

# THE WHITE SNAKE

Written and Directed by  
MARY ZIMMERMAN

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# Morals, Myths and the Importance of Story

BY WILLA J. TAYLOR

The Chinese Legend of the White Snake, from which Mary Zimmerman has adapted this production, is an ancient story that existed in oral tradition long before any written record and long before the tale was told through opera and films and a television series.

Myths – legend, folklore, and fairy tale - are stories based in culture and tradition and appear in every society on Earth. Some are based on fact; some are completely fictional. But they are all considered important sacred tales that explain the world and the human experience. These stories provide us with subtle suggestions on how to cope in difficult times, and in their symbolism we find encouragement and hope, examples of how to persevere and overcome, and guidance through the consequences of our choices.

My maternal grandmother, my Nana, was an inveterate storyteller. Everything was a parable, a lesson that I could learn. She used the stories of our family, of our history as African Americans, to teach me courage and perspective.

As an adult, I realize that many of the stories Nana told me were steeped in the folklore and mythology born from slavery. When Africans were forced to come to this country, they brought with them their own culture. But forbidden to speak their native languages or practice their own religions, slaves began to mix their native culture with that of European and Native American cultures in America. Many of these tales were used to educate the children on how to survive the horrors of slavery, and

to give courage, comfort and hope that some day their lives would change.

My Nana read and told me Uncle Remus stories. Remus, a fictional former slave, used animal stories to pass on folklore and morals to the children around him. “Uncle Remus” collections, written by a white post-Reconstruction journalist named Joel Harris, were steeped in the racism (both subtle and not so subtle) of their time. He presented a paternalistic and demeaning caricature of the docile, happy Negro in Remus while the stories themselves were based in the traditions of many African fables. And although meant as morality tales against stepping out of line and remembering your “place” in society, Nana used the trickster tales of Brer Rabbit to instill militancy in me (that she probably grew to both admire and regret). Nana spun these stories about a cunning rabbit who was constantly getting out of trouble, while written in a sort of racial innocence, to inspire me to be quick-witted, to be tactical as well as strategic, and to always understand that I was smarter than those that would try to oppress me.

While I loved Nana’s stories, as I grew up I craved adventure and derring-do, I was first truly taken with the ancient legends of oral tradition through film and television. My all-time favorite is that of Robin Hood. Watching with Nana’s side-coaching and commentary, his adventures helped me understand about people who live at the margins of society, about the power of collective purpose, and about how to fight back against bullies.

Myths are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancients. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. The myths of lost paradise, for example, give people hope that by living a virtuous life, they can earn a better life in the hereafter. The myths of a golden age give people hope that there are great leaders who will improve their lives. The hero’s quest is a model for young people as they transition to adulthood.

They also provide touchstones for common understanding. When Jackie Kennedy referred to her husband’s presidency as a new Camelot, we understood that she meant a golden age, like that of King Arthur. When we see soldiers or operatives smuggled into enemy territory in something innocuous, we understand the reference to Odysseus, who tricked the Trojans into admitting an army into their city by accepting the gift of a wooden horse. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts!

Myths and folklore – like the White Snake, Brer Rabbit and Robin Hood – tap into our universal concerns about good and evil, justice and injustice, life and death. They are the cultural collective wisdom that illustrates the universality of these themes across culture and time and act as both warning and promise. Each generation of new storytellers adds new layers of act and fiction onto the ancient stories, reinventing them to apply to our lives as we know them now, reminding us of our history, and helping us navigate obstacles to come.

# The Value of a Folk Tale

BY GINA PISASALE of the OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

The White Snake legend is an epic tale that has been passed down through both oral and written tradition over many centuries. As is the case for any folk tale with this kind of legacy, characters and plot points have been added, altered and erased as the story moved from one culture to another. In a version written by Philostratus in 2nd-century Greece, the White Snake character introduces herself as a common Phoenician woman, while she is the daughter of a Chinese king in a version recorded in Kashmir.

Some might consider such narrative inconsistencies and the tale's unknowable beginnings problematic, especially when trying to locate an authentic text or ascribe artistic value to recorded (re)tellings. But the absence of an authoritative text is perhaps one of the reasons for its perpetual value. Folklore scholar Dan Ben-Amos explains, "the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative and transcultural" in order for a story to be told and embraced as "an integral part of culture." *The White Snake's* unidentifiable origin and malleability are the very qualities that have helped the story survive over centuries in diverse environments.

## Evolution of the Tale

Although the story planted itself in various cultures across what are now the Middle East, Europe and Asia, it grew its hardest and most enduring roots in China. The White Snake story also has experienced major changes throughout China's remarkably long history.

One of the earliest recorded

ancestors of the White Snake story found in China appeared in an anthology of classic folk tales published in 981 CE. The story is categorized as a late period Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) romance, or a story from an old legend, and is titled "Li Huang," after its main character. In this version, Li is a married man who comes to Chang'an (present day Xi'an), the Tang capital, to find a job. He meets a "fairylake" lady dressed in white by a vendor cart, buys clothes for her, follows her home for repayment and eventually marries and spends three pleasurable days with her. When he returns to his home, he becomes ill and his body melts into his sheets. His servant leads his family toward the lady in White's house, but when they arrive, they find only an empty garden with a locust tree bearing checks to repay Li. Locals report that a white serpent was commonly seen by the tree.

The Tang dynasty is known as one of the Golden Ages of China. Its relatively peaceful conditions and strong centralized government allowed art and culture to flourish. The most famous patron of drama in Chinese history was the Tang emperor, Xianzong (712–756 CE). Xianzong established the Pear Orchard, the first known royal acting and musical academy in China. At the height of Tang rule, the imperial court employed 6,500 musicians to play ceremonial and popular music. Emperor Zhuangzong of the later Tang dynasty also was devoted to the arts. He even became an actor himself and famously created a character modeled after his father-in-law, a fortune teller and an herbal pharmacist of low birth.

## Influx of Religion

Political stability enabled an increased circulation of goods as well as ideas along the Silk Road, which connected the Tang capital Chang'an to Rome. Buddhism gained prominence as traveling preachers and storytellers introduced new material and artistic forms, many featuring spiritual belief systems from Central and South Asia. A renewed interest in Taoism also emerged among commoners seeking a transcendental dimension beyond the daily toil of human existence and strict social hierarchy imposed by the Confucian elite. The otherworldly concerns prominent in Taoist and Buddhist beliefs introduced and inspired stories of deities, ghosts and the supernatural. A new style of mixing vernacular prose with musical verse became known as bianwen, which has been translated as "texts of the unusual" and "tales of metamorphosis."

Later Tang storytelling forms moved toward nonmusical prose but still kept supernatural content. They were referred to as "marvel tales" or "records of weird things" and had more complex plots and tighter structures. They became prototypes for novels, picture scrolls, shadow puppetry, poems and dramatic literature. These tales, or huaben, firmly embedded themselves into the Chinese cultural fabric and provided basic material for future art, storytellers and opera plays.

Toward the end of the Tang dynasty, the Buddhists had accumulated significant social and political power. In 845, Emperor Wuzong, a fanatical Taoist disciple set on



Jon Norman Schneider (*Xu Xian*) and Amy Kim Waschke (*White Snake*) in *The White Snake*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

achieving immortality, considered Buddhism a threat to the state and had temples destroyed, expelled more than 200,000 priests and nuns, and confiscated their lands. Along with *bianwen* and fantastical tales employed by monks to preach Buddhist texts, the story of White Snake moved away from temples and into secular society.

During the chaotic period after the Tang dynasty fell, China was divided among warlords and minor kings. Language, musical rhythms and legends became regionalized and solo professional storytellers and acting troupes used local dialects, idioms and references, music, poetry and popular dance and acrobatic styles. As the White Snake story was dispersed and

developed over the next 700 years, it remained part of the popular repertoire, most likely taking on many regionally specific forms. At the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the legend received one of its best-known tellings by Feng Menglong as a vernacular short story.

The Ming dynasty followed an era of Mongol rule, established by Kublai Kahn. Mongolian leaders had dismantled Confucian social order and scholars went from being highly esteemed to being ranked 9th of 10 (just above “beggars”) in the Mongol social hierarchy. When the lowborn Han General Taizu reestablished Chinese rule, he sought to restore the grandeur of past imperial ages. During this

era of nostalgia, ancient texts were reprinted and widely circulated. With a keen awareness of fully restored Confucian social order, scholars and the literati elite were especially attentive to formal rules of writing, music and composition. Therefore, the nonstandardized repertoire of professional singers, storytellers and vernacular literature often held questionable value in a world now hyperaware of class status.

### **Fleshing out the Story**

Feng Menglong was a civil servant of low rank, despite being known as the popular literature expert of his time. His narration of the White Snake tale, titled “*Bai Niangzi Yongzhen Leifangta*” (“Madam White Is Kept Forever under

Thunder Peak Tower”) is found in “Stories to Caution the World,” the second of his three volumes of 120 Ming dynasty stories published in 1624.

Feng’s version is set in the Jin dynasty by the scenic West Lake in Hangzhou, one of the seven ancient capitals of China. The story still centers on a hapless young man, Xu Xian, who falls in love with a shape-shifting snake woman, Madam White, but displays the tale’s evolution into a complex episodic story. Rather than a single encounter, Xu and White meet and are separated four times in three cities due to complications caused by White. On four incidents, White reveals herself as a serpent to other characters in the story, and spiritual authorities make three attempts to expose and ward off White’s true identity. In the end, a Buddhist abbot, Fa Hai, magically traps both White and her sister-maid, Green, in an alms bowl and imprisons them under Thunder Peak Pagoda. Xu becomes a monk and wills his death several years later.

Following literary trends among both popular and elite literary circles, Feng cast his tale in the mode of formal realism, adding details of time, place and characters as well as local references to popular ghost and folk tales. In the beginning of Feng’s story, he gives both mythical and historical accounts of how story locales received their names. Xu Xian is not only a young man who becomes love struck by White, he is a 22-year-old herb store assistant who lives with his older sister and her husband because their parents

died when Xu was young. Xu meets White and Green on a boat in the rain while he is returning from paying respects to his late parents at a Buddhist monastery. White introduces herself as the younger sister of an imperial guard officer and a widow. Although White is ultimately a fantastical creature, she generally follows societal expectations of a dutiful wife and only uses her supernatural powers to express her (albeit overzealous) spousal devotion and when she feels her marriage is in jeopardy.

Feng claimed that the stories of ordinary people were more valuable than were those of the elite and pious. He argues that all fiction falls within the grand tradition of historiography, in which stories encapsulate the legacies of cultural heroes and demons as well as enduring social and moral teachings of their time. A story’s revision is a nostalgic look back,

but also an invitation to look inward at the present shape of our own values and forward toward our relationships to the world around us. The unknowable origin of the White Snake legend does not diminish its value or its cultural importance. On the contrary, its lineage and legacy through thousands of years and cultures testify to its resilience and ability to tell us more about our world and ourselves.

