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## A Cultural Clash of Emotions and Music: Connecting My Passion of Music to the Buddha Passion

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## *Introduction*

### *A Memoir of the Culture of Music Training*

Before getting into a music school to be trained as a professional violist, I played music as an amateur hobby. I did it as an after school thing. Besides my life going to school every day, the time spent with other students going to music classes and hanging out in the institute during the weekend occupied a big part of my life in primary school. There was an educational institute which was basically a personal business, founded by a sectional violinist in the local orchestra, which is now the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra, one of the most well-paid orchestras in China. Around fifteen to twenty years ago, it was still a really unknown local orchestra that existed in order to meet the government requirements. This violinist Ye, in my memory, was around fifty. In the beginning, he started this amateur business with his wife, aiming to provide violin lessons inside the concert hall where the orchestra rehearsed. This venue, as I remember, was located right across the street from my primary school Bibo Primary School 碧波小学. When I was little, my mom found out there were some people teaching violin lessons in this concert hall right next to my primary school and decided to take me to this place to take violin classes with at least twenty other children my age in a classroom surrounded by two giant glass doors.

I was studying in a big violin class at first, the same as other violin beginners. Later as I spent a couple of years being in a big class, and learning how to hold my bow and violin, and learning how to play some simple books of little pieces like songs in the Suzuki System. My teacher suggested that I be separated into smaller group lessons with other students at the same level of playing. My mom and the other two girls' moms requested us to be in a group lesson

together, as we continued to hang out until a couple of years later when the business's contract with the venue expired and we had to move somewhere else.

As the only child due to the One-Child Policy, I spent most of my time being home alone after school. I was really shy and introverted as a child and refused to join my peers' after-school activities or to hang out with my neighbors in the community space. In my memory, I usually waited for my parents to come back from work while doing my homework or watching TV at home. When I was in primary school, smartphones and iPads didn't exist and technologies were limited to a laptop and one TV. My parents were trying to restrict my usage of the laptop to make sure that I couldn't spend too much time playing computer games. They were not happy with me spending too much time watching TV either. However, I did everything possible to be able to watch TV no matter what channel I was watching, and I realized that as soon as I watched something that they thought was helpful for my studying, they would not complain about it anymore. As a result, there was a TV channel called 音乐之声 "The Voice of Music" which screened some classical music-related programs, such as films about European composers and interviews with famous soloists at present. I liked watching this channel with my parents when we were eating dinner together, as I found them more enjoyable and entertaining than practicing violin alone. My parents were happy about it too as they thought that it was a healthy and useful way for me to gain knowledge compared to watching comedians and TV shows.

The first time I knew about Hilary Hahn, an American violin soloist who became a superstar in the classical music world, was from an interview shown in "The Voice of Music" channel. She made her first solo debut with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra when she was 11 years old and later with almost every major orchestras around the world. During the interview,

the interviewer and Hilary had a conversation about her childhood, which she described as being fun. She enjoyed spending time with her father at home. She also took ballet and other fun classes besides playing violin. From her perspective, she never considered a great amount of practice and intense dedication in daily music playing as painful. Rather, it was an enjoyable part of her life being a child. I remember watching this interview with my mom. We both were amazed by how incredibly talented one young violinist could be in real life. I also realized some parts of myself feeling confused and a little bit upset. As a young student playing and studying violin, I couldn't relate myself to her experience being a musician in childhood. In my own experience, there was never a single moment of peace, joy or happiness. Rather, the memories of me practicing late at night everyday after school or walking back home from my violin lessons were involved in many fragments of crying, ugly emotions, accompanied by my mom's yelling and reprimand.

