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Dramatic Publishing

LETTERS TO A STUDENT REVOLUTIONARY

by

ELIZABETH WONG



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(LETTERS TO A STUDENT REVOLUTIONARY)

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LETTERS TO A STUDENT REVOLUTIONARY

A Full-Length Drama in One Act
For 2 women, 4-person chorus (1f, 3m; multiple roles)

CHARACTERS

BIBI 20s, a Chinese-American woman

KAREN20s, a Chinese woman

A CHORUS of four play the following roles:

CHARLIE / LU YAN / CHORUS ONE

BROTHER / FATHER / I.N.S. OFFICER / CHORUS TWO

SOLDIER / BOSS / CAT / JONATHAN / CHORUS THREE

MOTHER / MEXICAN LADY / CHORUS FOUR

PLACE: China and the United States.

TIME: One decade, 1979 - 1989.

There is no intermission.

LETTERS TO A STUDENT REVOLUTIONARY

AT RISE: *The CHORUS stand impassively together, upstage.
BIBI is downstage.*

BIBI. No peanut butter. No cheese. No toast. And I'm sick of jook. Jook is no joke. Jook for breakfast—yesterday, today, tomorrow. What is jook, you ask?

CHORUS ONE (*offers a bowl*). Rice porridge.

CHORUS. It's good for you.

BIBI. Boring. That's it. I've had it. (*To audience.*) I rebelled against breakfast. I pushed myself away from the table. The chair went flying like a hockey puck on ice. I struck a defiant Bette Davis pose. (*To CHORUS ONE.*) "Get that slop away from me, you pig!" (*To audience.*) My parents were appalled at my behavior. "You are rebel without cause," my mother said. Hey, I couldn't help it. I'm haunted by the ghost of James Dean. So wherein I wished I was sunning in the Bahamas, instead I was Kunta Kinte of the new roots generation—touring China with Mom and Dad. (*Chinese opera music clangs. BIBI hates it by smiling too broadly.*) Loved the music. Also, loved the toasting of the honored guests.

CHORUS [ALL]. *Gom bei!*

BIBI (*to CHORUS*). *Gom bei!* (*To audience.*) Oh sure, I loved the endless tours—the jade factory, brocade factory, carpet factory. But how could I appreciate it without some proper

grub. John Wayne wouldn't stand for it, he'd shoot the cook, who was probably a Chinese anyway. (*CHORUS ONE offers the bowl again.*) Cheerios?

CHORUS ONE. Jook.

BIBI. What a nightmare! (*BIBI abruptly runs upstage. She, not the CHORUS, sets the scene. [Playwright's note: The CHORUS should not be individuated.] BIBI continues, to audience.*) I took to the streets of Beijing. Wandered into Tiananmen Square—a hungry look in my eyes, a vain hope in my heart. (*To CHORUS FOUR.*) You there, sweeper. Could you please tell me where I might locate a golden oasis of fast food? (*To CHORUS TWO.*) Hey there, Mr. Chicken man, spare an egg for a simple sunnyside up? (*Goes downstage, to audience.*) Someday, right next to that rosy-faced mug of Chairman Mao, there'll be a golden arch and a neon sign flashing—billions and billions served. No place is truly civilized without Mickey D and a drive-up window. (*Runs back upstage, to CHORUS THREE.*) 'Scuse me, Mr. Soldier, can you possibly direct me to the nearest greasy spoon? (*CHORUS THREE slowly turns to look at BIBI.*)

CHORUS ONE (*to audience*). Summer 1979. Tourism was still so new in China.

(*KAREN enters, pushing an old coaster bicycle.*)

KAREN (*to audience*). I am on my way home from the factory. End of the graveyard shift. Is this the correct phrase? Yes, I think so. Graveyard shift. This morning, there is much mist. But it is already hot like hell. Do I say that right? Yes, I think so.

CHORUS FOUR (*to audience*). I sweep. I sweep. Everything must be clean.

KAREN. The square is very crowded, very many people everywhere. But I see a girl. She looks like me. But her hair is curly like the tail of a pig. She wears pink, lavender, indigo. She is a human rainbow. (*KAREN steps towards BIBI. But the CHORUS intimidates her.*)

CHORUS FOUR (*to KAREN*). I sweep you if you become unclean. Watch out for contamination! (*Whispered, to CHORUS ONE.*) You, you there, waiter!

CHORUS ONE (*overlapped whisper, to CHORUS TWO*). Watch out! You, you there, butcher!

CHORUS TWO (*overlapped whisper, to KAREN*). Watch out! You, you there. (*KAREN backs away from BIBI.*)

CHORUS FOUR (*to audience*). My duty to sweep all day. My duty to sweep all night. My back hurts. But I have duty to perform.

KAREN. What harm is there to practice a little English?

