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Democracy, "Democracy (Reprise)," and the Asian American Ambivalence of *Soft Power*

Donatella Galella

Abstract. In *Soft Power* (2019), David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori deconstruct and demonstrate the affective power of American musicals by reversing *The King and I* (1951). *Soft Power* satirizes democracy, white supremacy, and gun violence with whiteface, meta-propaganda, and a sweeping Broadway-style score. In the torch song "Democracy" and its reprise, the artists articulate Asian American ambivalence about US democracy—hope in its promise to lift everyone, despair in its rootedness in racism, and cognizance of musical theatre as a delivery system for ideology. This article uses repetition, interviews, reviews, and dramaturgy to consider *Soft Power*, soft power, and democracy.

On September 14, 2021, the Kennedy Center celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with an ode to US American performing arts and artists. Set in Washington, DC, with Audra McDonald as host and First Lady Jill Biden in the audience, the concert embodied the spirit of a national theatre that later reached homes across the United States via public broadcasting. At a time when violent attacks on Asian Americans have increased dramatically,[1] and given Asian Americans' historical relegation to the edges of the stage and the state, it was significant that the eleven o'clock number went to David Henry Hwang, Kelly Marie Tran, and cast members of the off-Broadway musical *Soft Power* (2019). Hwang introduced their performance of the songs "Democracy" and "Democracy (Reprise)" by speaking to "the role Asian and Pacific Islander Americans can play to address the challenges facing our nation today" as "we rededicate ourselves to the grand experiment of democracy itself."[2] Tran and the other Asian American actors crooned their dedication "[t]o keep fighting for life [and] liberty" and reflected, "Look,

[1] Kimmy Yam, "New Report Finds 169 Percent Surge in Anti-Asian Hate Crimes during the First Quarter," *NBC News*, April 28, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/new-report-finds-169-percent-surge-anti-asian-hate-crimes-n1265756.

[2] "The Kennedy Center at 50" took place in the Concert Hall on September 14, 2021 and aired on PBS on October 1, 2021.

this country's still hurting in so many ways," casting the Biden presidency as a period for healing from the damage wrought by the Trump administration and the attempted right-wing coup on January 6 of the same year. The cast insistently and repeatedly sang "I believe" while holding their hands over their hearts or above their heads, and they concluded by intoning somberly, "in America." In this patriotic hymn, they pledged their allegiance to the United States and their hope for democracy to survive and include their voices. But for this Kennedy Center performance, in keeping with the uplifting sensibility of the anniversary concert, Hwang changed some key lyrics from the stage version ("Look, this country's a disaster / In so many ways").[3] Furthermore, outside the context of the original musical, the songs lacked the production's meta-theatrical frame that offers an ambivalent Asian American take on democracy and a critical take on the seductive ideological force of musical theatre itself.

In *Soft Power*, librettist-lyricist Hwang and composer-lyricist Jeanine Tesori invert and satirize the premise of *The King and I* (1951) by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, celebrate and critique the United States, and seek to raise the audience's awareness of how unequal racialized power dynamics shape cultural production and reception. *Soft Power* looks down on the nation's election of Donald Trump, gun violence, and xenophobic racism as it dramatizes the real-life anti-Asian attack on Hwang. These events prompt the production's hallucinated conceit that situates China as civilization's savior via a Chinese musical. In political scientist Joseph Nye's influential theory, some modern nations use soft power, such as financial investments, cultural entertainment, and affective ideology, rather than brute force to gain

[3] Unless otherwise specified, all *Soft Power* quotations come from the Public Theater version. Play and lyrics by David Henry Hwang, music and additional lyrics by Jeanine Tesori, "Soft Power," Public Theater Opening Night Draft, October 11, 2019, 92.

influence.[4] Each iteration of the song "Democracy" indexes the artistic team's repeated attempts to move the audience emotionally and politically on multiple levels. A reprise is repetition with a difference: "Not only repetition, but also . . ."[5] With edited lyrics and reorchestrated music, a reprise offers alternate sonic and affective registers. In addition, *Soft Power* carries out reprisal, revenge for histories of yellowface and yellow peril. It performs what Dorinne Kondo calls "reparative creativity," "the ways artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair."[6] Hwang and his creative team generate reparative creativity through examining the political concept of soft power and putting it into practice in musical theatre form.

This article begins with a production history of *Soft Power* and literature review of *The King and I*, draws from reviews and interviews with members of the *Soft Power* creative team, and analyzes how *Soft Power* rewrites *The King and I*, reprises "Democracy," and reconsiders democracy as a political formation. The white and Asian American creators of *Soft Power* feel ambivalently about democracy, and they attempt to conjure a set of contradictory feelings in their audience, including a longing for the inclusion of Asian Americans into the democratic project, a searing critique of the possibility of an inclusive US democracy given its foundations in racism, and an awareness of musical theatre's political manipulation. They solicit the pleasures of patriotism and "Golden Age" musical theatre as well as prompt questions about democracy and propaganda. What happens when the will of the US American people, via the electoral college, favors outright white supremacy? To what extent might Chinese autocracy

[4] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Fall 1990): 153-71.

[5] Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., and Shane Vogel, "Introduction: Tidying Up after Repetition," in *Race and Performance after Repetition*, ed. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., and Shane Vogel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 24.

[6] Dorinne Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

seem like a viable alternative, particularly for Chinese Americans? How do emotional attachments to liberal politics and to canonical musicals affect interpretation? Many critics came away with hope as they simultaneously dubbed the production a puzzlement. *Soft Power* provides a significant case study for understanding the overlaps and gaps between artists and audiences in co-producing meaning when an inspirational musical works perhaps too well in activating nationalist sentimentality. The musical also probes the potentials and limits of democracy and affective politics. In the end, I reflect on the afterlives of *Soft Power* and my repeat engagements as I struggle with my own Asian American ambivalence toward US democracy and musical theatre.

Producing *Soft Power*

David Henry Hwang has both deployed and flipped Asian stereotypes in musical theatre, from *M. Butterfly* (1988) to *Yellow Face* (2007). In 2014, Hwang received a commission from Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, with which he has a long history. Initially a broad comedy, *Soft Power* reversed *The King and I*. Having reworked *Flower Drum Song* for Broadway in 2002, Hwang was no stranger to revising Rodgers and Hammerstein's repertoire. He had seen the 2015 Lincoln Center revival of *The King and I*, which both brought him to tears and caused him to ruminate on the musical's troubling racial politics. He imagined: what if instead of a white nanny teaching a Thai king how to run his country, a Chinese media executive taught Hillary Clinton how to solve US gun violence? What if this executive asked "DHH"—a stand-in for the author—to write a show for China to gain soft power? By the mid-2000s, "Hwang [had become] a sought-after consultant by various Chinese governmental agencies

wanting to develop their own theatrical productions for Broadway."[7] Hwang reached out to his longtime collaborator and director, Leigh Silverman, and then upon realizing that *Soft Power* should be a play with a full-fledged musical to capture the pathos and propaganda of *The King and I*, he approached Jeanine Tesori of *Fun Home* (2013) fame to write the score. Combining form with function, *Soft Power* realized his vision to combat the musical Orientalism of *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *Miss Saigon* (1991), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and now *The King and I* through the very medium of an original Broadway-style musical.[8] In addition to formalist dramaturgy, his musical featured dialectical thought, autobiography, meta-theatricality, and an ambivalent ending, hallmarks of Hwang's playwriting.[9]

But two tragedies changed the course of the project: in late 2015, Hwang was stabbed in the neck as he walked home with groceries, and in 2016, Trump won the US presidential election. Silverman and Tesori encouraged Hwang to include more of himself and his attack in the script, and the stabbing took on metaphorical significance as an attack on US democracy. The day after the election, Hwang thought, "[t]his can be bad for the country, but it could be good for the musical."[10] The musical premiered in spring 2018 at the Ahmanson Theatre via Center Theatre Group in association with East West Players, the oldest Asian American theatre company, and then transferred to the Curran Theatre in San Francisco. Trump's anti-Chinese rhetoric and his administration's policy of separating refugee children from their families formed the real-life backdrop. In this intensified xenophobic climate, the creative team revised the

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[7] William C. Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 136.