As I grew older, I realized that the number of kids spending time in this musical institute started to reduce. The children and their parents found that it was distracting to take music classes during the weekend and a lot of them quitted playing music instruments to apply for after-school tutoring in academic classes. As a result, I became one of the few people who stuck to instrument playing in the senior year of primary school and people who I grew up with were no longer there anymore. Besides taking lessons in violin, I started to play viola in the orchestra. One day, the manager of the orchestra found a couple of violin students including me in the orchestra and persuaded us to study viola. Prior to that, the orchestra was a string ensemble formed by mostly violin and some cello players. I also realized that things got serious as the longer time I spent at this place during the weekend. As I grew older and gradually became one

of the students who didn't give up studying music, the teachers and the manager of the institute started to pay more attention to me. They talked to my mom who sometimes picked me up after the orchestral rehearsal and mentioned to her the idea if she wanted me to play music as a career and apply for a conservatory, which was the music school I went to later for six years before going to college in the U.S..

When my mom first heard of the idea of applying to music school to pursue professional training there, she was scared but excited. As she never thought of the idea of sending me to a music school when I was at an early age. She was really pleased in terms of how teachers complimented and recognized my talent and physical conditions (of having long arms and big hands. I was taller than most of the kids at that age). At the same time, she heard that the acceptance rate of the music school was really low and it was extremely hard to get into a music school. Therefore, people who went there have to be talented and highly accomplished in technique and skills of instrument playing. One of the teachers mentioned a story of his former student to my mom—a girl who went to a public middle school at first and later realized that it was a good idea to drop out of school and to be trained as a professional violinist. The teacher suggested that this choice-making changed her life forever—going into a music school to pursue professional violin playing became the most significant foundation of her success in her future career, as she chose a different major to pursue unlike the rest of the students in China. What these teachers told my mom gradually changed my mom's mind; she later started to accept the idea that it was worth the risk of trying. The more she thought about it, the more she fetishized the idea that it was going to be a different thing which led to a different path of my future and the

right thing to do instead of competing with millions of other students in middle school in my academic performance.

One day my mom came to the realization that she wanted me to get into a music school to be trained as a professional performer in classical music. During years of studying classical music, I never felt like a passionate musician for the most part of my memory. I had a really complicated feeling towards playing music, as I knew that music was something that I have been taught and trained to do for most of my life. I was compromised and was never able to truly understand how much my role was involved in making this decision. Nonetheless, I like to tell people about my story starting to be trained as a professional musician when I was little as a choice of both of my mom and myself. It was a huge decision and I remember the moment my mom started to be committed to it, she started to be concerned about the reactions she would get from my dad and both sides of my family. Her concern was not wrong; as I remember throughout the senior year in my primary school, there were a lot of physical fights and arguments, which I avoided thinking of, between my parents over if I should drop out of my public middle school and pursue musical training in a conservatory.

My dad's biggest concern was whether I should leave my parents at the age of fourteen to be in a boarding school in another city that was three hours away from home. Besides being away from home at an early age, the financial investment in purchasing a musical instrument became the most crucial concern for my family as well as for other music students' families around me. The teacher who I was planning to study with suggested that once students get into the music school, every single one has to purchase an expensive instrument in order to be able to support the professional standard of playing, which we would be using throughout our school



life. Although students coming from different classes, statuses of the family have different levels of income and therefore, different levels of consumption and styles of living, when they come to the instrument purchase for children studying music, everyone agrees that it is one of the most serious challenges that their families have to experience. One viola player who studied in the same studio with me in the music school came from a really small town in Central China. His father who was a truck driver working in a construction site was the main financial support of the whole family. After they decided to let their child move to Southeast China to pursue classical music in our music school, they sold the most valuable item in their house—a big truck, in order to have enough money to buy an Italian handmade viola that just won a prize in an international instrument competition for his child.

The moment when my mom and I decided to apply for the music school that I was studying in for 6 years before college, it predicted the idea that playing music will be the only thing I do for the rest of my life. What my mom and I decided to do isn't unusual in Chinese society, as there exists a specific term in describing this phenomenon in the music world as *走专业*, which literally translates in English as “going onto the path of professional training.” The only way to pursue professional music training is to get into an affiliated primary school *附小* or an affiliated middle school *附中* of a traditional conservatory *音乐学院*, which are similar to pre-college programs in American prestigious conservatories. In other words, to be trained as a professional musician, it's necessary for students to attend a music institution to pursue music training as early as possible. As a result, some music students choose to receive professional training in an affiliated primary school, while others choose to do it later in an affiliated middle school. According to the traditional idea in Chinese society, it's nearly impossible for musicians

who dream of becoming a famous classical musician, more accurately, becoming a 独奏家 virtuoso soloist, without going to a music institution at an early age. 成为下一个朗朗, rendering as “becoming the next Langlang” almost becomes every music student and families’ goal of orientation and the mode of success in a worldwide scope for musicians in Chinese society.