*Image from the Summer Palace, Beijing, China, depicting the legend of The White Snake. Image courtesy of Shizhao via Wikimedia Commons.*



# The Archaeology of Performance

EDITED BY ELIZABETH MORK AND TERESA RENDE WITH PERMISSION FROM MARY ZIMMERMAN

*In this piece, originally printed in Vol. 15 Issue 1 of "Theatre Topics," Mary Zimmerman likens the development of her plays to an archeological dig. She explains, from her own perspective and directing experiences, the three elements through which she digs, and from which a script is born. We have edited this article for the guide; the full text is available in "Theatre Topics," which be can accessed through the Chicago Public Library website.*

Most of my time in the theatre is spent creating adaptations of nondramatic texts through the process of pre-production and rehearsal. Only once have I ever written a script before beginning rehearsals, and I've never typed a word of a play that didn't already have a scheduled, not too distant opening night. I've never done a workshop of anything or a draft of anything; and I use only the standard four weeks of rehearsal before tech.

The process goes like this: I fall in love, or have always been in love, with a particular text, or an episode that I happen to know from a particular text, or the back jacket cover description of a text in the hands of a friend I run into outside of Coliseum Books in New York, or, in one case, the title of a text. Next, I start telling someone at Northwestern, or at the Lookingglass or Goodman Theatre in Chicago, that I want to adapt that text and I trick them into saying they'll produce it. Pretty soon after this, my producers would like some questions answered: How many people in the play? I'm not sure. How long will it be, one act or two?

I have no idea. Will it be any good? Can't say.

Yet I'm not completely flinging myself into the void when I start on a play because I'm basing my work on a pre-existing text, or collection of texts, and that is my constant map and guide. When I am devising a performance, the primary factor that determines what goes into the final show is undoubtedly the unconscious and conscious impulses of my own personality in dialogue with the original text: How I read its story, how I can best give that story a body, what I am drawn to, what I feel is beautiful, what formal considerations I value, what I am obsessed with. In other words, my own taste. All of this comes to bear on anyone adapting anything, but in this particular way of devising, in which the script does not precede production, but rather "grows up" simultaneously with it, at least three other factors exert unusual pressure on the final form the script will take: the designs for the play devised by my colleagues and me, the cast of the play, and the events and circumstances of the world during the rehearsal period of the play.

## **The Design**

Because of the way the practical calendar of theatre production works, my set designer and I must commit to our design before I have written a word of the play, long before I know what settings, events and characters the set might be called upon to accommodate and represent. Shakespeare and Chekhov are thinking every moment about someone actually doing their plays on an actual stage and, for

the most part, dramatists avoid having characters turn into birds, fly around on carpets, participate in camel trains, split into two monkeys or battle monsters under water and in the sky. However poets, novelists, scientists and anonymous tellers of ancient myths aren't the least concerned with whether or not what they describe can be realized in the stubbornly material world of the stage, nor with such niceties as unity of time and place. So my set designer has two problems to contend with: the original text was never intended for the stage, and our script of that text does not yet exist. The design begins to radiate outward from particular images that seem to be coming forward from the story and presenting themselves. Whatever else the set design provides, it must provide an open, even floor because I know there will be a lot of fast traffic. Most of all, it must contain things for which I don't as yet have any use, but for which the cast eventually will. It must dare me to find a way to exploit all of its talents and possibilities. This phase of the process is both deeply pleasurable and extremely critical for me because I know that the set will generate meaning in even greater ways than it would in a conventional process. It will generate text. The design remains relatively unchanged once it is drafted and planned for and the materials for it are purchased—it is the script that remains fluid. The original story is the mother of the set, but the script of that story is in part the child of the design. When a performance is site-specific—that is, made specifically for an environment that already exists—then this "found" rather

than conceived design will have the most profound effect on a script, even when that script is an adaptation of a pre-existing text.

### **The Cast**

When I cast, I am casting an ensemble...when I am devising, actors are hired “as cast,” meaning that they agree to play whatever comes their way in the as-yet-unwritten script. I hold auditions by finding narrative passages in the original text, or by writing a couple of scenes that may or may not end up in the play but that use a lot of the characters that probably will definitely be in play. Who I cast may well end up determining which of the hundreds of potential roles in the original text will end up on stage.

The way I write is inextricably tied to the way I see the staging, to the gesture of the staging. I know as I am scripting what will be happening in staging or images, and so sometimes words aren't necessary; at other times, lots of words are needed. This is why until very recently I felt that my scripts could not be produced apart from my directing them: the text by itself was to me only one instrument in an orchestra and not necessarily the one always carrying the melody.

It takes considerable courage for an actor to accept “any part” in an unwritten play in a highly visible venue. Much of what appears in my adaptations, both in terms of text and staging, was created to play to the strength of a particular actor. Sometimes I witness something in the halls on a break, an interaction between the actors that I kidnap and force onstage; sometimes I like

to tease my actor friends with the things I make them do in the play. I write the text itself in the hours between rehearsals, trying to be attentive to where the rehearsals and the story are leading me.

### **The World**

Given all the potential—indeed, certain—pitfalls of working like this, why do it? Why not just write the thing before you start designing and casting and all the rest? I think I've implied part of the answer above: Text written in this way has an organic, potentially very powerful relationship to all the other elements of the event—the elements of design and the spirit and personality of the players. Everything is breathing together. But another reason has to do with the text remaining open to the world, part of the world, up to the last possible moment. Theatre has a chance to be an art form that can respond very quickly to the events of the world if we let it. It is made up of living human beings who read the paper every day, who are leading lives both inside and outside the “drama” at all times. These people come to rehearsal and they are full of the world. If allowed, they can carry the world inside, into a text in the making that may embrace it.

The real reason I devise theatre, instead of working from a completed script, is because I believe in the unconscious, and I believe in the will of certain texts to reach the air; and because the intensity of working this way forces me to live under the occupation of the will of these great texts and to submit to them in a way that I find ravishing. I confess I have very little

memory of actually writing scripts at all. I don't remember ever having done it. The pressure is so great, the time constraint so brutal, that there is no time to calculate, to reason, to justify: You just crack open. There can be no dramaturgy. You can't rely on anything other than what you already are and what the text already is, and what they are in response to each other and all the circumstances of production. There's no time to think up the polite or normal ways to express something theatrically; you have to go with the first idea you get, the one that deeply embarrasses you and that you wouldn't normally bring up, that you would censor were there time for a second thought. I have felt the will of a text asserting itself—I've felt the drive it has towards living, towards life. Musicians talk about this all of the time, that the instrument is playing I feel this way in rehearsal: We have all felt the palpable presence of the text entering the room. My job is to be an open door.

# The Math and Science of *The White Snake*

BY JESSICA WALLING

Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake* is a theatrical adaptation of a cherished Chinese fable. In true Zimmerman style, she took this simple story passed through generations and transformed it into an enchanted theatrical spectacle. Audiences are able to enjoy the simple elegance onstage, but what they might not know is just how technically complex Zimmerman's shows frequently are. From the automation and dye work to projections and millinery, all technical components in this production require a strong mathematical and scientific foundation.

## **Costumes: Millinery**

*The White Snake* initially began at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and toured a total of three theaters before arriving on the Goodman stage. When a show tours around the country, frequently its original set, costumes and props will travel with it. When our costume department unpacked the hats for *The White Snake*, they noticed several items needed to be repaired or remade to withstand the next full month-long run. Our costume craft supervisor, Susan Lemerand, likes to make her hats as lightweight and sturdy as possible. Hats tend to get thrown on and off, leading to extensive wear and tear. To avoid this problem, Susan uses either lightweight buckram coated in linen or fosshape instead of the standard millinery buckram (millinery refers to making and designing hats). Millinery buckram is a thick, woven material coated in a glue-like substance called sizing. It is heat and water sensitive and can be stretched or shrunk to fit specific

forms. However, it can be easily punctured, and if it gets too hot or wet, it will become malleable again. By using a lightweight buckram, she still can mold it to fit specific head blocks, which are blocks made of cork with a circumference roughly the size of an actor's head, come in many sizes and can be padded out to create unique shapes. Gluing linen to both sides of the buckram keeps it firm and will allow it never to alter in size. Being significantly lighter than standard millinery buckram causes less strain for actors over time. Fosshape looks like a white pliable felt and is comprised of a low melt synthetic polyester fiber. When heated, it reacts similarly to buckram and will take the form of whatever it is stretched over. Using fosshape can save valuable time and labor during the construction process, since it does not require messy additives such as glue or sizing. It is also waterproof, so if it does get wet, it will remain in its form. By making the switch to fosshape and lightweight buckram coated in linen, Susan is able to create sturdy, structural hats that stand up to water, heat and strain much more successfully than would their buckram counterparts at roughly the same cost.

## **Costumes: Fabric Manipulation**

The costume department also found that many costume pieces had to be repaired or remade depending on their condition. The main obstacle was recreating the same fabric as used on the existing costumes in the show. Much of the fabric had been custom dyed and manipulated to create one-of-a-kind textures and vibrancy. Dyeing fabric can be very difficult

because it is nearly impossible to recreate the exact same color every time. Dye amount, water temperature, length in the dye and environmental factors all affect how a piece of fabric will take dye. There are many kinds of dye, but the main ones are procion dye, acid dye and union dyes. Procion dye specifically targets cellulose fibers such as cotton. Although very vivid and bright, it does not work well on synthetics or protein fibers. Acid dye works best for protein fibers such as silk or wool. Union dyes, including RIT (the most common dye found in craft stores), work on both protein and cellulose but are less vibrant. Another major factor in dyeing is water temperature. Typically the hotter the water, the more thoroughly the dye will dissolve. If the dye doesn't dissolve completely, it can create a blotchy effect on the fabric. For this reason, mass amounts of fabric are uniformly dyed in dye vats. A dye vat is a tank that can heat a large amount of water (40-50 plus gallons of water), thus creating enough dye to color large quantities of fabric. The costume shop needed to keep all of this in mind as they went about trying to create the fabric to repair costumes. Frequently, our dyer must test several scraps of fabric before figuring out the perfect combination to create the correct color.

## **Scenery: Automation**

As technology continues to advance, shows continue to get more technically challenging. Automation, which has become a specialty field within the scenic department, uses largely programmable equipment (motors, winches, etc.) in a system of

manufacturing or other production process. In *The White Snake*, a medicine cabinet is set upon an automated lift. The cabinet is attached to the lift, which is winch-operated. A winch is a motor attached to a drum that has a cable around it. When the motor turns on, the drum pulls the cable up and down, thereby moving the lift up and down. The winch has to be strong enough to overcome the initial static weight of the unit. To help with this, we attached the winch to the floor to stabilize it. Unlike a stabilized winch system, a fly system is a system in motion. Fly systems also have to overcome the initial weight of a curtain or hung piece of scenery, but rather than stabilizing the system, we counter rig the weight so we don't have to compensate for the full static weight of the object we are moving.

