Study Guide: *Chimerica*

BY: Lucy Kirkwood

DIRECTED BY: Chris Abraham

A Canadian Stage and Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre production

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Overview
Study Guide: Chimerica

A letter to teachers and students:

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives. Sharing art diversifies our conversations and Lucy Kirkwood’s Chimerica exemplifies this. This play is a fictional work rooted in real-life events (as well as extensive research) that prompts serious questions around the role of art and media by negotiating how events are reported and remembered by diverse cultures and communities.

Kirkwood’s script transitions fluidly between time and place. The play begins in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 where students protested democracy en masse. Joe, a fictional photojournalist from America, captures the iconic “Tank Man” image: a photograph of a single (presumed) protester, standing still in front of a tank, holding plastic bags in each hand. This moment of defiance came to symbolize the political tension of that time in China. Shifting to more than twenty years later in New York, a mysterious note appears in a Beijing newspaper that suggests the anonymous hero depicted is now living in America. Joe sets out to find the image’s subject and establish what happened to him following that depicted moment. In the meantime, Zhang Lin, Joe’s friend in China, is outraged by the death of his 59 year old neighbour as a result of the severe air pollution in Beijing. He seeks a platform to discuss this pertinent environmental issue, one of many that the Chinese government adamantly censors. Set against the 2012 American elections, Kirkwood’s script presents historical events and contemporary issues. The work sparks debates around the role and responsibility of media, specifically photojournalism, the economic dichotomy in the West and China as well as the nature of censorship.

Based on the script, this guide explores Chimerica’s historical and social context, themes and structure in order to offer an academic starting point for students and teachers. It is meant to be a helpful classroom tool, providing educators with information for teaching diverse learners across a variety of subjects. Furthermore, this play’s fictionalized context and poetic staging may be analyzed to appreciate how performance art functions to connect us meaningfully to issues that seem foreign at first glance. Relating to curriculums such as Visual Arts, Media Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities, Canadian and World Issues, Business Studies, and of course Drama, this study guide can provide a bridge from the stage to the classroom and encourage critical thinking.

I welcome you to contact me to further discuss the suitability of this production and supplementary workshop opportunities for your group.

See you at the theatre!

Cheers,

Erin Schachter, Education & Audience Development Manager
416.367.8243 x280
eschachter@canadianstage.com
This study guide is created to be a helpful resource for teachers by providing background and thematic information about this play as well as practical activities to use in your classroom. You are encouraged to draw information directly from it as well as to use it as a roadmap for further exploration. In it you will find:

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Curriculum Connections

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| The Arts                    | • Drama – ADA 3M  
  Also applicable to ADA 4M and other senior drama courses.  
• Media Arts – ASM 4M  
  Also applicable to ASM 3M  
• Visual Arts – AVI 4M  
  Also applicable to AVI 3M and other senior level Visual Arts courses                                                                 |
| English                     | • English – ENG 4U  
  Also applicable to ENG 3U and other senior level English courses  
• Media Studies – EMS 3O                                                                                                                                  |
| Social Sciences and        | • Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice HSE 4M  
  • Challenge and Change in Society – HSB 4U  
  • World Cultures – HSC 4M  
  • Philosophy: The Big Questions – HZB 3M  
  also applicable to HZT 4U                                                                                                                               |
| Humanities                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Canadian and World          | • Canadian and World Issues: A Geographic Analysis – CGW 4U  
  Also applicable to other senior level Geography courses  
• World History Since 1900: Global and Regional Perspectives – CHT 3O  
  Also applicable to other senior level History courses                                                                                                   |
| Studies                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

