

Executive Summary:

Chinese Orchestral Compositions with Multicultural Musical Elements: A Case Study of Wang Chenwei's piece *The Sisters' Islands*

國樂合奏作品與多元文化音樂素材融合之可行性：以王辰威《姊妹島》為例

Guóyuè hézòu zuòpǐn yǔ duōyuán wénhuà yīnyuè sùcái rónghé zhī kěxíng xìng: Yǐ Wáng Chénwēi 'Jiěmèi dǎo' wéilì

Source of original article: *Artistica TNNUA* 《南藝學報》 19 (2019): 87-104.

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Translator: WANG Chenwei 王辰威 (2022)

Excerpt of the music score of *The Sisters' Islands* can be viewed from Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Digital Archives website at <https://archives.sco.com.sg>

Author's notes

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作者由衷感謝三位匿名審查委員對本文的寶貴建議，同時感謝王辰威、黃湏琪、陳育胤、林華源與謝明達給予本文的反響與回饋。

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The author would like to express her sincere appreciation to the three anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable advice, as well as WANG Chenwei, HUANG Chen-Chi, CHEN Yu-Yin, LIM Wah Guan and Jack Meng-Tat CHIA for their responses and feedback towards this article.

Translator's notes

The title and abstract were translated by Dr Lee.

[Notes by the translator, including translations of Chinese titles, are enclosed in square brackets.]

Where Chinese terms or titles are represented in Pinyin, the grouping and spacing of words were done at the translator's discretion.

1. Preface

The integration of diverse cultures is prominent in Singapore. The Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) has always encouraged the use of “multicultural musical elements” in composing Chinese orchestral works aimed at developing “Nanyang-style Chinese music” to reflect Singaporean culture.

Although earlier Chinese orchestra musical compositions have incorporated “multicultural musical elements” such as ancient tunes, folk music, and theatre music, most are limited to traditional music of the Han Chinese or ethnic minorities in China, thus restricting multicultural musical compositions to the musical styles of the Greater China region.¹

In recent years, some Chinese orchestras have begun to commission works with “non-Han musical elements” for more diversity. Unfortunately, many of these never gained popularity due to inadequate reconciliation of differences between the chosen musical style and the Chinese orchestra medium, raising scepticism over such attempts.

However, since Chinese orchestral music only started developing around a hundred years ago, its composition is still at a fairly experimental stage. We should explore with an open mind how musical elements from beyond Greater China can be integrated with the idiom of Chinese instruments.

This article will investigate how *The Sisters’ Islands*, a Chinese orchestral composition by Singaporean composer WANG Chenwei, ingeniously integrates non-Han-Chinese musical elements.

Wang composed *The Sisters’ Islands* in 2006, the year SCO held the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition. Although Wang originally envisioned *The Sisters’ Islands* as a double Zhongruan² concerto, he wrote it into a Chinese orchestra piece to compete and won the Singapore Composer Award. In the next ten years, this piece (along with its various arrangements) has been frequently performed in Singapore and Greater China.

2. Composer’s Biography and Synopsis of the Music

Born in 1988, the composer WANG Chenwei studied at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna under a Singapore government scholarship, graduating with a Magister Artium (5-year Masters) in composition.

Wang composed *The Sisters’ Islands* in 2006 after Zhongruan teacher ZHANG Ronghui invited him to compose a double Zhongruan concerto for the outstanding twin sisters Clara TAN and Sophy TAN. Their sisterly love reminded Wang of the legend of the Sisters’ Islands located south of Singapore, said to be transformed from two sisters Minah and Linah, who drowned there in their struggle against pirates.

The four sections of the piece are I. *Fishing Village*, II. *Capture of the Bride*, III. *Raging Waves* and IV. *Spirit of the Sea*. The three recurring musical themes – “sea”, “sisters”, and “pirates” – permeate the entire piece like Richard Wagner’s concept of the *Leitmotif*. As listeners take in the musical plot and dramaturgy, the familiarity of the musical themes frees up their attention to appreciate other aural designs, enabling the piece to be more readily appreciated.

3. The multicultural musical elements in *The Sisters’ Islands*

The Sisters’ Islands piece embodies the most prominent feature of Singapore’s culture – multicultural fusion, integrating three non-Chinese musical languages.

Composers can use a traditional melody in three ways: copy it, develop it, or compose in its style.³ The author classifies this piece under the third type.

¹ Greater China includes Mainland China, Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong.

² Translator’s note: the Zhongruan is a round tenor-ranged lute tuned to G2 D3 G3 D4.

