



Privileging the Oriental in Paco Bezerra's *El señor Ye ama los dragones*

Jeffrey K. Coleman

To cite this article: Jeffrey K. Coleman (2018) Privileging the Oriental in Paco Bezerra's *El señor Ye ama los dragones*, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 72:1, 3-12, DOI: [10.1080/00397709.2018.1421826](https://doi.org/10.1080/00397709.2018.1421826)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00397709.2018.1421826>



Published online: 09 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Privileging the Oriental in Paco Bezerra's *El señor Ye ama los dragones*

Jeffrey K. Coleman

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

ABSTRACT

Paco Bezerra's 2015 thriller-comedy *El señor Ye ama los dragones* destabilized the immigration narrative that often appears in Spanish theatre by creating a story in which Chinese immigrants are the focus, thus giving visibility and agency to a community that is little discussed in Spanish cultural production. Throughout his play, Bezerra inverts the common approach to immigration drama in which the Western is privileged in structure and in plot. Rather, in this play, the Oriental is privileged on a structural and narrative level, and the play concludes with the triumph of Xiaomei over her white Spanish counterparts. I propose that the Dantesque structuring of the play, the epistemological shift toward Chinese cultural norms, and the resolution of the play's mystery serve as a critique of the national narrative of multiculturalism and integration, which can be summed up in the common, yet ironic, Spanish phrase, "No somos racistas."

KEYWORDS

Paco Bezerra; Chinese immigration in Spain; *El señor Ye ama los dragones*; power dynamics

The immigration "phenomenon" has provided inspiration for Spanish playwrights since the early 1990s. However, the vast majority of plays have been concerned with North African and sub-Saharan African migrants. Paco Bezerra's 2015 thriller-comedy, *El señor Ye ama los dragones*, shifted the focus to Chinese immigrants through the story of Xiaomei and her mother, Señora Wang. Though Chinese migrants do not make up a large portion of the immigrant community (approximately 3.88% in 2014), their presence in Spain is notable for their racial, economic, and cultural differences.¹ Their (in)visibility in cultural production is a result of stereotypes and Orientalist notions, which often function to uncover the "mysterious ways" of an allegedly insular Chinese migrant community. Throughout his play, Bezerra inverts the common approach to immigration drama in which the Western is privileged in structure and in plot. Rather, in this play, the Oriental is privileged on a structural and narrative level, and the play concludes with the triumph of Xiaomei over her white Spanish counterparts (Magdalena and Amparo). In this article, I explore how Bezerra portrays the power dynamic between autochthonous and "immigrant" characters and the ultimate reversal of that dynamic.² I propose that the Dantesque structuring of the play, the epistemological shift toward Chinese cultural norms, and the resolution of the play's mystery serve as a critique of the national narrative of multiculturalism and integration, which can be summed up in the common, yet ironic, Spanish phrase, "No somos racistas."³ In analyzing this play, I aim to demonstrate the

changing position of Spain's Chinese community in relation to autochthonous Spaniards as the former now is in its second and third generation in Spain.

El señor Ye ama los dragones debuted in Madrid, Spain, on March 18, 2015, in the Sala Max Aub of the Teatro Naves del Español. The origin of the play, however, dates to the 2008 Summer Workshop organized by the Sala Beckett in Barcelona during which Paco Bezerra participated in a workshop called "La otra lengua," in which participants had to write a ten-minute play that featured another language.⁴ In an interview for *ABC*, Bezerra explained that "[y]o escogí el chino. El teatro ha de ser un reflejo de la sociedad en que vivimos, y creo que la literatura dramática no refleja la multiculturalidad madrileña ni invita a que esas nacionalidades pudieran subirse al escenario; no hay papeles para ellos" (*Bravo* 76). The choice of Chinese served as a challenge to the playwright to develop a play in which Spain's multiculturalism was highlighted and problematized. Bezerra, having no linguistic training in Chinese, employed the help of Pilar González España, professor of Chinese literature and philosophy at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, to translate and transcribe dialogue into Chinese. A common pitfall in immigration plays is that they tend to essentialize and stereotype immigrant characters. Bezerra, however, brilliantly nuances the Chinese condition through the character of Xiaomei, whose identity as a Spaniard of Chinese descent dismantles the Orientalist tendency to exoticize and simplify the Other.⁵ This play, therefore, not only sheds light on the lives of Chinese immigrants in Madrid, but it also provides an opportunity for actors of Chinese descent to appear on stage. As Bezerra noted, "[e]ncontrar a las actrices chinas fue complicado, pero no tanto como creíamos en un principio" (*Bravo* 76).

