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ABSTRACT

An American instructor taught a 5-week course on the family in American drama to a group of graduate English majors on the campus of Hebei Teachers' University in the People's Republic of China. The instructor learned as much about Chinese culture as the students learned about American culture. Lecture is the standard pedagogy even in graduate level classes. Students were stumped by the instructor's request that they write about the plays before being told what the plays meant. Nonetheless their observations were stimulating. For example, excerpts from their comments show that students were highly critical of Tom's escape from the Wingfield family in Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie." The Chinese culture places more emphasis on communal responsibility than on individual fulfillment. In reading Arthur's Miller's "Death of a Salesman," the students continued in the vein of social critique, laying all the blame for Willy's tragedy on the American capitalistic society. Some students saw in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" a confirmation of their worst fears of American bigotry; others appreciated the cohesiveness of the African-American family. After some initial confusion, students liked Edward Albee's "The American Dream" enormously and read its indictment of human folly as universal, perhaps because of its comedic and non-realistic mode. The students had a particularly difficult time with Marsha Norman's "'Night, Mother" because they could not understand how a lack of an autonomous self could drive someone to desperation. (TB)

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AMERICAN DRAMA THROUGH CHINESE EYES

Last spring, I spent five weeks on the campus of Hebei Teachers' University in the People's Republic of China, where I had been asked to teach a course in American drama to graduate English majors. When I began to compile a tentative reading list, I noticed that the playwrights in whom I was most interested shared a preoccupation with American family life and the tensions created in it by the conflicting impulses of mutuality and selfhood, of security versus freedom. I decided to focus my course in this way, calling it "The Family in American Drama." Because I was constrained by the five-week time span, I limited my reading list to the work of American playwrights who have made their mark in the last fifty years, in the approximate period between WW II and the present. With a few notable exceptions, they are the writers who have most influenced the direction of American drama today. My final reading list included Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun, Edward Albee's The American Dream, and Marsha Norman's 'Night, Mother.

There is something of the expose in American family drama, as if the playwrights are trying to demonstrate for audiences what life is really like behind the imagined Dick-and-Jane ideal, and I was concerned that the students would see these plays mainly as a vindication of their worst suspicions about American culture. I had

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tried to find at least one optimistic play, but a lengthy library search for such a text met with little success.

Still, however pessimistic the texts, I reasoned that an exploration of American family drama would foreground for my Chinese students certain American beliefs and values relevant to a discussion both of the texts themselves and of larger cultural issues. As critic Stephen Greenblatt has put it:

> . . . if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced.

I also anticipated a converse side to Greenblatt's argument, that whatever my students' readings of the texts might reveal to them about American culture, their readings would reveal to me something about Chinese culture and give me a perspective on the plays that I couldn't have imagined for myself. Today, then, I would like to share with you the multiplicity of my students' responses, to explore some implications of those responses and the way that together we tried to negotiate with each other over a set of texts.

I gathered from the reading I did and also from conversations with Chinese professors who have taught at Drake that even in graduate-level classes, lecture is the standard pedagogy in many Chinese universities and that the central approach to literary texts is memorization rather than interpretive analysis. Nonetheless, I designed my class as a seminar, with a sequence of interpretive writing assignments intended to "prime" students for discussions and give them experience writing academic discourse in English. The assignments included exploratory papers that the students were to write prior to any class discussion about each play as well as more formal papers.

The dean of the Foreign Language Department had scheduled a meeting on my first day on campus to discuss my course before it began. When I explained the writing assignments in detail, he politely shook his head and told me that I was expecting too much of the students. "It is not possible," he said firmly, citing the students' difficulties with written English and the limited time span of the course. He thought that a written exam at the end of the course was probably as much as I could or should expect in such a short time. After negotiating this point at some length, we finally agreed that the students would write often (up to two or three times a week) but that I would expect only short papers (which he defined as one or two handwritten pages).

I was often grateful during my stay that the regular--if attenuated--writing assignments survived that conversation; actually, the students almost always wrote papers longer than the minimum length, and many of them wrote extremely well. However, with the exception of Mr. Wang, the older and more experienced of my two teaching assistants, the students seemed appalled when they initially learned that they were going to have to write about each play without first learning from me what it meant.

