

NEO-ORIENTALISM IN THE OPERAS OF TAN DUN

by

Nan Zhang

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
February 2015

© Copyright by Nan Zhang, 2015

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1    The Neo-orientalist Composer: Tan Dun.....	1
1.2    Orientalism and Neo-orientalism.....	3
1.3    The Works of Neo-orientalist Composers.....	8
CHAPTER 2: THREE EARLY OPERAS.....	13
2.1    Shamanistic Ritual in <i>Nine Songs</i> .....	14
2.2    Collage in <i>Marco Polo</i> .....	19
2.3    Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun's Early Operas.....	22
2.4    Improvisation and Tempo.....	26
CHAPTER 3: TEA: A MIRROR OF SOUL.....	31
3.1    Representing the Tea Ceremony on Stage.....	39
3.2    Organic Music and Neo-orientalism.....	45
CHAPTER 4: THE FIRST EMPEROR.....	50
4.1    Representing Shamanism in <i>The First Emperor</i> .....	53
4.1.1    Two Shaman Roles.....	55
4.1.2    Costumes and Masks.....	58
4.1.3    The Ancient Chin Worship Band on Stage.....	60
4.2    Shamanism, Romantic Tradition and Neo-orientalism.....	64
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	76
APPENDIX A.....	84
APPENDIX B.....	92

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Chapters and Imagery in <i>Nine Songs</i> .....	15
Table 2.2	Chapters and Imagery in Tan Dun's Setting of <i>Nine Songs</i> .....	16
Table 2.3	Three Journeys of <i>Marco Polo</i> .....	20
Table 2.4	Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun's <i>Peony Pavilion</i> .....	23
Table 2.5	Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun's <i>Nine Songs</i> .....	25
Table 3.1	The Cast of Characters in <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> .....	32
Table 4.1	The Cast of <i>The First Emperor</i> .....	50

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	“Eclipse” in Tan Dun’s Opera <i>Nine Songs</i> , mm. 51.....	17
Figure 2.2	“Sun and Moon” in Tan Dun’s Opera <i>Nine Songs</i> , mm. 1.....	18
Figure 2.3	The Book of Timespace: Summer - Desert in Tan Dun’s <i>Marco Polo</i> , mm. 62.....	21
Figure 2.4	“Spring (1) — Composer’s Voice and Improvisations” in Tan Dun’s <i>Peony Pavilion</i> .....	27
Figure 2.5	Part II, “Floating (1) — Composer’s Voice & Improvisations” in Tan Dun’s <i>Peony Pavilion</i> .....	28
Figure 3.1	The Japanese Premiere of <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> in Suntory Hall, Tokyo.....	34
Figure 3.2	The Canadian Premiere of <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> by the Vancouver Opera.....	35
Figure 3.3	The Chinese of <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> in National Centre for the Performing Arts.....	37
Figure 3.4	Act I: “Water, Fire” in Tan Dun’s <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> , mm.4-6.....	42
Figure 3.5	Act I: “Water, Fire” in Tan Dun’s <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> , mm.7-14.....	42
Figure 3.6	Act III: “Ceramic, Stones” in Tan Dun’s <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> , mm. 26-30.....	43
Figure 3.7	The Japanese Premiere of <i>Tea: A Mirror of Soul</i> in Suntory Hall, Tokyo.....	44
Figure 4.1	Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> , mm. 149-156.....	56
Figure 4.2	Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> , mm. 149-154.....	58
Figure 4.3	Act 1 Scene 1 from Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> .....	61
Figure 4.4	Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> , mm.19-23.....	62
Figure 4.5	Act 1 Scene 1 from Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> .....	63
Figure 4.6	Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s <i>The First Emperor</i> , mm. 320-324.....	66

## ABSTRACT

As the most active neo-orientalist composer, Tan Dun is known for using instruments constructed from organic materials, and fusing Western avant-garde compositional techniques with Asian cultural traditions. Forming part of a larger repertory of music by Asian, Asian-American and Asian-European composers, this neo-orientalist aesthetic has captured the interest of critics and scholars alike. Yet an in-depth study of precisely how musical representations of difference function in this “neo-orientalist” repertory is far from clear. In this thesis, I investigate neo-orientalism in Tan Dun’s five operas: the three early operas, *Nine Songs* (1989), *Marco Polo* (1995), *Peony Pavilion* (1998); *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* (2002) and *The First Emperor* (2006). My examination outlines two neo-orientalist approaches used by Tan Dun in his operas: seeking inspiration from indigenous cultural traditions and Western musical traditions, and using familiar and recognizable musical features believed to be Asian by Western audiences. Ultimately, my analysis of Tan Dun’s operas serves as a case study of musical manifestations of neo-orientalism in the broader repertory.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Estelle Joubert for her guidance, kind advice, and her support for my study and research at Dalhousie University. I also appreciate the support given to me by my thesis committee members, my second reader Dr. Roberta Barker, and the external examiner, Dr. Hayoung Heidi Lee.

Special thanks go to Dr. Jennifer Bain, who not only provided me the opportunity of the RA position at Dalhousie University, but also gave me many suggestions about my research and career choices.

I would also like to thank my husband, Meng, for his understanding and support during my research. In addition, many thanks to my parents who helped me to take care of my baby during the process of writing the thesis.

Many thanks go to all the professors and staff at the Dalhousie Fountain School of Performing Arts including Dr. Jérôme Blais, Dr. Jacqueline Warwick, Dr. Steven Baur, Jessica Mailhiot, April Macdonald, and Lesley Brechin. I appreciate your help and kind advice very much.

Finally, many thanks go to Faculty of Graduate Studies and Dalhousie University for provide this precious opportunity for me to make my dream of studying abroad come true.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The Neo-orientalist Composer: Tan Dun

In his study of orientalism<sup>1</sup> and chinoiserie in contemporary American experimental music, John Corbett cites Tan Dun as “an excellent contemporary example of the new wave of Asian neo-orientalist.”<sup>2</sup> The varied creative activity of Tan Dun results from fusing Western postmodern compositional techniques with deep Chinese cultural roots. Forming part of a larger repertory of music by Asian, Asian-American and Asian-European composers such as Toru Takemitsu and Toshio Mayuzumi and Chou Wen-Chung, Corbett describes the neo-orientalist aesthetic as “playing on” prior imperialist and colonialist approaches:

fragments of imperialist (exporting Western musical values through conservatory education) and colonialist (importing non-Western musical materials for use in Western art-music settings) ideologies are both found here, but the music of the Asian neo-orientalists, at its best and most provocative, manages to subtly subvert them both.<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars and critics in China suggest that Tan Dun’s success depends largely on him being recognized by Western scholars and critics because his works are regarded as a version of orientalism, or more exactly, as music made exclusively for a Western audience. They argue that oriental composers’ works typically employ Western-style

---

<sup>1</sup> My definition of ‘orientalism’ is based on the theory of Edward Said, and refers to a deep-rooted episteme of Westerners’ attitude towards the orient which is static and undeveloped. It has always functioned as part and parcel of Euro-American colonialist ideology.

<sup>2</sup> John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, (California: University of California Press, 2000), 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

representation of orientalism rather than indigenous traditions. Paul Griffiths makes a similar comment regarding Takemitsu's neo-orientalism:

If Takemitsu's delight in evanescent, apparently unwilled sonorities seems on the surface to be a Japanese trait, on further reflection it may be found to link him at least as much with Feldman, while his orchestral writing draws much more from Debussy and Boulez than from indigenous traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Although approaches to orientalism appear to vary widely, Anthony Sheppard argues that "the issues raised by productions of old Orientalist works and by new operas engage in exotic representation are similar."<sup>5</sup> In other words, representations of orientalism in recent Western orientalist works are a reinterpretation based on Westerners' persistent orientalism. The essence of this reinterpretation has not changed and is still built on orientalism found in earlier operas. In effect, scholars and critics agree the representation of orientalism in Tan Dun's works is quite different from orientalist musical representations of Western composers. Yet an in-depth study of precisely how musical representations of difference function in this "neo-orientalist" repertory is far from clear. Anthony Sheppard has explored the representation of orientalism in Tan Dun's opera *The First Emperor* (2008) in "Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun's Tinte and The First Emperor".<sup>6</sup> While he does not use the term "neo-orientalist," he does claim that "the incorporation of exotic and newly invented instruments and alternative vocal techniques

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: A concise History* (New York: Thames & Hudson Press, 1994), 198.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Sheppard, "The persistence of Orientalism in the Postmodern Operas of Adams and Sellars," in *Representation in Western Music*, ed. Joshua Walden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 277.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Sheppard, "Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun's Tinte and The First Emperor," *Journal of Musicology*, Vol.26, No.3, (2009): 285-326.



for exotic representation in ‘The First Emperor’ points neither to Puccini and Stravinsky nor to the traditions of orientalist opera, but rather to other models of musical exoticism.”<sup>7</sup> Corbett comes closest to assessing the musical dimensions of “neo-orientalism” in the works of Tan Dun. Focusing on the “supposed Asianness of Tan Dun’s elemental objects” he suggests that

returned to their (mythic) point of origin, the stone, paper, and metal are not even recognized as musical. The deep complexity of neo-Orientalist strategies is revealed: an Asian composer in the West uses techniques devised for an Asian audience which hears it as an artifact of the bizarre West. Orientalism is reflected back-and-forth like a musicultural mise-en-abyme.<sup>8</sup>

This raises some fascinating questions regarding musical representations of neo-orientalism: to what extent does Corbett’s description of “neo-orientalism” apply to Tan’s operas? How do Tan Dun’s operas manifest neo-orientalism?

## **1.2 Orientalism and Neo-orientalism**

Oriental elements have been used to add exotic taste in Western artistic works. Western artists and musicians were inspired by the impact of Eastern art and aesthetics, and they started representing the imaginary East with their Western aesthetics and viewpoint. David Porter describes the impact of “Chinese taste” of Chinoiserie in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe:

Beginning as a trickle of exquisite luxury goods in the seventeenth century, imports of Chinese porcelain, silks, wallpaper, and lacquer ware furniture surged in the first decades of the eighteenth, responding to, among other things, the steady increase in market demand for

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>8</sup> Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” 180.

fashionable novelties and the rapid emergence of ritualized tea-drinking as a national pastime at every level of society.<sup>9</sup>

These imported goods inspired Western artists to imitate the Chinese style in architecture, gardens and decorations. The fanciful imagery of imaginary China is manifested in the popularity of Chinoiserie which is a representation based on a Western aesthetic. Besides the “Chinese taste” of Chinoiserie, other oriental cultures such as Turquerie or Japonism has influenced Western culture as well. These different flavors of exoticism are not only reflected in Western artistic works but also in Western compositions. Oriental themes and tunes are used by Western composers to exhibit the East they imagined. Notable operatic works with oriental subjects include Verdi’s opera *Aida* (1871), Puccini’s *Turandot* (1926) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904).

In studies of exoticism in music, Edward Said’s orientalist critique has been widely applied. Ralph P. Locke has reviewed the use of the term “orientalism” in recent works of music critics and scholars, concluding that

in the past two decades, the term has been invoked in connection to a wide range of locales. [...] In short, despite its origins, ‘Orientalism’ has become a term that can refer to any world population — including Caribbeans and blond Scandinavian-Americans — that differs from whatever a work of art constructs as its mainstream European or white-American persona or viewpoint.<sup>10</sup>

In Locke’s definition, musicological approaches to the term “orientalism” depends to a

---

<sup>9</sup> David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009):37.

large extent on constructions of “other” which are based on a “mainstream European or white-American persona or viewpoint.” Instead of “exoticism” broadly construed, I am interested in Said’s orientalist critique and theoretical framework.

According to Edward Said, “the orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”<sup>11</sup> It is constructed as an “other” opposed to the occident. Said defined orientalism as “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Said, the East is an object depicted as primitive, mysterious and strange, while the West is used as the yardstick of rationality, science and civilization. Orientalism is a result of descriptions and assumptions by Westerners who assume the position that the West is superior to the East. Thus, the formation of the theoretical system of orientalism is premised on understandings of the East in Westerners’ eyes. As a result, the East lost their right to express themselves and the initiative to speak from the beginning, and become an object to be described. As Edward Said asserts, orientalism can be discussed “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>13</sup> This deep-rooted episteme of orientalism had great impact on music creation,

---

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and some orientalist works are produced by Western composers with an already formed understanding of the East. Said's view is applied to these orientalist works, depicting the dominance of the powerful West over the weak East. The East becomes the object to be described by Western composers, and the East lost its initiative to speak from the beginning. However, with the deepening of communication between East and West, the East is starting to seek opportunities to express itself and participate in the remolding of orientalism.

In his recent landmark study on globalization, Jürgen Osterhammel asserts that [i]n the 1990s, globalization was embraced by a wider public and has since skyrocketed to terminological stardom. It has been integrated into the vocabulary of numerous languages, and various scholarly fields have adopted it as a leitmotiv and the central category of their research.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars started examining and discussing this issue from the perspectives of politics, economics, history, sociology, and other disciplines due to the rapid transfer of scientific technical information and the deepening of people's understanding of "globalization".

With the deepening of globalization, more and more hybrid cultures are formed through the integration and collision of different cultures. As Edward Said claims, "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic."<sup>15</sup> This hybrid culture also circulates and spreads more easily. Some traditional and unknown cultures are more easily

---

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, translated by Dona Geyer, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005):1.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books Press, 1994), XXV.

interpreted and accepted because the hybrid culture is packaged in a form that people from different cultural backgrounds can understand.

In the field of music, the term “globalization” is increasingly prevalent. After commenting on globalization’s influence, Ralph P. Locke summarizes three broad developments regarding new exotic compositions: “the complicating of the categories of West and East; population shifts (and other travel); and growing access to different music traditions”.<sup>16</sup> The fusion and collision of different East and West cultures are reflected in these new orientalist works. The cultural difference of East and West is emphasized by the form of hybrid culture. As David Irving remarks,

the positioning of Western music within an integrated system that takes global musical cultures into account thus requires analysis of binary oppositions, such as consonant/dissonant and soft/harsh. Relationships of difference provide the best means of cultural self-definition for all parties, and these relationships themselves assume primary importance as crucial components of interdependence and exchange.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the impact of globalization in the field of music, some Asian composers have started to represent orientalism from their perspective. In Asia, the developing compositional trend is committed to the pursuit of Western musical culture and musical modernity in the context of globalization. It is characterized by a power of self-consciousness which has been gradually enhanced. Some Asian-born and Western-educated composers (including those who learned Western compositional techniques in their own country) started to seek their native cultural identities. They

---

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 278.

<sup>17</sup> David R. M. Irving. *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 232.

represent the East by fusing indigenous cultural elements and Western compositional techniques. There are many commonalities amongst these composers: they have cultural influences locally while also being influenced by trends of modern Western composers; they are familiar with Westerners' aesthetics and musical expression. Moreover, they wish to remodel and reconstruct orientalism deeply rooted in Westerners' minds, which is a new understanding and representation of the East — neo-orientalism. Thus, these Asian, Asian-American or Asian-European composers can be called neo-orientalist composers who represent the East with their dual cultural identities by fusing Western compositional techniques and indigenous cultural traditions. Here I use the term “neo-orientalism” to distinguish between works produced by Western composers which represents the East as described in Edward Said's orientalist critique, and the conception of neo-orientalism used in academic literature to critique Western attitudes towards the Middle East, especially Islam. My musicological approach to the term neo-orientalism in this thesis is restricted to Asian composers' works.

### **1.3 The Works of Neo-orientalist Composers**

Since last mid-1950s, Chou Wen-Chung, Toru Takemitsu, and Isang Yun, as the representative of a group of neo-orientalism composers, have attracted worldwide attention and occupied a very important position in the international music scene with their own distinct personalities and unique styles. Yayoi Uno Everett explores the correlation between calligraphy and the shaping of musical gestures in Chou's late works

and the influence of I-Ching and Yin Yang: “Beginning with *Metaphors* (1961), Chou has developed and applied a modal system for organizing pitch (and later rhythmic) structures derived from the I-Ching (Yijing, or *The Book of Changes*).”<sup>18</sup> And “according to I-Ching, the *yin* symbolizes all that is passive or feminine in the universe and the *yang* all that is active and masculine. It is believed that these two forces consistently mutate into each other according to the prehistoric Chinese view of the universe.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Yin and Yang principles and Chinese calligraphy are always found in Isang Yun’s works. Water, trees, wind and other objects in the nature are also the subjects and inspiration of the neo-orientalist composers’ creation. For example, in Toru Takemitsu’s works, water, as a symbol of the endless flow and change in the nature, is closely associated with his creation. For instance, the titles for many of his works embody nature: *Garden Rain: for brass ensemble* (1974), *Water Ways: for clarinet, violin, cello, piano, two harps and two vibraphone* (1978), *Rain in Dream in G: for harpsichord* (1986). Also, in his late work *Toward The Sea* (1981), water is reflected by a tune or pitch-set. The method is to link the word SEA with the pitch names and each letter represents a scale degree.