The corporal presence of Chinese actresses, along with the sound of Chinese in several dialogues, makes this play noteworthy as it allows for the authentic voice of the Other to be heard and seen—a quality that is distinct to theatre. The play, though not written by an immigrant, provides new perspectives and voices missing from Spanish theatre through the culturally appropriate casting of the two Chinese characters, without whom the play might never have been staged or would it have been staged using Spanish actors with exaggeratedly foreign accents. In addition, as Bezerra himself poignantly explained in a personal interview, the inclusion of Chinese actresses and language attracted a large Chinese presence in the audience who previously did not attend the theatre. This diversification of the theatre helps to ensure the survival of the art form by attracting a wider array of Spanish residents. The play, rather than marking Chinese identity as contrary or incompatible to Spanish identity, highlights the ways in which Chinese migrants and their Spanish-born children can be woven into the Spanish national fabric.

The play is divided into three acts, titled "Infierno," "Purgatorio," and "Paraíso," following the order from Dante's *La divina commedia*.⁶ "Infierno" begins when Magdalena, the president of the building where Xiaomei and her mother, Señora Wang, reside, descends from her tenth-floor attic apartment to the basement to accuse them of running an illegal beer business out of their apartment. Her reasoning is that on two occasions, she has seen a cloaked person entering the building at night to descend the stairs to the basement. The second time, she followed the figure downstairs, but the person disappeared, thereby deducing that since "el vuestro es el único domicilio que hay aquí abajo en el sótano, así que tú [Xiaomei] sabrás" (16). Magdalena threatens to report the Wang family to the police if they do not cooperate. Señora Wang, who does not speak or understand Spanish, concernedly asks her daughter in Chinese what Magdalena wants, to which Xiaomei crafts a creative response so as not to worry her mother. During this antagonistic encounter, Xiaomei is stealthily able to convince Magdalena to host afternoon coffee and snacks in her attic apartment to celebrate Señora Wang's birthday in exchange for information regarding the mysterious figure; as Xiaomei states, "[e]n

dieciocho años es la primera vez que toca a nuestra puerta. Si le soy sincera, pensé que venía a invitar a mi madre a merendar” (19).

In “Purgatorio,” Magdalena scurries away to the fifth-floor apartment of her friend Amparo to discuss her trepidation at hosting the Chinese women and to ask who Amparo thinks might be the mysterious figure who is entering the building late at night. Following Xiaomei’s hint that the cloaked person is someone who lives in the building, Magdalena accuses Amparo’s daughter, Marina, who is a recovering drug addict. Amparo, thus wanting to know if her daughter is the culprit, decides to join Magdalena upstairs for the afternoon birthday celebration. In “Paraíso,” after having coffee, Xiaomei confronts the two Spanish women about their racist jokes, which she is able to hear in the basement through the building’s pipes. She then reveals the hidden truth: The cloaked figure is in fact Magdalena’s husband, who had lived in a basement storage closet for several weeks so that people would think he was away on a business trip when, in fact, he had lost his job four months before. Knowing that the couple does not have the money to keep their house, Xiaomei offers to help by asking him to help with the beer business and live in the basement apartment in exchange for her taking over the mortgage and residing in the tenth-floor penthouse, where she can rest comfortably and begin her university studies. Magdalena, appalled by the revelation and the proposition, hurriedly descends to the basement to find her husband has hung himself. The play then ends with Xiaomei preparing for bed in the tenth-floor apartment and Magdalena preparing to leave her basement apartment to sell beer.

