

## National Styles and Asymmetries of Perception— Transculturality in Bun-Ching Lam’s Music

Bun-Ching Lam 林晶晶 (Lin Pinjing), born in Macau in 1954 and educated in Hong Kong and the United States during the 1970s and 80s, is one of very few Chinese composers who does not insist on being Chinese: “My music could be called Portuguese, Chinese, American, I would not care,” she has said. In spite of this indifference, her oeuvre is punctuated by Chinese themes. The way from her now lost *Variations on Chinese folksongs* (1972/73) to a recent chamber opera *Wenji* (2001) is paved with Chinese titles: her violin concerto *Lang Tao Sha* (1981), her pipa solo *Run* (1993), *Qin 2000* for mixed instrumental and electronic sounds (1994), as well as many songs of Chinese poetry (e.g. *Spring Yearning*, with poetry by Guan Hanqing 1976; *Autumn Sound*, Li Qingzhao 1982; *Walking, Walking, Keep Walking*, Nineteen Poems from the Han 1991; *The Journey*, Xi Kang/Ruan Ji 2002). Lam won a prize at the Shanghai competition for „Compositions in Chinese Style“ in 1987 with *After Spring* (1983) for two pianos.

Lam explains that, while she never received formal training in Chinese music, she played the moon guitar *yueqin* 月琴 as a child, and some other Chinese instruments and watched performances of Cantonese and Beijing opera with her parents: “This type of music is at the back of my mind, always,” she says. On the other hand, to her “the piano is a Chinese instrument, just like the (Chinese fiddle) *erhu* 二胡.” Accordingly, she prefers it to be „a little out of tune,“ too. And yet, the pianos used in most performances of her „Chinese“ composition *After Spring* would have been tuned well. What is Chinese about the piece? The misty pentatonicism glinting through the composition, its motivic restriction, its emphasis on colourful sounds and the strettta effect throughout? —These are all elements that can be found in traditional Chinese music. But in a different context, the piece could stand equally well. One could read it as a minimalist composition, for example. One could laud its atmospheric nature, its refined structure. It is, as one critic, Tim Page, put it “The work of a real composer, who chose every note, every structure carefully, with commitment and feeling.”

### **Asymmetries!**

Similar things may be said about *Lü* 旅 (Journey) for percussion solo, composed in the same year 1983: it is an atmospheric piece with a refined structure. It leads us slowly from the preparation for a journey to

holy grounds to the performance of a sacrifice. The composition makes use of the ancient Chinese eight sounds *bayin* 八音 classification which arranges all instruments according to the material they are made of and hence by the timbre they produce. Each movement, i.e. each station of the journey, employs a different group of instruments. The eight sounds are metal, stone, earth, skin, silk, wood, gourd and bamboo. Lam uses only three: metal, wood and skin and thus comes very close to the instrumental range used in traditional sacrificial music: bells and sounding stones, wooden percussion instruments and drums.

The Chinese ritual context is particularly pronounced in the last two movements. In *Collect*, the dignified steps of a ceremonial procession are hinted at in the second timpani part which is marked "ceremonially." By convention, the music at an imperial sacrifice stopped when the emperor entered the temple and so it does here. Then, the leader of the musicians would beat his instrument three times which is echoed in the composition, too. Next, the emperor was expected to kneel twice and knock his forehead three times on the ground. This is depicted in the first timpani part which, in a glissando, makes the lowering of the head audible. The second timpani part hints at the thrice knocking of the forehead to the ground. The Sacrifice itself is then rung in with bells. This again tallies with ritual conventions: at the beginning of each sacrifice, the attention of the gods was attracted by cutting the ear of the sacrificial animal with a knife which had bells attached to it.

The composition can be interpreted as a powerful example of New Music deeply indebted to Chinese cultural heritage. One could argue that Lam's use of tradition as that of many other Chinese composers is a sign of the ease and naturalness with which they can draw on a culture in which they have been steeped. Is *Lü* Chinese music by a Chinese composer, then? One could read the piece entirely differently. One could argue that the interpretation given here writes more Chineseness into the composition than ever was consciously conceived. If this composition had not been composed by Lam but, say, a German composer, had anyone even considered a Chinese interpretation? Most probably not. And not for the worse! It is possible to listen to this piece without the Chinese explanation. One can laud it for its sensibility to instrumentation, the creation of interesting and new timbre effects, for its inventiveness in terms of rhythm, and its deliberate and effective use of sounds and

silences. One need not know of China to listen to this piece as accomplished music.

The nineteenth century idea of the “national composer” has long been unmasked as a socio-cultural construct. Not ethnic but individual differences are now considered pivotal in the works even of composers such as Chopin, Smetana, Dvorak, Brahms, Liszt and Fauré. Why, in the beginning of the twenty-first century cannot we allow the same for Chinese composers? The history of New Chinese Music which began in the first decades of the twentieth century, has been dominated by constant worries over national style *minzuxing* 民族性. It is a political dictum in China that the country should have, not just socialism in Chinese style, but a cultural modernity Chinese style, too. What’s more, and to make this asymmetry of perception even more pronounced, foreign music critics as well as critics within China often judge Chinese compositions deficient if they do not have national flavour *minzu fengge* 民族风格.