After the 1980s, a similar enthusiasm for music creation has emerged in China. Young composers wrote music using Chinese traditional and folk instruments (such as the *suona*, *pipa*, *erhu*, etc.) combined with Western compositional techniques that flourished in the early twentieth century. Their innovation, on the one hand, stems from the

---

<sup>18</sup> Yayoi Uno Everett, “Calligraphy and Musical Gestures in the Late Works of Chou Wen-chung,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 26(5-6) (2007): 574

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

twelve-tone techniques and harmonic series that are a breakthrough of Chinese traditional composition principles; on the other hand, they seek a musical culture with Chinese characteristics by using new structures, sound synthesis, and different rhythmic combinations. For instance, Qigang Chen's *Iris Devoilee* (2001), Tan Dun's opera *Marco Polo* (1996), Yuan-kai Bao's *Chinese Sights and Sounds* (1991), all use late romantic techniques combined with 'oriental sound' and rhythmic features. For those Chinese contemporary composers, combining traditional music materials, traditional instruments and Western modern compositional techniques in their compositions can help them find a unique position in the broader field of new music.

In Japan, the composer Toshio Hosokawa attracted much attention on the international music scene after Takemitsu. His music is based on traditional Asian arts and aesthetics while absorbing his teacher Isang Yun's main tones, creative thoughts and Western Avant-garde compositional techniques. Hosokawa's compositions have profound manifestations of the spirit of calligraphy and paintings in Japanese culture, and also Zen Buddhism. Moreover, he has a preference for traditional Japanese culture in his compositions' themes. For instance, the text in his work for guitar and voice, *Renka I's* (1986) draws upon the ancient Japanese set of poems, *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*.

As I suggested above, these neo-orientalist composers fuse Asian traditional cultural elements and Western compositional techniques. The essential purpose of their neo-orientalist works is to carry on the practice of their native culture "roots" and to



acquire recognition in the Western musical world. The performance of their work is a reflection and self-interpretation of the East and participation of orientalism's reconstruction. These neo-orientalist composers have been interpreting the new East in their own ways and have been widely recognized and discussed by Western musicians and scholars. Yet an in-depth study of precisely how musical representations of difference functions this "neo-orientalist" repertory is far from clear. Therefore, the study of musical neo-orientalism emphasizing Eastern and Western dialogue is more necessary in today's deepening globalization.

In this thesis, I will explore musical representations of neo-orientalism with the Chinese composer Tan Dun's operas as case study. As I will show, Tan Dun's neo-orientalist approach shifts from his early to later operas. First, I will examine Tan's three early operas *Nine Songs* (1989), *Marco Polo* (1995), and *The Peony Pavilion* (1998) in the second chapter. These three early operas exhibit a collage of Chinese elements and Western experimental musical influences. In this stage of Tan Dun's operatic creation, experimental and postmodern characteristics display his exploration of neo-orientalism. My analysis of Tan Dun's operas will focus primarily on the third chapter *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* (2002) and the fourth chapter *The First Emperor* (2006). In the opera *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* and *The First Emperor*, the structure and literary style of the libretto exhibits features more typical of romantic opera, which stands in sharp contrast to the avant-garde style of Tan's three early operas. My analysis will focus on organic instruments employed in the *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* and the shamanism in *The First Emperor*. I believe that a

clearer understanding of “neo-orientalism” in the broader repertory will be provided through my research on how musical representations function in Tan Dun’s operatic output.

## Chapter 2: Three Early Operas

Tan Dun has been constantly exploring his own language of opera creation. The collision of Asian and Western cultures, the expression of Chinese folk arts, and modern compositional techniques combined with modern media, constitute the dramatic force of Tan Dun's operas. These features also are reflected in the selection and design of the libretto, musical language, staging, as well as performance style. Crucially, Tan Dun's early operas exhibit experimental and postmodern characteristics rather than the late romantic features in the two later operas.

John Cage's experimental music had enormous influence on Tan Dun's early opera creations. Tan Dun's opera creation in this period explores new sounds and ideas which employ familiar Chinese traditional instruments, Chinese musical themes and Chinese classic poetry or script. He uses collage and quotation from Chinese music in ways that demonstrates his westernized attitude of how to treat the history, tradition and pluralism which uses Western experimental techniques and concepts to create Western operas.

Yet Tan Dun employs his early operas to represent ideas of Western contemporary operatic creation rather than "authentic" China or Asia. Therefore, the use of Chinese musical instruments, music, costumes, and adapted script does not represent "authentic" Asia or China, but serves his own aesthetic discourse on contemporary opera. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh reveal that "[...] those modernist and postmodernist composers who have drawn upon or made reference to other musics (non-Western, folk,

or urban popular) are not producing that music but drawing upon it in order to enrich their own compositional frame. They are transforming that music through incorporation into their own aesthetic: appropriating and re-presenting it”.<sup>20</sup> Thus in this stage of operatic creation, neo-orientalism in Tan Dun’s operas is manifested in a fusion of Chinese cultural elements, and Euro-American experimental and avant-garde compositional techniques such as collage, improvisation, and indeterminate music. In this chapter, I will explore four aspects of his early operatic output: shamanistic ritual in *Nine Songs*, collage in *Marco Polo*, innovative use of percussion instruments and improvisation in *Peony Pavilion*.

## **2.1 Shamanistic Ritual in *Nine Songs***

*Nine Songs* (1989) is Tan Dun’s first theatrical work after his studies in the United States. The world premiere was in May 12, 1989 at Pace Downtown Theatre of New York City. Tan Dun conducted and Yoshiko Chuma was the stage director and choreographer. *Nine Songs* is positioned as “ritual opera” and is Tan Dun’s first attempt and exploration of opera. He aims to combine music, dance and drama, as well as Chinese traditional music and Western music. The libretto is written in English and adopts the Chinese transliteration for a few words, since the opera is only performed on the Western opera stage. Tan Dun has therefore adjusted spelling *yun-bai* and singing

---

<sup>20</sup> Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. “Introduction,” in *Western Music and Its Others* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 15.

*chang-qiang* styles to suit English intonation habits (See Appendix B).

“*Nine Songs* is non-narrative, based on ancient poems of the same name by the great poet Qu Yuan.”(241-223 B.C.)<sup>21</sup> The poem set consists of eleven chapters with different artistic images or expressing different emotions (See Table 2.1 below).

**Table 2.1: Chapters and Imagery in *Nine Songs***

#	The name of the chapter
1	The Great Unity, God of the Eastern Sky
2	The Lord within the Clouds
3	The Goddess of the Xiang
4	The Lady of the Xiang
5	The Greater Master of Fate
6	The Lesser Master of Fate
7	The Lord of the East
8	The River Earl
9	The Mountain Spirit
10	Hymn to the Fallen
11	Honouring the Dead

Tan Dun excerpts a few verses from the eleven poems. Some of these verses use English translations and some use *Pinyin* (See Appendix B), and he continues to use this approach in his other operas such as *Peony Pavilion*. Table 2.2 displays the nine sections in Tan Dun’s *Nine Songs* and the corresponding poems that Tan Dun excerpts from Qu Yuan’s poems. The English titles are added on the *Nine Songs*’ CD and there are no titles on the score.

<sup>21</sup> Tan Dun Online, “Synopsis of Nine Songs,” <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Nine-Songs.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

**Table 2.2: Chapters and Imagery in Tan Dun’s Setting of *Nine Songs***

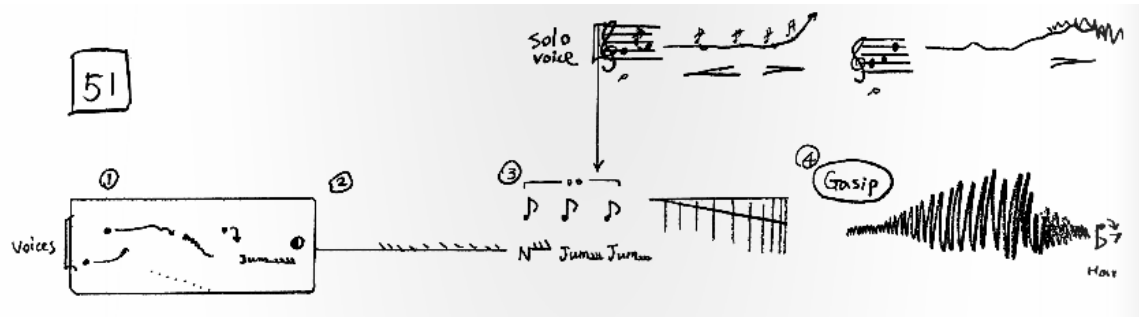
<b>The nine sections of <i>Nine Songs</i></b>	<b>The poems of Qu Yuan</b>
Sun and Moon	The Great Unity, God of the Eastern Sky The Lord within the Clouds The Greater Master of Fate
River	The Goddess of the Xiang
Water Spirit	The River Earl
Masters of Fate	The Greater Master of Fate
Echo in the Distance	None
Eclipse	None
In the Maintain	The Mountain Spirit
Souls of the Fallen	Hymn to the Fallen
Cycles	The Greater Master of Fate Honouring the Dead

There is no division of acts and scenes in *Nine Songs*; it consists of nine consecutive sections. The first and the ninth sections convey the feelings of a welcoming and sending God. The fifth and sixth sections employ modal syllables rather than specific texts. The second, third, fourth, and seventh section primarily express love-related themes. The eighth section describes the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their country in battle.

*Nine Songs* performs Chinese ancient ritual onstage and exhibits the origin of the shamanism, as imagined by Tan Dun. He uses music to record an imaginary ancient ritual process which refers to the Chinese ancient Chu (shamanist) ritual and Nuo Opera (See Appendix B). However, how the Chu ritual was exactly performed cannot be verified by written records. Thus, the primitive shamanistic ritual demonstrated onstage is that of Tan Dun’s imagination. For example, in the sixth section “Eclipse”, the instrument plays a simple melody line followed by a loud (textless) shout by the solo voices and orchestral

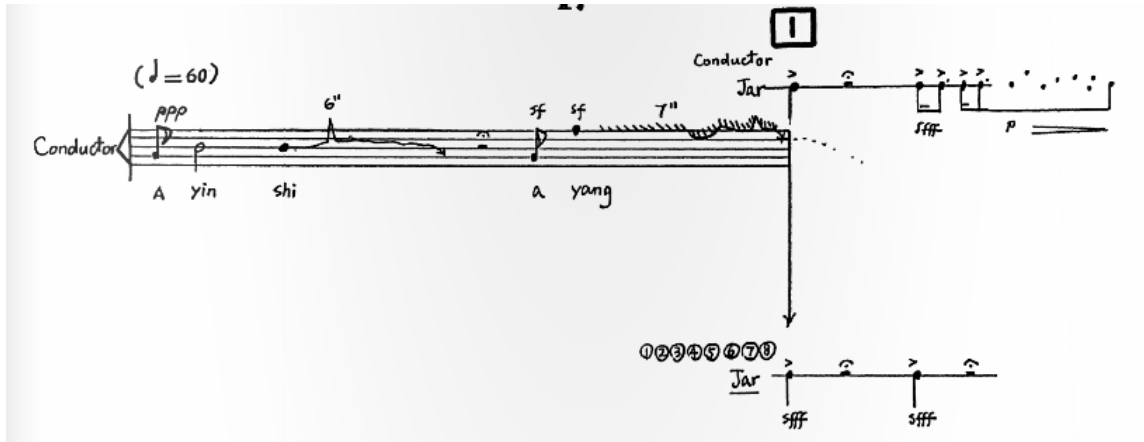
players.(See Figure 2.1 below) This unartificial sound used in performance is Tan Dun’s way of representing the primitive ritual onstage.

**Figure 2.1: “Eclipse” in Tan Dun’s Opera *Nine Songs*, mm. 51.**



In the performance of *Nine Songs*, the orchestral players, dancers and singers participate in a performance of this shamanistic ritual onstage. Moreover, the conductor becomes a part of the performance as well. If the performance onstage can be seen as a primitive shamanistic ritual, the conductor is the shaman who presides over the ritual. For example, the conductor recites the same verse at the beginning and the end of the opera to signify the start and the end of the ritual (see Figure 2.2 below).

**Figure 2.2: “Sun and Moon” in Tan Dun’s Opera *Nine Songs*, mm. 1.**



Although the mysterious shamanistic ritual performed onstage looks exotic to Western audiences, the approaches such as collage used by Tan Dun are derived from Euro-American experimental compositional techniques. Tan Dun’s Western experimental attitude towards contemporary operatic creation is evident in *Nine Songs*, especially in his approach to ritual and performance, and non-narrative plot. *Nine Songs* appears to be more of a pastiche of different kinds of musical forms rather than an opera with a specific plot. Tan Dun describes how he conceived of *Nine Songs*: “In my *Nine Songs*, I am interested in a form that fuses drama, dance, and music together, and a relationship between a man, God and nature, and a connection between the ancient sacrifice and contemporary life.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Tan Dun’s approach to neo-orientalism in *Nine Songs* uses exotic and mysterious shamanism based on Western avant-garde and experimental aesthetics.

<sup>22</sup> Zhenya Wang, “The Brief Introduction of Tan Dun’s *Nine Songs*”, *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music*, Vol.3 (1991):25. My translation.



## 2.2 Collage in *Marco Polo*

Tan Dun has been influenced by various styles and cultures of New York City since he started studying in the United States in 1986. At Columbia University, Tan discovered the music of downtown musicians such as John Cage, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, and Steve Reich, and Tan began to incorporate these influences into his compositions.

Collage is the most commonly used approach in Tan's early works. In *Marco Polo*, the collision of different Western and Asian musical traditions and cultures is represented by means of collage.

*Marco Polo* (1995) was commissioned by the Edinburgh International Festival and was premiered at the Munich Biennale in Germany on May 7, 1996. After a tremendously successful premiere, the opera was performed in over twenty cities in countries such as Netherlands, Hongkong, United States, Italy, Britain, and Japan. In 1998 Tan Dun won the Grawemeyer Prize for Music Composition for his *Marco Polo*. The libretto is adapted by American scholar Paul Griffiths from his own collection of short stories entitled *Myself and Marco Polo* (1989). In his essay on "Tan Dun through the Lens of Western Media", Eric Hung observes that "*Marco Polo* reflects much of Tan's early music in its ritualistic atmosphere (complete with enigmatic symbolism and plots), its abrupt juxtaposition of styles, and its evocation of many different musical traditions."<sup>23</sup>

In the opera, Tan Dun conceived of three journeys: physical, musical and spiritual.

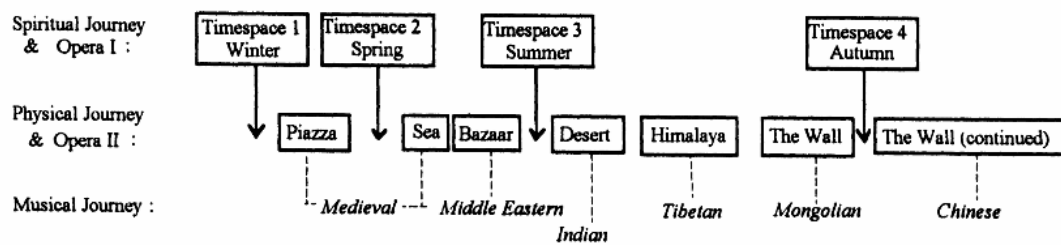
---

<sup>23</sup> Hung Eric, "Tan Dun Through the Lens of Western Media (Part II)," *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association*, 68(3) (2012): 660.

He included the following instructions on the title page of the score:

The physical journey is the story of Marco, the traveler, from Italy to China. ... The spiritual journey is a reflection on the three states of the human being — past, present, and future — and on the cycle of nature. ... The musical journey is closely related to both the physical and spiritual journeys. There are two operas occurring simultaneously. The first (Opera I) is the Book of Timespace which is developed on Eastern Opera vocal and instrumental traditions. The second (Opera II) is based on Western Opera traditions, blending and layering different musical styles and colors, languages, and using both Eastern and Western instruments.<sup>24</sup> (See Table 2.3 below)

**Table 2.3: Three Journeys of *Marco Polo***<sup>25</sup>



Tan Dun’s official website explains the creative intention of *Marco Polo*: “In *Marco Polo*, Tan Dun sought to discover a 21st-century form for opera — one that incorporates multiple languages, cultures and time periods, Eastern and Western operatic traditions, and varied musical styles to create an authentically international genre.”<sup>26</sup>

The collage used is partial and limited to Tan Dun’s two early operas *Nine Songs* and *Marco Polo*, and there is no continuation of the use of this technique in the later three

<sup>24</sup> Tan Dun, “On The Creation of *Marco Polo*”, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco\\_polo\\_33573](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573) (accessed November 5, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco\\_polo\\_33573](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Tan Dun, “Synopsis of *Marco Polo*,” *Tan Dun Online*, <http://tandun.com/composition/marco-polo/> (accessed on November 5, 2014).

operas. However, Tan Dun used collage in many of his early works such as *Heaven Earth Mankind* (Symphony 1997). There, he employs the well-known Chinese folk song “Jasmine” and Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”. In the opera *Nine Songs*, during an intense war scene in the eighth section, Tan Dun draws on the beginning of the first section “lieying” in the well-known Chinese traditional piece ‘Ambush from Ten Sides’ (See Appendix B) When the *pipa* enters, Tan Dun signals for the vocals and percussion to stop and let this traditional Chinese instrument play the authentic lute music ‘Ambush from Ten Sides’.

