

## **Eunuch X Pirate**

by Norman Yeung

### ***Artist Statement***

**BRIEF SYNOPSIS:** A dying Chinese not-quite-billionaire goes on a journey to reconcile with his Canadian tech-entrepreneur daughter, with the meddling of Zheng He, the celebrated 15th Century eunuch admiral, and Ching Shih, the 19th Century woman known as the most successful pirate in history.

#### **DEVELOPMENT HISTORY/AWARDS:**

Workshops and public readings by Outside the March

Ontario Arts Council Playwright in Residence at Outside the March

Tyrone Guthrie Award at Stratford Festival

Dramaturgical support from Stratford Festival

Ontario Arts Council Recommender Grants from fu-GEN Theatre, Modern Times, Outside the March, Soulpepper, Tarragon

Toronto Arts Council Grant for Playwriting

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Some years ago, after seeing a show at Stratford Festival, I gazed at the glistening statue of Shakespeare outside Festival Theatre and wondered, “Why do Canadian audiences know so much about the Renaissance in Europe, but know so little about the contemporary history in other parts of the world?” I decided to write *Eunuch X Pirate*, where a dying Chinese not-quite-billionaire goes on a journey to reconcile with his Canadian tech-entrepreneur daughter, with the meddling of a 15<sup>th</sup> Century eunuch and 18<sup>th</sup> Century pirate. This boisterous, tragicomic, family drama is invigorated by absurdism and metaphysical tomfoolery.

The primary setting is today. Koon-Ying was a wealthy CEO who has retired to a modest life in a Guangzhou village. His daughter Karina has lived in Canada for decades. Koon-Ying was mostly absent from Karina’s life, especially after her mother died. Karina resents her estranged, aloof father and is too busy to reconcile old wounds because her tech start-up is hot property.

Karina’s conscience is manifested by Ching Shih (1775-1844), a woman considered the most successful pirate in history. Ching Shih keeps Karina focussed on success and power, allowing no distractions from her father. Meanwhile, Koon-Ying’s conscience is embodied by Zheng He (1371-1433), the renowned Chinese-Muslim-eunuch-admiral, who urges Koon-Ying to be stoic and uphold dignity, to keep his illness secret and show no weakness to his daughter. Will Karina allow her father to salvage some semblance of family before he dies?

After my encounter with that Shakespearean statue, I gestated ideas about Zheng He’s Treasure Voyages during the Ming Dynasty – massive naval missions that flaunted an image of Chinese power and prosperity. How Chinese people are perceived is what gives me urgency; I wrote the first draft during the pandemic when abuse against Asian people was rampant. Today, when I hear of tensions between China and Canada/The West, I brace myself for another wave of Chinese

people being seen as the enemy. By showing nuances of Chinese behaviour in this play, I'm sharing our humanity.

I'm investigating a quality that many of us Chinese people hold preciously: saving face. Transgressions toward us are often absorbed silently as a show of strength. Typical responses to problems are: Nothing's wrong. We're doing great. We're not weak. Many Chinese want to control their own narrative. This play examines an obsession with a flawless image. What is the fragility at the core?

A lot goes unspoken by many Chinese people. Love, apology, and forgiveness are often shown through gestures as simple as a parent placing a morsel of food in their child's bowl of rice. My parents told me, "We don't say 'I love you' to each other because we know." I'm exploring the beauty and trust of unspoken communication, but also the risk of taking familial bonds for granted.

This play illustrates how success can incur loss. Karina becomes a billionaire but betrays her co-founder and best friend Maggie in the process. Koon-Ying forsook his family as he became a powerful CEO. Ultimately, success in *Eunuch X Pirate* is in keeping a family together no matter what form that family takes.

I'm playing with time and space to make something intrinsically theatrical. Some scenes occur in 2026, 1801, and 1395 simultaneously, intersecting histories to suggest Chinese hubris existing here and now as it has for centuries. I'm offering directors and designers fantastical moments like a leopard lurking on a plane, a pirate ship crashing into a Vancouver living room, a showdown between father and daughter as Imperial soldiers from 1407 battle pirates from 1808. Immersive staging is possible, perhaps in an open-concept office (or a facsimile of one) where audience mingle amongst ping-pong tables, beanbag chairs, snacks, and other trappings of a start-up. Performers might weave in and out, below and above the audience (think pirates climbing a mast).

*Eunuch X Pirate* will be entertaining and accessible, offering everyone a family tale as a welcoming point to glimpse into the Chinese soul. It's a theatrical experience spanning seven centuries, several oceans, multiple countries, with dozens of characters and giraffes and camels and puppets and one spectacular sea battle... But its heart beats a story about a family torn by distance and time. It's an intimate tale spotlighting roles and histories largely absent in Canadian theatre, presented in spectacular fashion.