Following that first day of class, during which I had spelled out my expectations for the course, Mr. Wang and Miss Xiong, my other teaching assistant, escorted me on a brief tour of a library room that housed the literature holdings in English. They explained, very apologetically, that the university offered no resources for the course I was about to teach, no material at all on the plays or playwrights we were to study. They pointed regretfully to the nearly empty and dusty shelves that held a few old volumes of anthologies and Cliff notes plus a collection of oddly assorted texts by writers as diverse as William Shakespeare and Flannery O'Connor. I assured them that I had come to China already prepared for the course, bringing my notes as well as copies of the critical essays that would provide the theoretical framework for our course, and that I wasn't depending on the library at the university for additional materials. Only later did I understand that their concern over library resources was not on my count, but the students. No conversation about textual "meaning," in other words, could occur without some authoritative word on the subject. And if I was not planning to provide that "word" for the students, then surely I expected them to glean an interpretation from the library.

Although the students had accumulated a surprising array of facts about Hollywood films and stars, they seemed to know almost nothing about American drama. I had learned in my reading that spoken drama is a relative newcomer to China, introduced as recently as 1907 into an ancient theatrical tradition whose main expression was Chinese opera in its many forms. During the Cultural Revolution, spoken drama was banned; the "eight model theatrical works" approved for performance included only opera. Today, Chinese theater includes both spoken drama as well as traditional opera, a duality that one of my students called "walking on two legs"--but its conventions differ in several ways from our own. Chinese plays generally address the political and social order, whereas American drama focuses more on individual lives; Chinese plays take a presentational form, a stylized account of moral and social meanings; our drama is largely representational, a rendering of psychological realities--more Tennessee Williams than Bertold Brecht.

I used the initial class meetings to discuss some of these differences, and we then began to read the plays, taking them in the order in which they were produced. We started with The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams' most autobiographical play. It is the story of Amanda Wingfield and her two grown children, Tom and Laura. Amanda's husband has long since disappeared, and Amanda would like for her son Tom, by nature a romantic and an adventurer, to settle into a conventional role of wage earner and also to find a gentleman caller for his sister, whose slight limp has made her painfully shy. I was intrigued that the responses of several students initially foregrounded the absence of the father character, who never appears on stage, except in a photograph. As Tom tells us in his opening narration, "My father was a telephone man who fell in love with long distance." As I had always interpreted this play, its main interest lies in Amanda's attempts to maintain a family and Tom's to escape it. I had viewed the father's absence as an autobiographical echo of Williams' own father's desertion, but more importantly as a device to shift the unwelcome role of man of the family to Tom, intensifying his conflict with Amanda. But some of my Chinese students took the father's absence as the central fact of the play and emblematic of the ills of American family life. Miss Chen, whose response echoed several others, wrote in her first paper:

> I found the Wingfield family was just like a mirror, reflecting the peculiarities of American society. For instance, the Wingfield family is not integrated or complete. The family is deserted by the Master, the wife without a husband, the children without father. In China, we say, If you marry a dog, follow a dog. If you marry a chicken, follow the chicken. But Mr. Wingfield married Amanda and followed long distance. Tom tries to describe what happened without naming it, but his words are a blanket for the truth: his father deserts him.

Like many of the students' responses early in the course, this one initially engages with the text largely through plot summary overlaid with social critique. As we worked through this play, however, the students tended to shift their emphasis. In her next paper called "Crippled Maid, Crippled Society," Miss Chen generates a more centered reading of the play, even providing an historical context:

> Laura arouses great pity of audiences. What makes Laura such a completely handicapped maid? She retreats into her world of glass collections because she is humble and haunted by the idea that everybody is watching her when she goes clumping forward. When the gentleman caller brings to her momentary smiles, they go out like the flashfire of a match. Tennessee portrays the frustration of modern man under a veil of romantic politeness. He wrote this play during the time of World War II and he reveals a crippled society with indifferent people who pay no attention to others, to

what is happening in other places of the world.

Social critique continued as a strong element in the students' papers, but it played out in various ways. Among the most revealing papers were some of the responses to the play's ending. In the last scene, Tom, like his father, answers the call of long distance and joins the Merchant Marines, leaving his mother and crippled sister to an uncertain future. This resolution has always seemed to me an inevitable outgrowth of the play's irreconcilable polarities--Amanda's clutching needs and Tom's adventurous spirit. American audiences, I think, understand Tom's decision to leave; it is his story--it takes place in his memory--and we view his flight as necessary if he is to survive emotionally, affirming the value of the individual over the group, independence over security.

