Daily

Life

Tiger Tales: Shadow puppetry's ferocious fairytale

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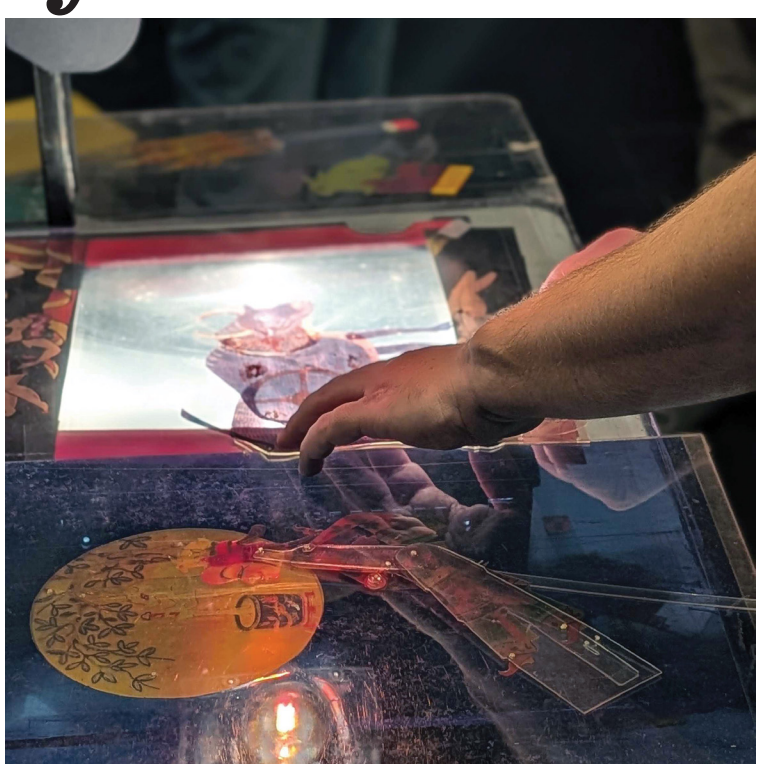
Harrison Greene puppeteering at Friday's show. Chinese Theatre Works, based in New York, performs classical Chinese theatre arts and western fusion shows. PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



Acetate puppets used during the performance. "Tiger Tales," by Chinese Theatre Works, blends western influence and traditional Chinese puppetry. PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

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Chinese Theatre Works (CTW) performed their shadow puppetry piece "Tiger Tales" on Saturday, Feb. 28 at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry (BIMP) in Storrs, Conn.

The hour-long performance focused on a grandmother rabbit spirit who tells her granddaughter about her days as the Tiger's prime minister.

CTW often performs traditional fairy tales, but "Tiger Tales" is an original work written by Stephen Kaplin and Kuang-Yu Fong, initially performed in 2002. Despite its modern initiation and Western influence, "Tiger Tales" draws on China's 2,000-year-old history of shadow puppetry, including references to the Jade Rabbit in the moon and animal spirits.

"In China, we believe that animals can turn into humans," Fong said. "How will I know whether a person is a real person or an animal spirit? Go to Chinatown and see — if someone has an animal on their head, that's a spirit. Now you know the secret!"

The first story was based on the Chinese saying, "伴君如伴虎" or "Working for the emperor is as dangerous as working for a tiger." In it, the tiger, the king of the jungle, looks for a prime minister to "do all the work and get none of the credit!" as Fong put.

The second story was based on the Chinese saying, "鸠占鹊巢," or as Fong translated, "The mean big bird took over the small bird's nest." In it, the unwelcome tiger appears in the newly-crowned Prime Minister Rabbit's kitchen, to her peril. The audience participated by "crying" along with various animals that came to confront the tiger in the rabbit's kitchen. The audience played along, chanting, "The tiger's in my kitchen and he won't get out!"

Chinese Theatre Works, founded by Kaplin and Fong in 2001, brings traditional Chinese performing arts to a modern stage, showcasing opera, shadow theatre, puppetry, dance and music. Kaplin studied puppetry at UConn under Dr. Frank Ballard, the founder of the University of Connecticut Puppet Arts Program. Fong majored in Chinese Opera at the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan and taught there before gaining a master's in educational theater at New York University.

Performing with them was UConn alum Harrison Greene, a member of CTW with credits on Comedy Central, International Puppet Fringe NYC and more. The trio's connection to the art form and to UConn's campus made their performance even more meaningful.

After the show, Kaplin talked about the history of the shadow puppets from the show.

"All the shadow puppets you see here were based after our collection of traditional Chinese puppets, made out of donkey leather," Kaplin said.

The puppets were brought to U.S. in the 1920s by Pauline Benton, an American puppeteer and scholar renowned for her work in Chinese shadow puppet theatre, Kaplin said.

"She passed away, and in her collection she had thousands of these leather puppets," Kaplin said. "They were all packed away, stuffed into a hot garage in southern California for decades, until someone found it and gave it to our friend in NYC, Jo Humphrey."