[8] See David Savran, "Trafficking in Transnational Brands: The New 'Broadway-Style' Musical," in "Theatre, Transnationalism, and Economy," special issue, *Theatre Survey* 55, no. 3 (September 2014): 318-42; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

[9] Esther Kim Lee, *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* (New York: Methuen, 2015), 3-7.

[10] Quoted in Jerry Portwood, "In 'Soft Power,' Hillary Clinton Sings and Dances to Keep Democracy Alive," *Rolling Stone*, November 7, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/david-henry-hwang-soft-power-play-hillary-clinton-sings-democracy-909182.

musical and adopted a more serious tone for the fall 2019 production at the Public Theater in New York City, where Hwang had his off-Broadway debut in 1980. The tightened libretto cut out targets for critique such as the US healthcare industry and climate change denialism. It focused more tightly on anti-Asian racism, as the assault on the character of DHH became the center of the musical, resting on the dramaturgical scaffold of *The King and I*.

The Soft Power of *The King and I*

The King and I remains popular: Bartlett Sher's award-winning 2015 production, the fourth on Broadway, went on a national tour—including a stop at the Kennedy Center in 2017—and it returns to London in 2024. Concord Theatricals, the licensing arm of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, lists other upcoming productions and offers an hour-long Youth Edition with an accompanying promotional video featuring mostly non-Asian children playing Thai characters, advertising "teacher-approved content," and exhorting viewers to "make the world a better place!"[11] *The King and I* boasts favorite showtunes such as "I Whistle a Happy Tune," "Getting to Know You," and "Shall We Dance?" and superficially progressive lessons of ultimately erasing cultural differences. Based on Margaret Landon's 1944 novel *Anna and the King of Siam*—itself based on the 1870s memoirs of Anna Leonowens—the musical concerns a British governess teaching King Mongkut, his wives, and his children how to govern their country and understand the world.

Recent biographies of Rodgers and Hammerstein tend to celebrate *The King and I* as a heartwarming, liberal musical and share the artists' biases toward US democracy. William G.

[11] "Rodgers & Hammerstein's *The King and I*: Youth Edition," Concord Theatricals, https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/65850/rodgers-hammersteins-the-king-and-i-youth-edition.

Hyland, a national security advisor to Presidents Nixon and Ford, writes of *The King and I*: "As in every Hammerstein script, there was an optimistic message: that love and mutual understanding would conquer all, even racism."[12] He also dubs the real King Mongkut "a tyrant, though a more enlightened one than most Asian rulers" and characterizes Rodgers's score as having an "Asian flavor" three times across five pages.[13] In *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution*, Todd S. Purdum notes the special performance of *The King and I* and remarks by Rodgers and Hammerstein given on November 23, 1953 for the Anti-Defamation League in Washington, DC:

> "I think the theater has a better right than almost any other influence in America, to speak for democracy," Rodgers began.
>
> Oscar chimed in. "We have no intolerance on the American stage, so we can plead for tolerance everywhere else."
>
> In other words," Dick added, "our house is in order. We're at no loss in the theater for blistering names to call each other—but they're never based on color or religion."
>
> "Another thing," Oscar said, "nobody tells us what to write."
>
> "The public tells us what it likes—and that's democracy for us," Dick concluded."[14]

The musical duo insisted on US American values of tolerance, democracy, and capitalism as represented by *The King and I*, despite the very real menaces of Jim Crow, McCarthyism, and

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[12] William G. Hyland, *Richard Rodgers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 195.
[13] Ibid., 194, 195-99.
[14] Quoted in Todd S. Purdum, *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), 225.

antisemitism. In *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical*, Laurie Winer similarly valorizes "Rodgers and Hammerstein's take on geopolitics in *The King and I*" and glosses over difference: "They were artists who had created a unified definition of Americanness. Their productions made audiences feel proud of not only what the country was but what it could be—that beacon of hope and fairness for which we strive yet find so elusive."[15] But as scholars including Christina Klein, Mary L. Dudziak, and Penny Von Eschen have critically shown, the US government invested in antiracist imagery during the Cold War to appeal to other nations and portray itself as good—another deployment of soft power.[16]

Both Purdum and Winer defensively push back on scholars such as Bruce A. McConachie who have argued that Rodgers and Hammerstein's works facilitated the United States' Cold War agenda in Asia.[17] McConachie and others illustrate how Rodgers and Hammerstein portrayed Asian people as immature and unable to govern themselves to rationalize US policies from the military strategies in Korea and Vietnam to the adoption of Asian children. He connects *The King and I* to Henry Kissinger, as he considers the scenes of Anna teaching the King and of the children obeying orders such that "Siam is reduced to the status of a child in need of western schooling."[18] In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Raymond Knapp notes the "child-oriented" and "primitivist repeated-note motive . . . as part of its 'oriental' musical profile," and he argues that

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[15] Laurie Winer, *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 255.

[16] Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 40-41; Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[17] Purdum, *Something Wonderful*, 315-16; Winer, *Oscar Hammerstein II*, 18-19.

[18] Bruce A. McConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U.S. War in Southeast Asia," in "Colonial/Postcolonial Theatre," special issue, *Theatre Journal* 46, no. 3 (October 1994): 392.

> by embodying the main roles through [white] Western actors, by slighting venerated historical figures, [and] by making Anna the impetus for reform, the show teaches us to disrespect as childlike a culture and people eminently worthy of respect in adult terms—even as it purports, without irony, to teach us the importance of respecting cross-cultural difference.[19]

In part because of the representation of King Mongkut as ignorant of Western customs and diplomacy, the Thai government banned the 1956 film of *The King and I* from public viewing.[20]

"Getting to Know You" exemplifies the United States' paternalistic treatment of Asia. The lyrics purport to be about Anna learning from the Thai children, yet the stage actions depict her teaching them and their mothers Western manners and changing them. The tune came from a song discarded from *South Pacific* (1949), another Rodgers and Hammerstein musical that preached racial tolerance (i.e., white people accepting the existence of people of color).[21] According to Christina Klein in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, "Getting to Know You" suggests equal exchange, yet "Anna's influence, like [US] American-guided modernization, results in local leaders governing themselves but always according to Anna's precepts."[22] Here is the benevolent imperialism of Anna singing "putting it my way, but nicely."[23] Danielle Glassmeyer explains how *The King and I* models "sentimental orientalism":

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[19] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 265.