CHORUS THREE (*to KAREN*). I am watching her, and... (*To audience.*) I am watching you.

BIBI (*to audience*). Oh look. Grandmothers with ancient faces, pushing bamboo strollers like shopping carts. Let's peek. (*She does.*) Ahhhhh, sweetest little babies with wispy, fuzzy, spiky hair.

KAREN (*to audience*). Look, there is a butcher I know. He carries chickens upside down, hurrying to market. He does not see me.

BIBI (*to audience*). Talk about ego. Check these pictures, bigger than billboards on Sunset Boulevard. And what's playing? That's the Mao matinee. That's Lenin. Stalin. Is that guy Marx? Yup. Give the girl a piece of the pie.

KAREN (*to audience*). There, a big strong worker shoulders his load of bamboo for scaffolds. He helps to build a hospital. He is too busy to notice me.

BIBI (*to audience*). Bricklayers push a cartful of bricks. A man carries a pole balanced with two hanging baskets, filled with live fish. Great smell! I think I'm going to faint. Bicycles everywhere in the square.

CHORUS ONE. Yes, a busy morning in the square. (*The CHORUS, one by one, build an impenetrable human wall between KAREN and BIBI.*)

CHORUS FOUR (*to audience*). I am not you and I am not me. I *am* a good citizen of the State.

CHORUS TWO (*to audience*). With so much going on, so many people, who pays attention to an inconsequential girl on a bicycle?

KAREN. I will go up to her and speak to her. We will make beautiful sentences together.

CHORUS FOUR (*to audience*). I am watching too. Watching everything. It is my duty as a good citizen of the State. (*KAREN tries to break the wall.*)

CHORUS THREE (*to audience, overlapping*). Anarchy will *not* be tolerated.

CHORUS TWO (*overlapping*). Even a spark of spirit will be squashed.

CHORUS ONE (*overlapping*). Wild behavior will not be permitted.

CHORUS THREE (*overlapping*). Wild thinking will not be permitted.

CHORUS ONE (*overlapping*). Any messes will be cleaned up.

CHORUS TWO (*overlapping*). That is what a broom is for.

CHORUS FOUR (*overlapping*). This is my sword. My broom.

CHORUS [ALL] (*to audience*). We must have cleanliness. The State will insist.

KAREN. Hello.

BIBI (*ignoring her*). Like in *Vertigo*. Jimmy Stewart climbing the steps, looking down from the tower. Or is that Orson Welles, the funhouse mirrors, *Lady From Shanghai*? Everything going round and round and round in a woozy circle. (*BIBI examines each member of the CHORUS.*) I see me and I see me and I see me. But not really, you know. I don't fit in, not at all.

KAREN (*breaks through the wall, crosses over to BIBI. Tentatively*). Hello. (*BIBI doesn't hear. KAREN steps closer. The CHORUS steps into line, turning their backs to the audience.*) Please excuse.

BIBI. Oh, hello.

KAREN. Please. Not so loud. (*Beat.*) Are you?

BIBI (*whispers*). I am. How can you tell?

KAREN. Ahh. (*Pause.*) Your hair.

BIBI. Completely unnatural, I know. It's called a permanent. Why something's called permanent when you have it redone every six months I'll never know. More like a temporary, if you ask me. Go figure.

KAREN. Go to figure.

BIBI. Right. It's like every time I go to the salon, they want to give me the same old, tired thing—the classic bob and bangs, *exactly* like yours. So I plead, “Please do something different.” Understand? But every time, without fail, I end up with...you know...(*Indicates KAREN's hair.*) *that*—bland and boring, like breakfast.

KAREN. Like breakfast.

BIBI. Right. They tell me, “But, oh no, you look so cute. A little China doll, that's what you are.” Make me *puke*. So I say, “Aldo, baby darling, perm it. Wave it. Frizz it. Spike it. Color it blue.” So if you look in the light. See? Not black, but blue with red highlights, tinged with orange. It's unusual, don't you think?

KAREN. You want haircut like me? That easy. Very simple. I do it for you.

BIBI. Sorry. I know I talk too fast. I'm what is known as an energetic person. I have so much energy, I sometimes think I'll leap out of my clothes.

KAREN. No, I'm sorry. My comprehending is very bad. My English is too stupid. But I wish to practice. I would like to have hair curly like yours. Can you do that for me?

BIBI. Sure, you come to California. And I'll set you up with Aldo. But I warn you, he'll poof and pull and snip, and you think you're going to be a new woman, but you get *banged* and bobbed every time.

KAREN (*starts to touch BIBI's sleeve; then withdraws shyly*).

Here we have only a few colors. Grey and blue and green.

BIBI. Grey and blue and green are good colors.

KAREN. May I ask what is your name?

BIBI. Bibi. My name is Bibi. (*They reach to shake hands, but before they touch, BIBI and KAREN freeze. The CHORUS speaks to the audience.*)

CHORUS THREE. It was nothing. Conversation lasted two, three minutes, tops.