Unlike the senses of openness, flexibility and the variety of possibilities of life that one is not restricted to imagine in the United States, thinking about the idea of pursuing a professional music training is in our own Chinese sense, a life-long commitment, one and the only one end goal of our living. Professional music training becomes itself the orientation of students’ personal life and of a family’s faith. In other words, choosing the path of professional music training is from the perspectives of families and students in Chinese society, a ticket for a better future, and an acceptance of the plan for the future—either going into a college or looking for a job—involves the practice of music. The moment we decide to study classical music, we are assumed to be well-prepared to confront many kinds of challenges and struggles and hardships. The phrases such as 打基础, translates as building a foundation (specifically in music technique) and 很艰苦, an adjective meaning arduous, hard and difficult, are two of the central terms that are constantly repeated by music teachers, players and other participants when narrating the principals and substances of the professional musical training.

In 2009, I was accepted into the music school Xinghai Conservatory of Music Affiliated Secondary School of Music 星海音乐学院附中 in Southeast China and started to spend my six-years in school studying classical music, before my life in college. The school constructed the most memories of my music training and it marked the beginning of my life as a student

training as a professional classical musician. There were memories of me feeling anxious regarding constantly trying to improve and get better by minutes.

There were two kinds of families that I observed the most in the life of music students. The first kind were families having a musical related background: students coming from a musical family, whose parents or family members worked for a job related to classical music. It was usual to hear that either the father or the mother works as a music teacher or in a main orchestra of the city and therefore, were influential music educators of the local community. As a result, students grew up surrounded by music and had their parents as teachers at the beginning stage of their musical life. Music played a significant role in their families and impacted them upon becoming a musician later in life.

However, I also acknowledged that not everyone came from a musical family. For most of the students studying in the music school whose parents didn't have music-related resources, music training became not just a practice pursued by the students themselves, but a life-long time and energy investment of the parents and an effort of the whole family. There was either the father or the mother in each family who chose to quit their job and sacrifice their life in order to devote themselves to the life of their children, while their partner stayed in the hometown and worked as the main financial support of the whole family. What these parents chose to do is called 陪读, translating as “accompanied studying.” It is considered the most common way of supporting the success of children in the world of musical training in Chinese society. Their goal is really straightforward—to pay full attention to students’ life as musicians in order to help them in achieving their life goals and being successful in the realm of classical music.

Accompanied by their parents, almost all music children moved away from where they originally come from. They settled down in another city far away from home, and rented a tiny apartment in the surrounding neighborhood. What these parents chose to do was not only time-consuming but a sacrifice of lifestyle that was full time students-oriented. Moving away from home and having no family connection in a new city, the parents devoted every piece of attention to their children and went through the same routine every single day. They accompanied students to every single private lesson and their practice section. When the students were not home for academic classes, they either stayed in the apartment or they bounded together with other parents who shared the same experience in a community. After classes, parents wandered around the practice building, some waited outside the practice building talking to other parents while others supervised their children practicing. Throughout the semester, there were some masterclasses, studio classes, and juries which occurred during the midterm and final week. During these performances, the recital hall was usually packed with parents sitting in the audience with their camera and recording devices on, as their presence was not only there for their children's performances, but also to pay attention to other students' performances. The unspoken competition could be sensed once stepping into the recital hall, as parents anxiously observed and carefully analyzed the performance of other students. The guest musicians coming from prestigious conservatories in the western countries were often shocked and amused by this unusual scene they experienced while teaching on stage. Some of them joke about how similar it was like to be teaching in a masterclass in Chinese music schools and talking in a news conference.