[20] Penny Van Esterik, "Anna and the King: Digesting Difference," in "South East Asia on Screen," ed. Rachel Harrison, special issue, *South East Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (2006): 300.

[21] Jim Lovensheimer, *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 32-33.

[22] Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 215.

[23] Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *The King and I*, in *6 Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: Random House, 1959), 391.

> If we approach Asians as the children they are, and give them the love and education that we know they need . . . perhaps generations in the future, *The King and I* promises, we will see the difference, as today's nascent democrats become tomorrow's adult democratic nation. Along the way, they will learn to love us as much as we have learned to love them.[24]

Through affective pedagogy, Anna makes Asians just like white US Americans and grateful for their colonial teachers. Scholars such as Laura Donaldson and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman have similarly written on the narrative trope of a white woman saving the oppressed women of the King's harem as an allegory for how US Americans could save Asian women and children from "Oriental" patriarchy.[25] Hammerstein wrote the musical while presiding over the board of Welcome House, an initiative to help US Americans adopt mixed-Asian children whose existence resulted from the consequences of US military interventions; his extended family included the first adoptee from Welcome House. On the global stage, during Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency, a hospital ship named *Project Hope* brought supplies to Southeast Asia and used "Getting to Know You" as their theme song.[26]

The King and I embodies theatrical orientalism with its amalgamated "Oriental"-sounding and -looking aesthetic, despotic king character, and framing of Asian people as

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[24] Danielle Glassmeyer, "'A Beautiful Idea': *The King and I* and the Maternal Promise of Sentimental Orientalism," *Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 120. For more on sentimentality, see Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 33-68.

[25] Laura Donaldson, "*The King and I* in Uncle Tom's Cabin, or on the Border of the Women's Room," *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 53-68. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "*The King and* Who?: Race, Dance, and Home," in *Victorians on Broadway: Literature, Adaptation, and the Modern American Musical* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 55-78. Let us note that Anna Leonowens had Indian heritage and passed as white.

[26] Lovensheimer, *South Pacific*, 33.

children, and in its obverse mirror, it ultimately reflects US American epistemology.[27] Rodgers did not research Thai music. In his autobiography, he pronounces,

> Western audiences are not attuned to the sounds of tinkling bells, high nasal strings and percussive gongs, and would not find this kind of music attractive. If a composer is to reach his [*sic*] audience emotionally—and surely that's what theatre music is all about—he [*sic*] must reach the people through sounds they can relate to.[28]

The portrayal of Siam reveals more about the US American authors than about Thailand. The musical suggests that Anna (and US Americans) can embrace Thai people (and Asians and Asian Americans) when these "others" assimilate to purportedly white Western values, namely democracy. Andrea Most theorizes in her book *Making Americans* that "[t]he Asian children replace Jews as the model minority of the future."[29] She elaborates: "Anna teaches about democracy by using the conventions of the theater. Only when the Siamese can learn to perform in the manner of the musical theater, this play implies, can they successfully transcend their otherness and become just like us."[30] This racial-colonial logic upholds white hierarchy and presumes that assimilation as "model minorities" is possible and desirable, although racialized differences and other ways of being, performing, and governing remain.[31]

Reversing *The King and I*

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[27] Josephine Lee, *Oriental, Black, and White: The Formation of Racial Habits in American Theater* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 11.

[28] Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 273.

[29] Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 186.

[30] Ibid., 184.

[31] For a critical history of the model minority trope, see Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

From the beginning, *Soft Power* explicitly discusses how musical theatre sways audiences. The show begins as a realistic play set during the 2016 election. Xūe Xíng, a Chinese producer played by Conrad Ricamora, commissions DHH, a representation of David Henry Hwang played by Francis Jue, to pen a musical adaptation of a Chinese film with the aim of increasing China's soft power. The characters experience soft power when they attend a performance of *The King and I* as part of a campaign rally for Hillary Clinton. DHH explains how the musical fits an Orientalist tradition: "the white hero goes to some dangerous land and civilizes the backwards natives. The writers get all these details wrong. And the locals somehow speak with stupid accents—in their own country!"[32] And yet the musical still makes DHH cry. Even as he can intellectually analyze the racist representation, he finds himself moved by the narrative and music. Zoe, Xíng's white US American girlfriend played by Alyse Alan Louis, dubs this phenomenon "the delivery system": "And musicals have gotta be the best system ever. I mean, once those violins start playing, these shows go straight to our hearts."[33] Scholars such as David Savran and Christina Klein have similarly observed the pleasure-producing and community-building levers of the musical as an ideology machine.[34] Xíng embraces this machinery while asserting that for his Chinese musical adaptation, China will be the "I" while the whitened West will be the "other." After Clinton loses the election, DHH is stabbed in the neck, and as he nearly bleeds to death, *Soft Power*, the musical within the play, bursts into life on stage. In DHH's fever dream, the twenty-two-piece orchestra tunes up, and Xíng becomes the leading man. Dialogue from previous scenes, *The King and I*, and other classic musicals form the

[32] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 6.
[33] Ibid.
[34] David Savran, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (November 2004): 215; Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 192.

blueprint for this hallucinated Chinese Broadway-style musical written fifty years in the future, when China has claimed global dominance.

Soft Power inverts *The King and I*'s Siam by representing the United States as backward and bellicose. The first song, "Dutiful," conjures "I Whistle a Happy Tune." Just as Anna encourages her son to put on a brave face when they meet half-naked Thai men carrying knives, Xíng reassures his daughter not to fear for him despite the United States' rampant gun violence. Upon landing, Xíng meets white US American homophobic thugs who wield guns menacingly. In their introduction to "Gun Culture," editors Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young contend that "long histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery . . . have produced the United States' exceptionally toxic gun culture" and articulated "whiteness, maleness, and violence as primary markers of full belonging in the civic community."[35] In "Good Guy with a Gun," the Vice President defends US militarism abroad:

> It's time to get real tough with folks
>
> So's we can liberate 'em
>
> Drop our bombs to help 'em
>
> And not because we hate 'em.[36]

Hwang and Tesori's lyrics send up US American cries of freedom that try to mask the racism, colonialism, and Islamophobia that drive the killing of Asian people from Vietnam to Afghanistan. In the song "Election Night," Xíng also learns about the vagaries of US democracy, from unchecked spending on campaigns to the electoral college, which

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[35] Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young, "Introduction: US Gun Culture and the Performance of Racial Sovereignty," in "Gun Culture," ed. Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young, special issue, *Lateral* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2020), https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young.

[36] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 74.

ensured that smaller and rural states

Had a disproportional say in selecting

A President

Which in the early days of our great nation

Ensured they could keep their slaves.[37]

Figure 1. Conrad Ricamora and the company of *Soft Power*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

As the ensemble in 1950s pastel dress dance and smile, "Election Night" highlights how white supremacy has always shaped the limits of US democracy through who can vote and how much their vote counts.[38] The number turns violent when Trump wins the election. His supporters chant "Make America great again!" and "Chinese go home!"[39] They stab DHH, echoing the stabbing at the start of the play and the stabbing of Hwang in real life. As Elisabeth R. Anker argues in *Ugly Freedoms*, "freedom often *is* a form of violence."[40] In offering these heightened images of barbarity, *Soft Power* urges the audience to think critically about US American exceptionalism, imperialism, racism, and democracy itself. If the winner loses the popular vote and campaigns on overt white supremacy, then is this really "the greatest system in the world,"

[37] Ibid., 53.