The inversion of power is symbolized in the play through the use of metaphors concerning beehives and bees. The play takes place in the “[i]nterior de un faraónico conglomerado urbano de panales en forma de edificio colmena que, como una pirámide, se alza junto a una autovía que circunda y delimita la ciudad” (11). Given the narrative reference to Dante, the beehive/pyramid is a representation of Mount Purgatory from *La divina comedia*, which has ten levels, similar to the apartment building, which has ten floors. This architectural structure is then compounded by a beelike social makeup in which, “[d]entro del mamotreto vecinal de ladrillos y hormigón, compuesto por varios bloques con sus respectivos portales, sus habitantes están constituidos de forma muy parecida a como lo hacen las abejas en sus colonias: abajo los obreros, en medio los zánganos y, arriba del todo, la abeja reina” (11).⁷ These structures emphasize the community of the apartment building and, by extension, of Spanish society.⁸ This sense of community, however, does not apply to immigrants because as Xiaomei explains in the first act, in eighteen years of living in the building, no neighbor has ever knocked on their door (19). In the stage directions that begin the play, Magdalena is described as “*una señora que va peinada como las reinas que de perfil figuran en las monedas, avanza con torpeza como si fuera un insecto atrapado en un recipiente de cristal*” (13; italics in original). Her appearance and her position as president of the building make her the symbolic queen bee, but the maintenance of such a status is hubristic. Her pride, which she redirects as xenophobia toward the Wang family, leads to her dethroning by Xiaomei at the end of the play.

The use of Chinese culture, in contrast, operates not on the symbolic level, but rather as a catalyst for the play itself. For example, Bezerra sets in the play in the year 4711 of the Chinese lunar calendar, which corresponds to February 10, 2013, through January 31, 2014. The calendar shift facilitates humor during the conversation in which Xiaomei explains that her mother only has two months left to live.

XIAOMEI. [...] Según el médico, hace ya algunas semanas, sólo le quedaban dos meses de vida. Con suerte, me han dicho que llegará al año que viene.

MAGDALENA. ¿?

XIAOMEI. La pena es que, dentro poco, ya no se acordará de nada. Tiene arteriosclerosis cerebral, pero ella no lo sabe. Bueno, sí que lo sabe, pero a veces se le olvida.

MAGDALENA. El año que viene es dentro de doce meses. Estamos en la primera semana de enero. Te lo digo porque, con las prisas, lo mismo te has puesto nerviosa y has calculado mal.

XIAOMEI. No, no he calculado mal, del portal para arriba puede que sea enero, pero del portal para abajo estamos en el 4.711 y el año nuevo comienza dentro de tres semanas. (21)

Xiaomei's decisive tone makes clear that her cultural norms dominate within the private space of her apartment, such that the hegemony of the Western Gregorian calendar does not dictate the happenings of her life. Given that the play takes place during the end of the Christmas holidays, which precede the Chinese New Year by three weeks, Xiaomei reimagines Western temporality to understand her mother's imminent death by wishing that Señora Wang be able to witness the Chinese New Year before dying. Xiaomei's conceptualization of time via the Chinese lunar calendar is therefore an expression of her hybrid cultural identity as a Chinese Spaniard. Xiaomei also makes a spatial distinction between the basement and the rest of the building that signals the lower status that she and her mother occupy in the community as migrants.

The second way in which Bezerra privileges Chinese culture is through the use of Mandarin Chinese in the text and performance. The dialogues between Xiaomei and her mother appear in the text in Chinese characters accompanied by the Pinyin transliteration for correct pronunciation, along with a translation to Spanish in the footnotes. During the performance, the Spanish translations are projected onto the screen above the stage, where images and texts are also projected between acts. The use of Mandarin Chinese serves as diegetic sound that reinforces the authenticity of the immigration narrative and establishes narrative agency.⁹ It also facilitates the humor resulting from Xiaomei's intentionally incorrect "translations" to her mother. As Señora Wang does not speak Spanish, when she asks Xiaomei if something is wrong, they engage in a dialogue in Chinese in which Xiaomei explains that Magdalena has a headache and came to ask for aspirin because pharmacies are closed for the holiday. Magdalena, feeling left out of the conversation, retorts, "[p]erdona, pero no sé si sabéis que es de mala educación ponerse a hablar en otro idioma delante de una persona que no lo entiende" (18). Although it very well may be true, Magdalena overlooks that she is not the only monolingual speaker present, leaving Xiaomei to interpret on both ends. Given Señora Wang's medical condition, which is related to dementia, it is not in Xiaomei's best interest to tell her mother the truth, and thus, she uses her bilingualism to create a scenario in which she can celebrate her mother's birthday and also appease Magdalena's desire to solve the mystery of the cloaked figure. This navigation of two languages simultaneously is what ultimately gives Xiaomei an advantage when dealing with Magdalena's deflective xenophobia. In addition, as the audience is privy to the meaning of both ends of the conversation—thanks to the translations—spectators are more likely to relate to Xiaomei.

