

Nick Rongjun YU

Speaking Freely

Writing is the best way for me to speak freely.

I was from a small village in Anhui province in East China. For many years, only eight families lived there—it became seven after my family moved. Approximately eighty villages like this disappear every day, some of which existed for hundreds of years. My father has been the headmaster and the only teacher in the village school for more than thirty years, and almost all the people from a dozen villages have been his students, including the other teachers (farmers who stop teaching in growing season). He taught me NOT to speak in front of people, NOT to share your opinions: silence is golden, hide yourself, be a quiet man. How could I speak freely aloud?

The village itself spoke freely in a way I understood and loved: it gave me all kinds of flowers in spring, the bees and butterflies, and the lotus roots which are delicious as soon as you pull them out of the deep-down under-earth; the smell of rice in the wind at night, cicadas singing in the trees, and people working in the field under the scorching sun in summer; autumn meant picking peanuts in the fields, baking sweet potatoes after school, singing while riding buffalo; the whole winter, everybody prepared for Chinese New Year, displaying red couplets and images of the door god, hanging red lanterns, setting off firecrackers to scare monsters away.

I found that I lost my way to speak freely when I moved to Shanghai in 1991, where I went to college to train in rehabilitation and hospital medicine. I did not understand the local Shanghai language and needed to use Mandarin for writing and talking instead of my native dialect. I didn't understand the way this city spoke until one afternoon in 1997. I was strolling down a small lane in the central downtown area, lost there, the sunshine on my face, and I noticed an old man standing nearby and cracking seeds, I noticed people playing cards, a woman washing clothes underneath a faucet, two children playing badminton on the street, two old ladies talking to each other through their windows. Suddenly, I found a way to describe Shanghai.

I quit my job as a doctor and I found a way to speak freely in the theater. I find the possibilities for expression infinite in the theater despite the limitations of the theater space, and there, all these memories came back and became unique. In the theater, I can fly freely in the time and space of the village where I lived before and live forever. Last year, that space allowed me to do something I thought I would never do: I wrote a traditional Chinese opera. We have more than three hundred traditional Chinese operas in China—in my hometown we had one named Lu Ju, founded by the poor people who begged for food door by door in disaster years by singing. The stories of those operas always featured the female character crying and singing from the beginning to the end about their miserable lives, but I liked them very much and my father always brought me to the opera when

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I was young. I never imagined that I could write one myself, but I discovered the specificity of the style gave me the freedom to express my childhood experience.

I love Iowa city very much, even though I just arrived one week ago. Every day, I try to find time to take a walk along the Iowa River, I sit on a bench by the riverside, and feel the peace. Suddenly, I hear the crickets singing around me, not only one but many, and in such moments, I ignore the noise from cars and people, I listen the deep place of my heart, and I can feel the grass growing, the flowers blooming, the clouds rejoicing, the air whispering. I am floating somewhere...the crickets singing and singing, I enter their conversations, their lives, their happiness and their joys...good, I think, they are speaking freely.

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