Not so for many of the students. Although they seemed to understand Tom's motives and the gnawing tedium of his life, several condemned what they called his "selfishness." Miss Feng criticized Tom's actions on both moral and aesthetic grounds: "Perhaps the ending is in keeping for an American play, but a Chinese play would not follow this conclusion. In China we are taught to be concerned for many instead of one ('Sow for China'). Sometimes this philosophy may be a burden, but in a play it is a good lesson."

Miss Xu also implied disapproval of Tom's flight but her disapproval was tempered by Tom's final monologue, in which he confesses he is haunted by memories of his family: "I was pleased to learn in his last speech that Tom has regrets. Tennessee Williams has watered Amanda's sorrow with the tears of justice. Without this touching speech, the play would be a dismal failure."

The writers in these two papers seemed to stand apart from the text, expressing little empathy in their judgments. The next response narrows the gap between writer and text. Mr. Zhang wrote:

> Tom does not understand that he will find happiness blooming only when he tends the garden for others. Naturally, I felt sorry for him at the end when he said, "Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind, but I am more faithful than I intended to be." He seems unhappy that his memory wraps him tightly like a vine, but he must expect it. We are always standing in the shadow of our families. Everyone grows impatient with a mother's chatter, but filial loyalty is a measure of a person's worth.

This paper seems to be working more from the premise of the play. The writer has articulated his own cultural values not so much to judge Tom as to try to understand him. Although he has leaned a bit heavily on metaphors (mixed metaphors), I was taken with the power of his language and his sympathetic tone.

The next play, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, was the one play on our reading list with which some students were already familiar, as Miller had produced it in Beijing in 1983. Several students were also familiar with certain details of Miller's life, aware, for example, that he had been married to Marilyn Monroe and was on the government blacklist during the McCarthy period.

American critics usually read the story of Willy Loman, the ineffectual salesman fired from the job he has held for decades, not only as an indictment of a profit-driven society but of Willy himself and of his false dreams. Predictably, however, several students read the play solely as evidence of what they referred to as "capitalistic brutality" and its corrupting powers. In fact, some were initially so quick to pounce on this evidence that they had less to say in their first papers about the text itself than about capitalism as an economic system. Miss Chen continued in the ideological vein that she had opened in her papers on Glass Menagerie. "Willy Loman," she wrote, "makes large errors when he falls as a victim to the values of American society. He was broken because the environment around him was so malicious and made him judge his own value as a human being by financial success."

Miss Li perceived this play as so damning of life in the United States that she expressed surprise that it had ever gotten produced. "Chinese shows," she wrote, "usually demonstrate that Chinese people are good people and life gets better for them. The performing arts in China is an excellent way for the government to project its message. But Arthur Miller successfully unveils the cruelty and unmorality and pure material interests of American society. The whole performance is pointed against American capitalism which blasts happiness out of human existence and ruins people not only in body but also in mind. No wonder he was summoned by the UnAmerican Activity Committee in Congress for questioning on his point of political views."

When I duplicated and distributed these two paragraphs for class discussion, I asked the students how they would reconcile these readings of the play with the character of Willy's neighbor Charley, portrayed as both a successful capitalist and a kind person, a staunch friend who stands by Willy throughout the action of the play, even offering him a job when Willy is fired. If the play is an unyielding indictment of the United States' economic system, I said, what is Charley doing in it?

After we discussed this question, the students wrote an in-class response. Some took a harder look at Willy himself, attending more closely to those scenes that demonstrate the role that he himself played in his downward slide, but Miss Li stood by her original reading and argued instead for a revision of the play itself: "Arthur Miller makes a serious mistake to put the neighbor Charlie in this play," she said. "Charley is an interesting character but he needs his own play where he acts the hero."

Her response pointed to a recurring issue that the students noted in most of the plays we were reading and one that I hadn't anticipated. Chinese and American cultures value literary ambiguities differently. In our serious (as opposed to popular) literature, we prefer complexities of character to good guys and bad guys, open endings to tidy, happy ones. This seems not true of the conventions of Chinese theater, and my students were sometimes troubled or irritated by the ambiguities they found in the characters and events.

In Death of a Salesman, long discussions revolved around Willy Loman's character. They knew that Willy was not a good man--he has taught his sons by example to lie and cheat, and--worse--he has cheated on his wife, in a scene especially distressing to them. Yet they confessed to feeling sorry for him, fearing that he would die (as, of course, he does at the end, killing himself in a highway accident so that his son Biff can inherit the money from his life insurance policy). Many were unsure of what to do with this fusion of contempt and sympathy. Mr. Hou even wished aloud that Willy could have somehow repented before his suicide, or at least have done something to redeem himself for the audience and alleviate the grief of his loyal and long-suffering wife, with whom he had strongly empathized. Then, he said, "I would finish the play with a peaceful heart."