[38] At the 2022 AAPI Performance and Pedagogy symposium at the University of California, Los Angeles, Esther Kim Lee noted that "Election Night" accurately summarizes the US electoral system, whereas *The King and I* mischaracterizes King Mongkut. Esther Kim Lee, "AAPI Performance in the Classroom: A Roundtable" (panel discussion, AAPI Performance and Pedagogy, UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, Los Angeles, CA, October 29, 2022).

[39] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 55.

[40] Elisabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 11.

as the character of Hillary Clinton insists?[41] Nevertheless, spectators can reassure themselves that they are watching Chinese propaganda, softening these deep critiques of US politics.

While US ideals of freedom ring hollow, *Soft Power* imagines China as a utopia where Chinese Americans can live free from anti-Asian racism, just as *The King and I* portrays the United States as antislavery during the Civil War. DHH initially defends the US because of his immigrant father's business success, but he concedes that his father contended with racist taunts and erased Chinese culture in DHH's upbringing. In the song "Fuxing Park," Xíng persuades DHH that China can be a free space for him; together, they sing the word "free," which floats and extends over instrumentals of woodwinds and violins like a breeze.[42] *Soft Power* repeats and reorients Cold War and contemporary US political discourse that, according to Rey Chow, presents a "polarization of [US] democracy and [Chinese] authoritarianism."[43] As Aihwa Ong identifies in *Flexible Citizenship*, "Chinese modernities are new racial imaginaries and regimes of domination that decenter Western hegemony in the global arena."[44]

Soft Power also turns racial hierarchy upside down through heightened performances of whiteface. Asian American actors play all the white US American roles, except for the role of Hillary. As opposed to the black wigs and slanted eye makeup traditional to yellowface, they wear blonde wigs, and in the Los Angeles production, they put on freckles and rouge.[45] The actors also adopt whitened vocalizations, from frontier cowboys to California surfer dudes,

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[41] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 37.

[42] Ibid, 30.

[43] Rey Chow, "Transnational Turns and the Future of China Studies" (keynote address, Transnational China Research Hub, University of California, Santa Cruz, May 13, 2023).

[44] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 83.

[45] For more on yellowface as a technology of Asian exclusion, see Esther Kim Lee, *Made-Up Asians: Yellowface during the Exclusion Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

mocking how US stagings of Asia mix up different accents.[46] Actor Raymond J. Lee, who played the Vice President, recollects, "How many times have I gotten, 'Hey, Ray, do a generic Asian accent'? And I'm like, what the hell is a generic Asian accent? So you mean like what Mickey Rooney did [in] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which I am not doing."[47] In addition, Hwang gave the white characters ridiculous names like Bobby Bob, or their names referenced popular characters like Holden Caulfield, making up for indignities like *The Mikado*'s (1885) Yum Yum. Theatre scholar Arnab Banerji analyzes the purpose of "the Asian American actors play[ing] 'symbols' of mainstream 'white' culture. The reversal, hopefully, invites audiences to critically reflect on the biases that they harbour as consumers."[48] When developing the gestural vocabulary for the white US American characters, co-choreographer Sam Pinkleton recalls, "The thing that I tried to do was be as lazy in thinking about white people, as I see musical theatre being in thinking about nonwhite people."[49] In our interview, he demonstrated the white aristocratic "fancy arms" for Hillary's campaign rally at McDonald's, as he lightly held up his arms in front and to the side, bent his elbows, and curved his fingers pointing up. Silverman adds, "I think what we were going for is the idea that you weren't considered American unless you were perceived as white."[50] These layers of racialized performance resonate with Ju Yon Kim's theory in *The Racial Mundane* of how turn-of-the-twentieth-century white US Americans feared Asians as too different to assimilate into US culture yet too good at assimilating and perhaps able to surpass

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[46] See Faedra Chatard Carpenter on aural whiteness and linguistic whiteface in *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[47] Raymond J. Lee, in discussion with the author, July 29, 2021.

[48] Arnab Banerji, "*Soft Power*: Hwang and Tesori's Reappropriation of *The King and I* in Representing Twenty-First-Century Diplomacy and the Dystopic Reality of Contemporary America," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13, no. 3 (2019): 277.

[49] Sam Pinkleton, in discussion with the author, August 14, 2020.

[50] Leigh Silverman, in discussion with the author, December 9, 2020 (amended via email, June 25, 2023).

whites.[51] Through whiteface, the Asian American performers play Chinese actors who out-white white US Americans. By performing this racial excess, they racialize whiteness, which too often goes unmarked.

A form of musical reprisal, *Soft Power* asks white audiences to experience what it feels like to be stereotyped and instructed to assimilate. The production's representation of white US Americans shares similarities with the examples Claire Conceison studies in *Significant Other: Staging the American in China*, but within a speculative future of Chinese dominance.[52] Pinkleton explains this reverse cultural appropriation: "My job is to connect with my gay white ancestors, and take from them and remix it and put it on different bodies."[53] For instance, the choreography of "Good Guy With a Gun" "pulls from the complicated references to what I think of as cliché Americana as it has been defined by white culture, from Agnes de Mille's 'Rodeo' to modern country line dancing and its many forms"; but then "[i]n 'The New Silk Road' we're obsessed with official Propaganda Ballets created by China in the mid-20th century, and the angularity of communist imagery—all of the 'rugged individualism' from 'Good Guy With a Gun' suddenly turned into clean lines."[54] In the latter number, the white US American characters physically assimilate into Chinese culture through choreographic reprisal. Hwang relatedly describes his artistic goals via the language of assimilation and appropriation:

> I'm interested in exploring appropriation, which is sometimes difficult for white audiences to understand; one typically hears white people say things like, "I don't mind

[51] Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
[52] Claire Conceison, *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[53] Pinkleton, in discussion with the author.
[54] Quoted in Ruthie Fierberg, "Inside the Making of the Deeply Meta Choreography for Off-Broadway's *Soft Power*," *Playbill*, November 12, 2019, https://www.playbill.com/article/inside-the-making-of-the-deeply-meta-choreography-for-off-broadways-soft-power.

> when Japanese people dress up like cowboys, so why should they be upset?" But appropriation needs to be understood in the context of a larger power dynamic between cultures. The notion of a powerful China (which, let's face it, many Americans fear) appropriating and stereotyping a weaker America, helps to more accurately replicate that dynamic. Where it comes to audiences of color, I hope the experience of seeing [*Soft Power*] proves empowering, validating the feeling of being dehumanized and stereotyped that we've experienced most of our lives, and also proves that we can create something just as beautiful and moving as those works we may find problematic.[55]

Rather than trying to reason with or seek empathy from white audiences, Hwang seeks to discomfit them while he affirms audiences of color.

Hwang dramatizes how power shapes epistemology, appropriation, and audiences' perspectives most clearly in a meta-theatrical scene that opens the second act. A televised panel of experts gathers to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Soft Power*. Descendants of the Chinese authors behind *Soft Power* portray Broadway musicals as merely "regional folk art" about cats that their fathers "elevated."[56] (But in reality, Broadway has "become accessible relatively recently in China."[57]) The panel's discourse satirizes current musical theatre histories that claim Rodgers and Hammerstein invented the integration of story, music, and dance, ignoring, for instance, Chinese theatre.[58] The fictional musical within *Soft Power* echoes not only mid- to late-twentieth-century US American musicals but also the Chinese socialist theatres of reform that

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[55] Quoted in Dorinne Kondo, "Soft Power: (Auto)ethnography, Racial Affect, and Dramaturgical Critique," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 2019): 278.