The play's title, which appears in both Spanish and Chinese, *El señor Ye ama los dragones* 叶公好龙, evokes a proverb about a Lord Ye who was obsessed with dragons, and so he painted his entire house and tattooed his body with dragons. One day, having heard about Lord Ye's obsessive admiration, the Dragon King himself paid Lord Ye a visit. Upon seeing the massive dragon, Lord Ye was so scared that he ran away and never spoke of dragons again. As Xiaomei explains, "se lo cuento porque los dos, tanto usted [Magdalena] como

el señor Ye ... temen conocer la verdad. *Pausa*. Aunque aparenten lo contrario” (58). The revelation of the truth behind the mysterious figure in the basement is made through Chinese storytelling, which enables Xiaomei to use her cultural practices to control the direction of the interaction. Magdalena, despite having all the clues necessary to have solved the mystery on her own (unopened letters from the bank stating the impending repossession of her penthouse apartment, the power outages that did not trip the circuit breaker, and the glaring fact that no one takes business trips during the Christmas holiday), lived in denial and deflected blame onto the Wang family.

The fourth manner in which Bezerra turns the tables on the migrant/autochthon dynamic is through the appropriation of power by use of racist language. Xiaomei’s figurative and literal ascent to triumph in “Paraíso” occurs through dismantling the racist and xenophobic notions that Magdalena and Amparo have about Chinese people. During a moment of awkward silence in Magdalena’s apartment, Xiaomei begins to tell a series of racist jokes about Chinese people, which she later justifies by explaining that “En este edificio los ruidos y las conversaciones bajan por todas partes: el patio, los muros, las paredes ... Hay días en los que las voces se cuelan, incluso, por las tuberías y los desagües. De quién creen, si no, que me aprendí los chistes” (47). Her location in the basement facilitates her ability to listen in on all the hatred that others in the building have spewed about her, her family, and her people for years. She recapitulates these jokes in a powerful maneuver, which evokes shock and reflection for Magdalena, Amparo, and spectators. The jokes and anecdotes she tells are “references to exaggerated stereotypes and prejudices regarding their activities and social organization [that] can often be overheard in daily conversations,” such as that Señora Wang wants to eat every dog that she pets in the street (Nieto 216). Their humor lies in Xiaomei telling jokes about her own people. In essence, she is inverting Europeans’ Orientalist views, because such jokes are the result of Western society viewing Oriental culture as “its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 1–2). This appropriation of racism, in addition to Xiaomei’s exaggerated delivery, develops off-color jokes that provoke laughter (in her neighbors and in spectators) based in discomfort and/or internalized racism. Xiaomei is therefore able to use the jokes to transcend the notion of the Other as a continual victim. Though the jokes may have hurt her feelings over the years, her ability to reproduce them flawlessly indicates an ability to overcome racist rhetoric and use it to shame those who employ it.

In a sharp change of subject, Xiaomei reveals her reasoning for bringing her mother along to the meeting and declares that when “[y]o tenía seis años. Era Navidad, como ahora. Mi madre estaba cruzando por un paso de peatones, pero, al parecer, un coche no la vio y se le echó encima. Lo normal es que el coche se hubiese parado, pero no, aceleró y desapareció. Nadie vio quien iba dentro, pero yo siempre supe que la que conducía era usted [Magdalena]” (48). This shocking revelation could lead readers/spectators to conclude that Señora Wang’s medical condition is a result of the trauma from that hit-and-run incident twelve years prior, in which case “forcing” Magdalena to bake Señora Wang a birthday cake and witness firsthand her condition in her final days serves as the first slice of poetic justice and the turning point for the play’s inversion of power.

When Xiaomei realizes that she has never introduced herself to Magdalena and Amparo, she says, “Por cierto, aún no me he presentado. Me llamo Xiaomei, pero, al entrar al colegio, me lo cambié por Estrella” (56). Although this detail may seem minor, it is relevant on two levels. First, there is a cultural practice of Chinese migrants translating their names to the language of the receptor nation or picking names that are common in that language to assimilate, though

in this case, Xiaomei does not translate to “star.” Second, the word star is the last word of each of the three cantos of *La divina commedia*, thus infusing Xiaomei with the symbolic “last word” as foreshadowing for the play’s end when she is the new owner of the tenth-floor apartment. Symbolically, the notion of Xiaomei as a star not only positions her above the autochthonous characters, but also asserts Chinese cultural norms and work ethic as superior to those of Spain.¹⁰ Furthermore, the star’s ascent could be a symbolic representation of the position of second-generation migrants as their hybrid identities allow them to rise within Spanish society.

