

Whither Chinese Composers?

Chou Wen-chung

In China, the millennia-old concept of the traditional Chinese wenren (philosopher-artist) has in the past century been replaced by the new image of a ‘composer’ who functions professionally on an international stage. Today, having followed Western composers for more than half a century, it is time for Chinese composers to think of the revival of the wenren spirit. Beginning in the 1940s, and continuing to the present, four waves of Asian composers have come to the West to study contemporary music—and even those who remained in Asia have felt the pressure to conform to Western aesthetics. In today’s commercially oriented ‘world music’ environment, there is an urgent need for Chinese composers to acquire an intimate knowledge of their own cultural heritage in order to contribute meaningfully and on equal terms with the West towards a true confluence of musical cultures.

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‘Chinese’... ‘Music’... ‘Composers’... Once upon a time, these terms would have conjured up stereotyped simplistic images—visual or sonic. No more. Today, none of these terms can be defined without complex investigations or scholarly debates. Who is a Chinese? It depends on whether the term is defined ethnically, politically or culturally. There are those from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and throughout Southeast Asia, and, of course, overseas Chinese on every continent. And what about mainland Chinese now settled in the West or elsewhere? All of them have different political, cultural and even ethnic identities, and yet most Chinese assume every other Chinese has the same cultural heritage as theirs. And this is also an assumption of Westerners. The truth is no assumption can be made that all Chinese are the same politically, culturally and ethnically in view of the fact that Chinese culture historically embodies a large number of indigenous ethnicities. Today, much depends on when they were born, where they spent their childhood or formative years, where they were educated and where they now live.

As for Chinese music or Chinese composers, it is even more complex. First of all, it depends on whether one is referring to living composers only. In the West, the

difference between the music of a major figure of the past, say Beethoven, and a living composer can be reasonably recognized as an historical evolution within the West European cultural complex. In China, however, the difference is huge as there appears to be no continuity between the music of a living composer and an historical figure since Chinese composers have now assumed Western practices. For example, the image of a Western composer, as popularized by romantic novels and movies until recently, is that of a composer pounding on a grand piano in a romantic, emotionally charged ambience in search of an individualized expression of some intense personal feeling. Its romantic aura notwithstanding, this picture still applies to the Western composer, at least before the era of computers. In China, a similarly traditional picture of a Chinese composer, at least until the early 1900s, as seen in numerous brushstroke paintings and in the *qin* (zither) handbooks, is that of a scholar, sitting properly in front of the *qin*, up on a mountain by a stream, facing the woods and appearing to be devoid of personal emotion. And almost invariably, this scholar is playing or composing a piece about some phenomenon in nature, and its philosophical or aesthetic impact. Today, this picture is no longer recognizable to most Chinese, wherever they are or whatever cultural heritage they bear.

An even greater difference between the two images is that the Western composer traditionally is considered a genius without any social or political responsibility, whereas his Chinese counterpart is never referred to as a composer and has never enjoyed the public recognition accorded to his Western colleague, nor is he compensated. Instead, he (and sometimes she) is an all-round philosopher-artist (*wenren*, 文人), who composes idealistically about nature and larger issues rather than personal emotions, and often shares a moral responsibility for, as well as influence over, the society with scholars, painters, calligraphers and poets.

History, Language, Aesthetics and the *Wenren* Spirit

The traditional 'professional' composers in China were referred to as 'musical craftsmen' who composed entertainment music, or as 'musical officers' of the court who composed music for ceremonial events or official functions. There are exceptions. For example, during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), many *wenren* avoided serving Mongol rulers by working as poets for musical drama or as landscape painters, thereby elevating these art forms to one of the highest artistic achievements and innovations in Chinese history. We can see, therefore, the traditional Chinese concept of a composer as 'artist' is cast in a very different mold to that of the West, today as in the past. It then follows that the Chinese composer *today* is in fact someone who functions internationally as a 'composer' in the Western sense, rather than in accordance with the millennia-old concept of a philosopher-composer in traditional Chinese society.

What then is Chinese music today? Is it music by a Chinese composer that emulates the music of the modern West? Or is it music that merely imitates or copies music of the present or past? Is it Western or Chinese? Is it unreasonable to expect a

true Chinese composer in modern times to preserve some of his forebears' commitment to Chinese aesthetics and to dedicate himself selflessly to the cultural continuity of the society? Actually, questions about continuing the integrity of traditional Chinese culture have long been raised, ever since the rising interest in Western culture at the height of European imperialism in Asia more than a century ago, but the history of Chinese civilization shows a long-term pattern of cultural continuity with periodic short-term cultural discontinuity. This pattern of recurrent cultural confrontations dissolving into a continual sequence of interaction/integration shows its strength, as well as its capacity for growth.