Although automation is always computer and motor driven, there can be key differences in varying designs. For example, *Luna Gale's* set sat on an automated turntable, which allowed for large scene changes to be done almost instantly. Both the medicine cabinet lift and turntable were controlled by Programmable Logic Controller, which uses digital encoders or algorithms that convert programmed information into the standard code the motors run on. The turntable automation is based on rotational math, calculating distance traveled in terms of arc length and radii, while the medicine cabinet lift is based on linear math, calculating the distance between two points. *Luna Gale's* set rotated via a gear-driven system. Circular gears interlocked and turned in as the turntable turned. In contrast,

*The White Snake* cabinet moves in a linear fashion on a cable-driven system.

### **Scenery: Projections**

Possibly the most dominant part of the set design isn't actually structural but digital. Projection design has found prominence in modern theater design, ranging from discreet surtitles to sweeping, animated vistas. In *The White Snake*, the entire back wall of the set is a screen. Projected digital pictures add imagery, texture and composition to the entire show. In fact, the projections tell as much of the story as the actors on stage. The designer uses rear projections, the process of casting images from behind the screen, unlike movie theaters, which primarily use front projection. For front projection, the projector is behind the audience and when the lights are turned off, cones of light appear in the empty space above audience members' heads. If someone stands up for any reason, the cone of light gets projected onto the person and leaves a black shadow on the screen. To avoid this problem, most theaters will put their equipment behind the screen and shoot from the back. It takes four projectors with .67 lenses (.67 refers to the angle degree of the light produced by this lens)—the largest lens available—evenly spaced to cover the entire screen. It is possible to use smaller lens with more projectors but more cost efficient to use larger lenses with fewer projectors.

The cones of light created by each machine must overlap slightly, roughly by one foot, to create a smooth image. The

designers use one of the most common mathematical equations to determine how far away the projectors have to be from the screen. Pythagorean's Theorem,  $a^2+b^2=c^2$ , is the staple of Euclidean geometry and can be used to find the length of any of the three sides of a right triangle. Since we know the lenses' size (thus the angle created by the lens) and the 90-degree angle created when the image hits the screen, we are able to calculate the exact distance the machines need to be in relation to the screen. Frequently, the design process is just as much about artistry as it is about engineering to create a look. As designs advance, projections continue to become a more integral part of the design process.

Theater gives audiences a chance to connect to a story. *The White Snake* explores topics such as love, humanity, family and happiness in a technically spectacular world. As you become immersed in the spectacle, remember that art cannot exist without the science and math to support it.

# Bright Ideas and Bright Colors: The Creations of Costume Designer Mara Blumenfeld

BY NEENA ARNDT

When we read a book or a play, we use the writer's words to create worlds in our minds. Each of us can paint a picture of the realm in which a story takes place, filling out details as we please and allowing our imaginations free reign. We craft environments where the laws of physics may not apply, where supernatural beings thrive or where a character is bedecked with glimmering jewels; for once, reality loses its grip on us. But when it comes to theater, costume, set, lighting and sound designers are charged with imagining a world for the story, while taking on the more practical task of bringing that world to life on stage. Mara Blumenfeld, costume designer for *The White Snake*, knows exactly how to deliver a magical, mythical experience to the audience, all while obeying the laws of physics.

Some plays call for environments that closely resemble real life; designers create living rooms and offices, or dress actors in jeans and t-shirts. Other plays

call for fantastical worlds in which animals cavort or metaphors twist reality. It is these kinds of plays that Mary Zimmerman, director and adapter of *The White Snake*, tends to tackle—plays that take place in water, or where sheep are bright red or panthers can talk. In order to make these worlds come alive, Zimmerman relies on designers with whom she has collaborated for years: Dan Ostling (sets), T. J. Gerckens (lighting), Andre J. Pluess (sound) and Blumenfeld (costumes).

"I love working on very out-of-the-box things," says Blumenfeld. She feels completely at home in the vibrant, anything-can-happen world of Zimmerman's plays, which isn't surprising considering she's known Zimmerman since the two attended Northwestern University at the same time. (Zimmerman was a graduate student earning a PhD in Performance Studies while Blumenfeld was an undergraduate, though they never worked together in school.) "I went to school

for acting, like so many people do, but fell into design," Blumenfeld explains. After college, she secured a job at the Goodman, assisting visiting costume designers for three and a half years. At the same time, she pursued design gigs of her own, and first collaborated with Zimmerman at Lookingglass Theatre Company, a relatively new organization in the early 1990s, founded by several Northwestern alumni. Since then, the company has expanded and primarily presents works that stem from the ritualistic roots of theater and use heightened language, stunning visual imagery and inventive physicality. Zimmerman's productions, most notably *Metamorphoses* (1998), propelled Lookingglass' success as well as Blumenfeld's career.

Meanwhile, Zimmerman began to work at the Goodman in the early 1990s (her first production was *The Baltimore Waltz* in the 1992/1993 Season) and Blumenfeld earned her first Goodman credit with Zimmerman's *Mirror of the Invisible World* in the 1996/1997 Season. Since the mid-1990s, Blumenfeld has been Zimmerman's go-to costume designer, thriving within Zimmerman's unique process, which involves beginning rehearsals without a script and creating text along the way. Blumenfeld must therefore design the costumes before the script is written. As with many of Zimmerman's adaptations of classical stories, however, previous source materials give a basic framework for the story and characters. "*The White Snake* is as well-known in Chinese culture as classic fairy tales, like *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*, are to our Western culture," Blumenfeld explains. "It exists in so many forms, from video games

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White Snake



Green Snake

Costume sketches by Mara Blumenfeld

to comic books to Chinese opera productions. I looked at a lot of those materials for inspiration.”

Working on a classic story from Chinese culture also allowed Blumenfeld countless opportunities to flex her creative muscles. “As with *The Jungle Book*, I really enjoyed studying and working within an Eastern aesthetic—in studying historic Chinese costumes I was struck by how many bright hues and strong patterns work together in combinations we would not normally think of using,” she notes. Blumenfeld also enjoys the challenge of bringing a fantastical myth from a foreign culture to a new audience. “We are Westerners creating a production based on this Chinese story. We can do all the research in the world, but we will always be telling the story through a Western lens.” That way of thinking informed Blumenfeld’s choices throughout the process: “There are certain tweaks we made so everything makes

sense to our audiences. For example, the character of the White Snake has a companion who is always referred to as Green Snake. But in most of the Chinese illustrations she’s depicted dressed in blue, because historically, the same distinction was not made between blue and green colors in Chinese culture. But it wouldn’t make sense to a Western audience if she were dressed in blue; it would take them out of the story. So I chose to put her in jade green, which has a bit of blue in it, but to our Western eye still reads as being green.”

The clothing Blumenfeld imagines becomes a reality she shares with audiences, and her vision shapes our understanding of the story we are told. Even a small decision like making the Green Snake jade rather than blue colors our view of the play, and transports us to a different, and very specifically imagined world.

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# Story: The Original Human Language

BY KELLY REED

Stories: What we watch in movies, read in books and tell our friends.

Stories: The way we communicate over social media, what we tell ourselves about our lives and the messages sent to us by our peers, our government and advertisers.

Story: The original human language.

This might sound too epic to be true, but it is. In the most fundamental sense, our day-to-day communication uses symbols to tell stories. Written language is the use of visual symbols to express what otherwise would be spoken aloud, and spoken words are themselves symbols used to represent experiences and express abstract concepts. Facial expressions are visual symbols for different emotions and states of being. Symbols are the essential human language, and story is the way we use them to the greatest effect. Hard-won wisdom most easily is transmitted when woven into a story. The tradition of using

symbolic narratives to teach lessons is ages old and used in every culture, and the stories that come from these traditions are collectively called folk tales.

Myth and legend are two terms often used interchangeably, but they are two different narrative forms. The word “legend” comes from Middle English “lief,” a word for a written account of a saint’s life; the Medieval Latin “legenda,” literally meaning “lesson” and “legere,” meaning “to read.” As such, “legend” used to refer to those stories read on respective Christian saints’ days as an educational lesson, though the word now applies to any fictitious story, sometimes involving the supernatural, and usually concerned with a real person, place or other subject (ex. The Legend of the Holy Grail). Myths, on the other hand, are not specific to Christianity and existed centuries prior to legends (i.e. Egyptian and Greek mythology). They usually involve deities or demigods and explain some practice, rite or phenomenon

of nature.

Below is a chart explaining some key differences between three traditional narrative forms: myths, legends and folk tales. The chart catalogs myths, legends and folk tales in their original purpose. In other words, most of us now consider Greek myths to be more fiction than fact, but at one point in history people believed the events actually happened. If traced back far enough, all cultures have their own mythology explaining how the world and their people came to be. Cultures and geographical areas also have their own specific forms of storytelling, i.e. the American tall tale. The tall tale is a narrative form unique to the American frontier, a.k.a. the Wild West. Tall tales depict the wild adventures of overly exaggerated folk heroes, are told as an oral form of entertainment and often explain the origins of lakes, mountains and canyons. Characters such as Paul Bunyan, Brer Rabbit, Davy Crockett and Johnny Appleseed came out of tall tales, although some characters—

Characteristics of Traditional Narratives	Type of Narrative		
	<i>Myth</i>	<i>Legend</i>	<i>Folk Tale</i>
Believed to have actually happened	Yes	Yes	No
Setting	Defined time & place	Defined time & place	Timeless, placeless
Time	Distant past	More recent past	Any time
Place	Earlier/in another world	World as it is today	Any place
Attitude	Sacred	Sacred or secular	Secular
Principal character	Nonhuman, often deity	Human	Human or nonhuman

Based on Bascom 1984, II, Table 2.

most notably Johnny Appleseed and Davy Crockett—are based on real people in American history.

Myths, legends, tall tales and other forms of stories including fables, old wives' tales and fairy tales, at one point in time, were major methods of communication and have evolved as humans created new ways of telling stories. Fairy tales, although we still tell them today, do not hold the same meaning as when they originated. When first published, fairy tales were a powerful form of moral education and Christian indoctrination. The Brothers Grimm, responsible for compiling and circulating many of the fairy tales we continue to read today (including "Hansel and Gretel," "Cinderella" and "Little Red Riding Hood"), are also responsible for infusing them with themes of Christian morality.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm lived in Germany during the 17th century, when most women and working-class people were illiterate. Instead of writing down their wisdom to preserve it, people passed it on through oral storytelling. These stories were full of pagan and naturalistic themes and wholeheartedly acknowledged a divine feminine power that existed right alongside the exclusively masculine deity recognized by the Christian church. In the early 1800s, the Grimm brothers began inviting storytellers to share their most popular stories and allow the brothers to transcribe them. More learned and literate than the storytellers, the brothers took certain liberties when recording the stories. Namely, they erased any

themes or symbols undermining Christian messages and replaced them with suitable alternatives. They kept the supernatural themes of magic, fairies and witchcraft—and the fairy tale was born.