[56] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 63.

[57] Laura MacDonald, "Rising in the East: Disney Rehearses Chinese Consumers at a Glocalized Shanghai Disneyland," in *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, ed. Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 130.

[58] Consider Daphne Lei's critique that Westerners make "Chinese opera" legible on their own terms. Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

themselves drew from US American movie musicals as well as Marxist theory, Russian aesthetics, and traditional Chinese instrumentation.[59] Chairman Mao's musical theatre was not so separate from Rodgers and Hammerstein's. On the panel, when the white US American adjunct professor "who specializes in second-world nations" suggests that the Chinese artists appropriated US American aesthetics and portrayed the United States inaccurately, the Chinese dismiss his concerns, accuse him of having a political agenda, and threaten to censor him.[60] They also push back on his defense of the attack on DHH as "random" by offering the disturbingly plausible context that "religious fundamentalists at that moment in American history seized power. They began imprisoning minorities in concentration camps and attacking them in the streets."[61] As Chinese propaganda, *Soft Power* purposefully leaves out China's human rights abuses but hints at the dangers of autocracy. In reversing Orientalist knowledge production, these exchanges illustrate how those with power control how history is told.

Performing "Democracy"

The climactic number, "Democracy," demonstrates the efficacy of musical theatre as a delivery system for ideology, beginning with Hillary's blistering critique of democracy and ending with her unwillingness to let it go. After Xíng wins Hillary's heart and wins over the Vice President to follow China's lead, he invites Hillary to follow the New Silk Road, which

[59] Max L. Bohnenkamp, "Neither Western Opera, Nor Old Chinese Theater: The Modernist 'Integrated Art-Form' and the Origins of the Maoist 'New Music-Drama," in *Rethinking Chinese Socialist Theaters of Reform: Performance Practice and Debate in the Mao Era*, ed. Xiaomei Chen, Tarryn Li-Min Chun, and Siyuan Liu (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 38.
[60] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 61.
[61] Ibid., 64, 63.

references China's real-life Belt and Road Initiative.[62] She rejects him and sings a torch song instead:

> So many times
>
> It's left me battered and bruised
>
> Disillusioned, in pain
>
> Feeling
>
> I've been used
>
> I swear I'll give it up
>
> Before it downright kills me
>
> Then it comes back again
>
> With promises that thrill me[63]

The way Hwang and Tesori structure the song is such that the "it"—democracy— is a big reveal. Hillary characterizes democracy as an abusive lover that "leaves her screaming on the floor."[64] This personification takes literally the harm done by democracy in a white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, cisheteropatriarchal nation where most white US American voters have not voted for a Democratic president since 1964.[65] This is the violence done to DHH the character and Hwang the person. This is the pain felt by those who voted for Hillary Clinton. Despite losing the election and knowing that many US Americans fervently support policies that hurt people of the global majority, immigrants, refugees, women, queer people, trans people,

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[62] Kyungjin Jo, "US Theatre and Cosmopolitics: Imperfect Reimagining of US-Asia Relations on Stage since 1945," (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, forthcoming).

[63] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 83.

[64] Ibid., 85.

[65] "White Voters, 1964-2020," The Decolonial Atlas, November 6, 2020, https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2020/11/06/white-voters-1964-2020.

nonbinary people, poor people, disabled people, and the planet, Hillary returns to her "man." As Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, "the failure of the nation to 'give back' the subject's love works to increase the investment in the nation. The subject 'stays with' the nation, despite the absence of return and the threat of violence, as leaving would mean recognising that the investment of national love over a lifetime has brought no value."[66] The song "Democracy" aptly cites "Something Wonderful" in which Lady Thiang, the King's first wife, sings of her husband, "You'll always go along / Defend him where he's wrong / And tell him, when he's strong."[67] The song also resonates with "What's the Use of Wond'rin'," which justifies domestic violence in *Carousel* (1945), and "And I Am Telling You" from *Dreamgirls* (1981), which Tesori invokes in order to make Hillary sound "powerful" and reference the context about not leaving a cruel partner.[68]

Soft Power is haunted by the real Hillary Clinton and *The King and I*.[69] Hillary still thinks that US Americans can change and that democracy can work if people are "wise enough / Just enough / Worthy of trust enough."[70] This is a tantalizing ideal. But history suggests that those with privilege rarely give away that privilege. US democracy might not be broken but is instead working as intended. Played by a white actress, Hillary takes on a white innocence that does not explicitly tackle systemic racism. Like those who cling to the US flag for protection, she believes in a more perfect union and forgets that the union is built on genocide, dispossession, and

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[66] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 131.
[67] Rodgers and Hammerstein, *King and I*, 403.
[68] Jamie Du Mont and Rob Russo, "Episode 74: Jeanine Tesori: End with Hope, 'Soft Power': Track by Track," April 22, 2020, in *The Fabulous Invalid*, podcast, MP3 audio, 1:28:15, https://broadwaypodcastnetwork.com/podcasts/the-fabulous-invalid/episode-74-jeanine-tesori-end-with-hope-soft-power-track-by-track/74.
[69] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
[70] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 85.

slavery. This critique might be hard to accept, as liberal white audiences might identify with her and cling to canonical musicals. In her power ballad that builds in speed and intensity, Hillary ends by singing "I believe in / Democracy" as the number buttons.[71] She belts her conviction. When audience members erupt into applause, are they cheering for the performer? The character? Clinton? US American democracy? Despite the righteous rebukes they just heard? An audience member might hear the incisive lyrics but be "swept away" by the music.[72] Others might register the deliberately ironic tension between music and lyrics and sit with discomfort. Still others might recall that they are watching propaganda by Chinese artists as envisioned by DHH's fever dream. Or they might vacillate among these thoughts and feelings.

Figure 2. The cast of the world premiere of *Soft Power* at Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre performing "Democracy (Reprise)." (Photo: © 2018 Craig Schwartz Photography.)

The finale reprise of "Democracy" reproduces and reckons with the force of musical theatre as a delivery system. Back in the world of the play, the fictional musical dissolves as DHH awakens from a hospital bed and recovers from his stabbing. In the Los Angeles production, he breaks the fourth wall to tell the audience that even though "the ballot box has given power to those whose America no longer includes people like me, . . . I can still hear the music. A song, clinging desperately to hope."[73] The reorchestrated reprise sounds gospel-like and

[71] Ibid., 86.

[72] Masi Asare, in Donatella Galella et al., "MT/D, or Change: An Anti-Racist Musical Theatre Reading Group," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 16, no. 1 (2022): 62-63.