This positioning of the Spanish below the Chinese is also foreshadowed in the final stage directions for “Purgatorio” by the description of Magdalena’s apartment, in which “*Tanto la estructura como la decoración del domicilio de MAGDALENA recuerda a la antigua forma de organizar el espacio de los hogares de los años cuarenta: un Cristo colgado de la pared, una banderita de España, tapetes de ganchillo y muebles estilo resentimiento*” (40; italics in original). This description links Magdalena to the 1940s, a decade that marks the beginning of the fascist Franco regime and its ultra-Catholic ideology. The antiquated style of her apartment signals nostalgia for a time when Spain was more Catholic (the crucifix), more nationalist (the Spanish flag), and more domestic (the crocheted rug) in the sense of women being homemakers. The image created of Magdalena’s apartment highlights its obsolescence in comparison with the present day in which Spain is now a more secular, multicultural nation. As Etienne Balibar astutely noted, racism and nationalism are linked through methods of exclusion needed to define or redefine the nation (37). The physical alienation of the Wang family to the basement of the building can therefore be seen as representative of the exclusionary tactics deemed necessary to create a “harmonious” (homogenous) Spanish community. Having the only residence in the basement, the Wang family is flanked on both sides by the storage closets. In that sense, their relegation to such an insignificant space amounts to them being equivalent to the junk that does not fit in an apartment, or in even more dehumanizing terms, it likens them to a “par de cucarachas” (33). However, as the play’s final pages denote, Magdalena’s racist attempt to denounce Xiaomei and Señora Wang resoundingly backfires. As Edward Said astutely resumes, Orientalism functions “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). However, Xiaomei’s hybrid status as a Chinese Spaniard enables her to see through Magdalena’s attempt at domination and ultimately subvert it via an offer that Magdalena cannot refuse. In this manner, the Orient, or that which is perceived to be the Orient, is able to overcome and triumph.

Bezerra explained in several interviews that the purpose of his play was to humanize and give visibility to the Chinese community in Madrid. However, very few theatre critics have directly discussed the tensions of multiculturalism present in the play. The vast majority praised the dramaturgy, scenography, and the staging of the production without delving into the symbolic contributions of the play. When the plot itself is discussed, critics have been ambiguous at best and xenophobic at worst. For example, Sergio Fanjul wrote in *El País* that the play “[muestra] situaciones de la vida cotidiana en la España de hoy,” without any clear reference to what those situations might be (4). On the other hand, Rafael Fuentes wrote in *El Imparcial* that “[l]a parábola se desarrolla más allá, mucho más allá, hasta convertirse en una alegoría del choque entre Oriente y Occidente, del poderoso avance planetario del Dragón chino. [...] Es el verdadero rey de los Dragones que nos visita y muestra el hocico de su auténtico poder” (emphasis in original). This excerpt establishes an Orientalist and apocalyptic dynamic in which Spain is a target of Chinese desires of world domination, such that Magdalena and Amparo are victims of Xiaomei’s opportunism, thereby painting a larger notion of the East dominating the West. As Mary Kate Donovan ascertains, “In contrast to

depictions of other immigrant groups, the Chinese are largely identified with their economic role in Spain, which is often framed as the primary avenue through which the Chinese community interacts with Spaniards and Spanish culture” (370). This view leads to the depiction of Chinese migrants like that of Alejandro Iñárritu’s 2010 film *Biutiful*, which “extends an image of the immigrant Chinese entrepreneur as a global villain whose moral turpitude plays a large role in the current cycle of labour exploitation” (Begin 2). Equating economic success of the Chinese migrant with unscrupulousness creates a paradox in which the migrant can never be integrated into Spanish society, as upward mobility threatens the autochthonous status quo.

Though Fuentes paints the play’s ending as a sinister representative of the destruction of the West, I refute that notion simply by pointing to the sins of the autochthonous characters: Magdalena, her husband, and Amparo. Using Dante’s Circles of Hell as a base, the three characters represent various sins including deceit, violence against oneself (i.e., suicide), pride, wrath, greed, gluttony, and sloth. The revelation of the truth in the last scene of the play exposes all of the West’s sins, those against the Other as well as those against itself, which allows for an examination of cultural values in the changing nation that is contemporary Spain. Xiaomei, on the other hand, rather than leave Magdalena (and her husband) to become homeless, offers her a bailout:

Bueno, quiero decir que ... si no tienen otro sitio donde meterse, y les apetece seguir viviendo los dos juntos ... pueden quedarse en mi casa.

