which might not have been possible prior to participating. RT created a domain where we could share our grievances, our struggles, and stories, and what could remain behind a wall of anonymity, wherein we did not directly use personal names but were able to harmonize our thoughts and feelings into the script, and share with others in the group who experienced similar connections.

Peter Qu

The RT workshops provided six strangers from the same ethnocultural background the space and time to talk about the issues that each faced in accessing mental health care in Canada. The RT workshops allowed six Chinese-Canadian youth to break a culture of silence around a topic usually hidden

behind closed doors and shuttered windows. It was also a place where we got to acknowledge that those around us (i.e., parents), who we may consider as the source of our issues, are themselves human. They are trying their best in a society that they have chosen to live in, yet do not truly understand the full breadth of it. Despite the limitations of the workshop in terms of time and nuance, we were still able to take the first step in a journey of a thousand miles.

Wenney Szeto

The RT process was personal, eye-opening, and fun. As a Chinese-Canadian youth, I found that many of the themes, like academic pressure, family expectations, and mental health stigma, deeply resonated with my own experiences and those of my peers. Collaborating with a group composed of people of similar background allowed us to bond and share our frustrations in a fun and engaging way and reflect on the generational and cultural conflicts we've personally encountered. It was meaningful to create a piece that resonates with others.

Megan Wong

Through the RT process, I was able to help share a story that seemingly resonates with the experiences of many Chinese-Canadian youth. As an individual working in the mental health field, the themes highlighted in this piece often reflect the challenges I hear from young people regarding academic pressures and cultural stigmas to seeking accessible mental health care. Contributing to this piece from an alternate lens created a space for me to reflect on my role in supporting other youth from a similar background and urge for further awareness of challenges within Chinese-Canadian communities.

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