

Tacoma Opera's 'Tacoma Method' takes on city's expulsion of Chinese residents

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Poet Zhang Er is librettist for Tacoma Opera's "Tacoma Method." (Angela Carlyle)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Sometimes opera gets a bad rap as having irrelevant plots or perpetuating antiquated stereotypes. But opera companies are producing contemporary works that tell true stories about our diverse communities. One of those works, a Tacoma Opera world premiere, reckons with the city's own racist past and challenges audiences to consider how to move forward as a multicultural city.

A decade in the making, "[Tacoma Method](#)" recounts the history of Tacoma's 1885 expulsion of its Chinese residents and the destruction of its Chinatown. With a score by local modern classical composer Gregory Youtz that draws on both Western and Chinese classical music traditions, the libretto was written by local poet Zhang Er. [Some of the music](#) premiered at Symphony Tacoma last month. Now Tacoma Opera is premiering the fully staged opera at the Rialto Theater in Tacoma from March 31-April 2.

"Tacoma Method"

March 31-April 2; Rialto Theater, 310 S. Ninth St., Tacoma; \$37-\$130; 253-591-5894, tacomaopera.org

Youtz serves on the board of the Chinese Reconciliation Project Foundation, an organization that raises awareness of the officially sanctioned [expulsion in 1885](#) of Tacoma's Chinese residents, who [made up about 10% of the city's population](#) at the time.

Many Chinese people had come to the area in the 1870s and 1880s to work on the railroad. Some had come even earlier, during the gold rush, and started their own businesses. A Chinatown began to grow and thrive in Tacoma. But as the economy soured, an anti-Chinese movement began to grow both locally and nationally, with the labor movement taking a hard stance against Chinese workers, whom they deemed willing to work for lower wages. "In fact, of course Chinese laborers worked for as much as they could get, and no American labor organization invited them to join the movement to improve wages and working conditions," [according to HistoryLink](#).

Anti-Chinese sentiment became a common campaign [platform](#) throughout the West. In Tacoma, driven by newly elected Mayor Jacob Weisbach (himself a German immigrant) and local organizations of white laborers, an "Anti-Chinese Congress" took place in late September 1885, issuing a decree that set [Nov. 1 as the deadline](#) for all Chinese residents to leave the city. Many left before the deadline. On Nov. 3, hundreds of white Tacomans marched through Chinatown, rounding up and forcibly removing the remaining 200 Chinese residents onto a Portland-bound train. During the next few days, looting sparked fires that burned down the entire Chinatown. Although 27 people were eventually indicted, [no one was ever convicted](#) of a crime for their part in the expulsion. Nationally, the reaction was mixed; there was public outrage, but many contemporary newspapers around the country celebrated the "Tacoma Method" as a model for action against Chinese communities.

In 2012, when Noel Koran, the then-director of Tacoma Opera, attended a CRPF fundraiser, it sparked the idea for an opera. Koran applied for a grant to develop an educational opera about the Tacoma Method to be performed in schools (Youtz and others on the creative team who grew up in Washington never learned about the Tacoma Method in school). In the meantime, Youtz reached out to Zhang, with whom he had previously collaborated on the opera "[Fiery Jade](#)."

The opera company didn't win the grant, but by then Youtz and Zhang were already captivated by the idea of an opera that would illuminate a part of Washington's history that had been erased. "We decided to move on and, as builders would say, 'write it on spec,'" said Youtz. That approach suited Zhang, who saw much more than a history lesson in the Tacoma Method. She saw a timeless human story that had been ignored for too long, worthy of the grand opera treatment.

Writing the opera

Zhang Er (the pen name of Mingxia Li) always loved poetry and theater but only started writing seriously when she moved from China to New York to earn her Ph.D. in pharmacology. "So far away from the motherland and living in English, writing poetry in Chinese became my way of keeping myself whole," she said. Several volumes of her poetry have been published in Taiwan; [three of them](#) are available in translation from Zephyr Press.