However, the original folk stories and old wives' tales at the heart of fairy tales still exist. Old wives' tales are stories passed on by word of mouth as pieces of traditional wisdom, often kept and spread by working-class women (hence the term wives, which then referred more to the age of a woman than her marital status). Today, the term old wives' tale refers to pieces of wisdom such as, "Don't make a funny face for too long or you'll stay that way," and "If you touch a toad, you'll get warts." Folk tales are pieces of a culture's wisdom passed on through longer narratives, including the Slavic folk story of Baba Yaga or the South African tale of Abiyoyo.

Urban legends are a modern-day equivalent to old wives' tales. Urban legends have obscure origins, with little to no supporting evidence for the horrific, humorous and moralizing events they relay. No one knows where these stories come from, they barely sound true and they often have a strong and confusing moral lesson. Neither urban legends nor fairy tales are as allegorical as parables, which make symbols out of concrete forms and people to teach an abstract, often spiritual lesson. In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus uses parables to teach his disciples. Jesus' well-known story of the Good Samaritan is a deeply symbolic parable for Christian life.

Fables also use earthly characters—often animals that speak and act like human beings—to teach a moral lesson. The most well-known collection of fables was authored by a man named Aesop, a slave and storyteller believed to have lived in Ancient Greece between 620-560 BCE. The fable of the Tortoise and the Hare is one of these, using the characters of the rabbit and the turtle to teach the merit of working slowly and steadily toward a goal.

Humans are truly the storytelling animal. We use story in all of our communications because of its powerful capacity to teach, disguise, enhance and heal. Indeed, modern communication derives from storytelling. Universities now teach whole courses on online storytelling, and "Twitter Fiction" is a subject of online lectures. Although our media is changing, our love of story has not. Yet it all started with simple face-to-face communication, making a person wonder how different we really are from our ancestors. Next time you find yourself putting your thoughts into the world over the Internet or even just talking with your friends, do an experiment. Ask yourself: What kind of story am I telling, and where do I want my story to go?

# From Folklore to the Performance Floor

BY RAVEN STUBBS

Folklore is usually described as a culture's oral sharing of stories that are passed down through generations. Most folklore has roots in a culture's past events and aims not only to provide entertainment but to promote the accepted morals and values. Traditional Chinese folklore transcended beyond oral storytelling and became the core of customary Chinese performance arts. These arts all have experienced a period where recent leadership or social movements decreased their importance. However, they achieved sustainability by finding their purpose in modern culture.

Much like the fable of the White Snake, China's early forms of performance arts are tied with the culture's customs and religious beliefs. According to the Britannica Online Encyclopedia, "these [ties] date to 1,000 BCE (before common era) and they describe magnificently costumed male and female shamans who sang and danced to musical accompaniment, drawing the heavenly spirits down to earth through their performance." The Beijing opera (Peking opera) is one of the most famous traditional performance arts of China.

Beijing opera has remained a pillar in Chinese culture and arts, greatly due to its resilience throughout the country's history. As each dynasty rose to power and different cultural movements occurred, Beijing opera found itself constantly at the core of the nation's cultural identity. Beijing opera dates back to the 18th century in Northern China and is based off of Beijing's popular Anhui opera. Anhui opera

was known to change quickly, often assimilating other acting styles and operas. By 1884, Beijing opera became the preferred opera style. This style includes music, mime, dance, vocal performance and acrobatics, in comparison to other traditional operas where the sole role of the performer is to sing.

Facial makeup is a key component of Beijing opera. Mask composition, including color, symbolizes character personalities, characteristics and fates. For example, emperors and other royals wear yellow or gold, high-ranking officials wear purple, the young wear white, etc. In addition to masks, character movement, costumes and facial expressions will not differ between troupes or regions performing a specific opera. This creates a universality of story accessible to all audiences. These fixed elements have remained part of Beijing opera, despite being banned by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. During this time, opera was considered bourgeois and feudalistic.

Created by communist leader Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, revolutionary operas replaced the traditional Beijing operas. The eight revolutionary operas forbade the use of kings, queens, chancellors or any title connected with imperialism or governmental hierarchy. The new opera's style contained only socialist's messages of foreign (Western) and class enemies. The operas also praised Mao Zedong as being the reason for China's new future success. After the fall of Chairman Mao,

Beijing opera found a new life. Institutions created performance schools to teach Beijing opera to a generation that hadn't been exposed to it because of the Cultural Revolution. In modern times, while still trying to keep with tradition, the Beijing opera style is a reformed version of the traditional technique.

Prior to the Western drama style reaching China, traditional performance arts took on some type of masking or exterior between the outer world and the performer—such as the key components of shadow puppetry: drapes and lights. Chinese shadow puppetry began a long time ago during the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD). According to legend, during the reign of Emperor Wu, one of his favorite concubines passed away from illness. Incredibly devastated, the emperor requested that she be brought back to life. In one story, a minister of Wu was on a walk and saw children playing with dolls. This gave him the idea to make a cotton puppet of the beloved concubine and invite the emperor to watch as he back lit the puppet behind a thin layer of fabric. In another origin story, Emperor Wu's officer designed a replica of the concubine's image in donkey leather, then showcased it behind fabric, using an oil lamp to make her shadow move and thus bringing her back to life.

Shadow puppetry is a common performance style in many cultures with its ability to entertain through storytelling and imagery. Shadow puppets are flat silhouettes propped on rods and manipulated by a puppeteer behind a



translucent screen. Traditionally, all of the materials were folded into one box for easy travels. During the Yuan dynasty (13th century), shadow puppetry was the main source of entertainment for Mongolian troops. As the troops swept through the Asia, the popularity of shadow puppets spread to countries such as Iran, Turkey and Arabia. While shadow puppetry has evolved, there are many different types. One of the most famous styles is Daoqing, where only one performer controls all of the puppets. Today, shadow plays are still quite popular in rural areas.

Just as in Beijing opera, shadow play emphasizes a performer's singing and movement abilities. Movement is an important component of most Chinese traditional performance arts

because of the symbolism placed on certain gestures, duration and pace. During the Han dynasty, traditional Chinese dances were folk dances, created as ritual enactment of cultural beliefs. The different ethnic groups formed their own versions, but the two most nationally ones were the dragon dance and the lion dance.

In the dragon dance, dancers hold poles that prop up a long dragon figure. The dancer's movements emulate the dragon's characteristic slither, representing power and dignity. The dragon's movement also can reflect its depiction as a river spirit. During the Han dynasty, people associated the dragon with rain, thus connecting the creature with natural water sources, i.e. rain and rivers. It was common during a drought for the dragon dance to be performed asking the gods for

water. The lion dance only requires two people to move the costume and is symbolic to China's national pride.

China's traditional performance arts were meant to keep the morals, values and principles of the community thriving during a time when emailing and texting weren't heard of or even when writing and literacy wasn't a typical skill of the common person. In all art forms, incorporating meaning and symbolism are key components so the message can be passed down easily and the style can be replicated and produced easily. Although the traditional art forms have survived different eras and have adapted to modern communications, the messages and morals of the original story are still at the center of Chinese performance arts.

# Chinese Culture Featured in *The White Snake*

BY ELIZABETH RICE

As a biracial child, both my parents impressed upon me the importance of learning about Chinese culture, especially since I consistently was reminded that it boasts a history more than 4,000 years old. The Chinese invented paper, gunpowder and pasta. Influenced by many ethnic groups—the six main groups being the Han, Mongols, Manchus, Hui, Zang and Miao—Chinese culture has changed and evolved over four millennia but even today is still steeped in tradition. Mary Zimmerman’s *The White Snake* introduces aspects of Chinese culture not generally known by Western audiences.

## Language

Chinese is one of the oldest written languages in the world. Both the Chinese and Japanese share the same traditional written language, while the simplified written languages differ. Mandarin and Cantonese are the most popular spoken languages in China; however, a variety of dialects varies from region to region. Both the written and spoken languages are pillars of Chinese culture.

**Scrolls** – Historically, books and documents were written on scrolls, first made of bamboo, then paper. Text is generally read from top to bottom, traversing the page right to left. Hanging scrolls and hand scrolls are two mediums used in Chinese painting and calligraphy.

**Brush painting** – The *White Snake* opens with a projected image of the Chinese characters for *White Snake*, in calligraphy. Brush painting and calligraphy are at the core of Chinese visual art traditions. This time-honored art form uses ink made from ash



*Tanya Thai McBride (Green Snake) and Amy Kim Waschke (White Snake) in The White Snake. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.*

and water and brushes of varying sizes and thicknesses, often made with horse hair, although different animal and synthetic fibers also can be used. Painting and calligraphy can decorate silk and paper scrolls, fans, screens, etc.

**Poetry** – In *The White Snake*, Fa Hai tricks Xu Xian in visiting the Golden Monastery by inviting him to have tea and create poetry after seeing the vista. This was often

a favorite pastime for scholars in Chinese history. People frequently would travel to scenic areas and use the views as inspiration for writing.

**Proverbs/idioms** – Chinese people often sprinkle their communications, both written and spoken, with proverbs and idioms. Often couplets, these proverbs, including are taught to children from a young age.

**Names:** Unlike the Western world, Chinese names start with their family name followed by their given name. Therefore, Xu Xian would be addressed as Mr. Xu in English, not Mr. Xian.

### **Customs**

The White Snake features a few Chinese customs that don't normally occur in Western culture.

**Grave sweeping** – Chinese people revere their ancestors, even after they have passed away. At least once a year, families will go to the graves of the deceased and clean them by pulling weeds, sweeping leaves, leaving offerings and lighting incense. This is done out of respect and honor for one's ancestors. Much like Dia de los Muertos in Mexico, there is even a major holiday, Qing Ming Festival, when families sweep their ancestors' graves.

**Hosting** – Being a good host to guests is an important part of Chinese culture. A common greeting when guests arrive to one's home is to ask if they have eaten. Hosts always make sure to offer drinks, usually tea, and small snacks.

**Tea ceremony** – The Chinese are a largely tea drinking society and are known for cultivating tea leaves. The Chinese tea ceremony emphasizes not only the taste of the tea but the scent and appearance as well.

**A "go-between"/matchmaker** – Historically, girls were not allowed to see or date other men. Women from higher classes rarely left the house. When children were of marrying age, parents would hire

matchmakers to help them arrange suitable marriages. These women would "go-between" parties, helping with the betrothal and introducing couples to each other.