[73] Play and lyrics by David Henry Hwang, music and additional lyrics by Jeanine Tesori, "Soft Power," Production Draft, May 15, 2018, 92.

inspirational. Tesori has previously drawn from African American music traditions in musicals like *Caroline, or Change* (2003), but here, there are no Black characters, an absence that perhaps comments on erasure, even as blackness has historically underscored sounds of freedom.[74] Gone is the language about democracy abusing people. When the ensemble sings "Lift us up," the music provides that lift.[75] With lots of repetition and few rhymes, "Democracy (Reprise)" feels straight from the heart. The scenic design references the US flag, as white stars on blue form a frame around the proscenium, and the cast wears casual street clothes in muted reds, whites, blues, blacks, and grays. They stand straight, equidistant from one another and take up the full stage space. Upstage, the set pieces have gone away to reveal folded-up ladders, flats, and sound equipment. White lights shine on the actors, while house lights sweep over the audience members in this two-thousand-seat theatre. Spectators can interpret these choices to eliminate spectacle as the artists of *Soft Power* expressing their authentic feelings about democracy. In this part of the script, the character names are replaced with the actors' real names, except for DHH.[76] This is no longer a show but a group of people on stage and in the audience coming together performing US American community. DHH seems to be the actual David Henry Hwang telling the audience that despite all his criticisms of the United States, he still believes in US American democracy, Asian American inclusion, and the people's power to change. As DHH, Jue sings "I still believe" in such a soft, high-pitched way that his voice might crack, voicing the fragility of democracy.[77] The ensemble supports him as they repeat "Won't give it up!" and the song buttons

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[74] For more on blackness as dematerialized style in a Korean version of *Dreamgirls*, see Ji Hyon (Kayla) Yuh and Emilio Méndez, "Translating Race in Musical Theatre," in *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre*, ed. Laura MacDonald and Ryan Donovan with William A. Everett (New York: Routledge, 2023), 537-51.

[75] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," Production Draft, 94-95.

[76] Travis J. Cross has pointed out the similar ending in Hwang's *Flower Drum Song*.

[77] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," Production Draft, 96.

with a note of triumph as harps, drums, and trumpets blast.[78] This is what democracy looks like and feels like.

"Democracy (Reprise)" captures this devotion to preserving democracy at a moment when it might crack. When the US Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, a crop of voter suppression laws appeared across the country.[79] Many Republicans have openly opposed democracy—particularly direct democracy—and embraced the vigilante violence of Kyle Rittenhouse. After the right-wing attempted insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, a poll found that "[n]early two in three (66 percent) Republicans say Biden's election win was not legitimate," a "majority (56 percent) of Republicans support the use of force as a way to arrest the decline of the traditional American way of life," and "[r]oughly four in 10 (39 percent) Republicans support Americans taking violent actions if elected leaders fail to act."[80] This approval of antidemocratic violence is rooted in racism. Another study found that "[t]he single survey item with the highest average correlation with antidemocratic sentiments is not a measure of attitudes toward Trump, but an item inviting respondents to agree that 'discrimination against whites is as big a problem today as discrimination against blacks and other minorities.'"[81] Meanwhile, a majority of Asian Americans support antiracist policies including affirmative action (70%) and Democrats such as

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Christina A. Cassidy and Ayanna Alexander, "Supreme Court Tossed Out Heart of Voting Rights Act a Decade Ago, Prompting Wave of New Voting Rules," *AP News*, June 6, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/voting-rights-act-supreme-court-black-voters-6f840911e360c44fd2e4947cc743baa2.

[80] Daniel A. Cox, "After the Ballots Are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Violence, and American Exceptionalism," Survey Center on American Life, February 11, 2021, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism.

[81] Larry M. Bartels, "Ethnic Antagonism Erodes Republicans' Commitment to Democracy," *PNAS* 117, no. 37 (September 2020): https://www.pnas.org/content/117/37/22752.

Joe Biden (54%), and their turnout increased from 49.3% in 2014 to 59.5% in 2020.[82] Still, only 29% of Asian Americans agree that "they feel like they belong and are accepted in the U.S."[83] The depth and pervasiveness of white racial resentment can fuel the urgency to claim the United States for Asian Americans and to believe that voting harder is sufficient to achieve racial equity.

Yet *Soft Power* has another layer. As repetition and reorientation, "Democracy (Reprise)" attempts to draw attention to the theatrical frame itself. The song sounds sincere in its pro-democracy nationalism, but it is ironic as part of the delivery system and caustic in its searing indictments of the United States. The ensemble reminds the audience:

> And I forget
>
> What I really should know
>
> I forget
>
> That it's just a big, big show.[84]

The "it" refers to both democracy and *Soft Power*, how charismatic performance trumps good government and how the audience is still watching a show. They are watching US propaganda. They are still being emotionally, ideologically, and musically manipulated.

While the 2018 Ahmanson Theatre version makes "Democracy (Reprise)" a tonally consistent positive anthem, the 2019 Public Theater version tries to clarify Asian American ambivalence about US democracy. Hwang's stand-in character shares how the attack on him inspired him to write this show and to end it with a nearly all-Asian American cast singing about

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82 "2020 Asian American Voter Survey," APIAVote, September 15, 2020, https://apiavote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Asian-American-Voter-Survey-Sept-15.pdf; Karthick Ramakrishnan, "In 2020, AAPIs Saw the Highest Increases in Voter Turnout," *Data Bits* (blog), AAPI Data, May 18, 2021, http://aapidata.com/blog/2020-record-turnout.

83 "STAATUS Index 2022 Report," LAUUNCH Foundation, 2022, https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf, 21.

84 Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," Production Draft, 93-94.

their country. Staged in the 299-seat Newman Theater, this production fostered greater intimacy. The house lights come up, the orchestra is revealed upstage, and the cast wears black jumpsuits over casual clothes that suggest the work that remains to be done for democracy. The stripping away of the musical's elaborate sets and lighting design attempts to raise the audience's consciousness of the very mechanisms of spectacle and to drive them toward antiracist action. Reflecting on his ambivalence about the theatre and theatre's capacity for its own undoing, Nicholas Ridout suggests, "It is in the imperfections . . . of its miming of the ideological structures of a given social organisation that theatre, perhaps, almost inadvertently, or with a coy slyness, discloses the weaknesses and blind spots in its own structures," wielding the possibility for spectators to think critically about their relationality to political economies and theatre itself.[85] Hwang bookends the reprise with the added line in Mandarin and English, "Good fortune will follow. If we somehow survive," recognizing the country's past and present attacks on Chinese Americans.[86] No longer ending with a fast explosion, the song slowly descends to a resolution with clarinets, oboes, and violins on a hopeful yet somber note. Asian Americans may never be full participants in US American democracy and identity—and even if they could be, that incorporation would not necessarily dismantle white supremacy and decolonize a settler nation—yet they sing "Still I dream."[87] Co-choreographer Sunny Min-Sook Hitt offers, "What are you going to do when you leave this theatre? Because democracy only works if we all participate."[88] Lee reflects, "I liked when people were charged politically, socially, from the musical in whatever way they got out of it, whether it was 'I'm gonna write an Asian show,'

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[85] Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.
[86] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 93.
[87] Ibid., 90.
[88] Sunny Min-Sook Hitt, in discussion with the author, September 9, 2020.

whether it was 'I'm going to be part of like, you know, Reverend Warnock's . . . campaign.'"[89] While holding the tensions of democracy, these artists hoped that audiences would make it more robust and more Democratic.

