



TLC SHOWCASE

MW SUN

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Introduction to *Behind the Curtained Door*

When I moved to Manchester in 2010 to look after my elderly mother, I wanted to do something meaningful besides taking care of mum. I found a charity and began giving free English lessons to Chinese people who worked in kitchens. Soon some students asked me to help with translation and other language related difficulties. Most of them had very little when they first came to the UK, but many worked hard and saved up to buy their own takeaway. While we are familiar with the notion that Chinese immigrants are hardworking, their struggles and personal stories are not known outside their communities.

I began to listen to and record the voices of my students, their families, friends, neighbours and acquaintances. And through the generosity in sharing their stories, I was able to write what is not spoken about. Secrets, lies, betrayals, disappointments but also of hope and forgiveness.

I began to dramatize the stories in 2018. Then a fall which resulted in a fractured humerus and injured shoulder meant I had to stop. Eighteen months later, I resumed working on the play after an operation on my shoulder. But much of the initial ideas seemed to have lost their appeal and I was unsure how to proceed. At the time I attended a playwriting workshop at CommonWord, Charlotte Maxwell and Martin de Mellor suggested I apply for the TLC Arts Council funded Free Read.

My script was read by Julia Thomas whose encouragement gave me the confidence I needed. Her detailed report pointed out my strengths and weaknesses, and where I needed to be mindful not to go too far. She saw the potentials and the missed opportunities. I received the report in April 2020 and the pandemic and lockdown caused me to pause a second time. The delays gave me more distance and fresh eyes. I completed the play with the support of Andy McNamee, *Behind the Curtained Door* told the stories of a silent minority. It follows three women after the death of the man who linked them together. While pragmatism clashes with grief - secrets, lies and betrayals are revealed threatening to destroy their love for each other.

It had a successful production in September 2022 at the John Thaw Theatre at the Martin Harris Centre in Manchester.

Extract from *Behind the Curtained Door* by MW Sun

ACT ONE

SCENE 2

PING has come back to help AhLuk clear out her dead husband CheungBak's room.

AHLUK Where's Yiling?

PING She's gone to look at a school. She'll be here soon.

AHLUK I hope she gets the job.

PING It's a building she wants to rent, she wants to have her own school.

AHLUK Why doesn't she get a real job, one that pays the bills and have something over so she can save up for a house. You shouldn't indulge her. What is the use of dancing? Teaching kids to dance ... what for? Better they learn something useful, something that will help them get a good job when they leave school.

PING She's stuck with the bookkeeping course. When she qualifies, she can get a steady job in an office. That's all I can do. She's already complaining that I interfere too much. I can't make her give up dancing.

AHLUK You can and you should. It's for her own good.

That's the trouble with young people these days, they don't listen to us.

Suddenly AHLUK hears the bell. She reacts/jumps up.

AHLUK Did you hear that?

PING Hear what?

AHLUK CheungBak's bell. I keep hearing it. It woke me up last night.

PING You're imagining it.

AHLUK He's calling me.

PING That damn bell, you should never have let him use it. I'll pack it up.

AHLUK I'll look for it now.

YILING enters.

PING Where's the red bean dessert? I can't even rely on you to do one small thing.

YILING If she wants red bean dessert, why can't she get it herself?

PING She is grieving. Her husband just died.

YILING It'll do her good to keep busy.

PING I'm trying to help her. She's exhausted, she needs to rest.

YILING What she needs is to get out, go for a walk, see the sky, breathe the fresh air.

PING So the air outside is better, huh?

YILING It'll certainly do her good if you stop telling her what to do. You people have no boundary.

AHLUK comes out of the OS bedroom.

AHLUK Ah, Yiling, how was the interview?

YILING It wasn't an interview. I went to look at a building. The space is good, two rooms we can use as studios. The floor is in good condition. It's the best I've seen. We can turn it into a dance school.

PING You're going to take it?

YILING I'll have to talk to the owner. He wants to sell it, maybe I can persuade him to rent to us. I wish I have the money to buy it. Having our own place will give us the security we need.

PING If you stop buying expensive handbags and going out with your friends, you will have enough for a deposit now.

YILING I haven't bought anything for a long time.

AHLUK You listen to Ping. If you save up now then you wouldn't be poor like me. Better still, find a rich husband, someone with a house, a good job and money in the bank. That's real security.

PING I'll do some packing up. Yiling, make a fresh pot of tea.

PING goes in to the OS bedroom.

AHLUK *(To YILING)* Your aunt is a good friend. I think I'd have gone mad if it won't for her. Looking after CheungBak, being stuck here, no one to talk to. I've never told her how much I looked forward to her visits. She's more than a good friend, she's like a sister.

PING had entered the room while AHLUK is talking. She stands quietly, listening.

PING You just wanted the snacks.