**Ingots** – Until 1911, the fall of the Qing dynasty, money was evaluated by weight. Silver and gold were formed into ingots and their value was determined by their weight in taels. A tael could differ from region to region, so it has no equivalent to standard weight.

**Dragon Boat Festival** – The summer Dragon Boat Festival memorializes famous official and poet Qu Yuan from the Zhou dynasty. A staunch patriot, Qu Yuan drowned himself after being dismissed by the emperor.

Realizing that his fellow officials framed Qu Yuan, the emperor ordered that his body be recovered from the lake. Unable to find the body, the rescuers threw rice wrapped in bamboo leaves into the lake so that the fish would not eat his flesh, preserving him in the afterlife. During the Dragon Boat Festival, people race boats shaped as dragons and eat rice wrapped in bamboo to symbolize this rescue. They drink realgar wine to protect the body from evil and disease.

**Lantern Festival** – The Lantern Festival occurs on the final day of the Lunar New Year celebration, the 15th day of the first month. Rice dumpling soup is eaten and lanterns are lit.



Lantern festival in Shanghai, China. Photo courtesy of North sea deamer via Wikimedia Commons.

# Health as Balance: An Overview of Traditional Chinese Medicine

BY KELLY REED

Viewed through the lens of Western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) would be considered overly simplistic, based on outdated theories about the human body and too imprecise to be effective. Pushing aside the Americanized, appropriated images of Eastern medicine we encounter most frequently, we see that the practices of TCM really come from established traditions which originated long before people in Europe—the birthplace of Western medicine—began making advances in the field.

The ideas behind TCM therapies (herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, exercise and food therapy) came about during the Shang dynasty in the 14th-11th centuries BCE. TCM is a practical realm of knowledge, meaning it was

developed through the practice—the careful observation and trial and error—of healers over the course of 5,000 years. Comparing Western medical practice to that of TCM highlights key differences in how the two societies define health and possible areas for growth in both definitions.

To start, Western and Eastern traditions are based on two very different methods of reasoning. Western medical knowledge stands on a foundation of deductive reasoning: methodical experimentation based on the scientific method, proving each and every detail before coming to a conclusion. When investigating the unknown, Western tradition moves from micro to macro: treating an individual's disease on a cellular, microscopic level and isolating

the treatment to the specific diseased areas. Health is defined as an absence of disease; if there is no disease and no abnormal symptoms exhibited, a person is healthy.

Traditional Chinese medicine utilizes inductive reasoning, looking less for undeniable proof of an answer and more for signs and patterns pointing towards that answer. TCM practitioners move from macro to micro, viewing each system as a microcosm of an even greater system. In this view, a human being is to his or her environment what a cell is to that human's body. Health is the balance between each individual unit (in this example, the human or the cell) and their environment. All environments have ways of threatening the health of a human,

	<i>Medical Tradition</i>	
	<i>Western</i>	<i>Eastern</i>
<b>Type of Reasoning</b>	Deductive	Inductive
<b>Ideology</b>	Micro to macro	Macro to micro
<b>Definition of Health</b>	Absence of disease	Balance between patient & environment
<b>Method of Treatment</b>	Changing the patient's or the disease's environment (i.e. antibiotics, sterilization)	Strengthening patient to adapt to his or her environment
<b>Role of Doctor</b>	Strategically eliminating disease from a specific area of the body using methodical, often chemical treatments	Strengthening internal defensive & adaptive abilities of patient; promoting balance

*Information in chart supplied by Julia J. Tsuei from Eastern and Western Approaches to Medicine. Western Journal of Medicine, June 1978.*

and it is the task of the healer to strengthen a person's inner resources to withstand these threats and promote balance between the two. This principle of balance is represented in the symbol of the yin-yang.

Yin-yang represents the two abstract and complementary aspects of everything in the universe. Yin is the inward, hidden, intuitive energy of the world, associated with water, the moon and the feminine. Yang is the outward, unconcealed, logic-oriented energy of the world, associated with the sun, fire and the masculine. It is important to note that these energies' association with the masculine and the feminine does not mean they are exclusive to men or women, or that the energies even have a gender in the first place. Instead, each phenomenon in the universe is made up of equal parts yin and yang, "female" and "male" energies. In traditional Chinese medicine, maintaining this balance is key to a person's health.

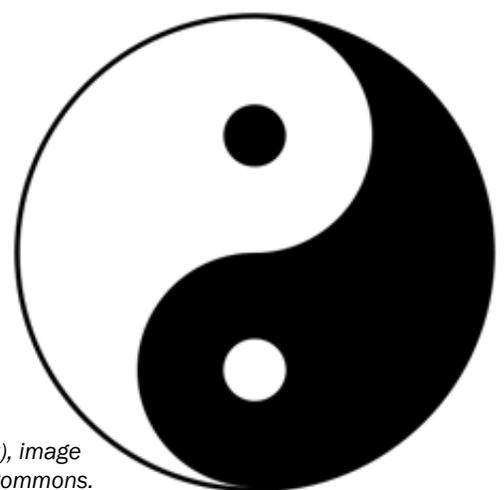
The methods of treatment used by Eastern and Western schools of medicine only accentuate the differences between the two. In Western medicine, treating a patient is all about changing the environment which is causing them harm. A cancerous tumor is attacked with a series of chemotherapy treatments, an infection is treated with antibiotics and medical equipment undergoes strict sterilization procedures. In Eastern medicine, treating a patient is about strengthening that

patient's ability to thrive within his or her environment, and against any harmful circumstances. A patient with cancer or an infection would receive treatment to bolster his or her body's ability to fight the disease independently. Medical tools would not need to be 100% germ free because realistically no one is ever in an environment void of germs. Therefore, it is important for a body to be strong enough to cope with the unsterile environments it inhabits.

Although traditional Chinese medicine possesses 5,000 years of wisdom, all the advances in modern Western knowledge would surely make this ancient tradition obsolete, right? What does TCM have that Western medicine has not already surpassed? From a traditionally Western point of view, TCM is quack medicine, exemplifying what the practice of medicine used to be like before our modern scientific advances. However, TCM understands something that Western medicine continues to grapple with: The importance of working with the forces we humans do not yet understand, unmeasurable

and just outside our realm of comprehension. It views a person as a whole being and the universe as a vast field of systems within systems. Each small part is a microcosm of the greater whole. Thus, it recognizes the importance of spirituality in health practice, and the practice of healing as a spiritual endeavor itself. Its integrity does not depend on controlling every aspect of a scenario or measuring out every detail. Instead, it pushes with the unmeasurables, acknowledging them as the workings of a greater system of which we are all a part.

In this way, TCM is a valuable perspective for Western medical practitioners. Western society has certainly made great strides in science and medicine, but it would be ignorant to claim that our methods offer the only real solutions to illness and disease. Similarly, it might be unwise to use TCM exclusively without infusing it with the lessons learned by the medical community through careful experimentation. Just like the yin-yang, it's all about balance.



*Yang (left) and Yin (right), image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

# The White Snake and Religion

BY RAVEN STUBBS

Religion and spiritual beliefs play a big role in *The White Snake*. Two religions are present in the story: Buddhism and Taoism. The fable of White Snake has been passed down in the Chinese culture from generation to generation. Most fables serve the purpose of capsulizing a culture's principles and traditions in story form, making it very easy to pass around to people through word of mouth. It is unknown for most fables what their origin is or when they were created. *The White Snake* certainly depicts China's historical relationship with Buddhism and Taoism religions.

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition whose principle belief is that life is suffering. By Buddhist practicing the Eightfold Path, Buddhists can give up their human cravings and escape the inherent suffering. Buddhism was founded about 2,500 years ago in Nepal by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Siddhartha was a sheltered prince. One day, after the age of 30, he went on a quest to seek truth in life. On his journey, he experienced the suffering of humans and began meditating to spiritually combat his grief. In pursuit of discovering how the individual can free the spirit through denying the flesh, he meditated under a Bodhi Tree. After 40 days, he finally achieved enlightenment, nirvana, which is the ultimate end of suffering through freedom from greed, hatred and ignorance. The freedom that Buddhist followers experience through enlightenment provides profound spiritual joy without negative emotions and fears. The Buddha is characterized by wisdom and compassion through his freedom; he is not the god of

Buddhism because Buddhists do not worship him. Instead, the Buddha serves as the teacher to instruct Buddhists in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

To start the path to nirvana, one must begin with the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the Bodhi Tree:

**1. "The truth of suffering (dukkha)**  
a. Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. Pleasure does not last; or if it does, it becomes monotonous.

**2. The truth of the origin of suffering (samudāya)**  
a. The root of all suffering is desire, tanhā, which comes in three forms (three fires):  
(1) greed and desire  
(2) ignorance or delusion  
(3) hatred and destructive urges.

**3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (nirodha)**  
a. To liberate oneself from attachment by extinguishing desire. Estrangement is sought to sense conditions clearly as they are without being enchanted or misled by them.

**The fourth principle, magga, is the path to the cessation of suffering.** Magga is the principle to the Eightfold Path that avoids both indulgence and severe asceticism. Notated by BBC Religion, the Eightfold Path is recognized as such:  
“(1) Right Understanding: Accepting Buddhist teachings.

(2) Right Intention: A commitment to cultivate the right attitudes.  
(3) Right Speech: Speaking truthfully, avoiding slander.  
(4) Right Action: Behaving peacefully and harmoniously.  
(5) Right Livelihood: Avoiding making a living in ways that cause harm.  
(6) Right Effort: Cultivating positive state of mind.  
(7) Right Mindfulness: Developing awareness of the body, sensations, feelings, and states of mind.  
(8) Right Concentration: Developing the mental focus necessary for this awareness.”

The beginning of *The White Snake* tells of the character White Snake studying the Tao to achieve enlightenment and eventually being able to change her shape as a result. Identifiable by the yin-yang symbol, Taoism is a polytheistic religion often depicted as synonymous with Buddhism, although it has its own principles. The yin-yang symbol represents The Tao (the way) with heavy emphasis on embracing opposites, such as nature and mind. The Tao also includes the philosophies of becoming one with nature and numerous deities. Discerning between fundamentally Tao ideas and ideas borrowed from Buddhism can be difficult, but one big distinction is that while Buddhists believe life is suffering, Taoists think that life can be virtuous through the unity and connectedness of all things.

Lao Tzu found Taoism during the Zhou dynasty (1046BC- 256BC) and authored one of Taoism's main texts “Tao Te Ching.” Taoism emphasizes the wu-wei: action

Taoist prayers at the Jade Emperor Peak of Mount Tai after dawn. Photo courtesy of Paqqqqman via Wikimedia Commons.



through non-action, naturalness, simplicity, spontaneity. Wu-wei also promotes the Three Treasures: compassion, moderation and humility. The treasures are energies that Taoists seek to possess in order to have balance in all things. The focus in Taoism is to create a harmonious life here on earth. The emphasis is on the body and creating balance in your current existence instead of focusing on the afterlife, such as with Buddhism. Some Taoists, however, do believe that the soul makes a transformation from the body to the heavens.