Moreover, in *Marco Polo*, Tan Dun designed the musical journey of “India — Tibet — Mongolia — China”. In the “desert”, Tan does not use a specific segment of Indian music, instead, he uses the Indian Purvi scale, Sitar and Tabla drums (See Figure 2.3 below).

**Figure 2.3: The Book of Timespace: Summer – Desert in Tan Dun’s *Marco Polo*, mm.62<sup>27</sup>**

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Shehe, Sitar, and Tabla. The score is in 6/8 time and features the Indian Purvi scale. The Shehe part is marked 'mf' and includes a 'M' dynamic marking. The Sitar part is marked 'mf' and includes a 'p' dynamic marking, with notes labeled with letters: S, N, P, D, M, G, R, G, S. The Tabla part is marked 'mp' and includes a 'p' dynamic marking. The score includes annotations such as '(Shoherezada) mf', '(5 beats)', and '(with improvisatory changes)'.

The attempt of fusing elements from the East and the West is demonstrated in the final

<sup>27</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco\\_polo\\_33573](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573) (accessed February 9, 2015).

“Book of Timespace” scene in *Marco Polo*. When the role of Mahler appears, Tan Dun draws upon the beginning of Gustav Mahler’s fifth movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, with the orchestration and texture completely intact. The text of this music is derived from the poem “Der Trunkene im Frühling” (“The drunken man in spring”) written by Li Bai, poet of the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) of China. The approach of collage resonates with Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh’s idea of music and difference, not “to evoke that other music but to create a distance from it and transcend it.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, this West-East dialogue and compatibility is achieved by juxtaposition, a so-called pastiche, but it is not a seamless integration. This pastiche is just the kind of contradiction, complexity, and inclusivity that post-modernism embodied. The reason the opera as a whole feels more like a collage than a fusion is because Tan Dun is interested in experimenting with rather than assimilating Western operatic conventions at this stage of his career. To conclude, the overall aesthetic of *Marco Polo* is a mixture of “multiple languages, cultures and time periods, Eastern and Western operatic traditions, and varied musical styles”<sup>29</sup> — a pastiche.

### **2.3 Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun’s Early Operas**

Tan Dun’s early operas exhibit an interest in exploring instrumental timbre.

---

<sup>28</sup> Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. “Introduction,” in *Western Music and Its Others* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Zhenya Wang, “The Brief Introduction of Tan Dun’s Nine Songs”, *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music*, Vol.3 (1991):26. My translation.

Percussion instruments play a tremendous role in his three early operas and it reflects Tan’s predilection for percussion instruments. He not only uses some Chinese percussion instruments with special sound effects but also uses some Western percussion instruments to achieve contrasting sound effects. The rich timbre of the percussion groups, the variety of playing techniques as well as different combinations contributes to the diversification of timbres. *Peony Pavilion* (1998) combines and contrasts Chinese and Western instruments. There are fourteen different percussion instruments and two auxiliary instruments: brush and bow (See Table 2.4 below). These percussion instruments are divided into three instrumental combinations: the first one is the bass drum which is used commonly in the Western orchestra, paired with the drum set that is often used in popular music; the second is Chinese percussion combination such as Chinese opera drum, Chinese cymbal, and small gong; the third is the “special color” percussion combinations such as udo drum, maracas, guiro, ratchet and so on. Besides these three combinations, some sounds are recorded on a CD, and it is played by the conductor according to the composer’s instructions.

**Table 2.4: Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun’s *Peony Pavilion***

<b>Players</b>	<b>Percussion Instruments</b>
Player 1	bangu drum (Chinese Opera drum), Chinese cymbal, small gong, large bassdrum, water gong, ratchet
Player 2	Drum set (pedal bassdrum, 4 tomtoms, hi-hat, snaredrum, cymbal), udo drum (a ceramic drum with 2 sound holes), maracas, guiro, Chinese cymbal, brush, bow, flexatone, 4 small Chinese bells (or finger bells), 2 cowbells (large, small).

Tan Dun makes further arrangements on the basis of the aforementioned categories. The arrangement can be divided into the dominant type and decorative type according to the different roles that instruments played. The so-called dominant type refers to some percussion instrument combinations used throughout the work. The leathery drums are played flexibly and hold a dominant position in *Nine Songs*' five types of percussion instruments, and the ritual style of the opera is established by these drums. Similarly, in *Peony Pavilion* the combination of bass drums and drum sets is the dominant type. The decorative type includes short percussion passages with unique color which are used occasionally. In addition to establishing the atmosphere of the scene, percussion instruments can also change the style of the musical material itself. For example, Tan Dun employs the drum set in the accompaniment of chant style theme in *Peony Pavilion*. The use of the drum set adds the element of "modernization" and changes the character of the chant theme, which evokes medieval Christianity.

Tan Dun has made bold attempts in his first opera *Nine Songs*. He abandoned the practice of the Western orchestra and instead refers to the *bayin* (See Appendix B). In effect, percussion instruments in the opera occupy an absolutely dominant position and involve twenty-one different instruments. They can be classified by material into the following categories: leather, soil, wood, bamboo and metal (See Table 2.5 below).

**Table 2.5: Percussion Instruments in Tan Dun's *Nine Songs***

<b>Category</b>	<b>Instruments</b>
Metal	5 Pairs of Chinese cymbals, 6 pairs of metal pipes, Tam Tam(1), Big gong(1), Peking gongs(3), Small gongs(2), Vibraphone(with brush)(1)
Skin	Chinese big drums(5), Chinese small drum(1), Bangu(1), A set of Chinese tom tom(5), A set of roto tom(5)
Earth	Pottery Jars(8), Pottery pipes(8), 2 sets of Pots(10), A set of Moon, A set of Platter, A set of Pottery sticks
Wood	5 Pairs of wood-sticks, Marimba(with brush)
Bamboo	A set of Bamboo-pieces

The leather drums, which play an important role can be further divided into the Chinese big drums, Chinese small drums, Bangu, Chinese tom tom, and roto tom. Clay instruments such as the pottery jar, pots, and pottery pipe are made by Tan Dun in collaboration with pottery artist Ragnar Raess.

Obtaining new sound materials, some of which can be self-made, had a direct impact on the sound exploration of Tan Dun's subsequent operas, which includes water, paper, and stone. Tan Dun adds additional mechanisms on instruments to develop the registral limits of some Chinese traditional instruments. He also employs some ancient, old instruments which are barely used in China now such as *qing* and *xun* (See Appendix B). Furthermore, he arranges the percussionists so as to involve them in the development of the opera's plot and they effectively become actors in the opera. Compared to some Western composers who explored new sources of sound material from the industrial society such as plastic barrels, wire, sticks, and all kinds of electrical appliances, Tan

explore new sources of sound but avoids modern materials. However, the approach of exploring new sources of sound and using self-made instruments is firstly used by Euro-American experimental composers. For example, John Cage (1912–1992), Tan Dun’s mentor and friend, had a great influence on the formation of Tan’s notion of sound. Tan Dun’s early works reflect a profound impact of the American experimental and avant-garde, and the timbre of Chinese instruments is merely one of the means by which he explores neo-orientalism. This exploration is based on Tan Dun’s Western musical aesthetics and compositional techniques, plus some Chinese musical effects, which do not appear as single individuals, but the form of a fusion of Western and Chinese effects. It brings an auditory perception of both familiar and unfamiliar to audiences.

## **2.4 Improvisation and Tempo**

Improvisation is widely used in Tan Dun’s three early operas. In *Marco Polo*, the themes and recitative use improvisatory techniques extensively. In *Nine Songs*, both musical materials and instruments are improvised. In most cases the beats are free and bar lines are abandoned. Tan Dun uses rehearsal numbers and minutes or seconds to mark the length of the music. In *Peony Pavilion*, there are two improvisational approaches: the first one involves recording the improvisational music beforehand and then playing it in the actual performance; the other one involves improvisational music in the actual performance by the performers rather than playing the recording. For example, the ten inserted “Composer’ voice & improvisations” in *Peony Pavilion* belong to the first



approach (See Figure 2.4 below).

**Figure 2.4: “Spring (1) – Composer’s Voice and Improvisations” in Tan Dun’s *Peony Pavilion*<sup>30</sup>**

(play composer’s vocal motives in pitch A, E, B, F# and C#)

(2)

(3) Reeds (insect song)

(4) Bowed Cym.

(5) Water Gongs

(6) Cym. (♩ = 60)

(1) Pipa (bird’s song)  
very high register

CD 4  
(Composer)

Liu:  
Raindrops disperse from plantain leaves. Breezes cease to ruffle Peony Tips  
Surely some grieving owner absent far fills this place with sorrowful  
memories; try as you may to forget, each turn of path by mound or pool  
captures your thought again.

There are only five basic notes (A E B# F# C) and a rough outline of the playing method.

The performers interpret how the melody and rhythm develops and how the voices and five instruments coordinate with each other.

Additionally, ‘rubato’ is also used extensively in Tan Dun’s early operas, and it refers to the equivalent Chinese term *sanban* (See Appendix B) in Peking Opera. In figure 2.5 from *Peony Pavilion*, Tan Dun does not indicate the tempo. Therefore the ceramic drum, water gong, xun and pipa are played freely (See Figure 2.5 below).

<sup>30</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/peony\\_pavillion\\_33582](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/peony_pavillion_33582) (accessed February 9, 2015).

**Figure 2.5: Part II, “Floating (1) — Composer’s Voice & Improvisations” in Tan Dun’s *Peony Pavilion*<sup>31</sup>**

Ceramic Drum  
(6)

(5) Water Gong  
*p*

(breathes I / slow) (murmurs) (blows) (breathes II / builds up)

(4) Water Gong  
*p*

Pipa  
(1) sliding with a coin & vocalising as the composer

floating sound  
(3)

(2) Xun  
playing & vocalising as the composer

CD [E] Composer

Du: You must guess, sir  
We have never met.  
I am no goddess  
come to shower petals from the air  
upon a bodhisattva,  
you, sir, you have strayed  
in a butterfly dream among the blossoms

Liu (ponders): True indeed, I did have a dream  
in the rear garden, looking west toward  
the sunset, I did see a young lady walking there.

Improvisation and the ‘rubato’ tempo markings in Tan’s early operas reflect his interest in indeterminate music. Generally speaking, indeterminate music in Tan’s early operas is exhibited in three ways: (1) indeterminate pitch (2) indeterminate tempo and beat (3) indeterminate rhythmic development. Improvised music and the indeterminate tempo achieve the improvised or accidental feel of music through intuition. This improvisatory compositional approach makes the work become an “event” or a kind of “behavior” rather than having eternal value associated with a traditional work-concept. Similarly, some other Asian composers such as Toru Takemitsu also commonly use indeterminate music in their works. His composition *RING for Flute, Terz, Guitar and Lute* (1961), *SACRIFICE for Alto Flute, Lute and Vibraphone* (1962), *VALERIA for*

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

*Violin, Cello, Guitar and Electric Organ with Two Piccolos' Obligato* (1965) draws on the various degrees of chance. Most of the works of Takemitsu call for a very slow tempo with minimal changes, and barely use sharply contrasting tempos. In fact, the specific compositional techniques and approaches used by Takemitsu and Tan Dun are derived from Western composers. John Cage's chance and improvisation undoubtedly play an important role in Takemitsu and Tan Dun's creation. As Georgina Born claims, "a number of these composers — among the Toru Takemitsu and Tan Dun — collude in Cageian Orientalism and employ a musical idiom derived from Western modernism or late romanticism, sometimes even stooping to chinoiserie, even if these aesthetics are refracted through their own Asian identities."<sup>32</sup> To some extent, I agree with Georgina Born's view. In fact, the Eastern themes quoted in early works by neo-orientalist composers are derived from Western compositional techniques. In other words, the use of Eastern themes in some neo-orientalist composers' early works is based on Western aesthetics and functions more like chinoiserie.

In Tan Dun's early operas, a Western postmodern aesthetic and the use of Chinese elements develop a personal voice that helps Tan establish himself as a neo-orientalist composer. Tan Dun's exploration of neo-orientalism is basically established by these Western compositional techniques and aesthetics. On the one hand, the Western modernists' aesthetic of "anti-tradition" is continually used by Tan; on the other hand, he

---

<sup>32</sup> Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. "Introduction," in *Western Music and Its Others* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 20.

picks up traditions that have been abandoned by the modernists, and then combines them with new ideas to form something different from existing musical idioms. Tan Dun's exploration of new timbres, librettos, aesthetics, and methods of creation in this creative period is based on his identity as a "Westerner". He has not yet started representing his own Asian or Chinese identity through his operatic output. To a greater extent, Ning Wang's assertion reflects the different creative stages of these neo-orientalist composers have gone through: "to succeed in the West, a non-Westerner should first of all identify himself/herself as a Westerner at the expense of his/her own national and cultural identity. But after success, one cannot but think of seeking his/her native country and cultural identity."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ning Wang. "Orientalism versus Occidentalism?" *New Literary History*, 28/1 (1997):65.

### Chapter 3: *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*

Combining the lyricism of Italianate opera, lush Western orchestration, a male ‘Greek chorus,’ gamelan-like percussion, and the organic sounds of nature — water, paper, and stones — Tea brings an ancient tale to the 21st century.<sup>34</sup>

Tea: A Mirror of Soul [...] offers a thrillingly unusual sonic and visual experience; an East-West fusion of musical traditions and natural sounds.<sup>35</sup>

After exploring organic music in many works such as *Water Concerto for Water Percussion and Orchestra* (1998) and *Paper Concerto for Paper Percussion and Orchestra* (2003), Tan Dun incorporates natural materials as instruments in his opera *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*. It seems that aside from the fusion of West and East, this organic audio experience is especially striking for audiences. This raises some questions regarding organic music in the opera: what is the function of organic music? How does Tan Dun use organic music to represent neo-orientalism in *Tea*?

*Tea: A Mirror of Soul* (2002) was commissioned by Suntory Hall, Japan and the composer Tan Dun dedicated the work to Keizo Saji (1919-1999), who is the founder of the Suntory Hall. The world premiere of *Tea: A Mirror of soul* took place at Suntory Hall, Tokyo, on October 22, 2002. Tan Dun conducted the world premiere and Pierre Audi was the stage director. Xu Ying and Tan Dun produced the libretto of the opera. Table 3.1

---

<sup>34</sup> “Programme Note”, *Music Sales Classical*, <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/33592> (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Lederman Marsha, “In Photos: Behind the Scenes of Vancouver Show Tea: A Mirror of Soul”, *The Globe and Mail*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/in-photos-behind-the-scenes-of-vancouver-show-tea-a-mirror-of-soul/article11739673/> (accessed February 9, 2015).

below outlines the cast of characters in the opera.

**Table 3.1: The Cast of Characters in *Tea: A Mirror of Soul***

<b>The characters in the opera /other performers</b>	<b>Voices/Instrument arrangement</b>	<b>Symbol/Metaphor</b>
Seikyo	Baritone (Japanese Monk)	discovery/philosophy
Lan	Soprano (Chinese Princess/Puppet Monk)	love
Prince	Tenor (Chinese Prince/Puppet Monkey King)/Lan's brother	anger
Emperor	Bass (Father of Lan/Shadow)	tradition/culture
Lu	Contralto (Shadow/Ritualist/Daughter of Tea Sage Luyu)	tea/messenger for spirit
Monks chanting	Bass-Baritone Chorus	religion
Three Percussionists	Water, Paper, Ceramic Instruments	nature
Orchestra		drama

The opera is set in the fifteenth century and the three main characters are Lan (Chinese princess), Seikyo (Japanese Prince), and the Prince (Lan's brother). The Japanese Prince Seikyo falls in love with the Chinese Princess, Lan, and wishes to marry her while he is learning the tea ceremony in China. Lan's father, the Emperor, requests that Seikyo recites tea poetry, and the Emperor agrees to the marriage due to Seikyo's excellent performance. But it stirs Lan's brother's (the Chinese Prince) wrath. At a tea

festival, the Prince of Persia offers a thousand horses in exchange for the ancient Chinese tea ceremony document *The Book of Tea*. The Prince is reluctant to accept the exchange of *The Book of Tea*. Seikyo points out that the book is not authentic since Luyu, author of *The Book of Tea*, has showed him the real one. The Prince is furious, and the Prince and Seikyo gamble with their lives to prove the truth. Seikyo with Lan embark on a search for the real *Book of Tea*. At a Chinese tea festival, they meet Luyu's daughter, Lu, and she tells them about the death of her father. Lu gives the book to Lan and Seikyo because they promise to expand the cultivation of the tea ceremony. As they read the *Book of Tea*, the Prince suddenly appears and fights for the book. In the fight between Seikyo and the Prince, Lan is stabbed and mortally wounded by the Prince when she attempts to stop the duel. The Prince is filled with remorse, gives Seikyo his sword and demands death. Seikyo refuses to kill the Prince and he chooses to live the rest of his life as a monk.