Pausa.

En principio no les cobraría nada. Eso sí, a cambio tendrían que ayudarme con el negocio de las cervezas.

Nadie dice nada.

Es fácil: sólo hay que comprobar el dinero, estar despierto por si tocan al telefonillo y controlar que haya siempre cerveza fría. Su marido dice que sí, que está de acuerdo.

[...]

Los primeros meses seguro se les hace cuesta arriba, pero yo creo que juntos, y abrochándose un poco el cinturón, de aquí a unos años conseguirán salir adelante (60–61).

This proposition inverts the power dynamic because it makes Xiaomei the new queen bee, able to oversee her worker bees (Magdalena and her husband) as they work to pay off their debts. As the nocturnal beer business is usually associated with Chinese salespeople, the sight of two white Spaniards selling beer in the streets of Madrid could be a visual shock for the clientele. However, the novelty may be a wise business endeavor that could increase Xiaomei’s profits if buyers are more inclined to buy their beer from autochthonous Spaniards than Chinese salespeople.

In the penultimate sequence, Magdalena runs down to the basement to find that her husband has hanged himself in the storage container. The stage directions note that Magdalena, once in the basement, “*avanza con torpeza por los pasillos como si fuera un insecto atrapado en un recipiente de cristal. Curiosamente, su pelo ya no recuerda al de las reinas que de perfil figuran en la cara de las monedas, ahora, más bien, se parece a una flor marchita*” (61–62; italics in original). Having lost her queen bee status, she is simply a relic of times past on display for spectators to learn from her actions. Magdalena’s literal and symbolic descent is a representation of the dangers of xenophobia, racism, and cultural scapegoating in Spain’s new era of multiculturalism. In fact, Bezerra revealed in a personal interview that Magdalena’s name was inspired by the phrase “te desinflas como una magdalena,” which literally refers to how

muffins can deflate or lose their shape when the oven door is opened too early in the baking process, but idiomatically, it refers to deep disappointment. The deflated loser in this play is not the immigrant, as depicted in many plays that feature cross-cultural interactions, but rather, it is the autochthonous protagonist who is unwilling to learn and grow for his or her own betterment and that of society.

Upon the discovery of her dead husband, “*MAGDALENA, al verlo, grita horrorizada, y el grito comienza a subir como la espuma desde el sótano hasta la azotea, retumbando como una pelota de ping pong contra todos y cada uno de los muros del edificio*” (62; italics in original). The reference to ping-pong takes on three simultaneous functions. One, ping-pong is an onomatopoeia of the reverberation of the scream. Two, it can function as a reference to Chinese culture as the sport is quite popular in China and the nation has won more than half the Olympic medals awarded in the sport since ping-pong became a Summer Olympic sport in 1988 (Olympic Results, Gold Medalists and Official Records, 2017).¹¹ Three, the Chinese translation of ping-pong, 乒乓 (pīng pāng in Pinyin), literally refers to the sound of weapons clashing, a wonderful metaphor for the end of Magdalena’s fruitless attack against the Wang family.

The representation of the Chinese migrant in Spanish cultural production as morally corrupt leads to an important question regarding the play’s finale: Does Xiaomei’s ascent function as revenge or justice against Magdalena and her husband? In my interview with the playwright, [Bezerra revealed](#) that the interpretation is purposefully ambiguous, but textual evidence demonstrates that Xiaomei is not responsible for the husband losing his job nor for his decision to hide in the storage closet. In fact, if it were truly a matter of enacting revenge, Xiaomei could have left Magdalena to be homeless because the bank would be coming to repossess her house in a few days. Rather, Xiaomei, having spoken to the husband weeks prior, had coordinated a plan to try and help the couple, to which he agreed (60). However, without Magdalena’s consent, Xiaomei could not move forward. If one considers the trauma and abuse that Xiaomei endured over the years as she was able to hear all the racist jokes spoken throughout the building, in addition to witnessing the hit-and-run accident of her mother by Magdalena, then her ability to obtain poetic justice while also furthering her ability to support and advance herself is well within her right. This justice painted as Chinese malice only further justifies why someone like Xiaomei, who identifies as Spanish and not Chinese, would seek justice for being made to feel as a stranger in her own country.¹² Xiaomei was born in the basement of the apartment building and had lived there her whole life, thus making her legally and socially Spanish (22). Her Chinese cultural upbringing simply enriches her multicultural identity, but it does not strictly make her Chinese. Xiaomei’s self-identification as Spanish does not reject her ethnic and cultural heritage, but rather, it serves to explain to Magdalena that she is just as Spanish despite her ethnic and cultural heritage. The seemingly innocent question, “¿de dónde eres?” is, in fact, quite nefarious as it signifies the normalization of the white Spaniards as the only people who have the right to identity with Spain. As Xiaomei asserts, “[I]a gente es de donde nace y de donde ha vivido. Yo nací aquí y aquí me ve. De dónde quiere que sea” (22). This quote demonstrates that Bezerra wants spectators to question who is allowed to claim Spanish identity and why. Rather than viewing Xiaomei’s statement as problematic, which would then strip her of national identity, we should view her statement as empowering because it challenges rigid notions of Spanish belonging.