³ Lo Leung-Fai. “Xiandai Minzu Zuopin Yunyong Chuandong Yinyue Sucai Zhi Tantaoyao” [“Examining the Use of Traditional Musical Elements in Modern Chinese Orchestra Works”] in *People’s Music* vol. 6 (2001). 15-17

盧亮輝，〈現代國樂作品運用傳統音樂素材之探討〉，《人民音樂》第6期（2001年），頁15-17。

3.1. Indonesian music – Gamelan

The first section *Fishing Village* uses the Balinese Gamelan scale named *pelog selisir* (Fig. 1).⁴ Wang designed the “sea” theme (Fig. 2) and the “sisters” theme (Fig. 3) based on this scale.



Fig. 1: *Pelog selisir* scale

Fig. 2: “Sea” theme, *The Sisters’ Islands* by Wang Chenwei

Fig. 3: “Sisters” theme, *The Sisters’ Islands* by Wang Chenwei

The integration of Gamelan textures and characteristics will be discussed later.

⁴ Composer’s clarification: Scales with the same interval structure when rounded off to Western notation (ignoring non-tempered Gamelan tuning practices) are used in Sundanese Gamelan as *pelog degung*, Javanese Gamelan as *pelog bem* and Balinese Gamelan as *pelog selisir*. At the time of Dr Lee’s interview, the composer was most familiar with Balinese Gamelan and thus called it *pelog selisir*. However, the composer did not seek to emulate any particular Gamelan style in this piece.

3.2. Malay Music – *Asli* and *Zapin* dance music elements

A Malay style is used from [D] onwards, accompanied by the Rebana (Malay hand drum). Melodic embellishments typical of the Malay *Asli* dance style is used at [E]. Section [F] mainly uses the Malay *Zapin* dance rhythm (Fig. 4).

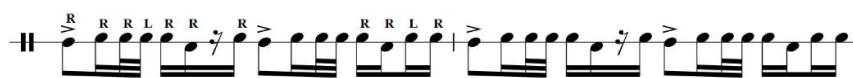


Fig. 4: Malay *Zapin* dance rhythm at [F], *The Sisters' Islands* by Wang Chenwei

3.3. Middle eastern music – the *jins hijāz* tetrachord

In the second section *Capture of the Bride*, Wang Chenwei designed a hexatonic scale formed out of minor second and minor third intervals, corresponding to the *jins hijāz*⁵ common in Arab music (Fig. 5). Three overlapping *jins hijāz* lend this atonal, artificial scale a middle-eastern flavour. The “pirates” theme is based on this scale (Fig. 6).⁶

Fig. 5: The relationship between the hexatonic scale in *The Sisters' Islands* by Wang Chenwei and the traditional *maqām hijāz* and *maqām hijāz-kār*.

Fig. 6: “Pirates” theme, *The Sisters' Islands* by Wang Chenwei

4. The potential of fusing Chinese musical instruments with multicultural musical elements

4.1. Fusing Chinese instruments’ standard playing techniques with multicultural musical elements

In *Fishing Village*, the composer used the musical texture of Gamelan, where different instruments develop embellished melodies out of the core ostinato, forming a heterophonic texture with different rhythmic layers. (Fig. 7)

⁵ A *jins* (Arabic: جنس) is a scale fragment of three, four or five notes. Each Arab *maqām* comprises different *jins* combinations.

⁶ Author’s email interview with composer Wang Chenwei on 17 May 2019.

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曲笛

大笛

低音笙

中音笙

低音笙

倍低音笙

吊镲

大低锣

倍低音锣

马林巴

古筝

扬琴

琵琶

中阮

大阮

高胡

二胡I

二胡II

中胡

大提琴

低音提琴

solo

mf

solo

mf

mf

mf

Fig. 7: Gamelan texture in *The Sisters' Islands* by Wang Chenwei

Making good use of the characteristics of Chinese instruments, the composer assigned more complex embellishing layers to instruments capable of playing faster figurations.

For the melody in section [D], which includes a lot of *asli*-style ornamental figurations, he chose the Qudi, a bright instrument well-suited to playing nimble ornaments. Section [F] mainly uses the Malay *zapin* dance style, presented by plucked string instruments emulating ornamental techniques on the Arab oud.⁷

Despite non-Chinese musical elements, *The Sisters' Islands* is not technically awkward or unidiomatic to the performer⁸. Thoughtful performance notes in the score further aid the players. Wang believes that “idiomatic instrumental parts and clear notation will enable musicians to play in a relaxed state with unfettered interpretation, leading to a good musical outcome.”⁹

4.2. Fusing Chinese instruments' sound with multicultural musical elements

Instruments with dissimilar properties are combined to create timbres with similar properties. For example, wind and plucked string instruments may play together in the same orchestral register. Percussion and plucked string instruments, while differing in the method of sound production, both produce punctuated sounds.