In my case, I felt embarrassed and anxious by neither coming from a musical family nor having someone in my family to accompany me studying music in a different city. From my perspective, my parents didn't devote themselves to my musical training like other non-music related families who tried to make up for the lack of resources they can provide in the realm of classical music, and had no profound interest or love for music compared to other students' families. As a result, my position being in-between these two kinds of families made me feel like the reason for failing to get enough attention from my teacher. Although my teacher claimed that he wanted to treat us equally with the same kind of attention, the levels of individual playing, family background, and parents' devotion in students' study imply that not everyone got the same attention from the teacher.

Living in an overall intense, competitive musical environment and surrounded by all these anxious parents around in school, I cultivated harsh judgments on my playing and adopted endless comparisons with myself and the people around me as these seemed to be the most efficient ways, enabling me to overcome difficulties and succeed in competition alone as a young musician. Although I acknowledged their effort in giving me enough financial support in paying for extra private lessons, gift-giving for my viola teacher during holiday seasons, and trying to go visit my teacher on significant occasions, what other people did in my music school and in the world of music training constantly reminded me of my parents' inability to have time devoted and invested in me as what other parents and family members did for their children, leading to my assumption that my parents didn't try hard enough to support me in musical study.

### ***Cultural Capital, Phenomenon of “music moms” and The Restrictions of Classical Music***

In Grace Wang and Mari Yoshihara’s ethnographic works, cultural capital is considered the most critical phenomenon that pushes Asian and Asian American musicians to pursue classical music. Reading their works is therapeutic, as Wang and Yoshihara summarize the essence of classical music training and bringing out musicians’ voices. It allows me to explain my unspoken feelings of the tension, of cultural actions in my own case. Western hegemony is closely associated with the practice of classical music; its associations with elite culture and social mobility motivate Asian and Asian American to pursue classical music. The phenomenon of “music moms” are referred to as the Asian parents who sit around in the lobby of Juilliard School during Juilliard Pre-college Division every Saturday.

These two authors are both inspired by the concept of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu, to expand their understanding of cultural capital and the motivations behind it in the case of Asian and Asian American musicians. In chapter one of *Soundtracks of Asian America*, Wang quotes Pierre Bourdieu to argue that the circulation of cultural capital emphasizes the capital of western cultures and western ideology. In her words, “Participating in a global economy historically structured by Western dominance, Asian parents understand Western cultural norms and capital as yielding the highest forms of recognition on the international stage” (Wang 2015:30). Thus, she suggests that Asian families view classical music differently. From their perspective, the practice of classical music is a unique form of cultural practice due to its language of ‘universalism’ and its symbolic association with the western culture that is different from other cultural practices. Classical music is an embodiment of western power. Participating

in classical music lays a pathway for Asian parents to integrate elite western culture into their lives.

As well, Wang provides a meaningful explanation of this insight by drawing a connection between the marginalization of classical music and the marginalization of Asian immigrants in mainstream American society. Classical music allows music parents to transcend from their position of marginalization to mainstream society, but music moms failed to foresee the struggle of classical music to expand new audience and keep thriving in American society, she says:

[T]he decline in popular attention paid to classical music in the contemporary U.S. context allows these parents to narrate their place within a field of culture that is marginal and prestigious as setting themselves apart from- and indeed above- mainstream American norms and values. Underpinning Asian parents' involvement in classical music is a desire to be arbiters of high cultural knowledge and to inhabit class and cultural identities of their own choosing rather than those imposed upon them as racialized immigrants in the United States(Wang 2015:31).

As a result, she suggests Asian immigrants' freewill in choosing classical music and their desire to self-describe and self-identify their participation in music in the American society.