Soft Power is both for and against democracy. It comments on and tries to capture how Asian Americans vacillate between hope and despair, as they experience inclusion in and exclusion from the United States. It performs what Karen Shimakawa names "national abjection," "at times embracing/ingesting [Asian Americans], at other times violently (if often symbolically) expelling/excluding/segregating them—and that these 'contradictions' may be understood as a product of the continually collapsing project of abjection as a fundamental element of national identity formation."[90] Dramaturgically both in and beyond the musical, with the actors playing themselves and their characters, the reprise realizes this sense of both/and. *Soft Power* seeks to replicate Hwang's emotional experience of watching *The King and I* and his consciousness about musicals as a delivery system for Orientalist ideology. As Hwang puts it, "One of the big challenges was to create that complicated feeling at the end of the show where the show is inaccurate, where it may be advocating something that we don't believe in, but it's so well done that it kind of sucks us in emotionally."[91] Just as critics of *The King and I* might still weep in the end, so might critics of Trump still defend the greatness of the United States.

The creative team wants audiences to feel ambivalent about US democracy and understand the role that musical theatre plays in subtly indoctrinating them. Hwang adds, "I want us to be aware of the problematic aspect of the initial Hillary version, a torch song about going

[89] Raymond J. Lee, in discussion with the author.

[90] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 17.

[91] Quoted in Lisa Fung, "A Big Bet on 'Soft Power': How David Henry Hwang's Latest Play Takes on China, Trump and More," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-soft-power-20180506-htmlstory.html.

back to her abuser, democracy. But I also want us to be hopeful at the ending, because I think a musical should be. I also want us to be aware of the mechanisms of the musical, the soft power of it, and the delivery system of it."[92] Silverman reflects:

> you know you're being manipulated, and yet we want you to be manipulated. We know democracy is fucked up, yet it's what we have. And we want you to love it. We wanted both things to feel true and be held by the audience. And in a way we tell you we're gonna do it that way. And then we do it that way. And then we reiterated that we did it that way. And some people felt excited to have that kind of complication and some felt confused because they're not used to musicals ending in a complicated way . . . we just didn't wanna let people off the hook.[93]

The director and co-choreographers commented on the difficulty for audiences to hold multiple truths at the same time. Pinkleton notes in our interview,

> I think the pile up of "Democracy," as you describe it, is that many things can be true at once. And this makes people, especially white liberals I would suggest, short-circuit. . . . The opinion that I have no time for is like, "Ugh, that ending is so naïve. It's so naïve. You just say it works. Can't you see it doesn't work? Donald Trump is President." It's like, yeah, it's fucking complex. And like, how exciting that this argument can actually, I think, only be laid out as a musical.[94]

The artists behind *Soft Power* and the characters in *Soft Power* clearly and repeatedly communicate the effectiveness of the delivery system in promoting ideology, their critiques of and hopes for US democracy, and their intention to demonstrate musical theatre's soft power.

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[92] David Henry Hwang, in discussion with the author, August 6, 2020 (amended via email, June 1, 2023).

[93] Silverman, discussion with the author (amended via email, June 25, 2023).

[94] Pinkleton, in discussion with the author.

They also gesture toward the difficulty of asking audiences to grapple with these ideas and their own interpellation into political propaganda.

Responding to *Soft Power*

Critics reveal an array of interpretations and layers to *Soft Power*. According to Banerji, "Most performance reviews of the show [in Los Angeles] comment on the excitement of the piece, but the respondents also seem to be confused by what is happening."[95] Reviews of the off-Broadway production were generally positive, although several white male critics objected to it as "messy," claimed "nothing quite jells," and expressed "doubt whether even the creative team of 'Soft Power' could graph its plot."[96] Of the dozens of reviews I've read, the one that best grasped the artistic intention came from Jackson McHenry of *Vulture*: *Soft Power* "finally redirects toward ambivalence. It's a forceful ambivalence, though, backed by the full arsenal of the American musical, with strings and horns and a whole ensemble of actors, all deployed here not to deliver an ideology but to try to shake you out of one."[97] The Broadway-style musical attempts to awaken the audience to the delivery system and their belief system.

Meanwhile, most critics interpreted the finale as solely pro-US American democracy. Helen Shaw writes, "There are some thrills in the show, not least the final image: a full-stage

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[95] Banerji, "*Soft Power*," 276.

[96] Jackson McHenry, "Theater Review: Flipping the Classic Musical Script in *Soft Power*," *Vulture*, October 15, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/theater-review-soft-power-at-the-public-theater.html; Frank Scheck, "'Soft Power': Theater Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, October 15, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/lifestyle-news/soft-power-theater-1247634; Jonathan Mandell, "Soft Power Review: David Henry Hwang's Sly Reverse Chinese Musical about America," *New York Theater*, October 21, 2019, https://newyorktheater.me/2019/10/21/soft-power-review-david-henry-hwangs-sly-reverse-chinese-musical-about-america.

[97] McHenry, "Theater Review."

chorus line of the large, nearly entirely Asian cast, singing its (broken) heart out about America."[98] Hwang scholar William C. Boles concludes about the Ahmanson production:

> despite presenting a view of an America that has lost its way in voting for a candidate who vilifies Hwang's ethnicity and ancestry, Hwang refuses to end the musical as an anti-American play. There is still hope, as expressed in the song "Democracy" . . . to not give up on the values that have made the country great, in essence to not give up on democracy.[99]

He understands the bare directorial-design choices as the actors proclaiming their unvarnished truth, and he frames the United States as having "lost its way" rather than following its historic white supremacist path. Peter Marks, former leading theatre critic for the *Washington Post*, dismisses the ending as "sentimental," a view that similarly considers the ending patriotic but unearned or naive.[100] Jesse Green, chief critic at the *New York Times*, calls "Democracy" "a full-out screamer of a tribute to democracy."[101] He reflects, "it's a strange complication that 'Soft Power' critiques the seductive persuasiveness of musicals—the 'soft power' of American culture—while also trading in it."[102] Green does not seem to realize that the authors did this purposefully. *Variety* concludes: "In the end, Hwang and Tesori recognize and honor the yin and

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[98] Helen Shaw, "Soft Power," *Time Out*, October 15, 2019, https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/soft-power.

[99] William C. Boles, "*Soft Power* by David Hwang (review)," *Theatre Journal* 71, no. 2 (June 2019): 214. See also William C. Boles, "The Alternative Realities of David Henry Hwang's *Soft Power* and Anne Washburn's *Shipwreck*," in *Theater in a Post-Truth World: Text, Politics, and Performance*, ed. William C. Boles (London: Methuen, 2022), 77-95.

[100] Peter Marks, "Ever Wondered How China Sees America? 'Soft Power' Offers Amusing Ideas," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/ever-wondered-how-china-sees-america-soft-power-offers-amusing-ideas/2019/10/15/ec49595a-eeaf-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732_story.html.

[101] Jesse Green, "Review: In the Musical 'Soft Power,' China Whistles the Tune," *New York Times*, October 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/theater/soft-power-review.html.

[102] Ibid.

yang of both cultures, where belief in duty, democracy and musicals is essential."[103] Using a Chinese trope and an imagined East-West binary, this review ultimately does not question the politics of the United States and the power of musical theatre.