An expository melody is sometimes repeated by instruments with contrasting properties, making it more memorable and expansive.

Chinese instruments are interweaved polyphonically to create timbral stratification akin to the Gamelan texture. The tam-tam imitates the effect of the Gamelan Gong Ageng.

Wang's use of multicultural musical elements did not contradict the regular playing techniques and sounds of Chinese instruments. Rather, it created a novel soundscape out of the Chinese orchestra's colours and stylistic nuances.

Wang avoids approaching the Chinese orchestra with a symphony orchestra sound in mind. Instead, Chinese instruments' timbres are his starting point.¹⁰

This piece owes its success to the adequate synthesis of cultural instrumentation (perspectives of musical cultures) and temporal instrumentation (perspectives of time and rhythm), coming together in logical spatial instrumentation (the relationship of one instrument to another).

Composers need the bidirectional capability to understand both foreign cultures and Chinese instruments' characteristics to effectively manipulate new elements and integrate them into a Chinese orchestra composition. As the composer Marcel Wengler suggested, “a good mixture should create a new colour in which you can't distinguish the individual components.”¹¹

Wang considers the following as factors that make a musical work convincing:

1. Familiarity: Most people are more comfortable listening to tonal music as they are accustomed to it.
2. Physiological limits to perception: there is a limit to how many things humans can absorb simultaneously. More complex is not always better.

⁷ Although from the Middle East, the oud is a core instrument in traditional Malay music. [Translator: It is used prominently in musical styles with Islamic influences, such as the *zapin*.]

⁸ Author's interview with Erhu performer HUANG Chen-Chi, 7 May 2019.

⁹ Author's email interview with composer Wang Chenwei, 19 Jun. 2019.

¹⁰ Author's email interview with composer Wang Chenwei, 19 Jun. 2019.

¹¹ Marcel WENGLER. “Special Features and Advices for the Orchestration of Chinese Instruments” in *Chinese Music Without Bounds-International Composers' Summit Proceedings and Papers*, e.d. YEUNG Wai-kit, 30. [Translator's note: The publication is bilingual. Instead of translating the Chinese text, the corresponding text in the English section is quoted.]

馬塞·溫格勒著，〈中國民族樂器配器之特色及建議〉（應為〈中國民族樂器配之特色及建議〉），楊偉傑編，《中樂無疆界：國際作曲家高峰會論文集》，頁 21。

3. Balance between consistency and contrast: Too much uniformity is dull, while too frequent and extreme changes confuse the listener.

4. Control of time in the piece: the durations of sections, the speed of approach towards a climax, the rate of change of harmonies etc.¹²

5. Conclusion

Besides using Southeast Asian musical elements and Chinese instrumental idioms, *The Sisters' Islands* incorporates Western composition techniques like tonality, counterpoint and harmony to present rich musical multiculturalism.

Nanyang styled works commissioned by the Singapore Chinese orchestra have time and again pioneered a new sound for the Chinese orchestra. Such works embody Singapore's Nanyang music and offer diversity to Chinese orchestras beyond Singapore.

The discussion highlights the differences in the perception and symbolism of "multiculturalism" between Greater China and Singapore. The latter mainly includes the cultures of Han Chinese and minority ethnicities.

As a Chinese-majority country in Southeast Asia, Singapore's perception of multiculturalism starts with de-Sinicisation, displaying local Chinese cultural characteristics and a global outlook. Singapore Chinese Orchestra's music also strives to reduce Han dominance, encouraging multicultural compositions of localised Chinese music.

The nationalism of Han Chinese in different areas results in widely differing ideologies and different motivations and choices of subject material in the creation of Chinese orchestra works. Therefore, Chinese orchestra compositions using musical elements beyond the traditional Han Chinese should be encouraged.

The fusion of Chinese orchestra works with multicultural musical elements reflects interculturality. The author hopes that the discussion of Wang's composition *The Sisters' Islands* can offer a viable example of fusing Chinese orchestra works with multicultural musical elements, inspiring scholars and composers to discuss further about cross-border and multicultural composition.

¹² Author's email interview with composer Wang Chenwei, 19 Jun. 2019.