In privileging the Oriental, Bezerra goes against the grain, while pointing out the faults of Spanish (and therefore, Western) society as it becomes more multicultural and multiracial. The didactic message that emerges from this play is one of societal introspection. By that, I

mean that if Spain is able to look inward to see its own flaws, it can understand its xenophobia as a cyclical occurrence that impedes the nation's progress. Young adults like Xiaomei are the future of the nation and are owed the same respect as their white compatriots in regard to their role in shaping Spain and its national identity. Otherwise, “su identidad es siempre problemático [sic],” which results in that “[t]ienen la conciencia de ser ‘otro’ en su propio país” (Basu 30). This disorientation of identity encourages resentment toward the nation to combat the “homogenizing discourse [that] has become a frequent response to the perceived threat that immigration poses to national integrity” (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 152). Bezerra paints an image of Spain's not-so-distant future when racial minority groups such as the Chinese will rise to equal footing with, if not above, their white Spaniard compatriots, as the population continually ages. In so doing, *El señor Ye ama los dragones*, through the juxtaposition of classical proverbs and texts, “aborda en tono de commedia temas profusamente tratados en dramaturgias anglosajonas (racismo, aculturación, dificultad de integración, paternalismo occidental, etc.) que, por lo general, son escasamente explorados en dramaturgias españolas” (Pérez Valiente). The play is an example of a new era in Spanish theatre in which racial and linguistic authenticity are used to create works that tell new stories and invite new audiences to partake in the theatre. The play therefore proves that there is much to learn from non-Western societies—most importantly that we have to release our fear of the unpleasant truth about ourselves and of the Other.

Notes

1. See the Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración's report *Extranjeros residentes en España: A 30 de junio de 2016*.
2. The word immigrant is in quotes because Xiaomei was born in Spain but was perceived as an immigrant (22).
3. This phrase is derived from and legally defended via Article 14 of the Spanish Constitution, which states, “Los españoles son iguales ante la ley, sin que pueda prevalecer discriminación alguna por razón de nacimiento, raza, sexo, religión, opinión o cualquier otra condición o circunstancia personal o social” (“Constitución española”).
4. Paco Bezerra (Almería, Spain, 1978) is one of Spain's most award-winning playwrights younger than the age of forty. He has won the Premio Nacional de Literatura Dramática 2009, the Premio Nacional de Teatro Calderón de la Barca 2007, the Mención de Honor del Premio de Teatro Lope de Vega 2009, and the Premio de Teatro Jóvenes Creadores de la Comunidad de Madrid 2005, among other awards. He studied dramaturgy at the Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Madrid, under the tutelage of playwrights like Juan Mayorga. He currently has eight plays, including the play discussed in this article: *Ventaquemada* (2003), *El piano de la bruta* (2005), *Dentro de la tierra* (2007), *La tierra de las montañas calmas* (2010), *Grooming* (2010), *La escuela de la desobediencia* (2012), *Ahora empiezan las vacaciones* (2013), and *El señor Ye ama los dragones* (2015). Interestingly enough, he has another play about immigration, *Dentro de la tierra*, which debuted for the first time in Spain at the Teatro Valle-Inclán in Madrid on October 11, 2017. This play, which Bezerra described as a “thriller rural,” explores the exploitation of immigrants who work in the greenhouses of Almería.
5. As Marco Kunz lays out, “La adopción acrítica e indiferenciada o la reproducción semiconsiente de ideas estereotipadas, negativas o positivas, es uno de los defectos principales de la representación de la problemática migratoria actual en la literatura española contemporánea” (113).
6. In my interview with Bezerra, he stated that Dante's work was not an inspiration for his play but that the connections are clear.
7. In the performance, the words “la abeja reina” appear on the screen above the stage as the stage lights illuminate Magdalena.
8. The beehive as a metaphor for Spanish urban society also appears in Camilo José Cela's 1950 novel, *La colmena*.