Contrary to the fairly stable history of West European culture across its history, China was under constant assault from all directions, with numerous major upheavals that led to lasting transformation in its culture. During the past two millennia alone, China was under sustained occupation or in chaos for practically half of the time! Thus the original Chinese culture was able each time to persist and integrate the incurring cultures and rejuvenate its own legacies. Therefore, what appears to be incongruous and negative in Chinese culture today may augur well for tomorrow when a re-integrated Chinese culture emerges, but the capacity of a culture to interact with others depends on the scope and the depths of its philosophical speculations and the strengths of its theoretical construct.

It is often observed that Chinese music, in particular, does not have a solid theoretical base; a view that has also caused modern Chinese composers and educators to ignore Chinese theoretical writings. In reality, though, such an observation only illustrates a universal attitude of judging other cultures exclusively according to the conventions of one's own. Contrary to Western practice, Chinese traditional arts theory does not limit itself to the investigation of materials and structure of any particular art form. It is concerned with concept and perception, how philosophy and aesthetics interpret nature, and the human response to nature; and then how such concerns are expressed in each of the art forms. Moreover, the Chinese maintain a unified theory for all artistic media, presumably influenced by the nature of Chinese language.

The use of ideograms instead of an alphabet generates a fundamental difference in how ideas are transmitted—by a complex of images and a sequence of sonic events as opposed to reliance on a series of letters that signify a distinct order of vowels and consonants. An ideogram may consist of components that specify objects, action, volition and emotion, or suggest mood, association and so on. The art of calligraphy that projects the ideogram further adds the dimension of time and thereby suggests movement as well. These characteristics of the ideogram have historically made them the foundation of all of the arts in Chinese civilization. For example, the *qin* notation for either a single pitch or a complete sonic event is close to how a composite ideogram conveys information—namely, with each of its components representing an image or a sound that join with all the others to project the overall meaning of the ideogram.

In *qin* notation, the components of each ideogram-like symbol specify not only pitch, articulation, timbre, dynamics and so on, but also additional information such

as vibrato or other forms of pitch modification after the articulation. Thus, such details indicate how a performer is to generate a musical event, just as the components of an ideogram would prompt a calligrapher to carry out his or her brushwork for a character. Both art forms move in space and in time. One might, therefore, say calligraphy is music in ink, and music is calligraphy in sound.¹ In short, because of the concept of a unified aesthetics for all the arts in China, studies on theoretic issues shared by different art forms are not likely to be reiterated for each of them, specifically as a traditional Chinese composer's knowledge is not supposed to be limited to one single discipline.

Throughout East Asia, and particularly in China, there has been a very long history of the philosopher-composer. Perhaps their idealism is exactly what we need, in our seemingly collapsing modern world, to counteract the increasingly egoistic and commodified character of modern music and to aspire to a new musical language. Yet that legacy of a selfless philosopher-composer had been declining since the seventeenth century and completely decimated by the mid-twentieth century at exactly the time when the first wave of Asian composers began to gain recognition in the West with works combining modern practices and various Asian aesthetics, instrumental sonorities and performance practices. Today, more than a half century later, having followed Western composers without making any true contribution to music on their own, should Asian, or at least Chinese, composers not think of a revival of the *wenren* spirit? This may well be what is needed at this time inasmuch as Western composers seem to be at a loss for creative direction since the death of the early twentieth-century masters.

Dilemma for the Asian Composer

In fact, the concept of the 'Asian composer' did not exist until the first wave of such composers began appearing in the West to study contemporary Western music and function professionally in Western societies 60 years ago. The few who came in the 1940s and 1950s had a substantially traditional education in their own heritage and strict training in traditional Western music.² They also conducted research in their own musical legacy because they were mesmerized by the historic need and the timely opportunity—highlighted by the end of a universal war—for developing a musical language built equally on European, Asian and other legacies. They were also fortunate in having apprenticed under some of the great masters of the time, and emerged as professionals before theoretic proclamations by young European composers took hold of the music world in the mid-century. In short, they studied in the West during a period of cultural ferment, but escaped from unwanted influences. Their resolve to be independent and the uniqueness of the music of each of them did not seem to have seriously influenced other Asian composers, who began to show up in the West in the 1960s and 1970s in a second wave. Almost all of them followed established Western trends and subsequently returned home to teach.³ It was not until the mid-1980s, when I brought a whole group of young post-Cultural