Zhang became fascinated by the Western opera canon after moving to the West Coast, where she teaches courses in biology and Chinese cultural studies at The Evergreen State College. "Some of the classical operas, the plot was so cliché and the language is so uncultivated. I thought, 'Wow, I can write better operas!'" So she taught herself to write English librettos by studying Wagner and contemporary artists like poet Alice Goodman and composer Kaija Saariaho.

When Youtz approached her to work on "Tacoma Method," she began research to find the human story buried in history.

"In all these historical accounts, I always have this feeling that something is missing. The 'something missing' is the Chinese voice. Who are these Chinese people?" she said.

She studied a period anthology of Chinese American poetry and original court documents from lawsuits on behalf of the expelled Tacoma residents filed by the Qing government of China and the American contractors who brought Chinese laborers to Tacoma. The testimony of one businessman described the day his family was driven out.

"He was talking about his wife, who went mad on that day when she was dragged out of her home and into the street, and the whole community was sent off on the train out of Tacoma. So finally, I feel I have an emotional connection with the community," said Zhang. She also had her protagonist.

Zhang and Youtz met regularly to develop the story and its connection to the music.

“I go to work with pencil and paper, making up stuff and letting Zhang’s words begin to sing to me,” said Youtz. A music professor at Pacific Lutheran University, Youtz has studied Chinese music for 30 years. To present two different cultures sonically, he wrote for an unusual 20-person chamber orchestra including four percussionists, banjo and guitar.



Gregory Youtz is composer for Tacoma Opera’s “Tacoma Method.” (John Froschauer / Pacific Lutheran University)

“When you’re dealing with Chinese music, you’re dealing with a lot more percussion than we’re used to in the Western classical tradition,” said Youtz. In the score, European instruments do double duty; banjo can be played to resemble the Chinese sanxian, while guitar can sound like the pipa. A church organ played in its highest register doubles as a sheng.

“It’s fun for me to be able to create sounds evocative of both cultures from the same group of musicians,” said Youtz.

Producing the opera

Founded in 1968 as a South Sound outreach project by Seattle Opera, Tacoma Opera became an independent, professional company in 1981. Over the next three decades, public support and a close partnership with Pacific Lutheran University enabled the company to premiere several operas and become an incubator for emerging artists.

“We understand the rolling ramifications of violence and racism, how it really permeates our society. It’s not a singular event but an event horizon that moves outward and really transforms the fabric of our community,” said Tacoma Opera’s general director Limuel Forgey. So the company jumped at the chance to produce “Tacoma Method” when it received a National Endowment for the Arts grant last year.

Casting began in July 2022 — very late by opera standards. They brought in PLU music professor Jim Brown, who had worked with Youtz and Zhang on “Fiery Jade,” to conduct.

For the role of labor contractor Sing Lee, the team discovered Washington, D.C.-based Allan Palacios Chan, while baritone Suchan Kim plays Mr. May. But many roles were filled closer to home. PLU voice professor Soon Cho will sing the protagonist Mrs. May; Seattle-based soprano Ivy Zhou was cast as her friend Mrs. Lee. Tacoma Opera regular and Metropolitan Opera veteran Robert McPherson will perform Mayor Weisbach.



2 of 2 | Suchan Kim plays Mr. May in Tacoma Opera's "Tacoma Method." (Courtesy of Tacoma Opera)

“Still playing out”

The May family was driven out of Tacoma nearly 140 years ago, but everyone on the production team is acutely aware that the story is still relevant.

Although the story takes place in the past, Youtz says Zhang’s story asks existential questions for Tacoma today: “What about the fact that we have one of the largest detention centers for illegal detainees in the country literally 2 miles from the theater, the fact that we’re the only major city on the West Coast without a Chinatown? How do we as a city respond to our other immigrant communities?”

Zhang hopes that audiences can identify with her characters. She said, “It is so important for us to revisit that history because it is still playing out in our life. This conflict of people coming together from different backgrounds and cultures, different foods, habits, religions, interests. So many people come from different places to America. How do we negotiate that?”

Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer; gemmadeealexander.com. This report is supported, in part, by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

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