A few students had reacted less sympathetically than Mr. Hou to Willy's wife Linda, feeling that "she spoiled him." But most admired her, even identifying with her. "She is strong by hiding her strength," one student said. "This is a very Chinese strategy, and my own mother uses it daily." However, whatever their assessment of Linda, almost all, like Mr. Hou, were disturbed by the ending of the play, mainly because they felt that LInda deserved better than she got in her final, grief-stricken moment at Willy's grave, in a resolution that failed to mete out--at least to their satisfaction--a proper sense of justice.

At one point, Mr. Wang, who had attended a local opera with me, pointed to the happy resolution of its closing scene as a model to be emulated. During the opera performance, he had helped me understand the meaning of the elaborate makeup and costumes that seemed to signal every character's position on the moral scale. I questioned whether all drama required the same kind of neat resolutions. Miss Xiong, who had also attended the opera, wrote in her next paper, "Perhaps in spoken plays the good people do not have to have a reward, but they should not be punished."

Her response led to a similar discussion about signalling the difference between morally good and bad characters. I had learned that during the Cultural Revolution the very notion of dramatizing any inner division in human beings was outlawed from the Eight Model Plays that could be performed, and I used this fact to ask whether such morally clear--and unrealistic--characterizations might tend toward authoritarian interpretation, commanding from an audience a ready-made reading rather than allowing it to forge its own moral judgments. The students agreed that, yes, this was possible, but some preferred this convention to what one called "American confusions." As Miss Su said, "In Death of a Salesman, we are dissatisfied because we can't hate Willy but we can't cheer for him either." Mr. Hou maintained that people attend the theater to enjoy the spectacle, what he called the "style," as opposed to the American concern for "realism." He added, "I enjoy these American characters for discussion, but when I watch the tapes, I feel restless." A less philosophical and more practical cultural difference that occupied us was the concept of life insurance. Life insurance is such a fact of American life that the plots of two of the five plays I chose--Death of a Salesman and Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun--hinged upon it, a detail that had escaped my notice when I compiled the reading list.

Life insurance is an anomaly in a socialistic state; only a few of my students were even aware that it existed, although they had no trouble understanding its rationale. However, some viewed it as an unfortunate necessity, a dangerous move, "a temptation to death," one of them said even as she laughed at the superstition. She explained that her grandmother had told her that when a suicide contemplates his fatal action, he sees a beautiful landscape--rolling hills with pools of water and graceful willow trees. Perhaps, she said, the life insurance policy gave Willy that vision. On the other hand, Mr. Wang said that Willy's desire to leave a large sum of money to his son seemed to him commendable and even Chinese: "Every father wants continuity with his son."

Because life insurance is also a factor in the events of _Raisin in the Sun_, the students made some connections between Miller's and Hansberry's play that, of course, I hadn't seen. In _Raisin_, Lena Younger is the matriarch of an African American family that includes her son, his wife and child, her daughter, and herself. When she uses her inheritance from her husband's life insurance policy as a down payment on a home in a white suburb where the family is clearly unwelcome, she triggers an explosive conflict with her son Walter, who wants the money to buy his own business. Lena sees the money as the family's ticket out of the ghetto, Walter as his single, desperate chance to escape his job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white man with its attendant humiliations. The arguments between Lena and Walter escalate as the play unfolds. Some students connected these arguments with Willy's fate to demonstrate that life insurance can be, as Mr. Zh ng said, "insurance for trouble." He wrote, "The insurance money is the central topic of both plays. It helps reveal the different dreams of the family members and also the conflicts between them."

Questions of life insurance aside, one student read the events of _Raisin in the Sun_ as validating housing practices in China. In the introduction to her paper, Miss Xu wrote, "People in China must live where they work, with their unit. We are denied a new place without government permission. At times this policy makes for confined feelings, but many unpleasantnesses can result if people are allowed to live wherever they prefer. Raisin in the Sun shows some of the problems. This play is about how the family of Lena Younger solved them together." Raisin in the Sun intrigued the students because it both reinforced and resisted their notions about African Americans in the United States. Several students referred to the bigotry that the Youngers confront as confirming the worst of what they had read about racial exploitation and the dangers of crime-ridden ghettos in the United States, sympathizing with the Younger family as victims of an oppressive society. On the other hand, they interpreted some of the actions through their own racial biases, holding the characters rather than society responsible for their predicament. For example, when Mama's son Walter blows his share of the insurance money by trusting a scoundrel and his get-rich-quick promises, several students took his poor judgment as evidence that blacks were, as they had heard, irresponsible and childish.