CHORUS FOUR (*overlapping*). Anything can happen in two, three minutes. Did they touch?

CHORUS ONE (*overlapping*). Was there a connection?

CHORUS TWO (*overlapping*). Did they touch?

CHORUS ONE (*overlapping*). Did she have a newspaper?

CHORUS THREE (*overlapping*). A book?

CHORUS TWO (*overlapping*). Was there an exchange?

CHORUS FOUR (*overlapping*). Did they touch?

CHORUS THREE (*overlapping*). Did they touch?

CHORUS TWO (*overlapping*). Watch her very closely. Such encounters might be dangerous.

CHORUS FOUR (*whispered*). Dangerous.

CHORUS ONE (*overlapping, whispered*). Dangerous.

CHORUS THREE (*overlapping, whispered*). Dangerous.

BIBI (*to audience*). Our conversation lasted about two, three minutes, tops. It was a fleeting proverbial blink of the eye.

We didn't have a pencil or even a scrap of paper. (*The two women move away from each other. BIBI shouts.*) That's Los Angeles, California. U.S.A. 90026. Can you remember all of that?

KAREN (*nods vigorously. To self*). Yes, I will remember. Yes. Yes, I remember it.

BIBI (*to audience*). She didn't even tell me her name. (*The CHORUS all sound like television newscasters.*)

CHORUS THREE. The girl peddled away.

CHORUS TWO. Merged with the other bicycles merging together.

CHORUS ONE. Bibi couldn't distinguish one rider from the other.

BIBI. I went back to the hotel, hamburgerless.

CHORUS FOUR. Then Bibi and her parents boarded the train to Hong Kong.

CHORUS ONE. Where she ate a fish filet at the McDonald's on Nathan Road.

CHORUS TWO. Where she also found a Pizza Hut.

CHORUS ONE. She stopped in every store and she shopped from dawn 'til dusk.

BIBI. Now that's freedom. Shopping from dawn 'til dusk.

CHORUS (*whispers*)

BIBI (*to audience*)

There is no you and there is no me. But China is changing.

There is no you and there is no me. KAREN

There is no you. There is no me. But China is changing.

CHORUS THREE. Nowhere is a hint of anarchy tolerated.

CHORUS [ALL]. Not here, nor there. Not anywhere.

CHORUS TWO. Bibi went back home to California, U.S.A.
And that was the beginning.

CHORUS THREE (*to CHORUS TWO*). The beginning of what?

CHORUS ONE (*to audience*). The beginning of a most *uncomfortable* correspondence.

(KAREN in her bedroom.)

KAREN (*writes*). Summer, 1979. My dear American friend...
(Scratches out, starts again.) My dear new friend. Greetings from Beijing. *(KAREN sits back, stares into space.)*

(BIBI on the beach. Slides of the beach.)

BIBI (*to audience*). Summer, 1979. *This* is Venice Beach. I have my chair, hunkered down in the sand, positioned for maximum good tanning rays. The pier to my left. The muscle boys to my right. The surfers in their tight black wet suits. Life can't get better than someone muscular in a tight black wet suit.

(CHARLIE, a virile, nice young man, brings on a blaring radio playing "Good Vibrations" by The Beach Boys.)

BIBI (*to audience*). Speaking of which, my friend. A cross between Frankie Avalon and Louis Jordan, which I guess makes me a cross between Annette Funicello and Leslie Caron.

CHARLIE. Limon? Ma cheri Gidget Gigi?

BIBI (*to audience*). Not bad. But temporary. I mean this guy thinks “Casablanca” is a fine wine. He does try, though, and he brings me lemonade. So here we are, me and Casanova, under an umbrella of blue sky, hoping for a beach blanket bingo state of mind. But I admit, I’ve been a bit preoccupied. (*BIBI shows a letter to the audience.*)

CHARLIE (*to BIBI*). Preoccupied, nothing. You’ve been downright morose. Whatsa matter, punky pumpkin? You been bluesy woozy all day.

BIBI. Turn that thing off.

CHARLIE. Okey dokey, cupcake. (*She resumes reading the letter.*) My lady Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, command me. I live to serve.

BIBI. Oh, put a lid on it. (*To audience.*) Like I said. He does try. (*To CHARLIE.*) Caesar, look on this. (*BIBI shows him the letter. He takes it, examines it.*)

CHARLIE. Nice stamp. (*KAREN continues. CHARLIE reads.*) “Summer, 1979. Dear Bibi, greetings from China. Do you remember me? I am the girl with whom you have shared a conversation.” (*To BIBI.*) Looks like you’ve got a pen pal. I think it’s very sweet.

BIBI. Keep reading.

CHARLIE. Read. All right. “I met you in Tiananmen Square, I write to you from my little room...”