Similar to what Wang argues about the cultural capital factor of aspirations regarding Asian immigrants in the U.S. context, Yoshihara in her book *Musicians from a Different Shore*, also points out the important factor of family investments related to cultural capital. In chapter four, she describes the overwhelming investments that individuals and their families have to spend on their musical training, such things include time consuming, economic investment, emotional investment and the sacrificial attitudes that parents take toward their children's future (Yoshihara 2007:146). The importance of classical music to these families lead to an emergence of "Asianness" in classical music. She then continues to seek why is it classical music

specifically, rather than other cultural practices that is so crucial to these Asian families. She asked in the book, “Given the huge monetary and emotional cost of classical music training, why do so many Asian parents push their children to study music?” (Yoshihara 2007:146). The narratives of her interlocutors allow her to understand the motivation behind these investments which is driven by the symbolic associations of class, elite education and social mobility that classical music training carries. In the case of Asian immigrants, the desire for families to assimilate into American society also constitutes part of their reason to invest in their children’s music training in the case of Asian Americans (Yoshihara 2007:137).

The most important thing that I learned from Yoshihara’s ethnographic fieldwork that differs from Wang’s, is her emphasis on class in relation to the cultural capital of classical music, which enables her to analyze the different mentality towards practicing classical music in both East Asian society and American society. The way Asians overvalue this practice due to its capital symbol implies their challenge to transfer this cultural capital from East Asia to the setting of American society and to successfully achieve actual upward mobility of class. This insight explains how societies in East Asia and in the United States value classical music differently. The theories of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu which discuss the formation of labor and class provides practical and useful understanding in the context of classical music. In Yoshihara’s opinion, they give accurate explanations on musicians’ class position—in reality, the relation between the music industry and musicians’ labor challenges the class position that classical music is associated with. The level of music playing, which should be the means of production in this context, is not the only factor that measures musicians’ class position anymore.



Social relationships, resources, and networks and other aspects are essential factors in translating their achievement into a class upward.

In addition, her analysis of the formation of labor and cultural production of classical music in the contemporary era demonstrates the challenge for musicians to make a living.

Musicians who are considered professionals don't produce enough economic capital to aid them in producing cultural capital. She illustrates an accurate portrait of the lives of classical musicians in the book:

A growing portion of their labor depends on commodities in the media, such as recording and broadcasting, and musicians must fight to gain their share of the profit generated by their labor. Professionals in other creative and intellectual fields (such as writers, actors, and some academics) labor under similar conditions, but the extremely long and rigorous training and the costly investments required to enter the profession make the economic contradictions of the classical music profession especially acute. [Yoshihara 2007:135]

There exists a contradiction in what Asian families perceive the participation of classical music to be and the reality of the industry in the American setting. As Yoshihara generalizes by relating to Aihwa Ong's theory of cultural capital in a transnational context, "immigrants have difficulty converting the cultural capital acquired in the home country into social capital in their adopted society because of the perceived mismatch between the distinction of their symbolic capital and their racial identity" (Yoshihara 2007:150). By demonstrating this, she implies that Asian and Asian Americans as racialized subjects in this encounter. They are placed in a more vulnerable position in this classical music industry due to their category as racial others in American society and their limited knowledge with the legitimate culture. The practice of classical music which involves the economic, emotional, and time investments that individuals and families put in, are unable to fulfill their expectations as a way of gaining economic capital.

### ***Personal Narrative—Narrating Selfhood***

Every project starts with an ambition, and a personal curiosity. My project is driven by my curiosity to find myself. The practice and participation of classical music become my way into the realm of cultural study, and the study of Anthropology. My personal narrative is a significant part of my analysis and a way for me to tell stories of my past experiences. It becomes my way into the fieldwork before approaching my interlocutors as I am aware of the limited responses I may receive that are on the surface instead of real meanings and the authenticity of their narratives. As a result, under the suggestion of my senior adviser Michele Dominy, I decided to work on a self-searching and self-reflexive piece by writing a personal narrative. My first stage of writing was to describe my story as an amateur violinist at an early age—a story of my own childhood encounters with practicing, and with friends possessing a childhood mind. As a note on writing a personal narrative and putting down thoughts was not easy during my writing process. It was a long-term commitment of thinking and sorting out puzzles while on the journey of self-discovery, self-identification and self-reflexivity. As a result, the process of writing a personal narrative was a process of overcoming the sensation of embarrassment in the back of my mind, when describing my “boring” early-child routines, some exhausting and ugly sides of the household life with my family and the repetitive and unlimited struggles in college in my opinion. This process also allows me to recall my encounters with the society, with my teachers and to compare the differences of music training in China and in the United States, which enables me to find out some central patterns of my experiences and the meaning behind it and to confront my own anxiety while analyzing my own behaviors and fears