However, other students noted that this family, in contrast to the families in the earlier plays, were able to overcome its differences and remain a cohesive unit. They argued that Hansberry's play transformed the strife and loss pattern of the first two plays, using the friction between the family members to offer creative possibilities for change rather than a fixed dilemma. Although the resolution is problematic--the family is leaving the ghetto apartment, but events have made clear that by moving to a white suburb they are risking injuries to property and self--many of them interpreted the last scene as hopeful, the optimistic note sounded by the family's triumph over its internal divisions and by each member's ultimate willingness to compromise and adapt. Miss Lu typified the reaction of several classmates when she noted this variation with some surprise:

> I feel glad for the Youngers at the end because everyone is able to make truces. No one in this family succeeds at the price of others or suffers alone. Everyone carries the heavy cooking pot. We hear much about how black people suffer many indignities in the United States and therefore live in broken families. But in this play they find harmony, more like a Chinese family. The white families in Death of a Salesman and The Glass Menagerie have only disharmony. I think this is because Lorraine Hansberry tries to show ways for black families to succeed.

The rest of Miss Lu's paper, as this paragraph indicates, achieved considerable complexity by reading Hansberry's play through a double lens--seeing it through the text of the first two plays as well as through the writer's own cultural practices.

Rui Hong also noted the ultimate cohesiveness of the Youngers' family unit, but insisted on reading the family dynamics as symptomatic of both racial and capitalistic problems. She wrote,

> Mama's family ends the play with many hopes for the new house. Now they are a unit. Before they move, each person in the family complains about their shabby apartment and wants something different. They hate to share the bathroom with the neighbor, and

> they feel sorry that Travis [Walter's young son] has the sofa for his bed, although the family already gets two bedrooms and a telephone. Ruth calls the apartment names like "rat-trap" and "misery." Mama wants a garden for her little plant. The Younger family remains together because they have been sick with unsatisfaction. They have learned to want more because they see white people who have more. Capitalism teaches people to want more than they have. If they do not stay together, they will never get what they want.

By now, I was beginning to see some of these ideological proclamations as little more than obligatory opening moves on the writers' part; they often collided later in the paper with what were strong insights, and I found myself reading past them without marginal comments. However, when I duplicated papers in which these kinds of statements appeared, the students themselves sometimes debated their appropriateness; in this case most argued that the characters' dissatisfactions were understandable, more than a case of wanting too much, even though they acknowledged that the Younger family enjoyed luxuries that most of them might never have. "We have to understand their lives as if we lived in America," said Mr. Wang at one point in the discussion. "The plays are happening in America." Then he added, straddling Chinese and American cultures with what seemed to me a particularly apt metaphor, "If you give me a piece of red glass and tell me to look at the sky, I will tell you that the sky is red, even if I know it is blue."

The next play on the list was Albee's The American Dream, an absurdist play. The students' responses to this play, with the many cliches and non sequiturs so typical of the devalued language of absurdist drama, were sufficiently different from the students' other responses as to raise issues beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, after some initial confusion, the students liked this play enormously and, although in my reading it provides the harshest commentary on what seems to me peculiarly American behavior, most students read its indictment of human folly as universal, perhaps because of its comedic and non-realistic mode.

That same cultural agility, however, did not transfer to their reading of last play on the list, Marsha Norman's _'Night, Mother_. On one level, this is not a complex play. It includes only two characters, a mother and her adult daughter, its action covers the exact time of its performance, and there are no subplots or flashbacks. Early in the action, Jessie (the daughter) announces that she is going to shoot herself in "a couple of hours." For the remainder of the play, Mama tries to convince Jessie to live, and Jessie tries to reconcile her mother to her irrevocable decision. In the final moments, we watch as Mama hears the fatal (and offstage) gunshot.

What complicates this play is the ambiguity of Jessie's motive. She has suffered a series of personal losses--her father is dead, her son is a loser, her husband has left her--but nothing we learn about her clearly explains what she is about to do. In fact, the reasons she gives sometimes obscure rather than clarify her motives. At one point she says, "There's no reason to stay except to keep you company and I'm not very good company." Later she says, "I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse." There is a temptation to read Jessie as either self-indulgent or deranged; her circumstances are tough but not extreme enough to merit suicide. But such a reading substitutes a purely personal context for a larger, more universal one, failing to account for the power of this play, and it casts Jesse in a neurotically irrational light, despite her literal and pragmatic behavior. Most American critics have read this text not as the story of a suicidal woman but as a comment on relations between mothers and daughters that foregrounds the problem of female identity and autonomy.