Characters

Joe Shofield - photojournalist  
Frank Hadley – Joe’s editor  
Mel Stanwyck – Joe’s journalist partner, writer  
Tessa Kendrick – market researcher, Joe’s love interest  
Zhang Lin – Joe’s main contact in China, ESL teacher, protesting Beijing pollution  
Herb – American tourist from Boston, Barb’s husband  
Barb – American tourist from Boston, Herb’s wife  
Zhang Wei – Zhang Lin’s brother, Benny’s father  
Doreen – Frank’s assistant  
Paul Kramer – Beijing correspondent for The Herald in 1989  
Waitress  
Young Zhang Lin  
Liuli – Zhang Lin’s fiancé, killed during Tiananmen protests  
Maria Dubiecki – a Democrat senator in her fifties  
David Barker – Maria’s legislative assistant in his twenties  
Mary Chang – Chinese girl living in New York, stripper, fired from job in China for accepting an ad related to Tiananmen protests  
Woman in Strip Club  
Michelle – an Asian-American NYPD cop  
Officer Hyte – Michelle’s partner  
Drug Dealer  
Jennifer Lee – Feng Meihui’s daughter  
Feng Meihui – Chinese businesswoman living in NYC, put memorial ads in Beijing newspaper  
Pengsi – Chinese, living in NYC  
Pengsi’s Wife  
Ming Xiaoli – Zhang Lin’s neighbour, 59  
Kate – a British reporter at Tiananmen Square  
Deng – young Chinese businessman  
Peter Rourke – CEO of Mytel computer systems, a US company with an office in Beijing, lives in Silicon Valley  
Dawn – Peter’s secretary  
Judy – Mytel’s lawyer  
Guard  
Benny – Zhang Lin’s nephew  
Nurse
The Story

In June 1989 as tanks roll through Tiananmen Square, crushing the student protesters’ cries for democracy, Joe, a young photojournalist from America, captures on film a moment of defiance that comes to symbolize the struggle: an unarmed civilian who had stepped boldly right in front of a tank, holding plastic bags in both hands. More than twenty years later, a mysterious note appears in a Beijing newspaper and along with it comes a tip that the hero depicted is now living in America. Joe sets out to find the unidentified Tank Man and establish what happened to him following that iconic moment. In the meantime, Zhang Lin, Joe’s ally in China, is outraged by the death of his 59 year old neighbour as a result of the severe air pollution in Beijing and leaks the story to his American journalist friend seeking a platform to discuss the issue.

Set against the 2012 American elections, Lucy Kirkwood’s play examines the changing fortunes of two countries, their tied fates, and the fates of all caught in between.

From the Author’s Notes:

It is a fact there was a Tank Man. It is a fact that photographs were taken of him. Beyond that, everything that transpires in the play is an imaginative leap.

This is especially the case with the journalist at the centre of the story, who is not based in any way upon a real person, alive or dead. Nor is he an amalgam of many of them. Joe is purely a fictional construct.

(Kirkwood 7)

Theatrical Context

About the Play:

*Chimerica* premiered at the Almeida Theatre in London, England in a production co-produced with Headlong on May 20, 2013. The production was remounted at the Harold Pinter Theatre in London’s West End, August 6-October 19, 2013.

The play won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2014, received an Evening Standard Award for Best Play, and won the 2014 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for best new play in the English language by a female writer.

This production is the North American debut.
About the Playwright: Lucy Kirkwood

"I generally think of myself as a smiley, chuckly person," she giggles. "But I guess I've got quite a dark sense of humour."

–Lucy Kirkwood (quoted in Jones)

Lucy Kirkwood is a British playwright known for her “quirkily entertaining” (The Independent) plays that tackle dark subject matter. Some of Kirkwood’s plays include *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now*, a raw depiction of a street-trafficked sex worker, and *Psychogeography*, which trails a young couple as they attempt to break into the housing market by purchasing a house that belonged to a serial killer. Kirkwood has also written for *Skins* (Company Pictures) and her drama series *The Smoke*, about a fictional London fire station, was aired on Sky 1.

For more information on Lucy Kirkwood, see this article by Alice Jones published in *The Independent*: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/lucy-kirkwood-britains-brightest-young-stage-writer-1809848.html

Historical Context

Tiananmen Square is a large city square in the centre of Beijing. It is named after the Tiananmen gate located to the North, separating it from the Forbidden City. It is the site of the Tiananmen Square protests of spring 1989, the largest pro-democracy demonstration in the history of China’s communist regime. The student-lead demonstrations gained widespread support among Beijing residents, demanding freedom of the press, democracy, and dialogue with the Communist Party, among other reforms.

Throughout the demonstration, China’s leaders were deeply divided over how to handle the unrest, with one faction advocating peaceful negotiation and another demanding a crackdown. On June 3, the Communist Party ordered the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to clear the square by 6 am on June 4 using whatever means necessary. The protest ended on June 4 with the final, deadly assault by the PLA, as they used rifles and tanks on the unarmed citizens. In the week following the massacre, the government regained control of the square.