In the production of the Japanese premiere (2002), Shinichi Yamada observed that “the staging did not attempt to duplicate Chinese or Japanese performing traditions; instead, the European production team — Pierre Audi, artistic director of the Netherlands Opera; French set and lighting designer Jean Kalman; Italian costume designer Angelo Figus — created its own metaphorical world.”<sup>36</sup> The abstract stage design emphasizes an active involvement of the orchestra, chorus and percussionists, more so than Chinese or Japanese elements in staging, lighting and costume design. (See

---

<sup>36</sup> Shinichi Yamada. “Tea — A Challenge to the West”, *Andante*, 2002.

Figure 3.1 below)

**Figure 3.1: The Japanese Premiere of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* in Suntory Hall, Tokyo.**



At this world premiere of *Tea: A Mirror of soul*, Tan Dun chose not to use overt Asian elements such as Asian traditional costumes or staging with an Asian architectural style in the Japanese production. Instead of sitting in the orchestra pit, Tan Dun moves the orchestra to the left side of the stage where it is closer to the audience. Moreover, organic instruments such as three water bowls and huge sheets of paper are placed in a conspicuous position. It seems that Tan Dun wished to exhibit a different East in this Japanese production, one that is meditative and natural rather than the cliché of the East used in Western orientalist operas. In other words, the Japanese production, embodying



Tan Dun's representation of neo-orientalism, has entered a new stage.

Another production of the Canadian premiere by the Vancouver Opera in 2013 displays an abundance of Chinese elements. For instance, in Act 1 Scene 2 (See Figure 3.2), the red color that symbolizes China is widely used in lighting, costumes, sets and props. A striking red box is centered on stage with circular decorative pattern and the shadow-puppet show in the opera is seen through the rice paper. In fact, the circular decorative pattern on the red box is a typical design in ancient Chinese constructions. Compared to the Japanese production, the design of props on stage in Vancouver's production display more references to Chinese culture and traditions.

**Figure 3.2: The Canadian Premiere of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* by the Vancouver Opera.**



The General Director of Vancouver Opera, James Wright, comments on the production: “*Tea: A Mirror of Soul* beautifully combines traditional Chinese vocal lines and Tan Dun's unique ‘organic music’ with western opera in the Italian style, [...] We believe that

this visually splendid production, which was designed by an all-Asian team, will be very appealing to people from all cultures and backgrounds.”<sup>37</sup> Although organic music is still the biggest feature of the opera, judging from the actual performance, it seems that the designed visual effect of the production becomes the most appealing to audiences.

In July 2008, *Tea* was staged at National Centre for the Performing Arts (China) in Beijing and it is his only opera performed in China. Prior to the performance Tan Dun remarks in an interview that “[...] when coming to the opera *Tea* at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, you will find that it is a visible musical experience and also an experience in which one can hear color. We formed the concept of our entire design of *Tea* in view of this visible sound and audible color. We hope that when you see the opera, your feeling about this opera is purely Chinese, no matter what the color or the melody is, and no matter what the philosophy or stage effect”<sup>38</sup> (See Figure 3.3 below).

**Figure 3.3: The Chinese of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* in National Centre for the Performing Arts**

---

<sup>37</sup> “News Release”, Vancouver Opera, April 22, 2013. Accessed February 17, 2015.  
<http://www.vancouveropera.ca/sites/default/files/Tea-April-22-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Jingbo Yang, “Record: Tan Dun interprets pure Chinese elements in *Tea*,” *Sina*, June 18, 2008,  
<http://ent.sina.com.cn/j/2008-06-18/ba2065245.shtml> (accessed February 9, 2015).



Different from the Tokyo and Vancouver productions, the Chinese production stages more authentic Chinese elements. Figure 3 depicts Act 1 Scene 2, where Lan (the Princess) and the Prince are performing *The Monkey King* which is a traditional Chinese shadow-puppet opera — the most frequently performed opera set to the Chinese legend “Buddha Passion” — for her father, the Emperor. Lan plays the role of Tang San-zang (the main character in *The Monkey King*) by the performance of Chinese folk dance *pao-lu* (See Appendix B). She rides a donkey made of paper, bamboo and cloth. The Prince is holding a puppet monkey to play the other role, Sun Wu-kong.

Aside from *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, Tan Dun’s other four operas have never been performed in China. Tan Dun intended to add some “authentic” Chinese elements on the props and stage setting in *Tea*. Chinese audiences were curious to see how Tan Dun would represent Asian culture through the use of Western compositional techniques. The

“authentic” Chinese stage setting and the visible musical experience of organic music in Tan Dun’s statement somehow becomes the selling point of the Chinese opera industry.

Seen from these three different productions of *Tea*, the sounds of nature generated by water, paper and ceramics in *Tea* is a common approach to represent Asia in performances in both Western and Asian countries. In an interview in 2013, Tan Dun explains the use of organic music in *Tea*: “the music has been designed to convey the duality of the spiritual inner space and its physical external counterpart. This form of expression is encapsulated in, and structured by, the concept of “organic music.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, organic music in *Tea* is the means by which Tan Dun represents the philosophy of the tea ceremony and “authentic” Asia. As Tan said: “organic music symbolizes the process of understanding the true essence of the tea ceremony”,<sup>40</sup> and “in order to achieve the state of harmony between man and nature in the tea ceremony, we should use natural objects with Chinese culture as instruments to make natural sounds.”<sup>41</sup> Is “authentic” Asia represented in *Tea* by the true essence of tea ceremony – “the harmony of man with nature”? Or through the use of props, costumes and stage design with Chinese elements? In my opinion, the “authentic” Asia in Tan Dun’s mind is a state in Chinese philosophy — “the harmony of man with nature” which is represented by

---

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Ratuski, “Talking Tea with Tan Dun,” May 3, 2013, <http://music.cbc.ca/#/blogs/2013/5/Talking-tea-with-Tan-Dun> (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Yan Chui, “Tan Dun’s Tea Returns to China,” June 17, 2008, <http://yule.sohu.com/20080617/n257561006.shtml> (accessed February 9, 2015). My translation.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

organic music. This state can only be demonstrated through the sounds of nature that is the unity of man and nature, represented by organic music. In conclusion, the essence of “authentic” Asia represented by organic music is the means by which Tan Dun represents neo-orientalism in the opera *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*.

### **3.1 Representing the Tea Ceremony on Stage**

Since the Chinese tea ceremony has spread to Japan in Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), the Japanese developed their own tea ceremony and it began to evolve its own aesthetic, particularly that of “sabi” and “wabi” principles. The elaborate and refined Japanese tea ceremony has strict regulations to achieve the “wabi-sabi” aesthetic which is a representation of Zen Buddhism. By contrast, the Chinese tea ceremony is a blend of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian thought, and requires people to keep an eternally silent and peaceful heart. The Chinese people believe that the process of drinking tea is actually a process of self-cultivation and communication between man and nature. However, unlike the Japanese tea ceremony which requires strict procedures, the Chinese tea ceremony is more relaxed. Tan Dun comments on the difference between the Chinese and Japanese tea ceremonies: “the Japanese tea ceremony is very artistic, and Chinese tea ceremony is life-like.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, in *Tea*, the stage design of the Japanese tea ceremony and the Chinese tea ceremony differs. For example, in the version of the National Centre for

---

<sup>42</sup> Chui Jun. “Tan Dun Says That The Tea Ceremony Is About The Men and Women, and Life and Death,” June 19, 2008. <http://bjyouth.yinet.com/3.1/0806/19/2897076.html> (accessed February 9, 2015) My translation.

the Performing Arts (China) in July 2008, the scene of the Japanese tea ceremony has water and a bamboo grove which is silent and dreamlike. By contrast, the Chinese tea ceremony scene is colorful and more lifelike. In addition to the stage setting, how does Tan Dun represent the difference between Chinese and Japanese tea ceremony? In *Tea*, Tan sets up three groups of organic instruments on stage including water, paper, ceramics, and stone. These instruments on stage musically represent the difference between the Chinese and Japanese ceremonies.

Organic instruments factor prominently into the structure of the opera itself. The title of each act corresponds to the materials of the instruments being used, as well as the plot of the opera. The first act entitled “Water, Fire” is a pair of contradictory images and an abstract expression of the plot development. “Fire” and “Water” are originally two incompatible things, but they both are unified in the process of making tea. The opening scene is a Japanese tea ceremony on stage that is conducted by the High monk Seikyo inside a temple in ancient Japan. The monks asked Seikyo: “How the bowl is empty, Master?”<sup>43</sup> Seikyo starts by telling the bitter romance of him and the Chinese Prince Lan from ten years ago: “Though the bowl is empty, the scent glows; though the shadow is gone, the dream grows.”<sup>44</sup> This expression becomes the basic mood of the entire opera. In an interview with the Executive Producer of Tokyo’s Suntory Hall on the occasion of

---

<sup>43</sup> Tan Dun, “synopsis”, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea\\_33592](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea_33592) ( accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

the opera's 2002 world premiere in concert form, Tan Dun remarks on the significance of tea and explains the meaning of the empty bowl:

In my research for *Tea* I traveled around Japan and China, and learned that Japanese Tea is a 'mirror of the soul.' When I was in the southern regions of China, which is of course the home of tea, I had the opportunity to interview an eminent nun. She always presents to her first-time guests an empty tea bowl, and on such occasions she herself also puts an empty tea bowl to her lips, as if to drain it of its contents. In this very action her spiritual world-view becomes vividly apparent. For me, there was something greatly enlightening about the spirit of Chinese tea as made manifest in her, and about the spirit of Japanese tea. In this opera, which I refer to as my "voyage through Tea," I make use of these two elements on several occasions.<sup>45</sup>

On Tan's official website, organic music is under the column of visual music. He claimed that the opera *Tea* is "to hear the color, to see the sound". Therefore, in *Tea*, Tan Dun makes the opera more visual by using the light and performer's gestures. At the beginning of the Act 1, a percussionist plays the waterphone with corporeal movements, starting from the right rear of the auditorium and then slowly walking towards the stage. A mystic and solemn atmosphere is established by the sound of waterphone. The Japanese tea ceremony continues. It is bitter and silent. Three glass basins are placed prominently on stage accompanied by white lighting and three percussionists making the sound of dripping water by hand. (See Figure 3.4 below) Only a very soft overtone of a contralto singing accompanies the sound of dripping water.

---

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lodico, "Ionarts in Santa Fe: Tan Dun's Tea", August 8, 2007. <http://ionarts.blogspot.com/2007/08/ionarts-in-santa-fe-tan-duns-tea.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

**Figure 3.4: Act I: “Water, Fire” in Tan Dun’s *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, mm.4-6.<sup>46</sup>**

The musical score for Percussion I, II, and III in Act I of 'Tea: A Mirror of Soul' (mm. 4-6) consists of three staves. Each staff shows rhythmic patterns with dynamic markings. Perc. I and II have a 'p' marking, and Perc. III has a 'p' marking. The text 'Water Drips (fade in sound + light)' is written above the staves.

Then the chorus of chanting monks fades in the overtone singing of “m-u-o-e” and the three percussionists join in by rhythmically patting and pounding on the water with their palms (See Figure 3.5 below).

**Figure 3.5: Act I: “Water, Fire” in Tan Dun’s *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, mm.7-14.<sup>47</sup>**

The musical score for Percussion I, II, and III in Act I of 'Tea: A Mirror of Soul' (mm. 7-14) consists of three staves. Each staff shows rhythmic patterns with dynamic markings. Perc. I, II, and III have dynamic markings of mp, f, sf, and p. The text 'Water Patting (pat water with palms of hands)' and '(collect and hold water in palms)' is written above the staves.

A strict and refined Japanese tea ceremony is represented as follows: “Seikyo raises an empty teapot, passes an empty bowl, and with obvious relish, savors empty tea

<sup>46</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea\\_33592](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea_33592) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



ritualistically: one sip, two, and then a half.”<sup>48</sup> The sounds of water functions as a special timbre throughout the scene and also musically represent the Japanese tea ceremony which is peaceful and elaborate.

Compared to the Japanese tea ceremony, the Chinese tea ceremony does not pay much attention to regulations but focuses instead on communication between man and nature. Tan Dun displays the Chinese tea ceremony in his mind onstage. The third and final act, “Ceramic, Stones”, depicts the death of the protagonist’s love. As Tan Dun explains: “The music of ceramics and stones sends a message of fate”.<sup>49</sup> The opening scene of this act is a Chinese tea ceremony offered by Lu, who is the daughter of Tea Sage, Lu Yu (See Figure 3.6 below).

**Figure 3.6: Act III: “Ceramic, Stones” in Tan Dun’s *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, mm.26-30.<sup>50</sup>**

The musical score for Percussion I, II, and III in Act III of Tan Dun's *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, measures 26-30, is shown below. The score is written for three percussion parts. Perc. I and III have melodic lines with fingerings (5, 1, 4, 2) and dynamics (mf, p, f). Perc. II has a more rhythmic, textured pattern with dynamics (f, p, f). A 'Cadenza improvise 45° in tempo' section is indicated for Perc. I and III.

During the tea ceremony, Lan and Seikyo arrive too late; the Tea Sage Lu Yu has already died before they came. Energetic and lively orchestral music begins, while the chorus and

<sup>48</sup> Tan Dun, “synopsis”, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea\\_33592](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea_33592) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea\\_33592](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea_33592) (accessed February 9, 2015).

Lu display the process of the Chinese tea ceremony. Halfway through the ceremony, the orchestra stops and only the ceramic instruments carry on the improvised music. All of the singers on stage kneel down and prostrate on the floor. A ritual and shamanistic atmosphere is established with the music of these ceramic instruments, and the performance of the singers.

In order to suit his aural and visual requirements, Tan Dun and some artists designed these ceramic pots and drums used in *Tea*, and made them from the material of natural clay. Furthermore, Tan Dun takes full advantage of the stage space to achieve rich and varied sound effects (See Figure 3.7 below). He sets up two percussionists playing pitched ceramic pots with mallets at the front and both sides of the stage, and one percussionist plays a ceramic drum with their hands at the back of the stage.

**Figure 3.7: The Japanese Premiere of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* in Suntory Hall, Tokyo.**



An alternate sound space on stage — an organic, natural space is effectively created by the use of these ceramic instruments placed in different positions.

In Tan Dun's mind, the sound of stones and organic instruments made from natural materials used in *Tea*, serves to represent the true essence or philosophy of the tea ceremony — the harmony of man with nature (humans plus nature always equals one). Tan explains the reason of using ceramic instruments and stones in his work *Earth Concerto for Stone and Ceramic Percussion with Orchestra* (2009): "As the oldest Chinese wisdom states: humans plus nature always equals one. In harmony with this philosophy, I use the sounds of earth and stone instruments to symbolize the connection of the heavens and earth with the orchestra representing the human beings."<sup>51</sup>

### 3.2 Organic Music and Neo-orientalism

Organic music created with water, paper, ceramic and stones in *Tea* corresponds with the titles of three acts, "water, fire", "paper", and "ceramic stones". Tan Dun utilizes the music played by these organic instruments to represent the essential elements in tea ceremony and as well as the aesthetics of tea. As he said in an interview that "in the *Cha Jing* (The Book of Tea) itself, the author Lu Yu writes about water, wind (the sound of paper), fire and earthenware, and I wanted to assimilate all of these elements into my work, because they are all essential to the aesthetics of tea. This is a further example of the opera's concern with double meaning."<sup>52</sup> The water music in Act 1 assists in creating

---

<sup>51</sup> Tan Dun, "Synopsis of the *Earth Concerto for Stone and Ceramic Percussion with Orchestra*," *Tan Dun Online*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Earth-Concerto.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Tan Dun, "Tan Dun talks Tea with CBC Classical", *Tan Dun Online*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Tea-A-Mirror-of-Soul.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

the peaceful, silent and meditative qualities of the Japanese tea ceremony. Furthermore, the spirit of the Japanese tea ceremony is also reflected in the water, according to Tan Dun: “before entering a tea ceremony room in Japan, one doesn’t merely wash one’s hands. Rather, in the action of washing the hands, the soul is washed and cleansed too.”<sup>53</sup> The paper music in Act 2 creates a “sensuous and erotic tea dream”<sup>54</sup> by imitating the sound of the wind. Two huge sheets of paper hang on the stage, and percussionists drum on the paper with sticks, blowing in and out of a paper bag. Tan also requires performers to tear, shake, and crinkle the paper with their hands. The orchestral musicians participate in the performance by quickly turning the pages of their score to imitate the sound of wind and rustling trees. In Act 3, the music of ceramic instruments and stones represent the Chinese tea ceremony in a ritual and shamanistic style. Therefore, organic music in *Tea* is not only used throughout the opera, but also has been incorporated as an underpinning concept by Tan Dun.

In fact, the preference of the use of water, paper and earthenware as instruments in Tan Dun’s music is not only reflected in Tan Dun’s operas but also his many other works such as *Water Concerto for Water Percussion and Orchestra* (1998), *Water Passion After St. Matthew* (2000), *Paper Concerto for Paper Percussion and Orchestra* (2003), *Water Music* (2004), and *Earth Concerto for Stone and Ceramic Percussion with Orchestra*

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Tan Dun, “synopsis,” *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea\\_33592](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tea_33592) (accessed February 9, 2015).