The students struggled with this play more than any of the others. Of course, they could easily follow its events, but they had trouble accepting that the lack of an autonomous self might drive someone to desperation. The whole concept of autonomy of self, so much a part of our culture, seemed a bewildering, even irritating, abstraction to these students, not surprising in a culture where successive traditions of feudalism, Confucianism, and communism have served to emphasize the value of selflessness rather than the individual self.

We talked around the issue at some length. The students could articulate an intellectual understanding of what was operating in this play, but most never connected on a meaningful emotional level with Jessie's character. They wondered aloud (partly as a joke) if Jessie had life insurance, reasoning that, since she is concerned for the continuing well-being of her mother, what she really seeks is not death but her mother's financial security. Miss Xiong recalled a Chinese myth to interpret Jessie's suicide: there are spirits, she said, called Soul Snatchers, who belong to people who have already committed suicide. These spirits can only be reborn as human if they tempt others to an act of suicide. Perhaps, she said, Jesse has been enticed by the voice of a Soul Snatcher. Although Miss Xiong offered the explanation apologetically, almost as a joke akin to the life insurance reference, I was intrigued by her response to this particular text, one that appears so static--no one comes, no one goes. Unable to account for what to her seemed unaccountable, she provided an external justification.

At one point, we looked closely at a passage near the end of the play as a way of exploring Jessie's motives. Mama says, "This is all my fault, Jessie, but I don't know what to do about it." Jessie says, "It doesn't have anything to do with you." To which Mama replies, "Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie. You can't do anything without doing it to me."

We spent some time discussing this exchange; most of the students read it as evidence of Mama's great pain. I agreed with the American critics who have pointed to this passage as signifying Mama's refusal or inability to grant Jessie any personal authority over her own life; she is saying, and has been saying all along, You are not a separate person. When I shared this interpretation with the students, they stared at me in incredulous silence. Then Miss Chen spoke. Her mother, she said, often told her two children, "I love you like the ten fingers of my hand. When you are hurt, I hurt." Miss Chen explained that she understood these words as a measure of her mother's goodness. Although she was too polite to say she found my reading foolish, her tone and facial expression seemed to challenge what I had said.

I pointed to another passage. Mama says, "You don't have to do this." "I know," says Jessie. "That's what I like about it." To me, this passage speaks clearly to Jessie's desperate need to define her own self on her own terms. But when the students grappled with it, it kept slipping through the discussion and disappearing into a debate about particular incidents of Jessie's life: she "liked" the idea because it would show her son how he had disgraced her, because it would make her husband sorry. Finally, dismissing this play and the two women in it, Mr. Hou seemed to speak for the group when he said, as to preclude further speculation about this play, that Jessie was very tired and needed what he called "a permanent rest."

Before going to China, I had read several theoretical essays about negotiated meanings and multiple perspectives, about classrooms as contact zones (to use Mary Louise Pratt's term) where those perspectives intersect. Certainly, my weeks in China translated many of those theoretical abstractions into specific experience. But, still, I ask: what do we really do with this multiplicity when we confront it? What does it mean to meet across cultures, grappling with each other's meanings without surrendering our own? That was a question that I struggled with during my weeks in China and one that remains unanswered for me even now. Like the plays I've been talking about today, this paper has have no tidy resolution. It has been a way to talk about what happened, not to come to any conclusions--because I can't. Any conclusion that I might attempt seems either reductive or simplistic. Or, perhaps, that is my conclusion--that our considerable talk about multiple perspectives serves to raise not only our awareness of the contact zone but questions about it, providing material for thought rather than answers.

A conversation I had with one of my teaching assistants on the last day of class serves well, I think, to illustrate the difficulties of arriving at any final generalization. The class had watched scenes from the videotapes of _'Night Mother_, and Miss Xiong and I were walking from the Foreign Language building back to my apartment when suddenly she stopped and faced me. Was Jesse's house, she wanted to know, particularly large by American standards? I replied that no, it seemed "average," a two-or three-bedroom "ranch" house. She listened carefully to my explanation of a "ranch" house, her eyes intent on mine, then she shook her head. "Such a big cooking space," she sighed, "and she killed herself."