Buddhism and Taoism are the spiritual beliefs presented in *The White Snake* due to their

significance in the Chinese culture's heritage. Both practices place importance on moving past human imperfections and focusing on connecting your spirit with the universe around you. This idea is best displayed in *The White Snake* when Xu Xian finally accepts White Snake not for her outer form but the good person she is within. *The White Snake* may not have ended with White Snake and Xu Xian being together; however, the Buddhists believe in karma, the causality where an individual's actions influence his or her future. From a traditional Chinese perspective, White Snake receives the karma that her spirit deserves.

# All About Isms

BY HEMANT MEHTA WITH INTRODUCTION BY TERESA RENDE

*The White Snake* prominently features Buddhism and Taoism and depicts the historical relationship between these two religions in China. While Buddhism and Taoism are indeed religions, people often identify or compare Buddhism as a philosophy. Why might someone compare or confuse a religion with a philosophy? One might be further curious to know how other belief systems, such as atheism and agnosticism, fit within the worlds of religion and philosophy.

Loosely defined, a religion is a collection of organized beliefs establishing the relationship between the natural and supernatural, as well as humankind's place within that relationship. Usually, religions are attached to closely held beliefs regarding the origin and meaning of life as well as the afterlife. These beliefs often are tied to narratives, whether historical, fictional or a combination thereof, that explain important queries about the universe and man's origins, and help define important ethics, morals and laws among groups of culturally or geographically linked peoples. Polytheistic religions worship or believe in multiple deities (a deity being a supernatural being, god or goddess) while monotheistic religions worship or believe in one god (or the oneness of god). Pantheism, by comparison, is the belief that the universe and divinity are identical; all of nature composes God (so there is no personal or anthropomorphized god, gods or goddesses).

Like religion, philosophy seeks to

answer fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, language, mind, reality, reason and values. Philosophy is the most basic set of beliefs, concepts and attitudes of an individual or group. One can see then how a person could say any religion is a philosophy. Religions do, after all, attempt to answer fundamental questions about our existence and values. What sets philosophy apart from religion, though, is that it rarely relies on a narrative to answer life's great questions. Instead, philosophical inquiry explores such questions with a systematic approach and reliance on rational thinking.

This brings us to atheism. Atheism often comes up in discussions of philosophy and religion, even though atheists generally lack any belief in the supernatural. We sat down with Hemant Mehta, editor of [FriendlyAtheist.com](http://FriendlyAtheist.com), to learn more about atheism.

## What is atheism?

Atheism, which comes from the Greek term *atheos*, essentially means "without god." Atheists do not believe that God (or a higher power of any sort) exists. That's not to say atheists know that with absolutely certainty, only that they have yet to see any evidence for God's existence. Despite what some people like to say, atheism is not a religion of its own. Simply put, atheism is a religion like bald is a hair color. The lack of religion is not a religion.

## Isn't that the same as agnosticism?

The two words are often confused

and used interchangeably, but they have very different meanings. While atheism is all about what you believe, agnosticism deals with what one can possibly know with certainty. In other words, it's possible (and likely) to be both an atheist and an agnostic. An atheist agnostic would believe there is no god, but not claim to know if there is or is not a god. On the other side of the coin, an agnostic theist might believe there is a god, even though they do not claim to know there is a god.

## Is atheism a new concept?

While the term New Atheism has been used frequently over the past decade, atheism has been around for many millennia and can be traced back to ancient Indian and Greek societies. It found new popularity in the Enlightenment era in the 1700s and has seen a revival of sorts in the 21st century with best-selling books by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.

## How does one become an atheist?

There are no rites of passage or rituals you must go through to become an atheist. If you no longer believe in God, then you're an atheist. That's it. Of course, many people who are now atheists didn't become that way immediately. There's usually a period of doubt and questioning—from a few weeks to a few years—that atheists go through before finally accepting that their old beliefs no longer explain the world properly.

## How many atheists are in America?

For a number of reasons, it's tough to estimate this, but the Pew

Research Forum in 2012 pegged the number of atheists at 2.4% of all Americans. However, the percentage of people who were unaffiliated with religion was at 19.6%, and that number surely includes those who would be defined as atheists even if they don't use the word themselves.

More importantly, perhaps, the percentage of unaffiliated rose to 32% when it came to people ages 18-29. In essence, around 30% of those under 30 do not belong to a traditional religious faith. There's reason to believe this number will continue to increase over the next several years. Younger generations appear to be getting less religious over time.

### **Can a person be spiritual and atheist?**

It depends on what spirituality means to you. While many atheists are critical of anything related to spirits, many of the 30% under 30 who are religiously unaffiliated would tell you they believe in some sort of higher power; they just don't belong to any of the traditional faiths. Furthermore, there are atheists who believe in the power of meditation—but who don't believe the power comes from a supernatural place.

### **Do atheists have morals?**

It's a common stereotype that atheists are immoral since God and goodness are often intertwined; however, most atheists will tell you they discern right from wrong the same way most people do: They simply consider the consequences of their actions and think about the effects they will have. Most atheists

abide by the Golden Rule, believing they should treat each other the way they want to be treated.

### **What do atheists believe happens when we die?**

Atheists don't believe in an afterlife, like Heaven or Hell or reincarnation. They believe that our bodies simply cease to exist. (Where were you before you were born? That's where you will be when you die.) For this reason, many atheists are organ donors or they will donate their bodies for research purposes.

If that sounds depressing, remember that you can still leave behind a positive legacy. Atheist funerals (yes, those take place!) usually focus on the life that was lived and on the wonderful memories the deceased left behind.

### **Are the lives of atheists meaningless without belief in God or an afterlife?**

In fact, it's probably the opposite. Because atheists don't believe they are going to Heaven (or Hell) after they die, there's even more incentive to make the most of the life they have now. That could mean anything from spending more time with their family to focusing on their other passions.

### **Are there atheist communities like there are religious communities?**

Absolutely. While not nearly as large or ubiquitous as churches, there are groups of atheists that gather all over the country. They tend to form online and meet on a weekly or monthly basis. A more recent movement, called the Sunday Assembly, has

created a structure adopted by many atheists that resembles a church. Their meetings include singing, sermons and community, all without any mention of God or the supernatural. To be clear, most atheists do not participate in any of these gatherings, but such communities are a welcome home for those atheists who miss the trappings of church but no longer believe in God.

### **Isn't America a Christian Nation?**

While some (though not all) of our Founding Fathers were Christians, the Constitution they wrote is a purely secular document. The word religion appears twice in the Constitution, and both times, it is preceded by the word "no." We have freedom of religion in this country (including the freedom not to believe in a god) and there is no religious test for public office.

### **Do atheists participate in other religions' traditions (like Christmas or Passover?)**

Many atheists celebrate the traditions of their youth without necessarily believing in the religious reasons for them. For examples, they'll exchange presents on holidays or fast in solidarity with their families and friends. While there have been attempts to create atheist holidays, none have achieved mainstream recognition.

### **Would it be safer to just believe in God, just in case?**

This is a question posed by 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal. In what has come to be known as Pascal's Wager, the argument is that atheists would be safer if they

just believed in God because the consequences if they're wrong are severe. However, atheists will tell you that 1) if God does not exist, you're saving time and money by not believing and 2) if God does exist, the wager doesn't tell you which religion to believe; it also gives an incentive to believe all sorts of things for which there is little to no evidence.

**What sort of issues do atheists care about?**

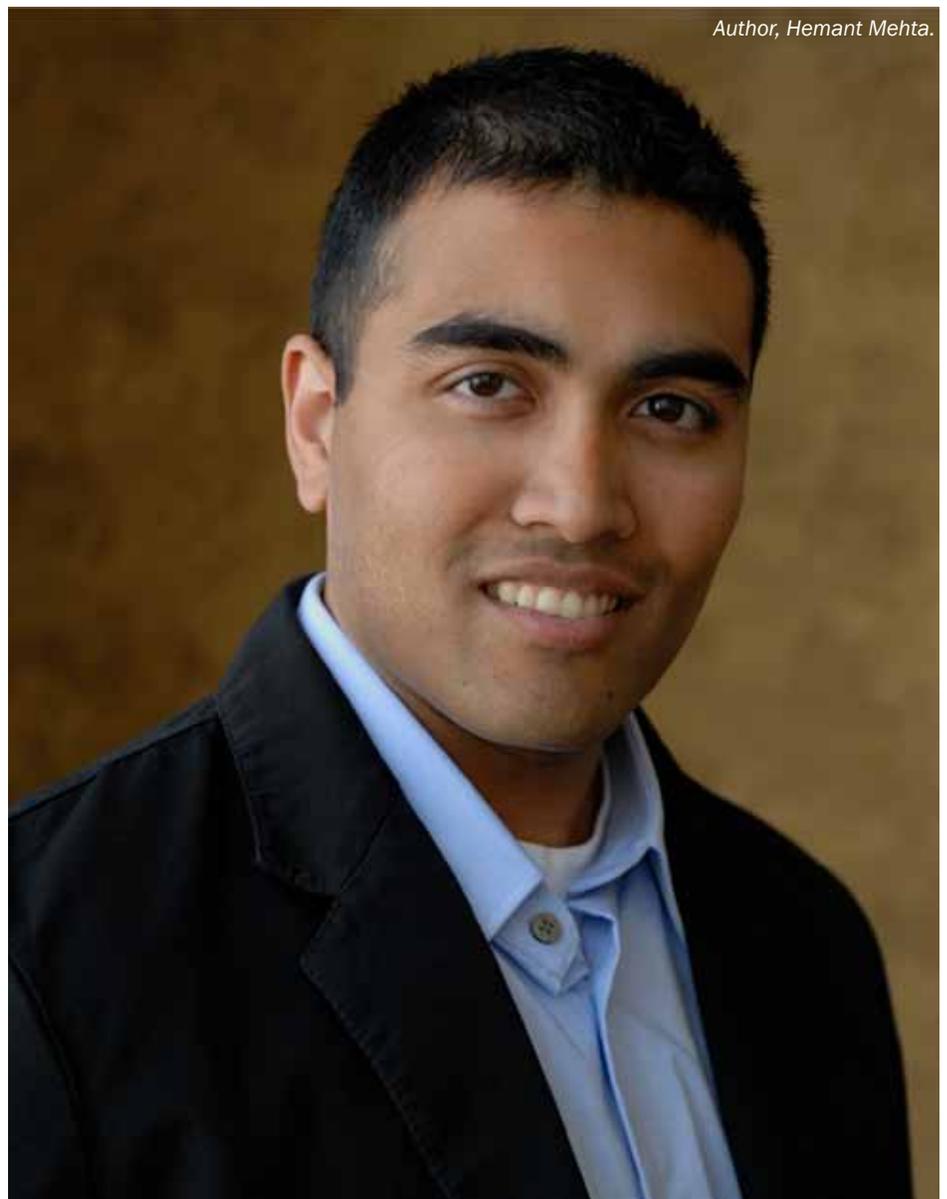
The more vocal atheists in America tend to focus on issues of church/state separation. Citing the First Amendment, they state that the government should not promote one religion over another, or religion over no religion. That has led to court challenges from everything from saying the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools (with the words "Under God"), to removing Ten Commandments monuments from state capitol buildings, to making sure religious groups receiving federal funding for service projects do not discriminate against non-religious or LGBT Americans in hiring.