while narrating this project. Moving forward from narrating my own story to the next step of theorizing my self-reflexive story is considered to be one of my biggest challenges of this writing process. I came to realize the anthropological solution when writing fieldwork in my own culture is to be kind and think in consideration of my readers.

In the beginning of the introduction, I present the story of my experiences as a violin beginner and the consequences of family tension. I write about my own observation of the surrounding families in my Chinese music institution and how society impacted my thinking as a young music student. My own life story becomes the vehicle in my own individual experience, for analyzing and understanding the culture and society I was situated. As a result, I submerged myself in-between the competitive music training system, struggling to get the attention of my teacher and become the proudest and the most talented student in my studio. My narration captures aspects of the Chinese culture, music training, conservatory system, and many traditional values such as the seemingly selfless sacrifice, and the devotion towards the family. In my memoir, I came to narrate what it means to pursue classical music under Chinese society, and what it means to practice and participate in classical music for different families and social groups in contemporary China. Thus, I discovered how classical music is valued in Chinese music system. By narrating my self-reflexive piece, I am able to exoticize myself in third person to understand how I perceive my own life and the lives of others. As well to understand how society viewed me as a subject—what was it like for me to be my parents only proud child, to be one of the many music students in the Chinese music training system, and to be viewed by my colleagues' families?

## *Chapter Summaries*

In chapter one, I present my personal narrative in the setting of American society—as a Chinese student who steps out of her mother country and immerses herself in another culture. In this chapter of narration, I perceive myself being situated in an exotic country and feeling a loss of identity and struggle for my musical life, specifically in the encounter between my American viola teacher Steven and me. I later theorize my experience of studying with my American teacher using two significant works—*Soundtracks of Asian America* by Grace Wang and *Music from a Different Shore* by Mari Yoshihara, discussing the discourse of classical music and the identity of Asian musicians. Their scopes of studies and narration of musicians’ voices play important roles in my project and in my understanding of the participation of classical music in the context of American society. As a result, I elaborate my relationship with my American viola teacher and my musical transformation in music-making by narrating some fragments of my music lessons. I tell the story of my complicated states of emotions, the clash of two cultures, my process of resistance and conversion of the intellectual, physical, and spiritual.

I then connect my musical journey through the cultural event of the *Buddha Passion* that the Bard Conservatory of Music (in the name of the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra) performed in China during the winter break in 2019. I separate my ethnographic fieldwork of the tour into two chapters. In chapter two, I write about my participation in the China tour as a member of the orchestra and a fieldworker, my observation of Tan Dun’s conducting styles during rehearsal processes, and the musicality of *Buddha Passion*. Music reviews, the description of the concert program, and my interlocutors’ narratives become my ways to bring out the expressions of the

cultural scenario, allowing me to analyze the meaning and values of two cultures. Writing about the China tour was not in my original plan. During the mid-way meeting with my three board members Laura Kunreuther, Michele Dominy, and Whitney Slaten, they were excited to hear the news after I unconsciously announced that our conservatory was having a big musical journey during the winter, performing a piece by Tan Dun, the dean of Bard Conservatory of Music. They suggested writing about the encounter with Tan Dun, a Chinese-born and American-based composer leading the orchestra, and to write about my experience performing back home in China. After beginning to write about my fieldwork, I realize that the meanings of the performance as a cultural scenario are bigger than I thought.