Revolution Chinese composers to the United States, that the ambience for the Asian composer changed drastically, but not in a healthy direction. By then, education in the West had swung away from its traditional European heritage, thereby severely weakening its centuries-old strength. Meanwhile, the healthy interest in the so-called 'non-Western' music since the Second World War had been replaced by a commercially oriented interest in so-called 'world music'—a term appropriated from the scholarly community and often used to misrepresent manufactured 'cultural' products.

Such ever-multiplying commodification of the arts, especially those of 'non-Western' varieties, triggered irresponsible promotions that further provoked contempt for and misunderstanding of non-Western cultures, particularly those habitually regarded as inferior or exotic. This was illustrated by the following comment on a radio interview with a renowned American composer and teacher invited to participate in a concert of American and Chinese composers in New York that was organized by a visiting mainland Chinese composer as a musical exchange. He said: 'People have been telling me how much Chinese music can contribute to the future of music. I have studied this and came to the conclusion that whoever said this is bound to be a dilettante'. Similarly, at a symposium on 'world music' in Hong Kong, after a keynote speech urging the music of East, West and other lands to converge towards a new mainstream, an influential European composer and teacher said sarcastically to a roomful of Asian composers including his own former students: '[I]ndeed where are the Asian composers? We have been waiting for them!'

Then, there was this often-heard defensive comment: 'I function *internationally*, I have no need for my *own* culture'. Or: 'I feel I should employ ideas from my own heritage, but I worry that people who like my music now might not like it then'. Some resort to styles much like the *chinoiserie* exportware of the nineteenth century with its juxtaposition of quaint decorations borrowed from both the East and West. Some other young composers, Asian and Western alike, fancy themselves as *beyond culture* inasmuch as they place their faith in the computer and technology. Well, the great master who first advocated better understanding of the role of science in music, Varèse, said half a century ago: '[T]he computer does not compose'. And I might add—technology is only a tool.

These attitudes point to the missing role in modern education of the 'master artist', the cultural conveyer who passes on legacy throughout Southeast Asia, or the 'philosopher-artist' of East Asia whose knowledge transcends all artistic disciplines and, more importantly, whose commitment to his or her artistic legacy never waivers or can be compromised. Such a suggestion may sound archaic today, but how does a composition professor teach young artists whose creativity ultimately depends on a modern expression of their own legacy that may be unfamiliar to the teacher and has always been ignored? The likely truth is that those old-fashioned master artist-teachers have been responsible for the prolonged survival of Asian heritages that have outlasted many other cultures. It is time to reconsider the education for composers and all creative artists of any heritage to ensure that they also learn about their own

heritage from the classics and masters of their own culture instead of only learning modern Western techniques and new speculative theories.

These issues are becoming more notable as more scholars in the West warn of the decline of the spectacular European era, but as I have been saying for the past half century, the time has arrived for an urgent coming together of all cultures, not the least, the long-surviving Eastern and fast-paced Western cultures, to evolve into the next cycle of human history. Unfortunately, while the ultimate decline of the present phase of Western culture appears to be more likely, the revival of Eastern cultures has not materialized, despite the considerable popularity in the West of some highly talented and accomplished Asian composers of the third wave who came in the late 1980s. That their music as a whole fails to rise to the level of true cultural interaction is due to precisely the cultural and social pressures referred to above. How should an Asian composer deal with these dilemmas? Indeed, what is the ultimate role for Chinese composers in particular in view of the remarkable recognition accorded to those of the third wave and the astonishing number of current composition students who are populating China's conservatories literally by the hundreds, many of whom are now or will be doing doctoral studies in the West?

Changing Environment for the Chinese Composer

From the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 until the thaw of United States–China hostility in 1979, mainland China was politically isolated, territorially divided and economically stagnant. Culturally, many of China's legacies were incompatible with Marxist ideology, prompting the new leaders to adopt policies as well as institute public movements against its own millennia-old legacies, except those of its villages and minority ethnicities. Meanwhile, Hong Kong continued under British colonial rule and Taiwan remained under the control of the Nationalists. Neither of these authorities during this period adopted effective policies to promote cultural recovery from the long destructive years of the Chinese–Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Second World War. This means all of the Chinese communities, including those in Southeast Asia, were in a period of cultural stagnancy or repression while the West was extraordinarily vigorous in its cultural revival during the decades after the end of the Second World War (except for the Korean and Vietnam wars). One might add that in the United States, this outburst of creative exploration was, to some degree, stimulated by the popular discovery during the Second World War of cultures worldwide, not the least those of Asia.