(2009). Undoubtedly, several noteworthy contemporary composers have inspired Tan Dun to explore the sounds and materials of the natural world. Tan Dun has admitted that “John Cage’s ideas from the *I Ching* are a second engine for my imagination... hearing the music surrounding you in your life — I also learned that from John Cage.”<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, for Toru Takemitsu the natural world was important as a source of inspiration:

I wish to free sounds from the trite rules of music, rules that are in turn stifled by formulas and calculations. I want to give sounds the freedom to breathe. Rather than on the ideology of self-expression, music should be based on a profound relationship to nature – sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh. When sounds are possessed by ideas instead of having their own identity, music suffers. This would be my basic rule, but it is only an idea and naturally I must develop a practical method. One way might be through an ethnological approach. There may be folk music with strength and beauty, but I cannot be completely honest in this kind of music. I want a more active relationship to the present. Folk music in a “contemporary style” is nothing but a deception.<sup>56</sup>

The following statement from John Cage comments on organic music in Tan Dun’s works:

What is very little heard in European or Western music is the presence of sound as the voice of nature. So that we are led to hear in our music human beings talking only to themselves. It is clear in the music of Tan Dun that sounds are sound central to the nature in which we live but to which we have too long not listened. Tan Dun’s music is one we need as the east and the west come together as our one home.<sup>57</sup>

Then what does this “very little heard” sound mean to Western audiences? And do they appreciate Tan Dun’s neo-orientalist approach, which is actually derived from Western compositional skills?

---

<sup>55</sup> Tan Dun, “Music that changed me,” interview by Heidi Waleson, *BBC Music Magazine*, 2000, 122.

<sup>56</sup> Toru Takemitsu, “Nature and Music,” in David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (eds.), *The Book of Nature and Music* (Middletown, Connecticut, 2001), 184.

<sup>57</sup> John Corbett. “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” in *Western Music and Its Others* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 179.

Orientalist appropriations have long been used in Western composers' works in varied ways and have also been reappropriated by contemporary Asian composers. The oriental primitive cultures or traditions became an effective way for Western composers to capture audiences' attention. Corbett points out that "what various 'traditional' music bring to the Western classical scene is a sort of shock of the ancient — they are seen as having values that were lost over the course of European art music history, or perhaps were never there in the first place."<sup>58</sup> John Cage is an excellent example of a composer who was inspired by the Chinese ancient oracle *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and Japanese Zen Buddhism, and who utilized these philosophies to create works rather than appropriating some oriental music or techniques. As a Chinese-born composer, Tan Dun cannot abandon the ancient philosophy of animism and Taoism, which is the key of "authentic" expression in neo-orientalism. This following statement made by Tan Dun could explain why he uses water, stones, and ceramics as instruments in his works:

"organic music" concerns both matters of everyday life and matters of the heart, these ideas find their origin in the animistic notion that material objects have spirits residing in them, an idea ever-present in the old village where I grew up in China. Paper can talk to the violin, the violin to water. Water can communicate with trees, and trees with the moon, and so on. In other words, every little thing in the totality of things, the entire universe, has a life and a soul.<sup>59</sup>

On the one hand, John Cage and Takemitsu inspired Tan Dun to explore the concept of organic music and also to utilize the techniques learned from them. On the other hand, the

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Tan Dun, "Organic music", Tan Dun Online, <http://www.tandunonline.com/visualmusic/Organic-Music.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

inherited and deep-rooted animistic and Taoist philosophy inevitably affects how Tan Dun conceives of a work and how he utilizes these techniques to represent “neo-orientalism” in his mind. As Corbett claims, “positioned by Cage as a champion of ‘the presence of sound as the voice of nature’, Tan Dun’s work is made to fit snugly into the “wisdom of the East” variety of Orientalist discourse.”<sup>60</sup> Utilizing water and stones as instruments in Western art music was no longer a shock but was familiar to Western audiences. Yet using these materials from natural world to represent Asian primitive culture and traditions or the philosophies behind the music and story, captures the essence of Tan Dun’s neo-orientalism. Ultimately, organic music is an integral component and also one of the crucial approaches of Tan Dun’s neo-orientalism.

---

<sup>60</sup> John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others”, 179.

## Chapter 4: *The First Emperor*

Following a commission from the Met in 1996, the opera *The First Emperor* received its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera on December 21, 2006, conducted by the composer Tan Dun with Plácido Domingo in the title role. Table 4.1 below displays the cast of the opera.

**Table 4.1: The Cast of *The First Emperor***

Emperor Qin	Tenor	Plácido Domingo
Princess Yueyang	Soprano	Elizabeth Futral
Shaman	Mezzo Soprano	Michelle DeYoung
Gao Jianli	Lyric Tenor	Paul Groves
General Wang	Bass	Hao Jiang Tian
Yin-Yang Master	Peking Opera Singer	Wu Hsing-Kuo
Mother of Yueyang	Mezzo Soprano	Susanne Mentzer
Chief Minister	Baritone	Hai Jing Fu
Soldiers, slaves, guards		The chorus of Met

There are three acts and five scenes in this opera. The libretto is written by Tan Dun and Ha Jin, and is based on the *Records of the Grand Historian* (See Appendix B) by Sima Qian (c.145-86BC) and on the screenplay, *The Legend of the Bloody Zheng* (See Appendix B), by Lu Wei. The narrative takes place two thousand years ago in China, when Chin Shi Huang established the first central government and named himself the First Emperor. Chin Shi Huang wanted to find an anthem which can unify the people, so he conquered the state of Yan, in which his childhood friend Gao Jianli lives. Since Gao



is also known as the Maestro, Qin Shi Huang demands that he compose the anthem, but Gao refuses and seeks death. Princess Yue Yang is moved by Gao's heroism, and begs her father give her a chance, and promise her that if she can convince Gao to live and compose the anthem. But to fulfill her filial and royal duties, she has to marry General Wang, who is ordered to conquer the state of Yan. Princess Yue Yang finally persuades Gao to compose the anthem which can be used to unify people, but this anthem turns out to be the song of the slaves who built the Great Wall. The emperor realizes that this is Gao's revenge.

The Chinese production team, headed by Zhang Yimou who is the best-known filmmaker in China, participated in the Met production. Zhang's cinematic conceptions are reflected in the staging, lighting and costumes of *The First Emperor*. For example, the costumes used in the Chinese martial arts film *Hero* (2002) directed by Zhang and the opera *The First Emperor* are both designed by the Japanese costume designer Emi Wada. The similarly loose style of Chinese traditional cloth is exhibited, as both the film *Hero* and *The First Emperor* tells the story about the first emperor Qin Shi Huang of China in the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). As Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte point out regarding the connection between the film *Hero* (2002) and *The First Emperor*, "Tan wrote the score for 'Hero', which is set during the reign of the first Chinese emperor and which he envisioned as the opera's prequel."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte, "Tan Dun's Opera: A Special Delivery from the Spirit World", *New York Times*, June 26, 2005.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/arts/music/26lips.html?pagewanted=1&sq=Special%20Delivery%2>

In his in-depth study of “The First Emperor and Zhang Yimou”,<sup>62</sup> Anthony Sheppard has investigated the connection between Tan Dun’s cinematic works of *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002), and *The Banquet* (2006), and the opera *The First Emperor*. These “cross-genre self-borrowings,” to use Sheppard’s phrase constitutes an approach drawing on similar themes and melodic materials in both Tan’s cinematic and operatic works. Sheppard has examined a similar melody used in the opera *The First Emperor* and the film *The Banquet* by Tan Dun, and asserts that

This melody is first heard prominently early in the opera when the Shaman asks ‘Who will be the next to kill, to burn, to sacrifice?’[...] This melody, only slightly varied, is the central theme from Tan’s score for *The Banquet*. (In this soundtrack, the pianist Lang Lang serves as celebrity soloist.) The sharing of this theme between *The Banquet* and *The First Emperor* implies consistency in its referential meaning.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, Tan Dun’s experience of previous cinematic works influences how he conceives and treats his operatic work *The First Emperor* to a certain degree. In fact, Tan Dun once remarked that “opera and film, to me, sometimes they are the same.”<sup>64</sup> To Tan Dun, the melody borrowed from his cinematic work serves as his representation of ancient Qin dynasty, and the portrayal of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang’s character in his opera *The First Emperor*. This cinematic experience created by a familiar melody and costumes

---

0from%20the%20spirit%20World&st=cse&scp=1&adxnlnx=1309964605-YoE51DuZ0Wo/r0k2TFBcQw (accessed March 4, 2015)

<sup>62</sup> Anthony Sheppard, “Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou between Film and Opera.” *Journal of Musicological Research*, 29/1 (2010): 1-33.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Elena Park, “Interview with Tan Dun,” translated by Kerry Huang, January 20, 2006. [www.Tandunonline.com](http://www.Tandunonline.com). (accessed May 20, 2014)

used in *The First Emperor* reflect that Tan Dun representations of the East in his opera and cinematic works are the same.

#### **4.1 Representing Shamanism in *The First Emperor***

As with many European grand operas, *The First Emperor* exhibits a particular historical moment that occurred more than 2,000 years ago in China, and represents the inner lives of figures from the past. Judging from the creative trajectory of Tan Dun's operas, the libretto and narrative mode has shifted back to tradition: *Nine Songs* and *Marco Polo* do not employ conventional narratives, *The Peony Pavilion* invokes story, *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* and *The First Emperor*, creates narrative. *The First Emperor* draws upon Romantic operatic features rather than the Euro-American avant-garde. As Anthony Sheppard points out, "it is clear that in composing *The First Emperor* Tan made a self-conscious attempt to incorporate both the European and Chinese operatic pasts while toning down the tendency toward more overt stylistic collage evident in his earlier works. In general, this opera exhibits enthusiasm for the operatic past rather than a stance of ironic detachment."<sup>65</sup> In this chapter, I will explore how Tan Dun uses shamanism and romantic traditions are at the center of neo-orientalism in the opera *The First Emperor*.

In the documentary "Root – Talk Between Tan Dun and His Hometown", Tan Dun comments on the great impact that shamanic culture plays on his music creation: "in fact,

---

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Sheppard, "Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun's *Tinte* and *The First Emperor*", *Journal of Musicology*, Vol.26, No.3 (Summer 2009): 287.

no matter how I organize a language and how I design a structure based on a theme, one thing I think that I can never abandon from the bottom of my heart is Hunan's *Wu* culture and *Nuo* culture"<sup>66</sup> (*Wu* culture and *Nuo* culture are translated into shamanistic culture in English). Undoubtedly, shamanistic culture has had a tremendous influence on Tan's composition. Tan Dun's preference of using shamanistic culture in his music is not just reflected in *The First Emperor*, but also in many of his other works, such as *Nine Songs* (1989). In fact, it is an opera with mysteries of shamanistic ritual. In another work, *Ghost Opera* (1994), Tan "was inspired by childhood memories of the shamanistic 'ghost operas' of the Chinese peasant culture".<sup>67</sup>

In fact, Tan Dun's use of shamanistic musical elements in his music creation stems from his childhood experience. Tan Dun was born in a small town near Changsha city, Hunan Province, and his house is next to a cemetery where funerals were held nearly every day. For each funeral, there was a Shaman to preside. When he was young, Tan Dun found that what the Shaman seeking, was a kind of state in which he could communicate with the past life and the next life, and communicate with God and nature. This sense combined with the sounds of nature gradually inspired Tan Dun's sensitivity and curiosity with sound. Thus, his childhood experience profoundly influenced Tan Dun to compose works with shamanistic elements. Yet how might the impact of the childhood

---

<sup>66</sup> The documentary "Root — Talk between Tan Dun and His Hometown", Director is Sheng Boji, producer is Zhou Yujiao, and it recorded and made by Ya Fan Art Workshop of China in 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Peggy Monastr, *Tan Dun Online*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Ghost-Opera.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

memories with shamanistic culture help Tan to shape his opera *The First Emperor*? In the following chapter, I will analyze three aspects of shamanistic culture in *The First Emperor*: two Shaman roles, costumes and masks, and a Chin ancient worship band on stage.

#### **4.1.1 Two Shaman Roles**

There are two shamanistic roles in this opera: the Yin-Yang Master and the Shaman (Western prophet), and they cannot be found in records about the first emperor as chronicled in *Records of the Grand Historian*. It is obvious that the Yin-Yang Master symbolizes Eastern culture, and the Shaman symbolizes Western culture. Thus, the difference between Eastern and Western religious practices is demonstrated onstage.

Although Western and Eastern culture has its own different mythologies and rituals, the primitive mysterious stage effects performed by the Shaman roles remains the same. Tan Dun clarified the contrapuntal concept of the opera's creation as follows: "my concept in creating *The First Emperor* is to fuse contrasting musical elements. It is to develop 'music counterpoints' to the counterpoints of different times, different styles, different cultures, and different languages. It is to realize my '1+1=1' music philosophy by using contrasting musical ideas to fortify the unification of music texture and music structure."<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Tan Dun, "An Operatic Evolution - On the creation of *The First Emperor*," *Tan Dun Online*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/The-First-Emperor.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

Therefore, in *The First Emperor*, the use of these two Shaman roles is not to emphasize the different cultures of East and West, not “1+1=2”, but to create an appealing mysterious and exotic representation of religion onstage. Different from the shamanism used in his early operas such as *Nine Songs*, Tan Dun adds Western shamanistic elements to represent the China rather than only using ancient Chinese shamanism. This approach, on the one hand, demonstrates the contrast and collision of two different cultures; on the other hand, the same mystery and effect are also achieved by the two different shamanistic performance styles. Therefore, Tan Dun’s preference for using shamanism to represent neo-orientalism in his works remains unchanged, and the “1+1=1” music philosophy becomes the new way of representing the neo-orientalism.

Here raises the question of how Tan Dun represents shamanism musically. As narrators, the two Shaman roles bring audiences back to that period of history and immerse them in the ups and downs of the plot. They also take part in musical expression and development, as diegetic music accompanies the appearance of the Shaman. The augmented fourth and diminished fifth are used as motivic intervals to musically represent the two Shaman roles in *The First Emperor*, and also widely used in the theme, melodic figures and the harmonic texture (See Figure 4.1 below).

**Figure 4.1: Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor*, mm. 149-156.**



These motivic intervals serve to establish symbolic meanings such as the foreshadowing of misfortune, and they reflect the narrative features of the motivic intervals as well. The appearance of the Shaman and Yin-Yang Master must be accompanied by the augmented fourth. Additionally, every appearance of the Shaman interrupts the narrative and causes a reversal in the plot. Because of the dissonant characteristics of the augmented fourth, Tan Dun utilizes it as an ominous intervallic motive to interrupt the continuation of the story and to create an intense atmosphere, which fills the opera with tension and drama. This motive has the ability to foreshadow the developments of the plot, particularly when it links the two roles of the Yin-Yang Master and Shaman.

The visual and musical appearance of these two Shaman roles is an ominous warning. They are so discordant in the environment of peace that the development of the plot is always interrupted by them. For example in Act 1 Scene 1 (See Figure 4.2 below), the Shaman sings praise to the ancestors and gods and presides over the ceremony. The Shaman proclaims the prophesy: “Who will be the next for us to kill to burn to sacrifice?”<sup>69</sup> Introduced by the Shaman, this theme recurs in its original statement and subsequent adaptations.

---

<sup>69</sup> Quoted from the online score of Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor*, mm. 125-141, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first\\_emperor\\_fs\\_35240](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first_emperor_fs_35240) (accessed February 9, 2015).

**Figure 4.2: Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*, mm. 149-154.<sup>70</sup>**

The musical score for Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*, mm. 149-154, features a Shaman and a Chorus. The Shaman's part is in treble clef, and the Chorus's part is in bass clef. The lyrics are: "Who will be the next for us to kill, to burn, to kill, to burn." The score includes dynamic markings: *ppp*, *mf*, and *sfp*.

Similarly, in Act 1 Scene 2, the Emperor discovers that Princess Yue-yang can get up, walk, and even run; he enters the room followed by General Wang, the High Priest and the Shaman. The augmented fourth (F and B) and diminished fifth (B and F) are sung by the Shaman. The dissonant musical materials prophesy the tragic ending of love between Princess Yue-yang and Gao Jianli, as the General is distressed and indignant that his betrothed has given herself to Gao Jianli.

#### 4.1.2 Costumes and Masks

Shamanistic culture has a long history in China, and it derives from the Chinese ancestor-worship ritual ceremony. Shamanistic performance is one of the most important components in Shamanistic culture. Stutley explained that "[...] most western writers use the term 'seance' for shamanic performance,"<sup>71</sup> but it is called Nuo Opera (See Appendix 2) in Hunan province of China. Nuo Opera widely absorbs features of Chinese folk dance music and drama, and performers mostly wear masks. In early Nuo Opera, the roles are

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 20.



generally distinguished based on the masks. Fearful expressions and darkness in the masks strengthen the fear and awe of the audience. In the early Nuo Opera, roles are usually distinguished by masks which directly demonstrate the personality of the role wearing it. Later on in some Nuo Opera, makeup is used instead of wearing masks. Nowadays, masks and painted faces are both seen in the stage.