In chapter three, I apply Victor Turner's concept of ritual and ritual symbols to capture the performance of the *Buddha Passion*. The performance is a transformative ritual process, fusing my interlocutors' head and heart. The event captures the desire of the Chinese government to promote the cultural life of modernization. It captures the increasing desire for classical music in eastern countries, inviting the audience to celebrate the ethnic and national pride of Tan Dun who is recognized as a "pop star" in the Chinese public. I search for a connection of my belief and passion for music to Tan Dun's musical mission. While talking to my American interlocutors, I come to acknowledge a tension between the diminished desire of classical music in western society and the contrasted thriving desire within the eastern audience, who sees it as an expression of the cultural capital and of practicing high culture. Tan Dun is captured in the American eyes, a charismatic figure in many ways. In the emergence of classical music consumers in Asian countries, he is viewed as a cultural breaker, mediating East and West. Tan Dun's is on a divine musical mission to break the classical tradition with his cross-cultural

identities and indigenous authority. His music style itself is a new musical form—a product of hybridity, conveying power to display the power of cultural dominance of western tradition.

## *Chapter I: Personal Narrative*

### *Cultural Shock —Playing and Experiencing in Music*

Entering Bard College Conservatory of Music in 2015, I was admitted to be a student of my teacher Steven Tenenbom's studio and study viola performance with him. Being chosen to be in his studio at Bard was, in my opinion, a way to study with the most prestigious conservatory faculty members, while also being able to pursue a degree other than just music. As a result, I was excited to pursue a level of music training like in the traditional conservatory as well as be a normal liberal arts college student. Entering a college in the United States was a huge accomplishment in my life moving onward from the stage of music training in China to a higher stage of music training in the western world.

From my perspective, it affirms my performance during the audition which was in favor with my studio teacher's standard. My teacher Steven enjoys a profound status in the East Coast and the United States as a chamber music player, a solo performer and, more importantly, a viola teacher teaching in some of the most prestigious conservatories of the United States such as the Juilliard School of Music, Yale School of Music, and the Curtis Institute of Music. I remember my first lesson of my college life with Steve was in Laszlo Z. Bito '60 Conservatory Building 107, a big dressing room behind the Conservatory Performance Space (CPS) where faculty members and students' recitals occur. After waiting a little bit for him to finish his lesson with Wen-Long, a fifth-year Chinese student at that time, Steve opened the door of the teaching room and introduced himself to me. I went into the room feeling really anxious and nervous about not being sufficiently well-prepared.

Steve told me the reason he accepted me into his studio was because of his first impression of me in my audition for Bard. I knew immediately what specific moment he was talking about. In my college audition at Bard, I played the first movement of *Der Schwanendreher* by Paul Hindemith. It was one of the many auditions I took during my one-month audition journey in the United States. I remember before my audition at Bard, I had already finished playing auditions for three different conservatories. As a result, it went amazingly as I was relaxed and well-experienced after taking a number of auditions playing the same kind of repertoire over and over.

My experience studying with Steve has been hard for most of my college life. In the first three years of my music training with him, we both sensed the confusion and frustration on our own part. While other international students complain about cultural shocks such as food, challenges in making friends with American colleagues, and dealing with chores themselves in a foreign country, studying with my American teacher Steve on how to play music was what “shocked” me the most. From his perspective, my background coming from China where we were taught hand by hand how to play each note makes my experience of being situated in the western system where teachers teach differently really difficult.

In my senior year of high school, my mom complained about me not getting into any good schools. She gave me a phone call every week to check if I was planning to schedule a lesson with my viola teacher for the weekend. She believed this was the only way I could get better at playing. She said to me over and over, “你比不过别人的, 你要多上课, 像你这样没有天赋的, 没办法练的, 我们只能花钱让你跟老师上课, 多让老师给你调一调。” “You can’t compete with other people (studio mates), you have to take more lessons, people like you



who are not gifted, who are incapable to fix things for yourselves, we can only spend money so that you can take more lessons, that's the only thing we can do to you, let teacher fix things for you.”<sup>1</sup>