On June 5, a lone man carrying two shopping bags stood in front of tanks driving out of Tiananmen Square. Each time the tank tried to go around him, the man blocked their path once again. This dance continued for some time, until the man climbed onto the foremost tank to speak to the driver. After descending from the tank and resuming his position blocking their path, he was whisked away by a group of people. The identity of these individuals, as well as of the “Tank Man” himself, remains unknown to this day. The iconic image of the Tank Man that was widely circulated in Western media was captured by five photographers that day. Video footage was also captured by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and CNN.
Further Sources

Timeline of Events:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/cron/

Map of Tiananmen Square:
http://www.tsquare.tv/tour/

Interviews from PBS:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/interviews/wong.html

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/interviews/pomfret.html

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/interviews/schell.html

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/interviews/brook.html

Translated Documents:

http://www.tsquare.tv/chronology/May18mtg.html


http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/cron/papers.html

Critical Exploration

Photojournalism and its Ethics

TESS. The Vietnam War wasn’t lost on the battlefields of Vietnam, it was lost in the living rooms of America, right? (Kirkwood 57)

Through *Chimerica* and Joe’s quest to discover the fate of the Tank Man, Kirkwood poses many questions about the craft of photojournalism and its ethics. Kirkwood prefaces her script with the quote, “Images transfix. Images anaesthetise.” These words from Susan Sontag, author of *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (resources Kirkwood credits in her Author’s Note), succinctly contextualize the conversation. Many scholars of photojournalism highlight that photographs have the ability to transport viewers and have a subsequently unique impact compared to written or oral reporting.
Kirkwood also acknowledges the evolution of photojournalism—from the individual with the camera responsible for documenting a historical event, to the bystander with the cell phone.

As Julianne H. Newton writes: “On one end of the ethical continuum, an idealized photojournalist visually captures history, documenting moments and people for the world’s diary. On the other end of the ethical continuum, a photojournalist is little more than a scavenger, a voyeur turning tragedy and victory into commodities for sale” (Newton 88). Because photojournalism frequently acts as the public’s sole vantage point into an event such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, there must be a code of ethics that reins the practice. The ethics of photojournalism are heavily debated. Issues of consent, context, and voyeurism are commonly raised among photojournalists and critics.

“Photographs may be documents, photographs may be indictments. Depending on our engagement with them, they may also be instruments of the imagination.” —Alex Danchev

A picture is worth 1,000 words, but who decides what those words are?

Further Sources


The Many Images of the Tank Man

From the Author’s Note in *Chimerica*:

“...the image of the Tank Man we are familiar with in fact exists in a number of forms in common currency. There are at least six recognised versions, the play takes place in an imagined universe in which there are seven. In reality, Jeff Widener’s is the most famous, and [the one used, with permission,] in the publicity for the play.” (Kirkwood 7)

In June 2009, *The New York Times* published an in-depth look at four known versions of the Tank Man image to mark the 20th anniversary. The article offers anecdotes from each photojournalist and discusses the images’ distinguishing characteristics. In response to this article, a fifth photojournalist came forward presenting a photograph that was taken from street level. A video of the Tank Man, not discussed in *The New York Times* piece, was also taken at the time of the episode.

Further Sources


Dichotomy of East and West: *Chimerica* and “Chimerica”

Many scholars see Tiananmen Square as the catalyst for change in China, but not in the way that the world had expected:

“Contrary to almost universal Western expectations after Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Communist party not only survived but reinvented itself and, over the last 30 years, has presided over the most remarkable economic transformation in human history”

—Martin Jacques

The economic and industrial growth in the decades following Tiananmen reinvented the country and solidified its place as a global economic power. This power and the resulting global shifts are put under the microscope in Kirkwood’s play. *Chimerica* addresses the relationship between China and America’s shifting economies, industries, and cultures. The term “Chimerica” was coined by economists Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick. Ferguson expands on this theory in an article for *The American Interest* magazine published in January of 2009:
The most important thing to understand about the world economy over the past decade has been the relationship between China and America. If you think of it as one economy called Chimerica, that relationship accounts for around 13 percent of the world’s land surface, a quarter of its population, about a third of its gross domestic product, and somewhere over half of the global economic growth of the past six years.”