Assuming the 200-year old role of communicator, the Yin-Yang Master paints his face red and wears white masks at the back of his head, since he has the two personalities of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>72</sup> For example, in the Act 3, Princess Yue-yang's ghost appears and tells her father that she killed herself as she was unable to sacrifice her love for Gao for her country. The Yin-Yang Master switches from a red to a white face, and performs bodily gestures while Princess Yue-yang's ghost sings. Once the Emperor reaches the tenth step, the Shaman announces General Wang's suicide. His ghost appears and declares that his unwavering loyalty to the Emperor would never allow him to commit suicide. At this moment, the Yin-Yang Master switches from a red to a white face again, and performs some corporeal movement while General Wang's ghost is singing. Consequently, the white face represents death, and red face represents life.

The Western Shaman paints her face white instead of wearing a mask, and her lips and eyes are exaggerated. She also wears a colourful long robe and a small helmet. Her necklace is ornamented with animal bones and teeth. Stutley describes the Western

---

<sup>72</sup> In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang are concepts used to describe how apparently opposite or contrary forces are actually complementary, interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another.

Shaman's costume as follows: "the costume is usually a long coat hung with pieces of iron, rattles, rings and figurines of mythical animals, or pieces of material made into snake form, a breastplate, a mask, a large hat, cap or helmet, embroidered stockings and a decorative belt. All the above have mystical meanings."<sup>73</sup> Thus, when the Shaman first appears on stage, the costume is familiar and the audience could feel the mystery and power of this Shaman role. In fact, the Shaman has the ability to communicate with spirits. As Edson explains, "[...] shaman was a person believed to be in communion with the spirits."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, shamanistic stage effects are reinforced by the use of masks and costumes.

#### **4.1.3 The Ancient Chin Worship Band on Stage**

The most striking musical feature of *The First Emperor* is the absolute dominance of diegetic music. Besides the traditional Western opera orchestra, Tan Dun sets up an ancient Chin worship band on the stage. Compared to the orchestra, the band has a different timbre that creates different sense of space. The band is equipped with the following instruments: large Chinese drums, 15-string zheng, pitched ceramic chimes, giant bell onstage, and pairs of stones. The band not only accompanies the chorus, but often participates in musico-dramatic expression. The worship band and orchestra

---

<sup>73</sup> Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction*, 72.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Edson, *Shamanism: A Cross-Cultural Study of Beliefs and Practices* (London: Mcfarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009), 9.

alternate; performers wear costumes and do bodily movements synchronized with the music.

The design of the ancient Chin worship band not only adds timbral contrast, but also gives a special theatrical effect. For example in Act 1 Scene 1, a ritual is performed in the Ancestral Shrine of Chin at the foot of the Great Wall. Thirteen large Chinese drums are placed in the center of the stage (See Figure 4.3 below).

**Figure 4.3: Act 1 Scene 1 from Tan Dun's *The First Emperor***



Tan Dun requires the chorus to read the syllables while performing corporeal movement (See Figure 4.4 below).

**Figure 4.4: Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor*, mm.19-23.<sup>75</sup>**

The musical score for the Chorus in Act 1 Scene 1 of Tan Dun's *The First Emperor* (mm. 19-23) is presented in two staves. The top staff contains the lyrics: "Ha wu ka Ha-shi wu". The bottom staff contains the lyrics: "Ha wu ka Ha-shi wu". Above the staves, performance instructions are provided: "[Shout and raise right arm]" above the first measure, "[Slap side of leg with right hand]" above the second measure, "[Shout and squat half way. Slowly stand up again.]" above the third measure, and "[Shout and stomp]" above the fourth measure. Dynamic markings include "fff" and "sf".

They raise their right arms and slap side of leg with right hands, then they squat half way and slowly stand again. Meanwhile, the ancient Chin worship band onstage uses stone to play the required rhythms corresponding with the chorus’ shout of “Ha”, “Wu”, “Ka”, and “Ha-shi”. In fact, the use of small stones rather than drumsticks to play the drums exemplifies Tan Dun’s attempt of reproduce the ritual of ancient Chin dynasty on stage. According the report of “People’s Daily Online”, Tan was inspired by his travel to Xi’an: “he learned about the ceramic instruments that were used during the Qin dynasty, and discovered that the music of the era relied largely on chanting and ritualistic body movements.”<sup>76</sup>

Also, in the Act 1 Scene 1, the performance on stage is suggestive of the ritualistic and shamanistic ceremony in the ancient Chin Dynasty. In this scene, selected percussionists play pitched ceramic chimes with drumsticks on the left of the stage. The Shaman sings praise to the ancestors and gods and presides over the ceremony, with

<sup>75</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first\\_emperor\\_fs\\_35240](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first_emperor_fs_35240) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous, “Chinese Opera The First Emperor Transmitted Live into Theaters Worldwide”, [http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114\\_341080.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114_341080.html), January 14, 2007.

masked dancers representing spirits surround her (See Figure 4.5 below).

**Figure 4.5: Act 1 Scene 1 from Tan Dun's *The First Emperor***



In his book *An Introduction to Shamanism*, Dubois described the shamanic performance in detail: “Practitioners [...] beat drums at a rapid and unflagging pace, clanged cymbals or bells, and/or chanted songs of power and complexity. They responded to the music bodily: through dance, hyperactivity, and dramatic shifts from action to torpor.”<sup>77</sup> The shamanistic performance in *The First Emperor* has something in common with the performance described by Dubois. In view of the analyses of the above two examples, Tan Dun not only make reference to ancient Chinese ritual, but also to shamanic performance in other countries. The shamanic and ritualistic atmosphere of the opera is established through the use of the two Shaman roles, masks and costumes, and the music

---

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Dubois, *An Introduction to Shamanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154.

played diegetically by the ancient Chin worship band enhances the shamanic effect.

#### 4.2 Shamanism, Romantic Tradition and Neo-orientalism

In his discussion concerning the creative intension of *The First Emperor*, Tan Dun claims that “at first I mistakenly thought that innovation is established on the basis of reconstruction which smashed all traditions and even showed great anti-traditional. Later, however, I gradually found that the tradition is a great asset and can absorb more nutrients for innovation. ‘Innovation’ is built on the development of the traditions.”<sup>78</sup>

Returning to traditions is at the centre of Tan Dun’s neo-orientalist approach in *The First Emperor*. Frequently used avant-garde and postmodern techniques such as collage, and improvisation in his earlier *Nine Songs*, *Marco Polo*, *Peony Pavilion* are no longer used in *The First Emperor*. An in-depth study of *The First Emperor* by Anthony Sheppard reveals the connection between Puccini’s Romantic tradition and *The First Emperor*:

Tan’s earlier Ghost Opera, Marco Polo, and Peony Pavilion, with their more abrupt stylistic juxtapositions and direct quotations, might be more easily described as postmodernist than the recent Tea or The First Emperor. In fact, Tan’s manipulation of different musical styles in The First Emperor parallels Puccini’s structural and dramatic deployment of tinta more so than it does Tan’s own earlier works.<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, in *The First Emperor*, drawing upon tradition is the most crucial means of achieving neo-orientalism. For example, Tan Dun shifts his operatic creation to recitative,

---

<sup>78</sup> Tan Dun, “About the Creative Concept of The First Emperor.” ( paper presented at the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing, China, arranged by Jianguo Zhang, March 30, 2007). My translation.

<sup>79</sup> Sheppard, “Blurring the Boundaries”, 308.

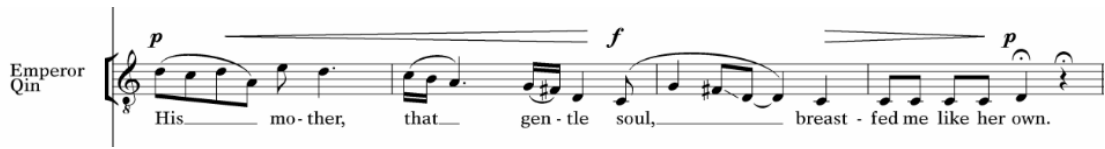
adhering to the tradition of “singing” and the lesser spoken parts of the Chinese opera. He also uses pentatonic lines which are based on the diatonic scale, and parallel fifths and fourths to reflect the Western clichés of representing Asia or East. On the one hand, Tan Dun looks for inspiration from the ancient Chinese cultural traditions. He went to Xi’an (the capital of the Shanxi province of China) to observe and study the qin-qiang, an ancient Chinese vocal style that originated during the Chin Dynasty. But he did not use any of the folk melodies he heard. He explains that “I want these melodies to be singable by a typical opera singer, but also to expand them.”<sup>80</sup> He learned three distinctive formal structures which are employed in the qin-qiang vocal style from the local scholars: “the tritone interval, the continuance of a fourth, and the practice of starting with highest note and descending to the lowest — the opposite of Western opera’s climactic high note at the end of an aria.”<sup>81</sup> For example, in Act 1 Scene 1, the Emperor Chin recalls life in Yan with Gao Jianli as hostage prisoners. The basic melodic structure only occupies four measures, and is lengthened by repetition. The singing style employs a qin-qiang vocal style which starts with the highest note and descends to the lowest (See Figure 4.6 below).

---

<sup>80</sup> People’s Daily Online, “Chinese Opera The First Emperor Transmitted Live into Theaters Worldwide,” January 14, 2007. [http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114\\_341080.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114_341080.html) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Figure 4.6: Act 1 Scene 1 in Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*, mm. 320-324.<sup>82</sup>



On the other hand, drawing on orientalist portrayal of operatic heroines is another approach to represent the neo-orientalism in *The First Emperor*. Tan Dun draws on the narrative of tragic love and the death of heroines, inspired by Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. However, unlike Puccini, Tan Dun portrays the Princess Yueyang as a woman who is brave, wise, and dares to fight. This stands in stark contrast to the ideal image of oriental women, Cio-Cio San, who is gentle, weak, and loyal. In *The First Emperor*, the Princess Yueyang chooses her own love bravely and does not yield to pressure from her father to marry General Wang, whom she does not love. Therefore, the female role portrayed in *The First Emperor* demonstrates the difference between Tan Dun's representation of neo-orientalism and Western orientalist composers.

Moreover, Romantic operatic conventions of ritual scenes inspire Tan Dun as well. Ritual and supernatural power has been performed on the opera stage, and through the ages ritual scenes have never been absent from the Western theatre. However, unlike the Western style, Tan Dun uses Chinese ancient ritual — shamanistic ritual to represent ancient Chin. Furthermore, Tan Dun does not abandon the Western ritual tradition, but adds Western shamanistic elements to represent supernatural power on stage. To the

<sup>82</sup> Tan Dun, *Issuu*, [http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first\\_emperor\\_fs\\_35240](http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first_emperor_fs_35240) (accessed February 9, 2015).



audience, they experience a primitive mysterious atmosphere by this familiar Western and exotic Chinese shamanistic performance onstage. Here Tan Dun's use of shamanism as a fusion of Western and Eastern cultural tradition not only demonstrates his "1+1=1" music philosophy, but also signals his neo-orientalist approach. As the statement made by Tan himself:

Like many of my contemporaries of the 21st century, I am a product of multi-cultural attitudes. The purpose of evolution and revolution in contemporary opera, both musically and culturally, is not to destroy or rebel against traditions, but to draw on the traditions and revitalize the varied and sometimes opposing cultural concepts of "new and old", "east and west", resulting in a unique and new operatic language.<sup>83</sup>

Those inspirations gained from the ancient Chinese cultural tradition, orientalist operatic conventions and Romantic operatic conventions of ritual scenes help Tan Dun form his neo-orientalist approaches.

---

<sup>83</sup> Tan Dun, "Dialogue with Tan Dun", *Tan Dun Online*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/The-First-Emperor.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The overall aim of my thesis is to explore the neo-orientalism in Tan Dun's operas. I have analyzed the musico-dramatic features and elements that make up neo-orientalist representations of difference. Tan Dun's three early operas exhibit experimental and postmodern characteristics. As I have demonstrated, Tan Dun's operatic creation in this period is an exploration of new operatic forms, aesthetic, and methods of creation rather than representing his own Asian or Chinese identity. The other two operas *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* (2002) and *The First Emperor* (2006) represents Tan Dun's mature approach to neo-orientalism. In these two operas, my analyses have been focused on organic instruments employed in *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* and shamanism in *The First Emperor*. As I have shown, organic music used in *Tea* is an integral component of Tan Dun's neo-orientalist aesthetic. In *The First Emperor*, the Chinese primitive shamanistic tradition and Western musical conventions are the approaches Tan Dun used to represent neo-orientalism. These approaches used by Tan demonstrate how he engages in the construction of the neo-orientalism, and also reflects the expression of Asian composers' broader understanding of neo-orientalism.

In order to construct a convincing analysis, I have drawn heavily on theoretical sources related to the orientalism. These essential texts offer a historical and theoretical framework of my analysis and provide a clear understanding of orientalism. By consulting Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) which is the key work in academic field of

postcolonial studies, I realized that orientalism is a deep-rooted episteme of Westerners' thinking about the Orient, and that it has always functioned as part and parcel of Euro-American colonialist ideology. Thus, representations of orientalism in works by Western composers have essential differences with orientalist representations in works composed by Asian composers. I analyzed representations of orientalism in Tan Dun's operas as distinct from Western composers' representations, in order to explore and explain the aesthetic of neo-orientalism. I have also been able to view literature related to analyzing cultural dialogues in today's post-colonial world and recent discussions of neo-orientalism in music. These diverse sources not only provide me with the musical, theoretical and cultural views of neo-orientalism, but also help me to summarize and shape my own standpoint. Moreover, the available DVDs, recordings, and scores have been crucial references for information regarding his compositions. Tan Dun's official website also allowed me to observe introductions, synopses, and commentaries of Tan Dun's compositions. All of the aforementioned sources have helped me to construct a convincing analysis of neo-orientalism in Tan Dun's operas.

In the first chapter I defined the term "neo-orientalism" used in music and explored the relationship between neo-orientalism and globalization. As I demonstrated, neo-orientalism results from the profound impact of globalization in the field of music. In today's rapid development of globalization, the emphasis on self-identity is simultaneously intensified, and will undoubtedly make East and West similar and convergent. Moreover, this convergence is built on preserving cultural differences of both

sides, rather than eliminating the differences. Therefore, whenever and wherever the degree of globalization is more strengthened, there will be more emphasis on local culture and more dependence on identity and recognition. This is why neo-orientalist composers choose to seek inspiration from their own indigenous cultural traditions. On the other hand, the globalized market offers the opportunity for Western audiences to listen to various musics from different cultures, and they are interested in “new” and “unusual” sounds. Ian Buruma remarks on the unfamiliar Chinese musical element in Tan Dun’s works: “The exoticism of his [Tan Dun’s] work is perfect for a globalized market hungry for new and unusual flavors.”<sup>84</sup> In a way, Westerners’ great interest in these “unusual” and “unfamiliar” exotic musical elements just reflects their emphasis on self-identity. As David Irving claims in his book *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* that “many cultures can only discover their own identity through opposition or difference.”<sup>85</sup> As for neo-orientalist composers, these “unfamiliar” and “unusual” musical elements are the means by which they discover their own identity and represent the “new” orient in their mind.

The term “neo-orientalism” as defined in the first chapter, refers to works produced by Western composers which construct the East using pre-existing Western-style representations of the East. These neo-orientalist composers participate in the

---

<sup>84</sup> Ian Buruma. “Of Musical Import: East Meets West in the Art of Tan Dun”, *New York Times*, May 4, 2008. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Ian-Buruma/2753> (accessed April 6, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> D. R. M. Irving. *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.

construction of orientalism, and their approaches of representing Asia can be viewed as a remodeling of an Asian self-image. Arif Dirlik, in “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism” (1996), argues that since the East or Asia is also involved in the construction of orientalism, orientalism should therefore not only be seen as a problem of modern Europe, but also of modern Asia.<sup>86</sup> While Said insists that there is still discourse power in Western culture, Dirlik claims that orientalism emerged out of indispensable contact zones from the beginning, rather than simply being a natural product of the development of Europe. Similarly, Anthony Sheppard has remarked that “Tan Dun has been accused of engaging in ‘self-Orientalism,’ trading on Chinese exoticism and tempering his earlier avant-garde style to achieve commercial success.”<sup>87</sup> This “self-orientalism” or “remodeling of an Asian self-image” emphasizes the Asian composers’ participation in representing Asia, which is no longer an object to be described solely by Western composers. Therefore, in order to emphasize this “new” understanding and representation of the East in these Asian composers’ works, I use the term neo-orientalism.

Yet how do these neo-orientalist composers engage in representing the East? And can these approaches used in neo-orientalist works be viewed as a representation of the authentic East? In my opinion, Asian elements used in Tan Dun’s neo-orientalism cannot be considered authentic. It seems that the works of neo-orientalist composers sound

---

<sup>86</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism”, *History and Theory*, 35/ 4 (1996): 96-118.