9. There has been an unfortunate trend in Spanish theatre for Spaniards to play the roles of immigrants through the use of exaggerated foreign accents and costume design aimed at making obvious the origins of the immigrant character. This tendency can often result in creating a caricature of the immigrant and thus detracts from the sociopolitical message of the play.
10. The representation of these characteristics as superior to that of Spaniards is also the root of the more problematic representations of the Chinese in Spain present in various works. For more information, see [Donovan](#).
11. China won 53 of the 100 Olympic medals awarded in table tennis from 1988 to 2016.
12. In “Infierno,” Magdalena says that Xiaomei speaks as if she were not Chinese, to which the latter responds, “[s]í, porque no soy china” (22).

References

- Balibar, Etienne. “Racism and Nationalism.” *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, Verso, 1991, pp. 37–67.
- Basu, Swagata. “La inmigración y su representación: Un vistazo al cine español de inmigración.” *Hispanic Horizon*, vol. 28, 2011, pp. 26–47.
- Begin, Paul. “Empathy and sinophobia: Depicting Chinese migration in *Biutiful* (Iñárritu, 2010).” *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–16. doi:10.1080/20403526.2015.1015823.
- Bezerra, Paco. *El señor Ye ama los dragones*. Instituto Nacional de las Artes Escénicas y de la Música, 2015.
- Bezerra, Paco. Personal interview, 11 Sept. 2017.
- Bravo, Julio. “Proverbio chino, realidad española.” *ABC*, 13 Mar. 2015, p. 76.
- Cela, Camilo José. *La colmena*, edited by Jorge Urrutia, Cátedra, 1988.
- “Constitución española.” *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, Jefatura del Estado, 1978, pp. 29313–424.
- Donovan, Mary Kate. “‘Se ríen de la crisis’: Chinese Immigration as Economic Invasion in Spanish Film and Media.” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017, pp. 369–93. doi:10.1353/rvs.2017.0034.
- Fanjul, Sergio C. “El teatro que refleja la realidad.” *El País*, 21 Mar 2015, p. 4.
- Flesler, Daniela, and Pérez Melgosa, Adrián. “Battles of Identity, or Playing ‘Guest’ and ‘Host’: The Festivals of Moros and Christians in the Context of Moroccan Immigration in Spain.” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 151–68. doi:10.1080/143620032000117761.
- Fuentes, Rafael. “El señor Ye ama los dragones, de Paco Bezerra: los señuelos del monstruo.” *El Imparcial*, 30 Apr. 2015, <http://www.elimparcial.es/noticia.asp?ref=150741>.
- Kunz, Marco. “La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea: Un panorama crítico.” *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea*, edited by Irene Andres-Suárez et al., Verbum, 2002, pp. 109–36.
- Nieto, Gladys. “The Chinese in Spain.” *International Migration*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2003, pp. 215–37. doi:10.1111/1468-2435.00247.
- Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. “Extranjeros residentes en España: A 30 de junio de 2016.” Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2016.
- “Olympic Results, Gold Medalists and Official Records.” *Olympics*, 2017, <http://www.olympic.org/olympic-results>. Accessed 28 Sept. 2017.
- Pérez Valiente, Miguel. “Crónica de ‘El señor Ye ama a los dragones’ de Paco Bezerra.” *Glosas teatrales*, 29 Mar. 2015. <http://www.glosasteatrales.com/2015/03/29/cronica-de-el-senor-ye-ama-a-los-dragones-de-paco-bezerra>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Random House, 1978.

Notes on contributor

Jeffrey K. Coleman is an assistant professor of Spanish at Marquette University. His research interests include immigration, race, and other sociopolitical issues in contemporary Spanish and Catalan theatre. He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Shockwaves: Immigration and Its Racial Reverberations on the Contemporary Spanish Stage*, which will examine the representation and racial hierarchization of Spain’s most visible immigrant groups (Latin Americans, North Africans, and sub-Saharan Africans) in plays dating from 1992 to the present.