—Niall Ferguson

The creation of “Chimerica” not only denotes a new era of global economics, but also the dawning of a relationship between Eastern and Western powers in which the West no longer dominate. China’s economic dominance can translate to a cultural dominance as well. China now has the clout to refuse the expectations of “Western hubris”, a trend that is displayed colourfully throughout Kirkwood’s play.

Chimerica expands on the idea of East versus West, contrasting the characters and their respective countries in both industrial and cultural contexts. The play and its highly politicized and modernized events show how different the East and West are while also examining how China and America are often similar. Dr. Robin Pharoah, anthropologist and market research agent specializing in the Chinese market, identifies the root of the East/West dichotomy: Westerners assume that China’s embracing of Western brands means their embracing of Western culture. There is indeed a marriage, a hybrid “Chimerica” in Kirkwood’s play, but also a rift and misunderstanding, which exists both industrially and culturally.

Further Sources


Censorship in China

Living in Canada, we take our rights to freedom of speech for granted as a democratic nation. In China, these rights do not exist, and censorship by the Chinese government is all-encompassing. Particularly relevant to *Chimerica* is the heavy censorship of the events surrounding Tiananmen Square, but censorship in China extends to democracy, Maoism, Falun Gong, ethnic independence movements, corruption, police brutality, anarchism, gossip, disparity of wealth, food safety, and pornography. While the event of the Tank Man and Tiananmen Square are well known in the West, Kirkwood highlights that individuals born after the massacre frequently have no knowledge of it, *to the point where the image of the Tank Man is unrecognizable to young Chinese.*

**FRANK.** The girl on the advertising desk is 19 years old. She wasn’t born when Tiananmen happened, most of her generation don’t know it happened, it’s been erased from the history books, so when some lady calls up with a bunch of coded messages about one of the worst fucking atrocities in her country’s history, the girl doesn’t think anything but ‘how long til lunch?’. That’s the beauty of censorship.

(Kirkwood 49)

*Chimerica* focuses on the censorship of photography, internet, and media. Joe tries to take photos in Tiananmen Square and is stopped by a man wielding an obstructive umbrella. (Kirkwood 22-23) This scene draws on the lived experiences of Western journalists in China. Zhang Lin’s blog post on pollution in China is online for only six hours before it is firewalled, and he is later arrested. This is not dissimilar to the real-life arrest of Shi Tao, a Chinese journalist imprisoned for releasing a document of the Chinese Communist Party to Western sources. The information necessary for his arrest was furnished by Yahoo China. As Ma Jian, a banned Chinese novelist, reflects:

[Tiananmen] seems now to be locked in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, forgotten or ignored, as China continues to hurtle blindly towards its future. The amnesia to which China has succumbed is not the result of natural memory-loss but of state-enforced erasure.

—Ma Jian

Further Sources


Pollution in China

Lucy Kirkwood also touches on China’s extraordinary level of pollution in *Chimerica*. Zhang Lin, inspired partially by his neighbour’s deteriorating health, becomes an activist about this issue and is eventually detained as a result of his public criticism. “Lin writes a blog entry about the pollution levels in the atmosphere, posting what he perceives as the real levels rather than the party’s skewed results. In doing so, he knows that he will be reprimanded – but he feels so strongly about it that he is willing to take the repercussions” (Resource Pack 14). This issue has been widely discussed in Western media, including an article in *The New York Times* by Edward Wong that offers a more in-depth understanding of the scope of the problem as well as the Chinese government’s efforts to deny the severity. The theme of pollution connects directly to the issue of censorship in *Chimerica* as Zhang Lin’s blog post on the subject is removed from the internet and he is later arrested.

Further Sources


Curriculum Relevant Discussion Questions

Drama

- Much of *Chimerica* suggests a naturalistic staging. This, and select other moments, stand in stark contrast.

Zhang Lin looks at Liuli. Many Liulis enter. Red dresses flood the stage. Zhang Lin is surrounded by them. Zhang Lin begins to type. We keep sight of him, typing quickly, as if thousands of miles away.