**Can atheists experience persecution just as different religious peoples have?**

Yes. While the Constitution protects atheists just as it does religious believers, atheists often encounter a lot of obstacles in achieving that equality. For example, there are countless stories of high school students trying to form after-school atheist groups, only to be blocked by their administrations. Atheist immigrants trying to become U.S. citizens have seen their applications blocked by the government—though when

objections were raised, their applications were approved. Even outside the law, young atheists who live in very religious communities risk losing friends if their beliefs are discovered. Recently, in Rhode Island, a young atheist who successfully filed a lawsuit to remove a religious plaque from her high school's auditorium felt the need to drop out of school her senior year because of the social backlash she experienced.

Hemant Mehta is the editor of FriendlyAtheist.com and the author of *I Sold My Soul on eBay* and *The Young Atheist's Survival Guide*. He has appeared multiple times on Fox News and CNN and has served in leadership positions for several American atheist organizations. When he's not writing, Hemant is a National Board Certified high school math teacher in the suburbs of Chicago.



Author, Hemant Mehta.

# Gray Areas: How Symbols Deepen and Limit Our Understanding of Culture

BY ARIEL ZETINA

According to famed psychiatrist Carl Jung, symbols are “terms, names or even pictures that may be familiar in daily life, yet...they imply something vague, hidden and unknown to us” (Fontana). In our everyday lives, symbols show up as the cross on top of a church, the American flag on top of a library, or as the comedy and tragedy masks that represent theater. By absorbing the image, we subconsciously recall the idea the symbol represents, deepening our understanding without the need for words. Although symbols have the ability to enrich our lives, they also can hinder us by limiting or misconstruing our understanding of the ideas they represent, especially when examining cultures foreign to us.

In our Christian-majority U.S. culture, we are all familiar with the image of an apple. It calls to mind the biblical apple picked by Eve, so when we see a work of art with an apple, it represents temptation. However, we also must remember the many other symbolic uses of apples: in the fairy tale “Snow White,” for example, or the golden apples that started the Trojan War. Even if an image on first glance symbolizes one idea, it can have many different interpretations. Fortunately, we can examine different cultures and time periods to search for representational meaning in images if they are not readily apparent. Although it is not always necessary to look for these deeper meanings, it deepens our understanding of a world, and in Mary Zimmerman’s adaptation of *The White Snake*, which takes

place in a different culture and time period than our own, this search can provide a deeper appreciation of the work.

The legend of the White Snake has been part of Chinese culture

for centuries. It is full of images representing bigger ideas, yet some of the symbolic meaning remains unknown to those who are unfamiliar with the cultural context. For example, there is a moment in the adaptation where Lady Bai



*Jon Norman Schneider (Xu Xian) and Amy Kim Waschke (White Snake) in The White Snake. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.*



A depiction of Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, by Liang Yuanjiang. Image courtesy of the artist via Wikimedia Commons.

eats peaches. For an audience member without an understanding of Chinese culture, this moment appears simply as a lady eating a peach, but according to Chinese legend, peaches represent immortality. Every 3,000 years, the goddess Xi Wang Mu (also known as the Queen Mother of the West) celebrates her birthday. On this day, the peach fruit in her sacred grove ripens, and all the gods attend the Feast of Peaches. Thus, immortality and long life are associated with peaches. When Lady Bai eats a peach in *The White Snake*, she is biting into the food of the gods, further signifying herself as not human, but a spirit who has lived for thousands of years.

Lack of an extensive cultural knowledge sometimes has the ability to undermine or shrink our understanding of some symbols. Take the swastika, for instance. Most of the Western world associates this with the Nazi party and its crimes during the

Holocaust, but swastikas were first Sanskrit icons that mean “it is good.” They often are placed in front of entrances of buildings to foster peace. Another example can be seen in *The White Snake*. In our cultural context, snakes have ties to the same biblical story of Adam and Eve and represent temptation and evil. Although still symbols of malevolence in China, they also are associated with the origin of life and the universe, often referred to as “little dragons,” smaller versions of the mythical creatures that are revered in China.

Just as images that represent lofty ideas can limit our understanding, everyday symbols can misrepresent and exclude. In the U.S., public bathrooms operate using two icons: one female and one male. At first glance, how can these cause harm? Yet, they perpetuate the idea that a gender binary exists. In other words, the idea that sexes, genders and gender expressions can only be male or female, masculine or

feminine, and nothing else. These bathroom icons exclude anyone who exists in the gray areas: intersex, trans and genderqueer people. Despite seeming universal, these icons limit our grasp on the concept of gender. Codes can offer an ease in understanding, but it is important to look at the full picture.

Sometimes, an image doesn’t just limit or misrepresent. It can leave a whole meaning out entirely. The Chinese goddess mentioned above, Xi Wang Mu, is the Queen Mother of the West. The name Xi Wang Mu is written in Pinyin, the phonetic interpretation for Chinese characters “西王母.” To some of us, this just looks like three Chinese characters, but every character represents a word: 西 means “west,” 王 means “royal” or “monarch” and 母 “mother.” Although the ability to pronounce is revealed, the actual meaning of each of these characters is lost. Symbols have this ability: to exclude the reader, to hide the whole meaning. But if you have a vested interest in using these tools, it is possible to use them to eliminate or lessen your exclusion. It might seem like using symbols only causes problems, but knowledge of them is a helpful way to investigate a concept you are unfamiliar with, and at some point, explanations are necessary in order to see the whole picture. Ironically, these problems are also what make them beautiful. They are not definitions, but windows into a world full of many ever-changing meanings.

# Conditionally: The Problem With Appropriation

BY LEAH ROTH BARSANTI

At the 2013 American Music Awards, Katy Perry, a singer with no Asian heritage, sang “Unconditionally” dressed as a geisha, performing a Chinese fan dance and otherwise using symbols from various Asian cultures to decorate the different elements of her act, from her backup dancers—who also were dressed as geishas—to her set, which was meant to evoke a nondescript Asian village.

The next day, the Internet buzzed with comments from people deeply offended by Perry’s performance. They took issue with her use of Asian imagery and called the entire spectacle a harmful example of “cultural appropriation.” And, in the case of Perry’s performance, this label seems appropriate. A complicated term, at its core “cultural appropriation” refers to the depiction of a certain culture by someone who cannot claim that culture as his or her own, whether by birth or through upbringing. Often such presentations seemingly demonstrate an ownership or understanding of the culture, when in reality little to no such ownership or understanding actually exists. As a result, acts of cultural appropriation can often range from misleading to offensive, especially to people who can legitimately claim the appropriated culture. This was the case with Perry’s performance, which offended many Asian because it presented Asia as culturally homogenous. Americans often make the mistake of lumping Asian cultures together, and the performance seemed to reinforce the idea that this sort of ignorance is acceptable.

But culture can be appropriated

on various levels. While it is easy to pinpoint the problem with Katy Perry’s performance, which sent messages—whether intentionally or not—that were offensive to Asian descendants and used such cultures as “accessories,” it is harder to gauge whether or not our day-to-day activities that are influenced by other cultures are harmful as well. For example, more than 20 million Americans practice yoga, originally an Indian form of spiritual meditation and prayer meant to balance the mind and body. In Western culture, however, yoga is a form of exercise. Most of the 20 million Americans who practice yoga might not consider themselves participating in an act of prayer. Therefore, yoga can be considered an example of cultural appropriation, but is it a particularly harmful or offensive one? One could argue that it is offensive because it takes something that was initially spiritual and secularizes it or because it creates misinformation about Indian culture by implying that yoga is a form of exercise. On the other hand, yoga doesn’t mock Indian culture, nor does it really use Indian culture as an “accessory.” This leaves one to wonder if such practice of yoga is a valid detriment to Indian culture or Western notions of Indian culture.

Furthermore, what is the difference between cultural appropriation and mere curiosity? For example, if a non-Japanese person watches anime or reads manga, would it be correct to say he is appropriating Japanese culture, or merely that he is consuming it because it is something that resonates with him? If this person were to create an anime cartoon about

American history to be presented to American audiences, is that cultural appropriation, even if they studied anime, grew up watching it and learned how to draw in Japan? It’s a hard question to grapple with, but it’s also one that comes up often in real life. Elvis Presley, for instance, was criticized for being a white man who commercialized and popularized rock ‘n’ roll music across the nation in the 1950s, with that style having been a part of black culture since the 1940s. However, Elvis grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, where he listened to artists such as Chuck Berry, and identified with rock ‘n’ roll at an early age. His success helped black rock ‘n’ roll musicians and performers gain more popularity and a wider fan base in the ‘50s. Elvis’ career raises questions about how to define cultural appropriation and when cultural appropriation is offensive, while reinforcing that the answers to these questions are not always black and white.

Although it would be nice to define cultural appropriation, or to identify when something is being appropriated, setting such iron-clad guidelines would not be helpful to discuss such a murky issue. Instead, instances of cultural appropriation should be discussed on a case-by-case basis in order to establish a dialogue about the various performances of culture that we encounter in our society. And these discussions always should include the question: How does this specific example of cultural appropriation affect the people who are being represented?

# SSSSSnake SSSSSSSymbols

BY ELIZABETH RICE

*The woman replied, "The snake tempted me and I ate." Then Yahweh God said to the snake, "Because you have done this, Accursed be you of all animals wild and tame! On your belly you will go and on dust you will feed as long as you live. I shall put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; it will bruise your head and you will strike its heel."*

Due to Christianity's prominent influence in Western society, passages like this one from the Book of Genesis have left a lingering demonization of snakes in

the Western culture. Serpents often symbolize evil, desire or danger. Think Voldemort and Slytherins in the Harry Potter series. However, in Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake*, serpents are powerful, benevolent creatures. White Snake shows her loving compassion on multiple occasions.

Serpents act as important symbols in many world cultures. Perhaps the most visible use of the snake today is in the medical field. Often, hospitals, clinics and other medical organizations use a singular snake or two snakes entwining a staff to represent their organization

or profession. A singular snake entwining a staff represents Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing. Multiple myths tell of Asclepius's ability to change into a giant snake and heal the sick. Nonpoisonous snakes often roamed freely in temples dedicated to Asclepius. Greeks interpreted snakes' ability to shed their skin as a type of regeneration and thus a symbol of healing. The caduceus, or two snakes entwining a staff, also is associated with the medical field, albeit incorrectly.