Privileged audiences tend to resist challenges to their ideology. Dani Snyder-Young writes, "white audience members interpret theatrical performances in ways supporting our existing worldviews, even if that requires ignoring substantial elements of the work we have seen. These patterns of white spectatorship fundamentally support white racial comfort."[104] Although the Los Angeles and New York audiences included people of color, especially Asian Americans, in large part thanks to outreach by East West Players and Sunny Min-Sook Hitt, they still leaned white due to the theatres' subscriber bases. In *Disaffected*, Xine Yao reminds us, "To depend upon white feelings as the catalyst for social change reinscribes the world that enables their power" because Asian American artists appealing to white audiences reinforces white people as the arbiters of humanity.[105] I have been focusing on white people's reactions, and I should not recenter whiteness, so I turn now toward Asian Americans, whom the creative team have said are their target audience.

Soft Power has offered life-giving reparative creativity to many Asian American critics. In his review, Austin Yang writes,

> There's a special feeling evoked by the justice that underlies the humor in *Soft Power*. When I see the "white" ensemble played by Asians in blonde wigs, the generalization and

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103 Frank Rizzo, "Off Broadway Review: 'Soft Power,'" *Variety*, October 15, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/legit/reviews/soft-power-review-musical-public-theater-1203369974.

104 Dani Snyder-Young, *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 100.

105 Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 2.

> simplification of American culture, the Chinese outsider pointing out the fallacies of American government, I laugh, but I also understand that they represent years of POC marginalization at the hands of white writers.[106]

For Yang, the musical offers hilarious reprisal instead of resentful bristling or shame, which people defensive of the United States and *The King and I* might experience. Ana Paulina Lee concludes, "*Soft Power* compels audiences to imagine and enact political futures that are not driven by fear or hatred, but rather by the possibilities of life-making, art, and regeneration in the wake of the modern state and its racial regimes."[107] Dorinne Kondo sums up the musical's intervention: "Above all, *Soft Power* stages an Asian American–critical race studies perspective that is absent from mainstream, white-dominant US theater, television, and film."[108] She adds, "I wish I could see it every day."[109]

Same. I saw *Soft Power* three times in Los Angeles (including one viewing with Kondo) and once in New York. As a Chinese-Italian American to the far left of Hwang, I felt affirmed. I howled at the sendups of the United States. I also experienced ambivalence. When I watch "Democracy (Reprise)," I am profoundly moved—and resentful that I am moved. I appreciate the words that recognize the violence that the United States does and the music that recognizes the people can do better. I do not want to be included in a white supremacist settler state. But as much as I try to push away my national identity, I am pulled into the US American project. In 2023, I sat stoic watching the recorded version of the musical in the Theatre on Film and Tape

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[106] Austin Yang, "Review of *Soft Power* at the Public Theater," *New York Theatre Guide*, October 16, 2019, https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/review-of-soft-power-at-the-public-theater.
[107] Ana Paulina Lee, "*Soft Power*, Written by David Henry Hwang," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 6, nos. 1-2 (2020): 201.
[108] Kondo, "*Soft Power*," 267.
[109] Ibid., 266.

Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, until I noticed that Jue repeatedly sang "This is America" while gesturing toward the Asian American cast members to either side of him and then laying hands on his own torso. I cried because I felt like he was singing to me: "You are America." How is he making me cry after all these reprises and all this painful self-awareness? To me, what is most remarkable about *Soft Power* is its simultaneous insistent belief in democracy, criticism of US democracy's foundational investments in racism, and meta-theatrical mindfulness of the musical's affective force.

The Afterlives of *Soft Power*

Soft Power has circulated with more overt political purposes in a heightened anti-Chinese climate, as Republicans blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on China and Asian Americans. For example, Ken Calvert, chair of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and recipient of the most donations from the National Rifle Association among sitting representatives from California,[110] regularly singles out China as a security threat. At a BroadwayCon session, Jue recounted that he has lost track of how many times he has been spat on.[111] After the misogynist anti-Asian attack in Atlanta in March 2021, an attack that the police deracinated and dismissed as the killer merely having a "bad day," Hwang has come to terms with his own attack as motivated by anti-Asian racism.[112] That year, the *New York Times* article "As Biden and Xi Begin a Careful Dance, a New American Policy Takes Shape" used performance language to describe the United

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[110] "Gun Rights Recipients: Money from Gun Rights to US Representatives, 1990-2024," Open Secrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/industries//summary?ind=Q13&recipdetail=H&sortorder=S&cycle=All.

[111] BroadwayCon, "Soft Power: AAPI Art and Advocacy," Facebook, April 29, 2021, MP4 video, 46:54, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=263186648835339.

[112] Bill Chappell, Vanessa Romo, and Jaclyn Diaz, "Official Who Said Atlanta Shooting Suspect Was Having A 'Bad Day' Faces Criticism," *NPR*, March 18, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978141138/atlanta-shooting-suspect-is-believed-to-have-visited-spas-he-targeted.

States censuring China for its treatment of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, just as China characterized the United States as a politically unstable threat to the world.[113] *Soft Power* remains ever relevant.

The ambivalence of "Democracy" and its reprise avails patriotic performances in different political arenas. As popular US American discourse has increasingly acknowledged anti-Asian racism, and *Soft Power* was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Hwang has received more platforms from which to share his personal story and musical. For the 2020 Democratic National Convention, the Asian American Pacific Islander Caucus invited Hwang to speak, and Ashley Park performed "Democracy."[114] Phillipa Soo sang the song for a 2020 American Civil Liberties Union fundraiser. At the Kennedy Center, in the context of the nation's capital and Biden's presidency—and decontextualized from *Soft Power*—"Democracy" and "Democracy (Reprise)" became the buoyant anthems for Asian American inclusion that some critics interpreted the original stage versions to be.[115] In the most significant lyrical change, Hwang turned "I forget that it's just a big, big show" to its opposite: "I forget that it's not just a big, big show."[116] He explains, "Trump had been defeated at the ballot box and democracy, while still flawed, had functioned successfully. Moreover, the celebratory circumstances, with elected officials and FLOTUS present, led us to soften some of the despair and irony of the number in the musical."[117] The creative team continues to revise the musical.

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[113] David E. Sanger and Michael Crowley, "As Biden and Xi Begin a Careful Dance, a New American Policy Takes Shape," *New York Times*, March 17, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/us/politics/us-china-relations.html.
[114] For more, see Donatella Galella, "Another National Anthem," Lights Camera Action Committee, September 7, 2020, https://lightscamera.org/home/another-national-anthem.
[115] Hwang and Tesori, "Soft Power," 90.
[116] "Kennedy Center at 50."
[117] David Henry Hwang, email message to author, May 12, 2023.

Soft Power's flexibility to produce contradictory meanings and shed layers points back to the multivalent possibilities of musical theatre. The musical invites scholars to think about and feel how soft power works, although it might work so well that you might not notice it working. As Biden deports asylum-seekers, and as Republicans attack everything from democratic norms to critical race theory, I question the success of democracy and US exceptionalism. Hwang's stabbing reminds me of Wendy Brown's critique of wounded attachments, her push to want more than identity-based solicitations that reify the state: "How might democratic discourse itself be invigorated by such a shift from ontological claims to these kinds of more expressly political ones, claims that, rather than dispensing blame for an unlivable present, inhabited a necessarily agonistic theater of discursively forging an alternative future?"[118] Rather than plead for antiracist reforms on the basis of being a wounded Asian American, I wonder how reprises of "Democracy" and struggles over US democracy could make possible a stage for radical democracy where we participate, share, and have our basic needs met without flattening racial differences and without *The King and I*. Still, I dream.

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[118] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 76.