AHLUK Of course I wanted the *wontons* and the *charsiubao*. And the gossip! You're the only connection I have with the outside world. How else would I know that our fat neighbour had died on the flight back from Hong Kong, and your boss has a new girlfriend. Seriously, you're my only friend and my best sister. I have five sisters, none of them is like you.

PING goes back into the OS bedroom. AHLUK gets a photograph to show YILING.

AHLUK My mother and her six daughters. My poor mother, she kept trying for a boy, but all she got were girls. That's me, the baby, the sixth girl. At first my grandmother wanted to give me away, but after consulting the Daoist

priest they decided to keep me. Well, being the sixth – *luk*, in Cantonese, means good fortune – they thought my mother would have a son after me. So they call me AhLuk.

YILING I didn't know that's how you got your name. And your mother had a boy?

AHLUK No, my mother didn't have any children after me.

YILING So the Daoist priest was wrong?

AHLUK I don't know. In those days you did what they told you. I wish there's one here. I have so many questions about the future.

YILING Do you believe in them?

AHLUK Of course. Five thousand years of celestial wisdom. Our ancestors cannot be wrong. That priest saved me. Feng shui masters, astrologers: they work in mysterious ways. On the surface of it, he might be wrong, but we don't know if he was just trying to get my parents to keep me.

How about you? Did your father give you your name?

YILING I don't know. You'll have to ask Ping.

ALUK Where is your father?

YILING I don't know.

AHLUK But you know who he is.

YILING No, I don't. I've never met my father.

AHLUK Why? What happened to him? Didn't you ask Ping?

YILING She never tells me anything.

AHLUK She's the same with me. She doesn't like it when I ask her about her family. That's not right. You should know who your father is. I'll ask her. Maybe she will tell me. Yiling, I'll get her to tell me. Now, tell me about your grandma.

YILING She's dead.

AHLUK So you lost your mum and your grandma?

YILING No, grandma died only a few years ago.

AHLUK So you did live with your grandma at first, was it only for a short time? Ping said she raised you.

YILING I lived with Ping since I was small.

AHLUK Your Grandma must have helped raise you.

YILING Ping didn't want her to help..

AHLUK What did your grandma say about that?

YILING They had a row. Grandma was angry. Then she went back to China.

AHLUK There's something ... I think you know the answer to that ...
How come your aunt never got married? Was she too picky?

YILING Why are you asking me all these questions?

PING enters the room carrying a small box.

PING I found some cassettes.

AHLUK *(Looking at the tapes.)* We used to listen to these old songs. *(She holds a cassette up.)* CheungBak loved this one. It was his best Karaoke song.

YILING CheungBak used to sing Karaoke?

AHLUK Don't sound so surprised. We were young once.

YILING Look, you even have a Beatles tape.

AHLUK Oh yes, Cheung Bak liked them. *(She sings)* Da da.. my English is no good, but CheungBak knew the words. He said if he stayed at school for one more year, he would have been okay, you know, his English would be good then.

YILING Why did he leave school?

AHLUK His mother died, and his father remarried. The new mother wanted him to work and bring money home.

PING We didn't think English would be useful one day. My father took me out of school after a few years. He thought I already learned too much. He said all I needed was to be able to write my name.

AHLUK continues to look through the box of cassettes.

AHLUK Aiya! My favourite song.

YILING Can we listen to this?

AHLUK Yiling, give us a dance.

YILING begins to dance. The three of them continue to sing along with the music.

AHLUK and PING join YILING in the dance. After a while, music changes, becomes surreal, AHLUK dances alone, then she's joined by CHEUNGBAK in older music from 60s. AHLUK and CHEUNGBAK dance. She's young and carefree again.

About the Writer

MW Sun was born in Shanghai but grew up in Hong Kong. She has always been a writer but only began creative writing in 2010. After graduating she worked for the BBC in London writing and presenting news stories in Chinese. She then moved into English news, covering major developments in China for RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) before a short stint as a television reporter and presenter for CNBC in Singapore. She also worked in corporate communications, leading teams in global communications, media relations, investor relations and crisis management in China, Hong Kong, New York, Taiwan and the Philippines.



MW Sun moved to Manchester in 2010 to look after her ailing mother. Since then she has completed the Writers Pathway course and gained a MA in Creative Writing at Manchester University. Her first drama works are two short plays *Arachnophobia* and *The Good Fortune Restaurant* produced by New Earth Theatre. In 2014 she joined an ambitious theatre project *From Shore to Shore* which is based on interviews with Chinese people in the north of England. With Arts Council England funding, it toured the UK three times. The script was published by Aurora Metro in 2019 and it was adapted for BBC Radio 4 in 2020. The following year she worked on the adaptation for BBC Radio 4 of Pearl Buck's award-winning novel, *The Good Earth*. Her full-length play, *Behind the Curtained Door*, had a successful production in 2022 and a tour is planned for summer 2023.