Indeed, it had been a foreigner, Alexander Tcherepnin, with his 1934 competition for “Piano pieces in Chinese style,” who may have been the first to publically demand that Chinese composers write music with national flavour. Upon his visit to China, he was convinced that “Great musical activity is going on in China. The Chinese composer has under his hands one of the richest sources of native music. ... The more national his product, the greater will be its international value.”

### **Transculturality!**

Bun-Ching Lam’s case illustrates very clearly that the Chineseness of Chinese music need not be considered a matter of course but of individual choice and development. Chinese composers write their own personal musics, creating something beyond the cultural traditions (Chinese or otherwise) they have been influenced by. And there is a lot of *otherwise* in the case of Lam. Considering the range of topics, instruments and motifs she has used, her music could equally well be called German (*Three Dada Songs* Hugo Ball 1985; *Nachtgesänge* Friedrich Hölderlin 2000), Japanese (*E.O. 9066* 1989; *Omi Hakkei* 2000) or even Irish (*Four Beckett Songs* Samuel Beckett 1980), for example. But has anyone studied her Irishness? A serious engagement with Lam’s (and other Asian composers’) oeuvre calls for analysis not just of the Chinese elements but of these others, too. They constitute a transcultural dialogue between the different texts, instruments and concepts they employ.

To what extent are they replicating asymmetries, are they occidentalist answers to orientalist questions? Or merely typical examples of eclectic postmodernism? If so, what does that mean?

Lam Bun-Ching's "German" *Dada Songs*, based on sound poems by Hugo Ball for soprano, flute, cello and piano, are compositions in parody. They take up structural patterns from the European musical tradition, exoticism in *Karawane*, which, in its rhythms alludes to African music, the coloratura soprano in *Seepferdchen und Flugfische* and finally, in *Totenklage*, the funeral march. It is an exuberant piece, which constantly surprises and subverts the audience's expectations. Is this Dada music? Perhaps it is: Lam takes up on many tenets of the Dada movement, which was out to shock, to shake off the dead-weight of all ancient traditions, social and artistic. Dadaists would make pictures out of rubbish or exalt scandalous objects like urinals to the dignity of art-objects; bruitism, or noise and sounds could become music; senseless syllables, poetry: Dadaism exalted in chaos, in unmasking the meaninglessness of meaning. Lam's composition appears quite in the Dada spirit: she uses the piece to mock a particular concert and performance tradition—the imposed but artificial silence, the perfections (and imperfections) in artistic execution, the obsessions with virtuosity, the implicit and explicit rivalries between performers and soloists. The composition integrates sounds and noises as equal partners. But it would need closer analysis and expertise in Dada to judge whether this piece conveys some of its spirit and how it changes and subverts it. What in turn happens to the meaning of Dada if a Chinese composer uses it? Although Dada was very consciously an *internationalist* movement, its internationalism was restricted largely to Europe. By composing her piece, Lam somehow redresses this asymmetry while at the same time inscribing herself into it.

The same must be said for *Omi Hakkei* "Eight views of Lake Biwa" (2000). Again, it shows Lam "thinking as a citizen of the world" as Ken Gallo put it. The piece is inspired by Claude Debussy's *Sonate en trio pour flute, alto et harp* (1915). Lam uses a double trio which juxtaposes the Chinese instrumental counterparts with Debussy's set of instruments: flute-*dizi* 笛子, viola-*zhonghu* 中胡 and harp-*zheng* 争, thus denaturing what's usually assumed as natural, in a postmodernist manner. The piece is based on the composer's personal experience during a three-month stay in Japan of visiting the eight sights near Kyoto that had also inspired woodcut artist Hiroshige Ando

(1797-1858). The movements are named after Hiroshige's prints. The music attempts to make up an imaginary landscape, trying to capture the atmosphere in the woodcuts. Is her rendering Japanese?

The original purpose for the composer's visit to Japan, had been to "find ancient China in Japan." Hiroshige's woodcuts were one such discovery as Japanese landscape woodcuts are inspired by early Chinese landscape painting. Debussy in turn had been interested in Japanese art, and Japanese composer Takemitsu—to whom the piece is dedicated as an homage—was influenced by Debussy. Lam admits, "it's all related, if not convoluted" and indeed, it may be impossible to disentangle these different levels of (trans)cultural significance in *Omi Hakkei*.