Nonetheless, in 1963, Hsu Tsang-Houei (許常惠) (1929–2000) of Taiwan, having returned from his studies in Paris, attended the very first international conference on Asian music in Manila, which was organized by José Maceda (1917–2004) of the first wave of Asian composers. Hsu joined in on a conversation between Maceda and me on the need for an organization for modern Asian music. Hsu later succeeded in

persuading nearby societies to help him set up the first such organization, The Asian Composers League, initially with only representatives from a few East Asian nations, but expanding gradually to include Australia, New Zealand and Israel. Meanwhile, Doming Lam (林樂培) (b.1926) returned to Hong Kong after studying in the United States and became active in promoting international events for all Asian composers. There were then very few composers who were truly active in modern music internationally. Nonetheless, his efforts have been multiplied over much of East and Southeast Asia. Yet it was Maceda who spent decades building up a new tradition of researching one's own heritage as a prerequisite for learning to be a composer. Maceda later joined me in developing strategies and educational planning for promoting cultural conservation among the numerous indigenous cultures in southwest China, many of which share the same heritage with ethnicities in Southeast Asia.

In China, however, composers' exposure to modern music was restricted to only Soviet Russian composers. They were required to compose ideologically using folk and ethnic material exclusively, while ironically allowed to adopt only the styles and technique of nineteenth-century Europe. Nonetheless, there were many talents who were unable to develop freely until years after the end of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In 1977, I reached an understanding in Beijing at the Central Conservatory of Music to establish the Center for United States–China Arts Exchange at Columbia University to carry out cultural exchange. The scope envisioned was to encompass all arts disciplines and all regions culturally related to China. Although the Center was initially established through a non-government agreement, its timing was coordinated with the processes leading to normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979. Its projects were subsequently carried out jointly with the Vice Minister of Culture for the Arts. Among the major projects was a multi-year conference on arts education that led to the establishment of a super-ministerial agency: the National Commission on Arts Education.

On that initial occasion, and regularly thereafter, I delivered to major Chinese arts institutions large numbers of scores and recordings as well as similar materials in other disciplines. The exchange of material was then followed by exchanges of personnel (artists, teachers, theorists and performers) as well as symposia, performances and collaborative projects. Among the talented composers who were earlier sent to Russia to study, Wu Zuqiang (吳祖強) (b.1927) subsequently emerged as a leader in coordinating exchanges between China and the West that greatly transformed the ambience for the education of Chinese composers, which in turn nourished the third wave of composers.

Hsu, Lam and Wu collaborated with me in initiating and cultivating cooperation among mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong composers, and in promoting their interaction with composers worldwide. Subsequently, I also worked with many educators in major conservatories to modernize the curriculum and invite American artists to visit. In such an atmosphere, many young Chinese composers were able to

develop impressively. By the mid-1980s, their progress was so obvious I began to arrange for some of the most qualified to attend Columbia University or visit the United States professionally under the aegis of the Center for United States–China Arts Exchange with scholarships or grants I was able to secure for them. Meanwhile, others also had the opportunity to study in Europe and eventually elsewhere as well. Ironically, a couple of the most gifted and independent never studied abroad, but nonetheless eventually earned considerable recognition in the West. Apparently, they benefited from the intense ambience of exchange over time, but avoided the distractions and temptations they might not have been able to avoid if they had spent years training and functioning in the West.

Naturally, young composers from Taiwan and Hong Kong had also been studying in the West, but in much smaller numbers, and therefore appear to have made a lesser impact internationally. Aside from the vast population gap between mainland China and the other two regions, mainland Chinese composers who went abroad had other advantages. They represented the cream of their generation in China inasmuch as they were the first to be selected to attend conservatories after the Cultural Revolution, during which all true educational activities were suspended. Moreover, in those exceptionally trying years, they learned how to survive and reach their own goals in the end.