<sup>87</sup> Anthony Sheppard, “Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou between Film and Opera”, *Journal of Musicological Research*, 29/1 (2010): 25.

exotic to Western audiences' ears, but for Asian audiences, these works are considered to be more Western, rather than representing Asian indigenous traditions. In fact, these "authentic" Asian elements are processed specifically for Western audiences by composers. For instance, Tan Dun frequently uses organic instruments such as water, ceramic and paper in his works. However, incorporating sounds borrowed from nature first appeared in Western postmodern experimental music rather than in works of Tan Dun. Tan Dun wishes to express his understanding of Asia through the use of this invention created by Westerners. The same water, stone and paper cannot only be used to express post-modern experimental music in the West, but also has the ability to create a shamanistic and ritual atmosphere, and express the mystery of a constructed Asia or China in Tan Dun' works. Therefore, the most productive way to engage in the construction of neo-orientalism and an expression of neo-orientalist composers' understanding of orientalism is by incorporating familiar and recognizable musical features believed by Western audiences to represent the East.

As I have shown in the second chapter, Tan Dun represents neo-orientalism by using collage, an innovative use of percussion instruments, improvisation, and other Euro-American avant-garde compositional techniques. The three early operas not only reflect Tan Dun's preference for simple and mysterious Chinese classical aesthetics and philosophical traditions, but also creative concepts of postmodernism. Although the use of Chinese elements is a significant feature in Tan Dun's work, interpreting China is not the goal of Tan Dun's early creations. The use of Chinese elements is just the means of

representing postmodernism and the Euro-American avant-garde in his works.

Tan Dun's creation in recent years forms part of a trend towards reassertions of tonality and tradition. Moreover, the intention of "seeking roots" has been further strengthened. In his subsequent works, the demands and aspirations of representing "authentic" China became the central point of his creation. As I mentioned before, Tan Dun seeks equality in orientalist representations and wants to engage in the construction of orientalism with an expression of Asian composers' understanding. The analyses of the third and fourth chapter have shown that the use of Chinese traditions is very different from three early operas. These differences are manifest in following ways: first, he draws on historical figures and writes original librettos rather than drawing upon ancient poetry or dramatic script. Second, the music no longer directly used folk songs or was improvisational, but Tan creates new music with these traditional features based on the study of the folk music or cultural traditions that are not familiar to many people. Third, organic instruments and some self-made instruments are used more often, although Chinese traditional instruments are still used in the orchestra, as is the case in his early works.

As can be seen from these changes, Tan Dun has gradually formed his own neo-orientalist approach on the basis of traditional exploration. For example, the use of organic instruments in Tan Dun's works is inspired by ancient Chinese instruments and Western Avant-garde experimental compositional techniques. In *The First Emperor*, Tan Dun looks for inspiration from the Chinese ancient instrument, *qing*, which is made of

stone (See Appendix B). Tan requires percussionists to play drums with small stones rather than drumsticks. Instruments made of stone are widely used in primitive sacrificial ceremonies and the imperial orchestra, and are classified as one of the ancient Chinese musical instruments called *shi*. Tan Dun's approach of using small stones in place of drumsticks embodies looking for inspiration and new ideas from traditional ancient Chinese instruments. On the other hand, besides seeking inspiration from Asian or Chinese cultural traditions, Tan Dun also draws on the European musical past. For example, Anthony Sheppard has argued that the final ritual dance in *The First Emperor* echoes several primitive-style passages in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, and the chugging staccato oboe rhythm in Act 1 of the opera recalls the neoclassical style.<sup>88</sup> Thus, Tan Dun draws on indigenous traditions and conventions of the Romantic musical past to represent Asia and China in his construction of neo-orientalism.

Just like Tan Dun, neo-orientalist composers such as Toru Takemitsu, Somei Satoh, and Akio Yashifo look for inspirations from their native cultures. The Yin and Yang principle, Chinese calligraphy, Buddhism, and objects in the nature such as water and trees are the sources of creative inspirations. These neo-orientalist composers are mostly Asian-born and educated in Western-musical traditions. They understand both Western and Eastern aesthetics. Therefore, the East in their mind is represented in ways that Westerners can understand and accept. To accommodate Western audiences' aesthetics,

---

<sup>88</sup> Anthony Sheppard, "Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun's *Tinte* and *The First Emperor*", *Journal of Musicology*, Vol.26, No.3 (2009): 289.



they create so-called “authentic” oriental elements by using the familiar Western musical traditions and techniques. Therefore, their works reflect the remodeling of orientalism, and they participate in neo-orientalism constructions.

As “an excellent contemporary example of the new wave of Asian neo-orientalist,”<sup>89</sup> Tan Dun’s representations of Asia and China have captured both Western and Chinese audiences and critics’ attention. Although it is well worth noting that the works of other Asian composers exhibit neo-orientalism as well, as a Chinese researcher I chose Tan Dun’s operas as my research objects. I believe that I have better understanding of indigenous Chinese traditions in Tan’s operas, and my research on Tan’s works will also serve as a case study of musical manifestations of neo-orientalism in the broader repertory. I hope that my thesis will arrive at a more clear understanding and analysis of “neo-orientalism” in Tan Dun’s operas.

---

<sup>89</sup> John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” in *Western Music and Its Others* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 179.

## Bibliography

Abbate, Carolyn. *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

———. *In Search of Opera*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Braun, William R. "The Emperor Speaks". *Opera News* 71/6 (2006): 14-15.

Buruma, Ian. "Of Musical Import: East Meets West in the Art of Tan Dun", *New York Times*, May 4, 2008. Accessed February 3, 2015.  
<http://www.japanfocus.org/-Ian-Buruma/2753>

Brady, Tim. "James Bond, Tan Dun, and the Canadian Future of Music". *Musicworks: Explorations in Sound* 71 (1998): 29-31.

Chang, Peter M. "Tan Dun's String Quartet Feng-ya-song: Some Ideological Issues". *Asian music*, 22(2), (1991): 127-158.

"Chinese Opera The First Emperor Transmitted Live into Theaters Worldwide", *People's Daily Online*, January 14, 2007. Accessed February 4, 2015.  
[http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114\\_341080.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200701/14/eng20070114_341080.html)

Corbett, John. "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others." In *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Born, Georgina and Hesmondhalgh, David, 163-186. California: University of California Press, 2000.

Chui, Yan, "Tan Dun's Tea Returns to China", *Sohu Yule*, June 17, 2008. Accessed February 4, 2015. <http://yule.sohu.com/20080617/n257561006.shtml>.

Chui, Jun. "Tan Dun Says That the Tea Ceremony Is About Men and Women, and Life and Death", *Beijing Qingnian*, June 19, 2008. Accessed February 4, 2015.  
<http://bjyouth.ynet.com/3.1/0806/19/2897076.html>.

Chute, James. "There's No Composer in the World Like Tan Dun." *San Diego News*, July 28, 2012. Accessed March 15, 2014.  
<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2012/Jul/28/La-Jolla-Music-Society-Summerfest-Tan-Dun/2/?#article-copy>.

Douglas, Tim. "Music Career Inspired by Nature". *The Australian*, September 21, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2014.  
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/music/music-career-inspired-by-nature/story-fn9d2mxu-1226478365827>.

Delgado, María M. "A love Three Incarnations Long". *Performance Research*, 6(1), 2001: 101-107.

Dirlik, Arif. "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism", *History and Theory*, 35/4 (1996): 96-118.

Driscoll, Paul F. "The First Emperor: An Empire Reborn," *The Metropolitan Opera 2006–07 Season Book*, New York: The Metropolitan Opera Guild, (2006): 52.

Everett, Yayoi Uno. "Calligraphy and Musical Gestures in the Late Works of Chou Wen-Chung." *Contemporary Music Review*, 26 (5-6), 2007.

Goldwasser, Dan. "Tan Dun's Dragon." *Soundtrack.Net.*, December, 2000. Accessed March 15, 2014.  
<http://www.soundtrack.net/content/article/?id=65>

Griffiths, Paul. *Modern Music: A Concise History*. New York: Thames & Hudson Press, 1994.

Gim, Yu-hyi. "Three Case Studies of Eastern Contemporary Music: A Postmodern Portrait". *Yonsei music research*, 10, (2003): 1-24.

Han, Feng. "The Study of Musical Characteristics in Contemporary Opera — Analysis in Case of Tan Dun's Opera Creation." *Yin Yue Shi Kong*, 4 (2012): 36-37.

- Hoi-Yan Wong. "Bartók's Influence on Chinese New Music in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era." *Studia Musicologica*, 12/2 (2007): 237-243.
- Hung, Eric. "Tan Dun Through the Lens of Western Media. Part I". *Notes*, 67/3 (2011): 601-618.
- Hung, Eric. "Tan Dun Through the Lens of Western Media. Part II". *Notes*, 67/3 (2011): 659-666.
- Hearn, Maxwell K. "A Conversation with Tan Dun: A New 'Peony Pavilion' in an Old Context." Accessed March 13, 2014.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/concerts/a-conversation-with-tan-dun>
- Irving, D.R.M.. *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Issuu. "The Online Scores of Tan Dun's Operas." Accessed February 9, 2015.  
<http://issuu.com/nanzhang7/stacks/83ee998adc384257877751b5f4804e52>
- Kouwenhoven, Frank. "New Chinese operas by Qu Xiaosong, Tan Dun and Guo Wenjing". *CHIME*, 1997: 10-11, 111-122.
- Liu, Tao. "Visual Demonstration of Tan Dun's Opera Music." *Literature & Art Studies*, 6 (2012):160-162.
- Li, Shiyuan. "The Music of Tan Dun and Postmodernist". *Musicology in China*, 3 (1996): 115-128.
- Locke, Ralph P. *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Lodico, Michael. "Ionarts in Santa Fe: Tan Dun's Tea", August 8, 2007. Accessed February 9, 2015.  
<http://ionarts.blogspot.com/2007/08/ionarts-in-santa-fe-tan-duns-tea.html>

Min Tian. *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008.

Marsha, Lederman. "In Photos: Behind the Scenes of Vancouver Show Tea: A Mirror of Soul", *The Globe and Mail*. Accessed March 10, 2014.  
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/in-photos-behind-the-scenes-of-vancouver-show-tea-a-mirror-of-soul/article11739673/>

Morris, Lois B. and Lipsyte Robert. "Tan Dun's Opera: A Special Delivery from the Spirit World", *New York Times*, June 26, 2005. Accessed March 4, 2015.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/arts/music/26lips.html?pagewanted=1&sq=Special%20Delivery%20from%20the%20Spirit%20World&st=cse&scp=1&adxnlnx=1309964613-YoE51DuZ0Wo/r0k2TFBcQw>

Oteri, J. Frank. "Tan Dun: Tradition and Invention", transcribed by Lu, Julia, video presentation by Nordschow, Randy. *New Music Box*, 2007.

Osterhammel, Jürgen and Petersson, P. Niels, translated by Dona Geyer. *Globalization: A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

"Programme Note", *Music Sales Classical*. Accessed February 4, 2015.  
<http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/33592>

Putten, Bas van. "Tan Dun's Marco Polo: A Multi-cultural Journey". *CHIME*, 9 (1996): 57-62.

Porter, David. *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Park, Elena. "Interview with Tan Dun," translated by Kerry Huang, January 20, 2006. Accessed May 20, 2014. [www.Tandunonline.com](http://www.Tandunonline.com).

Ratuski, Andrea. "Talking Tea with Tan Dun". *CBC Music*, May 03, 2013. Accessed March 11, 2014. <http://music.cbc.ca/#/blogs/2013/5/Talking-tea-with-Tan-Dun>

- Randel, Don Michael. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Belknap Press, (2003): 260–262.
- Shi, Zhengrong. “The Tendency of Wu Culture and Modern Thought of Wu Culture in Tan Dun’s Music.” *Art Education*, 1 (2000): 38-41.
- Song, Yue. “The Musical Aesthetical Meaning in Tan Dun’s Opera *The First Emperor*.” *Beauty & Times*, 12 (2012): 73-75.
- Sheppard, Anthony W. “Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou between Film and Opera.” *Journal of Musicological Research*, 29/1 (2010): 1-33.
- . “Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun’s *Tinte* and *The First Emperor*.” *Journal of Musicology*, 26/3 (2009): 285-326.
- . “The persistence of Orientalism in the Postmodern Operas of Adams and Sellars.” In *Representation in Western Music*, edited by Walden, Joshua S., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2013): 267-286.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books Press, 1994.
- . *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Press, 1995.
- Scott, Derek B. “Orientalism and Musical Style”. *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 2, (1998): 309-335.
- Stutley, Margaret. *Shamanism: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge Press, 2003.
- Snowling, Margaret J.; Hulme, Charles. *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Blackwell Publishing, (2005):320–22.
- Tan Dun. “Words”. *21st-century Music*, 15/7 (2008):1.

———, “About the Creative Concept of The First Emperor.” Presentation at the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing, China, arranged by Jianguo Zhang, March 30, 2007.

———. “Music That Changed Me,” interviewed by Heidi Waleson, *BBC Music Magazine*, (2000): 122.

———. “On The First Emperor”. *21st-century music*, 14/1 (2007):1.

———. “Comments by Tan Dun on His Music”, transcribed and edited by Shawn Mativetsky. *Circuit: Musiques Contemporaines*, 12/3 (2002): 35-43.

———. “Marco Polo, An Opera within An Opera.” Audio CD. East Sussex : Opus Arte, 2008.

———. *The First Emperor*. DVD. London: EMI Classics, 2008.

———. *The First Emperor*. DVD. London: EMI Classics, 2008.

———. *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*. DVD. Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 2004.

———. *Nine Songs*. Audio CD. New York: CRI, 1990.

———, Itzhak Perlman. *Hero* — Music from the Original Soundtrack, New York: Sony Music Soundtrax, 2004.

———, Itzhak Perlman. *Hero* — Music from the Original Soundtrack, New York: Sony Music Soundtrax, 2004.

———, Walker, Lynne. “In Tune”, BBC Radio 3, November, 26, 1996.

Tommasini, Anthony. "A Majestic Imperial Chinese Saga Has Its Premiere at the Met". *New York Times*, December 23, 2006. Accessed April 6, 2014.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/23/arts/music/23empe.html?pagewanted=all>.

Takemitsu, Toru, "Nature and Music." In *The Book of Nature and Music*, edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001: 184.

Tan Dun Online. The Official Website of Tan Dun. Accessed November 10, 2013.  
<http://www.tandunonline.com/>

Utz, Christian. "Extreme Cross-over, Extremely Personal Music: Tan Dun's Art for a New Generation." *CHIME*, 12-13 (1999): 142-50.

Wang, Ning. "Orientalism versus Occidentalism?" *New Literary History*, 28/1 (1997):57-67.

Wang, Zhenya. "The Brief Introduction of Tan Dun's Nine Songs", *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music*, Vol.3, (1991):25.

Xu, Nan. "Changes of Philosophy and Formal Structure in Modern Chinese Musical Compositions". *Chinese music*, 15/2 (1992): 37-40.

Yang, Heping. "Research on Tan Dun's Operas." Ph.D. diss., Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 2009.

Yang, Yehong. "The First Emperor in the Perspective of Mixture of Chinese and Western Culture." MA diss., Xinjiang University, 2011.

Yang, Ling. "The Organic Music of Tan Dun". MA diss., Shandong University, 2009

Yu, Siu Wah. "Two Practices Confused in One Composition: Tan Dun's Symphony 1997: Heaven, Earth, and Mankind". *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, (2004): 57-71.

Yu, Siu Wah. "The Revitalization of Imperial Symbols in the 1997 Reunion of Hong Kong with China". *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, 8/9 (1998): 84-91.



Young, Samson. "Reconsidering Cultural Politics in the Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Music: The Case of Ghost Opera". *Contemporary Music Review*, 26/5-6, (2007): 605-618.

———. "The Voicing of the Voiceless in Tan Dun's the Map: Horizon of Expectation and the Rhetoric of National Style". *Asian Music*, 40/1 (2009): 83-99.

## Appendix A: Synopses of Tan Dun's Operas

### **Nine Songs (1989)<sup>90</sup>**

Nine Songs is non-narrative, based on ancient poems of the same name by the great poet Qu Yuan. Written for performance with dance, music and drama, they are filled with the beauty of nature and mysteries of shamanistic ritual. The text, a multi-language construction of abstract sound and form, makes an independent but integral contribution to the musical scoring.

### **Marco Polo (1995)<sup>91</sup>**

#### Act 1

Marco and Polo, led by the shadows of Dante and Sheherazada, journey from Venetian darkness across seas, desert and the high Himalayas to arrive at The Wall. Kublai Khan awaits them: on a balcony, in the auditorium and on stage. Medieval chant, ancient timbres, violence, longing and the sensuality of nature open a world of light.

#### Act 2

In four dreams and three interviews, Marco and Polo are led by the Shadows of Shakespeare, Feud and John Cage to examine inner space. Chuang Zi dreams as a butterfly; Mahler and Li Po drink to the song of the earth. In China or elsewhere, is contact possible? Can love be achieved? Kublai still waits; Marco and Polo give way to Marco Polo; the unending begins.