Lam reminisces: "Half of my life I have lived in the United States and I grew up in Macau. So I was well versed in Western culture; but still deeply rooted in my Chinese culture. I have the best of both worlds. Actually, I don't think of it as two worlds. It's one world." Her musical interpretation of the occidental Other, her potential reverse exoticism in a reading of the oriental Other—never forgetting that exoticism did produce a lot of beautiful music in spite of its somewhat negative repute today—her music with its peculiar shares of ethnocentrism, relativism, regionalism, transculturalism and universalism all of which remain to be studied in detail, certainly has a lot to say to the world, but not because it is Chinese but because it speaks in many other languages, too. New Chinese Music like hers, in its ever more polyphonic transculturality is not national but truly international music.

### **(Trans-)culturality**

This is true even when national history and politics are at stake. Lam's opera *Wenji* (2001) is more than the retelling of a story from Chinese history. With this opera, she contributes to an almost universal problematique: the question of cultural identity in all its dimensions from intercultural conflict to intermarriage. The opera deals with a historical figure, Cai Wenji, who lived in the 2nd century, was kidnapped by barbarian troops, abducted to Inner Mongolia and forced to marry a king of the southern Huns with whom she then had two children. After a dozen years or so, she was ransomed and brought back to Han territory.

Lam's *Wenji* is torn between two worlds: one, the world of her forefathers, the other, that of her children. She constantly questions where she belongs: to the

world of roaming barbarian nomads who understand but the beauty of nature; or the world of a settled, sophisticated people steeped in literature and music? In order to depict the two worlds, the opera plays deftly with several languages both on the linguistic and on the musical level. Wenji's barbarian husband is a dramatic bass, he sings in English. Her father is a Beijing opera singer and sings in Chinese. Wenji herself—between the two worlds—is a Western operatic soprano but sings in Chinese, mostly. These vocal and linguistic differences are further foregrounded by attributing to every person and every cultural sphere particular instruments. *Guqin* 古琴 (the seven-stringed zither) and *pipa* 琵琶, the Chinese lute, are used for the Chinese, cello and bass clarinet for the Huns. The Chinese instrumental passages are often linear or heterophonic whereas the music of the Huns is based on vertical harmonics and counterpoint. Yet, these divisions are not always adhered to strictly. Lam thus illustrates the changing and mutually embracing nature of intercultural contact and conflict and the politics of identity.

Wenji obviously loves her husband and she loves the children they have together. But she loves her own country, too. When offered to return (sc. 9) she sings in Chinese: "I left missing my home, my heart all confused, I return missing my children, my thoughts forever heavy." At her departure, she repeats the same thought, now in English: "Alone I go home without the children, when I arrive I miss home every day." (sc. 10). So what is home for her? Indeed, that is the fundamental question in the piece. In an age of violent cultural clashes, Wenji stands quietly between opposed worlds to ask this question of us all. Lam's piece tells an episode from Chinese history, but addresses an international public. Hers is a powerful story about the experience of migration and exile, both voluntary and enforced. It is a story about cultural conflict and contact. Ultimately, the problem remains unresolved, but Lam offers glimpses at its solution: communication and patience, appreciation and openness for other points of view, love and understanding.

The piece thus can be read as a general statement of international significance. And yet it can be read as a particular, even political statement about China, too. The book-burning scene and the smashing of the zither are signs which will be understood by Chinese audiences as immediate references to the many persecutions of intellectuals throughout Chinese history, since the first bookburning by emperor Qin Shihuang in 213 BCE, and most recently during the

Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76) which, especially during its first two most violent years, witnessed the destruction of Chinese and foreign intellectual and cultural heritage and the persecution of intellectuals and artists, on a scale unprecedented in Chinese history. Music about Chinese politics, then, it is significant to foreign audiences not because but in spite of its Chineseness.

### **Conclusion**

In 1979, Wen-Chung Chou, himself an important Chinese composer and student of Varèse, said about the Asian composer: "The pressing need for bi-cultural competence is indeed his advantage over his Western colleagues." 20 years later, Dun Tan formulates a demand to all: "I think it is a tragedy for today's composers if they are only interested in one culture, it is not enough to develop your own language."

Any Chinese composer grows up with at least two classical musical languages, he is taught the compositional traditions from Europe and he comes across, more or less frequently, the Chinese musical tradition. Few Chinese composers are as well-trained and as knowledgeable in the Chinese musical tradition as they are in the European musical tradition, however. There is a fair degree of alienation from their own musical tradition, partly because the conservatory system largely keeps the two areas—traditional and foreign-style music—apart.

Nevertheless, most, if not all Chinese composers call on Chinese tradition to compose, partly out of their own will, partly because they feel pressured to do so. And yet, there is not much of the same in New Chinese Music. There are perhaps as many Chinese styles as there are Chinese composers. China's musical tradition may in many cases have served as a catalyst, and may have stimulated the development of important compositional tendencies in their style, one of which is an openness to the Other in all kinds of forms and formats. Yet, there are many approaches to the Other, and there are greater and lesser composers in China as everywhere. Just the fact that they are used to juggling several musical languages, one of them Chinese, does not make their works accomplished. Coming from a non-Western tradition, and employing it in his or her composition, the Chinese composer may be inscribed in this process of questioning and reconsidering both West and East.

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