As noted earlier, the failure of the third wave composers as a whole to stir cultural interaction is due to a number of factors in the West as well as the East as cited above. I should, however, add to this list the following. In the West, there appears to be a longstanding reluctance to acknowledge any true contribution to the arts by Asian composers, while eager to applaud sensational bravados. I cannot help but recall that as early as the mid-1950s, when my orchestral works were attracting much attention, the most powerful promoter of American music asked me: ‘You are Chinese, aren’t you? Why don’t you do something strange such as throwing a Chinese gong on the stage floor!’ Since then, this remains the tone of endorsement for Asian composers. Such applause for a circus act is perfectly matched by the official line of praise back home in the East urging the artists to go on winning another gold medal, as if they were athletes. And then considering the current American thirst for commodifying any conceivable or imaginable merchandise and the Chinese vogue for emulating everything American, it is not surprising to see how few Chinese composers are aware of the great long-term opportunity there is for them to play a genuine role in shaping the future of music, instead of fulfilling momentary needs of the commercially driven musical enterprises in the West.

And in China, an additional deterrent has been the lack of a true knowledge of China’s own heritage and the decades of negligence in understanding Western culture. To comprehend this, we need to recognize the fact that, for more than half a century, not only have China’s classics and histories been removed from curricula at all educational levels, but students and adults alike have been unable to read these texts, unless trained as specialists. This is because all Chinese on the mainland have been taught only the new simplified ideograms rather than the complex original for

more than half a century now. This policy, originally designed to combat large-scale illiteracy, has in effect created a situation where hardly anyone under the age of 70 can read publications in the original language.

Towards a Confluence: The True Role for All Composers

Ultimately, however, it will not be the *talent* of any Chinese composers that matters to the future of music, but rather the potential of the Chinese culture, much of which has been ignored, allowed to decline and even suppressed. Much of Chinese culture paralleled or complemented the Greco-Roman legacies, but we also know that much of this culture is the aggregate of many ancient cultures. What truly matters is the modern understanding of this rich fabric of layers of musical aspirations, explorations and accomplishments. To transmit such an understanding to a world audience requires intimate knowledge and solid investigation of the remaining legacies still preserved in China, Korea and Japan, as well as elsewhere. To put all that into a composer's own creativity is the true *role* of the Chinese composer, as well as all East and Southeast Asian composers—namely to contribute to the *confluence* of musical cultures. If Chinese composers could learn the modal systems from South and Central Asia by the turn of the 600s so as to create their own new secular musical forms in the Tang Dynasty (618–906), and if the late sixteenth-century calculation for equal temperament by Zhu Zaiyu (朱載堉) (1536–c.1610, pub. 1581) could lead to Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, why can we not expand our concept and practices in music today with ideas from other sources from bygone days?

To aspire to a confluence of cultures for the future, one must know the difference between cultures. To know the difference is to know both heritages, but as the title of my speech, 'Independent is the Keyword', given more than a decade ago in Tatarstan, suggests, the Asian composer, or any composer, must be *independent* of all *a priori* opinions, not only those of the West, but also of their own society or even their own heritage. The future Asian composer, or composer of any heritage, who can truly interact with, not 50 years, but 500 years of Western heritage is one knowledgeable enough and courageous enough to be independent.

There are already signs that a few of the Chinese as well as other Asian composers of the new wave are determined to achieve their independence by pursuing their own heritage as the prerequisite for their creativity. I expect some of them—representing the largest block of composers of their time in terms of nationality—will begin working towards a confluence of music. Meanwhile, I trust that the thoughtful among the third wave Chinese composers, who are now in their mid-career, will grow with enlightened creativity, in view of their inherent talent, superior professional education and exceptional experience of crossing over from a culturally isolated and creatively inhibited society to a cross-cultural musical arena over the past quarter century. Both generations deserve our understanding and need our critical support.

Notes

- [1] This parallelism is illustrated by the fact that Chinese theoretical investigations on the relationship of lines in calligraphy are remarkably similar to those studies made in the West on the art of counterpoint.
- [2] Chou Wen-chung (b.1923), José Maceda (1917–2004), Toshiro Mayuzumi (1929–1997) and Isang Yun (1917–1995).
- [3] Among the exceptions are Tōru Takemitsu (1930–1996), who never studied in the West but remained active internationally; Chinary Ung (b.1942), who studied composition exclusively in the United States and has been teaching there; and Joji Yuasa (b.1929), who also taught in the United States and was particularly involved in developing a technological language based on Japanese aesthetics.

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