---

<sup>90</sup> Tan Dun, *Tan Dun Online*, <http://tandun.com/composition/nine-songs/> (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Marco-Polo.html> (accessed February 9, 2015).

## **Peony Pavilion (1998)<sup>92</sup>**

Bridal Du, daughter of Du Baoyan, the provincial governor of Nan-an, falls asleep in the garden, intoxicated by the springtime. She dreams of meeting a handsome young man. Upon waking, she pines for this dream lover, and languishes with lovesickness. Eventually she dies of her longings, and is buried in the garden. Three years later, the young scholar Liu Mengmei finds a portrait of Bridal Du while in the garden, and falls in love with her picture. Faithful to her dream even in death, Bridal Du steps out of the painting; as a wandering ghost she pursues her dream lover. Liu Mengmei helps bring her back to life, and she becomes his wife.

## **Tea: A Mirror of Soul (2002)<sup>93</sup>**

ACT 1: Water, Fire

### Scene 1

Japan, in ancient times. Inside a temple in Kyoto. Silence. A tea garden. Floating paper as set, as shadow screens, as musical instruments. Layers of paper with deconstructed video images. Paper costumes.

Water music wafts in, with shadow voice sending a message of rebirth. The Japanese tea ceremony continues. It is bitter and silent. High monk Seikyo raises an empty teapot, passes an empty bowl, and with obvious relish, savors empty tea ritualistically: one sip, two, then half. Chanting monks ask why he savors the tea from emptiness. Seikyo, a Prince by birth, replies that ten years ago he became a monk because of his bitter love ...

### Scene 2

Ten years earlier. ChangAn, ancient capital of China. Scenes of family bliss inside the palace. Deconstructed images of the palace are reflected on paper screens. Beautiful Lan (the Princess) and her brother (the Prince) are performing for their father (the Emperor) a shadow-puppet opera from within *The Monkey King*, the most frequently performed opera set to the Chinese legend "Buddha Passion."

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, [http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Peony-Pavilion-\(1998\).html](http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Peony-Pavilion-(1998).html) (accessed February 9, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> Tan Dun, *Tan Dun Online*, <http://tandun.com/composition/tea-a-mirror-of-soul-opera-in-three-acts/> (accessed February 9, 2015).

Seikyo enters, interrupting the puppet show. The Emperor receives him with surprise. They speak of fond memories from the past. Seikyo expresses his wish to marry Lan. But the Emperor is hesitant, and asks Seikyo to recite a couplet of tea poems. The Prince angrily expresses his disapproval: “no one breaks the family and takes Lan away!” However, Seikyo’s excellence at reciting poetry leads the Emperor to give his consent to the marriage.

A Chinese tea ceremony begins. It is lively and colorful. The Ritualist announces that a Persian Prince has arrived, and is offering a thousand horses in exchange for one book. Curious, the Emperor asks what book would demand such a price. The Book of Tea, the Ritualist replies; thousands of treasured secrets — fire crosses water, Ying and Yang, lines map the inner spaces of body and mind — fill this book of wisdom. When the Emperor inquires as to who has the book, the Prince reluctantly retrieves it from his silk sleeve. Reading the Book of Tea inspires the Emperor; Seikyo, on the other hand, doubts that this book is the same one shown him by its writer, Tea Sage Luyu, with whom he had studied tea in the South: “The book is a fraud!” Angry and jealous, the Prince challenges Seikyo; he vows to sacrifice his own life if Seikyo can produce and show him the “real” Book of Tea. Seikyo likewise promises to end his life if he is proven wrong. “Once you’ve given your oath, a thousand horses cannot retrieve it,” shout Seikyo and the Prince. Lan weeps with fear and grief as she watches her beloved and her loved one seal their fates.

## ACT 2: Paper

Bare flesh. Video close-ups on floating paper screens. Sensual rendition of body and silhouette, echoing nature’s undulating terrain: a sensuous and erotic tea dream.

Paper, as musical instrument and visual set, sends a message of wind. Seikyo, accompanied by Princess Lan, travels to the South in search of the real Book of Tea, which he hopes Luyu will show them. He prays that sun and moon dispel the mist of grief: “then Prince appeased, Princess at ease.”

Lan acquaints Seikyo with a legend about how tea was invented thousands of years ago, and introduces the popular use of double meanings in the making of Chinese tea:

rubbing the....

oolong, dark dragon, rises.

squeezing the....

moli, jasmine flower, opens.

pressing the....

lounching, dragon well, overflows.

While making love, they sing: “in tea mind, the woman made life art, the man made art life...” Inner emotional turmoil contrasts sharply with the seemingly serene, external landscape. Naked shadows behind the paper screen chant and have tea bath.

### ACT 3: Ceramic, Stones

The music of ceramics and stones sends a message of fate. In the South, Lu, the daughter of the Tea Sage, offers a tea ceremony in shamanistic ritual style and announces the death of Luyu, her father. Seikyo and Lan arrive, too late, during the ceremony. However, Lu’s ritual mask consents to give them the Book of Tea, but only on one condition: that they vow to spread its wisdom around the world, and to do so with an ambition tempered by love; this will also break the curse of Seikyo and the Prince’s dispute. Lu presents Seikyo and Lan with the real Book of Tea. As they read it, trembling with excitement, the Prince bursts in and grabs the book from Lan. A deadly fight erupts between Seikyo and the Prince. But it is Lan who is mortally wounded; she is stabbed when she attempts to stop the duel. Covered in blood, Lan raises the empty teapot, passes the empty tea bowls, and drinks the tea of emptiness: “to die for the one I love by the one who loves...”

Griefstricken, the Emperor sings farewell to his daughter with a quote from the puppet opera Lan and her brother once performed for him: “without you, life is a living death....” The atmosphere is ghostly. Lu repeats Lan’s last words in Taoist double meaning: “after this tea, home –” The Prince kneels before Seikyo, and gives him his sword, proclaiming: “with me it began, with me it shall end.” Instead of killing the Prince, however, Seikyo slices off his own hair ... The chanting of monks returns:

though bowl is empty, scent glows.....

though shadow is gone, dream grows.....

Water music wafts in again, bearing the endless message of rebirth. In a Japanese tea garden, high monk Seikyo raises the empty teapot, passes the empty tea bowls, and savors with obvious relish the empty tea: one sip, two, then half. In the bitter silence, Seikyo sings once more: “savoring tea is the hardest...”

## **The First Emperor (2008)<sup>94</sup>**

### Historical Background

Two thousand two hundred years ago, China was divided into seven warring states. The state of Chin was the strongest and eventually conquered the other six states. After unifying the country, Chin Shi Huang established the first central government and called himself the First Emperor. He initiated many national projects such as standardizing the written word, currency and measurements, and several building projects. Two of his projects, the Great Wall of China and his tomb guarded by terra-cotta soldiers, are among the eight Wonders of the World. But behind all these imperial achievements, there is a tragic story of love, hate, and betrayal.

Prologue: Shadow A ritual is being performed in the Ancestral Shrine of Chin, which lies at the foot of the Great Wall. Large bronze vessels, incense burning and the ancient Chinese bells adorn the altar. The Shaman is singing praise to the ancestors and gods and presiding over the ceremony, masked dancers representing spirits surround her. The Emperor Chin is watching with his beautiful daughter Princess Yue-yang is at his side, carried in a sedan chair. Also by his side is his faithful general, Wang. Suddenly, Chin interrupts the Shaman's invocation. He finds the music devoid of soul and heavenly spirit and claims it will weaken his kingdom. The General reminds him that the Chin kingdom is feared by all. The Emperor replies that ruling the whole kingdom requires divine spirit. What he needs is an anthem full of soul that will glorify the expanding empire of Chin. He declares that he will change his war strategy and conquer the Kingdom of Yan before the Kingdom of Chu, so that he can find the elusive Gao Jianli, known as the Maestro. Princess Yue-yang asks if Gao Jianli is the shadow her father has often told her about. He confirms this and tells her about his tender feelings for the childhood friend and musician, who he is determined to find. Gao's mother raised them as brothers while the Emperor, still a child, was a hostage in the state of Zhao. As a child, Gao promised Chin that he would compose an anthem for Chin when he became emperor. He orders General Wang to conquer Yan and reconfirms for the General the pledge of his favourite daughter, the beautiful but crippled Princess Yue-yang. The General takes his order and vows to return triumphant. A chorus of war cries and bells fade away. Act One: Love Scene 1: Long, white-silk banners with assorted calligraphy adorn a grand hall in the Chin Palace. China has been unified, but the country is still in chaos. The Emperor discusses measures to strengthen central rule with the High Priest. General Wang enters to announce the successful capture of Gao Jianli, he is followed by Princess Yue-yang in her sedan chair. The Emperor asks that Gao Jianli be brought in and dismisses everyone except the

---

<sup>94</sup> Tan Dun, *Tan Dun Online*, <http://tandun.com/composition/the-first-emperor/> (accessed February 9, 2015).

Princess. Gao Jianli is brought in and has the word “slave” branded on his forehead. The Emperor is upset at the branding of his friend, but is glad to see him. The princess looks down at Gao and is dismayed at the sight of the man in tatters, she cannot believe that her father could love such a man. The Emperor welcomes Jianli as his brother and regrets that it has taken eighteen years for this reunion. Jianli responds with hatred and blames the Emperor for the destruction of his village and the painful death of his mother. He would rather cut off his tongue than call Chin his brother. Emperor Chin regrets the death of the woman he loved as a mother and tries to explain that his deeds are the price of enduring peace in the kingdom. He reminds Gao Jianli of the childhood promise to compose an anthem for Chin. Gao Jianli, refusing to listen, declares that he would rather die than compose the national anthem for the Chin Empire.

Scene 2:

In a chamber in the Chin Palace, Gao Jianli is lying on his death bed with the Princess attending him. Since being captured he has refused to eat, drink, speak or open his eyes. The Priest asks the Emperor to relieve the Princess of this burdensome duty. She begs that her father give her one more chance and promise her that, if she can convince Jianli to live and compose the anthem, she can own Jianli. Her father does not understand but in desperation, agrees to the promise and leaves the room with the Priest. Having tried different methods, including seduction, and failed, Yue-yang tries to feed him from her own mouth. Gao Jianli is startled and accepts the food from her mouth. He takes more and more food from her. He has opened his mouth, eyes and heart. Gao Jianli takes her in his arms and they passionately make love. She complains that Jianli has hurt her legs. Miraculously, she gets up and walks, then runs. Hearing the shouts, the Emperor enters the room followed by General Wang, the High Priest and the Shaman. The Emperor is ecstatic to see his daughter walk again. The General is distressed that his betrothed has given herself to Gao Jianli. The High Priest realizes that his position of power is threatened by Gao Jianli. Yue-yang and Gao Jianli sing of the miracle of true and eternal love. The act closes with the Shaman singing of impending doom.

INTERMISSION

Act Two:

Anthem At a construction site of the Great Wall, slaves are laboring under the threat of whips. They are carting bricks, working at the kiln, and carrying bags of sand. The Great Wall winds endlessly into the background. In the foreground, Gao Jianli, looking healthy and blissfully in love, is giving a music lesson to Princess Yue-Yang. She sings a composition to him as he plays the zhu. Gao Jianli stops the lesson to listen to the

Shaman and the slaves. The Shaman is lamenting the price of the empire: the rivers of blood, the mountains of bones and the cries of widows and orphans. The slave chorus sings a haunting song of the burden of the imperial dream. Gao Jianli is clearly touched by their music. Guards come in to drive away the Shaman and the slaves and make way for the Emperor and his Queen. Emperor Chin has come to remind the Princess of her filial and royal duties, and insists that she honor his pledge and marry General Wang. She refuses and threatens to commit suicide if forced to marry the General. Tearfully the Queen tries to reconcile father and daughter, but fails. Yue-yang storms out followed by her mother. Emperor Chin turns to Gao Jianli and asks him to give up the Princess, temporarily, for the good of the nation. He promises Jianli that the General will die in battle soon and then Yue-yang will be his. Jianli reluctantly agrees to wait. The Emperor reminds his friend to compose the sublime anthem. From the distance the slave chorus song returns, Gao Jianli is deeply moved and tells the Emperor that this beautiful song should be a part of the anthem. The Emperor replies that the laments of slaves cannot be part of an anthem that praises the Chin Empire.

### Act Three:

Accession On the banks of the rushing Yellow River the ceremony for the imperial inauguration is set. The Emperor and his large entourage are present. The throne is at the top of a pyramid of steps. The Shaman is in a trance. She and the Eunuch are exchanging riddles. Gao Jianli, the newly-appointed High Priest, begins the official ceremony. He orders the burial of the terracotta army so that they may guard the royal ancestors. The Emperor begins to climb the pyramid. As he reaches the fifth step, the Shaman has a vision and announces that Princess Yue-yang has been strangled to death by General Wang for refusing to enter the wedding chamber. The Queen collapses and cries out for her daughter. Princess Yue-yang's ghost appears and tells her father that in truth she killed herself as she was unable to sacrifice her love for Jianli for her country. She begs her father to protect her loved one. As the Emperor reaches the tenth step the Shaman announces General Wang's suicide. His ghost appears and declares that his unwavering loyalty to the Emperor would never allow him to commit suicide. Gao Jianli has had him poisoned and Wang warns the Emperor that Gao still seeks revenge from the Emperor. The Emperor continues his lonely ascent with a very heavy heart. As he reaches the fifteenth step, Gao Jianli rushes up with his zhu, he is crazed and grief-stricken by the death of his beloved. He cannot continue to live without Yue-yang and admits his guilt. The Emperor asks Gao Jianli to support him as a brother. Gao Jianli laughs madly and smashes his zhu. He regrets having composed the anthem and refuses to ever compose again. He bites off his tongue and spits it out at the feet of the Emperor. Realizing that it will be a slow and painful death, and out of his deep sense of love and pity for his shadow,



the Emperor stabs Gao Jianli. He reaches his throne and finds that it is lonely and cold. The price of reaching the top has been too high. The soldiers hail the First Emperor. The glorious National Anthem of Chin begins, interwoven with echoes of the slave song and Shaman laments.

## Appendix B: Terms in Chinese Music

**Yunbai:** It is a form of heightened speech used in Beijing opera and Kunqu opera. It utilizes a local dialect typical of central China, with a sing-song and rhythmic quality.

**Pinyin:** It is the official phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet.<sup>95</sup>

**Bayin:** Chinese musical instruments were traditionally classified into eight categories known as *bayin*. The eight categories are: silk, bamboo, wood, stone, metal, clay, gourd and hide. There are other instruments which may not fit these classifications. This is one of the first musical classifications ever.<sup>96</sup>

**Sanban:** There are six different tempos in Peking Opera, including manban (a slow tempo), yuanban (a standard, medium-fast tempo), kuai sanyan (leading beat), daoban (leading beat), sanban (rubato beat), and yaoban (shaking beat). Of these tempos, yuanban, manban, and kuaiban are most commonly seen. The tempo at any given time is controlled by a percussion player who acts as director.

**Ambush from Ten Sides:** It is a masterpiece written for the Chinese instrument Pipa. This famous Chinese classical lute music describes the battle in 202 B.C. at Gaixia between the two armies of Chu and Han.

**Pipa:** Pipa is also called the Chinese lute. It is a four-stringed Chinese traditional instrument. It belongs to the plucked category of instruments and is one of the most popular Chinese instruments in China.

**Pao-lu:** This is a folk dance of the Han nationality in northern China. It is performed in the Spring Festival and some other festivals. The prop used by the performer is made of bamboo, cloth and paper.

**The Monkey King:** It is based on the Chinese novel Journey to The West. It is published in the 16th century and attributed to Wu Cheng'en. It is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literatures.

**Records of the Grand Historian:** It is a monumental history of ancient China and the

---

<sup>95</sup> Snowling, Margaret J. and Hulme, Charles. *The science of reading: a handbook*. Blackwell Publishing, (2005): 320–22.

<sup>96</sup> Don Michael Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Belknap Press, 2003), 260–262.

world as it was known to the Chinese of the 2nd century BC, covering a 2500-year period from the age of the legendary Yellow Emperor to the reign of Emperor Wu of Han in the 2nd century BC.

**The Legend of the Bloody Zheng:** It is a screenplay written by Wei Lu. It tells the story that the musician Gao Jianli composes the anthem to eulogize the first emperor Chin Shi Huang's virtues and achievements while Chin unified China.

**Nuo Opera:** Nuo Opera is one of the Chinese traditional operas which absorb folk dramas and sacrificial ceremonies. It is rich in dramatic elements and it demonstrates vividly the stories about spirits, shamanic culture, and the people through language, music, dance and other body movements in the drama. Nuo Opera widely absorbs the features of Chinese folk dance music and drama, mostly wearing masks when performing. The folk percussion instrument plays an important role in Nuo Opera. The small gong, medium gong, cymbals, drums, horns are common instruments.

**Qing:** Qing is the ancient Chinese percussion instrument which is made of stone. It is first used for the Han nationality's folk music and dance, and used by emperors and rulers in the orchestra of the court later when holding ritual or ceremonial activities.