Jo Humphrey, the founder of The Gold Mountain Institute for Traditional Shadow Theater, spent years restoring hundreds of the puppets from the Benton collection. Upon her retirement, CTW received the restored puppets.

"We took them apart, put them on a Xerox machine and created these acetate, transparent puppets," Kaplin said. Acetate puppets are less fragile, and more effective with the overhead projector.

The audience was filled with people of all ages. Children sat in the front, while students and community members filled the back chairs.

Helen Clark, a community member, attended the show.

"My dad used to work with Frank Ballard," Clark said. "I was born during a Frank Ballard show that my father worked on: UConn's production of Pippin, 1983. I grew up going to the puppet shows at UConn, I got my acting degree at UConn. Most of my best friends were in the puppetry program at UConn. Big love for the art and big love for BIMP!"

When asked about the challenges of the show, Kaplin said, "One of the challenges about doing stuff on the overhead projector is that everything is transparent. You have to give puppets space, light space, so you can see the figure. It's kind of a design challenge in a way."

The transparent puppets can easily overlay one another and create unintended shadows and effects, according to Greene. This restriction requires the puppeteers to be especially careful in how they maneuver the puppets.

"Because of the translucent nature of the puppet, there's no hiding from mistakes," Greene said.

Other challenges in performing include the lightness of the acetate puppets — as the puppets move, their movable limbs can get stuck — and the difficulty in seeing the puppets.

"When you perform in a dark place, if you don't know where your puppet is, forget about it!" Fong said.

Birdbrained Science: Blue, green or aquamarine?

ILLUSTRATION BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE MANAGING EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

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In Mandarin, there's a particular character: 青 ("qing"). The word generally is translated to blue or green. It's not as commonly used nowadays, as there are also separate words for blue and green, but I always think about it whenever people can't agree on if something is blue or green. I bring this up because it reminds me of a bird that we're going to discuss today.

Odds are good that you've seen a blue jay. And if you've been to southern Texas, you might have even spotted a green jay before. (If you're not familiar, look up a green jay; I promise whatever you're picturing is not the same as the real thing.) But how about a jay that's both?

In 2023, such a bird was spotted in the wild for the first time in San Antonio, Texas. The hybrid had blue feathers and a back and tail pattern like a blue jay, but its head was more similar to a green jay's. However, this bird also had a blue upper chin and throat, which aren't features found in either parent species.

A few months later, this same individual was seen following a blue jay flock. The bird seemed to be calling back and forth with the flock, though it also produced a few green jay calls. Shortly afterwards, the hybrid was captured by researchers, who banded the bird and took a blood sample. They also examined the bird and learned that it was a male over a year old. By analyzing DNA from the blood sample, they determined that the hybrid had a green jay mother and a blue jay father. The hybrid was released and wasn't seen again until the summer of 2025.

I'm a believer in the inherent value of existence, and I think that applies to this hybrid. It is noteworthy that this bird exists at all, especially since we've never seen this particular combination in the wild before. (There is another blue x green jay hybrid on record, but this one was produced in captivity in 1965.) But there are deeper reasons for the novelty of the hybrid as well.

Bird hybrids are not uncommon, but most vertebrate hybrids have parents from closely related species. Blue and green jays do not fall into this category; they are only distantly related, as the last time they shared an ancestor was about 7.5 million years ago. Additionally — and perhaps, most importantly — blue and green jays historically have been isolated from each other, meaning they were living in different areas that didn't share much overlap.

However, this is changing. Using data from eBird — a citizen science database that collects information on bird sightings — researchers found that the number of reported interactions between the two species has risen since 2000. Researchers also used climate data to build models showing each species' current and future ranges (the area where a species is found), and where the two species might overlap.

The ranges of both green and blue jays have grown in recent years. In the United States, green jays have historically only been found in southern Texas. However, in the last 20 years, green jays have also been moving northward into central Texas. Based on the models, green jay range expansion seems to be linked to warmer temperatures and less snow, which are results of global warming.

Blue jays have also expanded their range over the last few decades, moving into south and west Texas. Unlike green jays, it's not clear if climate change helped blue jays increase their range. What's more certain is that blue jays seem to increase their range in the wake of human settlement. In other words, as humans move into more and more areas, blue jays follow.

Though green and blue jay range expansions may not have been caused by the exact same reasons, anthropogenic (human) activity influenced both expansions, even if indirectly, since the current era of global warming is largely caused by human activity. This means that the green x blue jay hybrid is not only the result of two distantly-related species, but it is also the result of an anthropogenically-driven no-analog (unprecedented) species interaction.

Human activity isn't only affecting the ranges of blue and green jays. These two species most likely aren't the only no-analog interactions that we'll be seeing. This hybrid probably also won't be the last new one we see. As the climate warms, more species will continue moving into entirely new areas and more species will come into contact with other species they have never interacted with before. These new encounters might give us insight as to how climate change and other anthropogenic causes are changing the systems of the natural world.

Today's content was based on "An Intergeneric Hybrid Between Historically Isolated Temperate and Tropical Jays Following Recent Range Expansion," a 2025 paper by Brian R. Stokes and Timothy H. Keitt.