KAREN (*overlapping*). ...Tiananmen Square. I write to you from my little room. There is no window, but I have a big picture of a map to show me wondrous sights of America. The Grandest Canyon and Okey Dokey Swamp. I share my room with my brother who teaches English at the high school.

(*Her BROTHER steps from the CHORUS.*)

BROTHER. Hey, ugly, turn out the light!

KAREN. I would like to get a new brother. Is that possible in America? I think anything is possible where you live.

(A CAT steps from the CHORUS, sits at KAREN's feet.)

CAT *(to audience)*. Meeooww.

BROTHER *(to KAREN)*. And get that hairball out of the room. Or I'll make kitty stew!

KAREN *(to BROTHER)*. You wouldn't!

BIBI *(to CHARLIE)*. In China, cats are not kept as pets.

KAREN *(to BIBI)*. She is not a pet. I do not own her. She is a free cat.

BROTHER *(to audience)*. Cats are functional. They eat rats. *(To KAREN.)* Or they are *to be eaten*? Which is it?

KAREN *(to audience)*. I put the cat outside. *(To CAT.)* I say, "I am sorry, kitty cat. So very sorry, little kitty. Go on now, go to work and catch some micey mousies." *(To audience.)* And then, she say in extreme irritableness...

CAT. Meeooow.

KAREN *(to audience)*. I pretend to go to sleep. And when my brother starts to snore, I get up and write to you, my dear friend Bibi.

BIBI. Here it comes.

CHARLIE. Bibi, you may sound like a tough cookie, but only I know what a soft, mushy cupcake you are.

BIBI. Oh yeah? Well, read on, *cupcake*.

KAREN *(to audience)*. It is a happy feeling I have...to have you for a secret friend, a special friend. I have much stupidity since I realized I never told you my name. How do you like my name? Do you think this is a good name?

BIBI *(to KAREN)*. Karen? Yes. I think Karen is a good name.

KAREN (to BIBI). Good. I am so glad for this. (To audience.)

I chose my new name in secret. This is my choice. Only my best friend knows about this secret. We call each other, Debbie and Karen. Where you live, you can be open about such matters. But here we must do everything in secret.

CHARLIE. This is a very nice letter, Bibi. Hardly appropriate of you to be so provoked about it, cupcake. (Provoked by the belittling endearment, BIBI takes the letter from CHARLIE.) Hey!

BIBI. You aren't helping. And *don't* you cupcake me anymore...stud muffin. Stop patronizing me, categorizing me, objectifying me, labeling me like some damned Hostess Ding Dong.

CHARLIE. Why so miffed, love bun?

BIBI. There you go again.

CHARLIE. I just...

BIBI. You just what? A lot you know. *This*, for one, is not a nice letter. This just *sounds* like a nice letter.

CHARLIE. Cupcake, not everybody has ulterior motives. Have a little faith in human nature.

BIBI. You are not listening. This letter, stud muffin, is crafted on two predictable emotions—guilt and more guilt. I will NOT be made to feel responsible before my time.

CHARLIE. Are we not our brother's keeper?

BIBI. No, we are not. Mom and Dad slaved so I could squander all their hard work on college. On top of everything, they got annoying letters like this.

KAREN. Bibi, you have such freedom.

BIBI (overlapping). Bibi, you have such freedom. (To CHARLIE.) Mom calls them "Ailment-of-the-month" letters. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lee, my dear very rich American relation, could you send us some money since life here is so bad, and you have it so good.

KAREN. I have no freedom. None whatsoever. Is it my misfortune to be born in my country and you were born in yours? I look at you and it is as if I look at myself in a glass.

CHARLIE (*to KAREN*). You mean mirror.

KAREN. Thank you for this correction. (*Beat.*) Yes, I look in mirror, yes. I think, "You are me." I was meant to be born in the United States, to live in freedom like you. Do you understand? (*Beat.*) Two days after I met you, my boss at the factory where I am in the accounting department, asked to speak to me.

(The CAT gets up, and with an abrupt turn becomes the smiling BOSS, who approaches KAREN.)

KAREN. My boss has a kind voice, but a frown is in his heart. I am taken to a small room in the basement. This is *not* a good sign.

BOSS. Please sit down.

CHARLIE (*to KAREN*). Then what happened?

KAREN. I sat down.

BOSS (*kindly, as if to an errant child*). You were seen talking to an American. An American student. Now, you mustn't be worried. Don't be afraid. You may talk to Westerners now.

CHARLIE (*to BIBI*). I read about this. China is relaxing some of its policies.

BOSS. We are more relaxed under the new policies. But you must not listen to what they say. You must not get any ideas. (*Recites by rote.*) Good citizens have only ideas that also belong to The State. The *State is your mother*. The *State is your father*. The *State is more* than your mother or your father. Do you understand?