(Kirkwood 63)

What do you think is Kirkwood’s intent in including these poetic moments and images? What themes or ideas might she be trying to highlight? If you were to direct a production of *Chimerica* how would you approach these moments?
• Before now there has only been a single production of Chimerica. The designer of that set used a rotating stage which made the constant and quick passage of location possible. How did the designer of the Canadian Stage production address this challenge? How would you approach a set to accommodate a script in which the setting changes so frequently?

Visual Arts

• What are the roles of artists in social movements? Compare photographs that document social movements throughout history (like the Tank Man photo) with photographs that document more current social movements (the Arab Spring, Ferguson Unrest, student protests in Montreal). Do you think photos have the same impact today as they did 20 years ago?

• Kirkwood opens her play with the quote “Images transfix. Images anaesthetise” (Susan Sontag). What do you think this quote means? How does it manifest itself in the play?

Media Studies

• Consider the different versions of the Tank Man photo and video footage from the same event. How do these media representations portray social, political, and cultural issues? How could these representations affect people’s interpretations of the issues and events depicted?

• “We somehow were brought up with the notion that documentary pictures were the equivalent of a testimony that was credible because it was a photograph” (Newton 94). A picture is worth 1,000 words, but who decides what those words are? The subject? The photographer? The editor? The viewer?

• How do competing factors influence Frank’s decisions about what stories his news magazine should cover? How does an awareness of the influence of outside parties on news coverage impact the way you access and interpret the news?

Media Arts

• At Joe’s exhibit two very different images are prominently featured:

   A gallery, midtown Manhattan. Images of protest on the walls. JOE’s shot of the Tank Man. Next to a close up of TESS, grinning, milk running down her face.

   (Kirkwood 98)

How might the choice to show these two images next to each other reflect Joe’s journey as a character? Furthermore, how might the curation of these images impact the viewers’ interpretation of each of them?
Social Sciences and Humanities

- What impact do you think the increasing consolidation of media ownership has had on the reporting of social justice issues? How is this manifested in *Chimerica*?

- What evidence of globalization is seen throughout the play? How is globalization positive? Negative?

- How do different cultural perspectives lead to conflicts or misunderstandings between characters in *Chimerica*?

Philosophy

- What are different philosophical perspectives that relate to globalization or social change? How would these philosophers interpret events in *Chimerica*?

- Joe feels as if it would be unethical to use some of his political photos on a credit card:

  JOE. That river, those kids are fishing in? It’s one of the most polluted rivers in the world, the rate of childhood mortality in that village is –

  TESS. It’s a great image.

  JOE. Sure only there’s a fucking ceiling on how much money I want to make from a bunch o kids dying in a developing country okay?

  (Kirkwood 39)

How does Joe’s dilemma relate to the more general argument of utilizing images of war and other crises for personal gain including financial and fame? Identify instances when this has occurred and the conversations that resulted. Identify the ethical dilemma he is facing and explain it using philosophical schools of thought.

Canadian and World Issues/Business Studies

- Compare the Western and Chinese economic markets. Refer to section on *Dichotomy of the East/West*.

  TESS. I categorise people. By, well, anything, purchasing habits, political affiliations, sexual politics. I’m refining the profiling system that...this company uses, we have a Western model but it has to be adapted to the Chinese market.

  (Kirkwood 18)
This Study Guide was created and compiled by:

Erin Schachter, Education & Audience Development Manager
Sarah Cooper, Education & Audience Development Coordinator
Victoria Fraser, Producing Intern (past)

Thank you to Almeida Theatre Company for sharing your resources.

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Please feel free to contact me or an Advisor from your own board to discuss productions and further education opportunities at Canadian Stage.

Erin Schachter  eschachter@canadianstage.com

Alicia Roberge  Marc Garneau, TDSB  alicia.roberge@tdsb.on.ca
Christine Jackson  TDSB
Janet O’Neill  TDSB  Janet.O’Neill@tdsb.on.ca
Jennifer Burak  Arts Educator  jenniferburak@hotmail.com
Julian Richings  Arts Education Consultant
Laurence Siegel  Arts Education Consultant  ljsegel@sympatico.ca
Lisa Kapp  Appleby College, CIS
Melissa Farmer  Branksome Hall, CIS  mfarmer@branksome.on.ca
Michael Limerick  Monarch Park, TDSB  Michael.limerick@tdsb.on.ca
Sally Spofforth  Marc Garneau, TDSB  sallyspofforth@sympatico.ca