*Eve Tempted by the Serpent, by William Blake. Image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum via Wikimedia Commons.*



The caduceus represents the Greek messenger god, Hermes, and has multiple origin stories. One story tells of Apollo giving Hermes the staff in a gesture of friendship after Hermes has stolen his sacred cattle. As compensation, Hermes gives Apollo his magical lyre. Another myth says Hermes used his wand to separate two snakes in combat, which then became a symbol of peace.

Although Greek in name, the Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, appears in many cultures across the world, usually symbolizing continuity and cyclicity, a closed circle. The Norse god Jormungand, known as the Midgard Serpent, is an Ouroboros. A child of the trickster god Loki, he encircles the world. When he lets go of his tail, he will bring about the end of days, battling the god Thor to the death.

Jormungand also is considered a cosmic serpent as he circles the world with his body. In the Hindu tradition, Shesha is a cosmic serpent and the king of all Nagas, a race of snake beings able to turn into humans much like White Snake. A cobra, Shesha holds the universe in his hood. Nagas occur in Buddhist lore too. One story tells of a Naga named Mucalinda sheltering Buddha from a storm as he meditates in a forest.

Many of the serpent myths and legends personify snakes. Aztec and other Meso-American cultures venerate Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. The patron of priests, books, calendars and craftsmen, Quetzalcoatl is depicted as a man with a beard

too. Some psychologists suggest that the personification of animals helps humans better understand and identify with non-humanlike beings. The symbolism of serpents varies from culture to culture with both benevolent and malevolent representations. How do you think each culture's depiction explains its relationship and understanding of snakes?

*BELOW: Festival participants wrap a sacred white snake float around a bail of rice during the closing parade of the 53rd Annual Iwakuni Festival in Japan. The white snake, unique to Iwakuni, is considered by some to be a god bringing good fortune to money and business. The white snake wrapping around the bail of rice, representing good fortune and blessings, is symbolic of the snake holding on to the blessing for the people of Iwakuni. Image courtesy of the United States Marine Corps via Wikimedia commons.*



# Theatre Etiquette with Mary Zimmerman

BY GOODMAN EDUCATION

What should I wear?

Definitely dress nicely but comfortably; try business casual. No tank tops, ripped jeans, etc. Baseball caps or hats must be moved once you enter the theatre. The Goodman is air-conditioned so be sure to bring an extra sweater or dress warmly.

What should I bring?

Only what you really need. Electronic devices such as **PSP, Nintendo DS, smart phones, and laser pointers** are not permitted during the show. If it makes noise or is distracting, please refrain from having it out in the theatre. A purse, bag, or backpack is fine. School supplies are not necessary. Remember that you are here to sit back, watch and enjoy, so don't bring anything you don't need.

(Please remember):

**No smoking, and  
no eating or drinking**

while inside the theatre.

What if I need to leave the theatre during the show?

Only if it is an **emergency**. Otherwise, it's very disrespectful. Make sure to use restrooms before the show, or wait until intermission.

Have respect for other audience members.

This means **no talking during the performance, no feet on seats, and no kicking.**

(For your safety and others'!)

Director Mary Zimmerman in rehearsal. Photo by Liz Lauren.



How should I respond to what's going on on the stage?

Honestly but appropriately. If you find something funny, then laugh—but don't laugh for five minutes straight or laugh so hard that you need to leave the theatre. Theatre is very different from watching a movie at home. Always remember that you are in a room full of people who are there to watch the performance. They can hear your responses just as well as you can hear theirs. Most important, the actors can hear and see you. They will appreciate any appropriate feedback but might be extremely offended if it is inappropriate. Whether you enjoy the play or not, you owe **respect** to the actors for having given it a try.

What to do before the show:

When your class arrives, your teacher will let the Education staff know how many people are in your group. It is a good idea to arrive at least 15-20 minutes before the performance.

**If you are late**, often you will not be allowed to enter the show until after intermission. Once your group is called, an usher will lead you to your seats and hand you a program.

Please promptly sit where you have been assigned. Remember that the show needs to begin on time and everyone needs to be seated.

What to do during Intermission:

Most plays have a **15 minute** intermission. This gives you time to stretch your legs, walk, use the restroom, get water and discuss the play with your friends.

We do ask that if you are sitting on the main floor that you remain downstairs and if you are sitting in the mezzanine that you remain upstairs. There are restrooms on both floors.

When intermission is over, the lights in the lobby will **flash several times**; that is your cue to get back to your seat because the performance is about to begin!

What to do after the show:

There will be a post-show discussion immediately following the performance. Members of the **cast** will come out on stage and **answer your questions**. Feel free to ask anything that's on your mind about the show, but please remember to be respectful.

And remember the Golden Rule of Theatre-going:

**Theatre artists are paid professionals.**

When you enter a theatre, you are entering their work space. Respect their work as you would have them respect **yours**.

**Enjoy the Show!**

# Reading Your Ticket

BY GOODMAN EDUCATION

As a patron of the theatre, it is important to know how to read your ticket and find your seat. Generally, seats for all performances in the Goodman's Albert Theatre are assigned seating, so be sure to know how to be able to find your seat. When you come with your school, you will be ushered to a section where you and your fellow students can sit and enjoy the play together.

Below is a seating chart— a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater — and an explanation of how to read your ticket. If you have any problems, ask an usher for help. They're here for you!

**This will guide you to the lobby door closest to your seat — aisle numbers are on plaques that hang above the doors to the theater**

**The section of the theatre you will be sitting in: Main Floor or Mezzanine**

**This is your seat number, located on the edge of the bottom seat cushion**

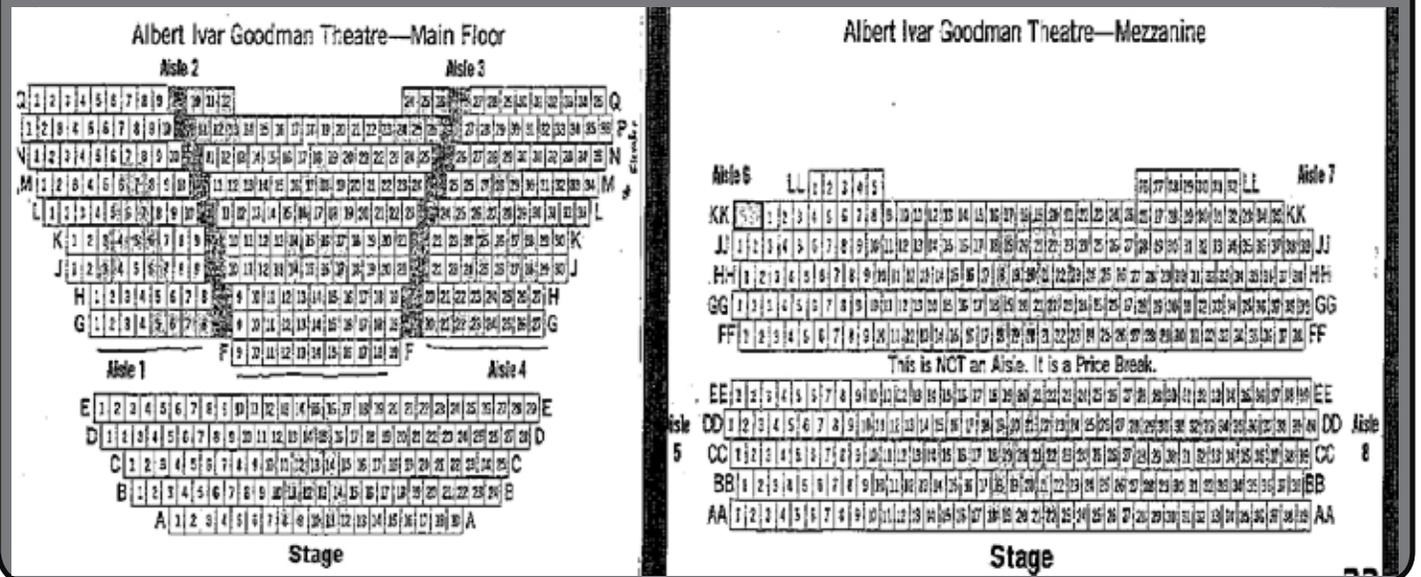
**The row where your seat is located, noted in a letter on the side of the end seat of each row**

**Play you are seeing and its author**

**Day and date of performance**

**Curtain time**

## Goodman's Albert Theatre



# Writing Your Response Letter

BY GOODMAN EDUCATION

After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it's time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with *The White Snake* whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer, the playwright or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your experience at the show and your feedback about his or her work. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we'll forward it on to that artist!

**Here is an example, a great student letter we received in response to *Animal Crackers*:**

Dear Cast and Crew,

I would have to say that every single one of you have done a superb job in this play. All the effort you have put forth into this play has resulted in a memorable experience for all of us. I thought it was clever that the actors, actresses and the orchestra interacted with the audience. From viewing the original film of *Animal Crackers*, I think the cast played in the play and the original cast of *Animal Crackers* very similar! This play might have been the first encounter of the Marx brothers for many teenagers and children and I believe that the crew and cast of *Animal Crackers* proved that early comedy can also be entertaining and memorable!

The director's vision of the play was a rather conscious one. Exposing the Marx brothers to the vast majority of people who never knew about them and bringing back nostalgic memories to the older audience was a great idea. This play was actually my first play and a first trip to Goodman Theatre. I myself, as a young adult, finally realized that plays are enjoyable and gratifying. The play had all the elements of emotion and slapstick comedy which made it a great one. The technical aspects as well as the props were amazingly set to follow each scene. My favorite scene had to be the scene where Harpo and Rivelli tried to clear up the misunderstanding of "The Flash." I thought the script was very flowing and comfortable. Was there any improv involved? I did not find any negative aspects of this play. I have found the play and the ambiance of Goodman Theatre very positive. I give *Animal Crackers* two thumbs up.

Sincerely,  
A CPS student

Important information to include:

- Your name, age and school
- Your mailing address (where a response may be sent)
- Any questions or special observations you want to share with the artists!

Send your letters to:  
Education and Community Engagement  
Goodman Theatre  
170 North Dearborn Street  
Chicago, IL 60601

Or email us at:  
[education@goodmantheatre.org](mailto:education@goodmantheatre.org)

Goodman Theatre Education & Community Engagement is also online!

Check us out on Facebook:  
<http://www.facebook.com/goodmaned>

Or Twitter:  
<http://twitter.com/GoodmanEd>

We love hearing your thoughts, so don't be afraid to drop us a line, comment, tag us in a note, @reply, or retweet us. Also check out our online educational resources for more information regarding the play you've seen, or anything else you'd like to know about how our programs (and theatre) work!

Keep checking in for updates online!