As a result, I can't count how many times I went to my former teacher's studio and played the same movement of Schubert Arpeggione Sonata arranged for Viola, Hindemith or Bach Cello Suite No.3, the repertoire which I played for my college auditions. During a lesson with my former teacher, my teacher would say “你要想象一个女孩在跳舞，这一句是非常优雅的” “这里要用大揉弦，你怎么揉一些不揉一些音，不揉弦就听起来很死板，没有音乐。” “用我的指法，这是我的指法。” “You need to imagine a girl dancing here, it's really elegant in this phrase,” “Here, you need to use a lot of vibrato, how can you vibrate some notes while not vibrating the others. It sounds really rigid if you don't vibrate in this phrase, it's unmusical.” “Use my fingerings, here are the fingerings I use.” My former Chinese teacher was, in my opinion, a really good teacher. He cares about his students and has taught students who are successful worldwide. In my memory, he always tried to motivate students to be musical and play music with expression in a lesson through amusing words and dramatic body language. His focus on fixing things with me in detail was shown in his way of working bar by bar with me which leads to my dependence on my teacher while approaching music. Thus, being musical in playing in the past experience was more of my former teacher's intention rather than my own choice of musicality which contrasts with my American teacher's value of teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations included throughout my process of narrative are not the exact same wording, but they present similar dialogues with my subjects at the moment. Some conversations can be heard in the recordings and be seen in the note-takings of my viola lessons.

### ***“Are You Praying When You Play?”***

I recall having more bad lessons than good lessons with Steve in my freshman and sophomore year at Bard. I had no idea how to start from scratch to work on a new piece even after all those years’ intense musical training in China. I noticed in my practice session, I would work specifically on a passage and then record it. I tried to fix things in detail—my vibrato, my intonation, my bow pressure, and sometimes the place of my bow on the strings, just to get the result that I thought matching with my imagination on how that specific phrase should sound like in my head. I repeated the same process over and over until hours later, I realized I ran out of time. I remember bringing the same piece that I practiced bar by bar, with hard work and dedication in the practice room like how I was taught by my former teacher to Steve. By doing so, I hoped that my hard work in detail would turn out to be perfect so that Steve could notice that I cared about music and worked really hard on practicing. However, he wasn’t pleased by that due to my way of learning things which led me to not being able to learn the whole piece and being unprepared for my lessons. I could tell immediately when the lesson wasn’t going well just by looking at his reaction after I finished playing in the beginning of the lesson. He would look at me for a while with doubt or with irritation, trying to find words to explain how he was not pleased with my playing. I noticed when he didn’t react immediately and went silent. I felt anxious and hopeless when this happened. I was too familiar with that reaction but I had no idea how to fix it and make him happy. I had a problem overlooking the importance of working the piece as a whole and finding the right balance in preparing for a music

Steve liked to recall his memory of me playing *Der Schwanendreher* for my audition at Bard, recalling it repeatedly in the last four years of my lessons, either with confusion or with

doubt because of the mismatch of what I presented to him during the audition and in a lesson. As he usually implied during the lesson, “It reminds me of the girl I heard in the audition, playing *Der Schwanendreher*...It was powerful and I heard the strength and toughness in her playing... Now I don’t see it anymore.” or “My first impression of this girl, who came in and played *Der Schwanendreher*, it was so beautiful and powerful and there was no fear in her playing, I wonder where she went.” One time when he was really frustrated about me having no progression in a lesson, he said, “I have to tell myself that the audition you played was not the real you. Your teacher in China told you every fingering you use and taught you how to press down your fingers and where to vibrate and so on. That’s why you played so well.”

I usually remained silent in this situation as I had no words to explain where “the girl” went and when could she come back from the journey of confusion. It’s unpleasant to hear when your teacher implies the idea that you’re not as good as he once thought. Steve knew that I was trying hard but he noticed that I wasn’t thinking music or practicing music with the right approach. But what was the right way to think about music? I couldn’t figure it out by myself. I understood why he repeatedly mentioned our first encounter in the audition for Bard and seemed to be frustrated. What I represented to him in the audition was the presentation of my best performance I achieved by spending a year-long preparation in advanced applying for colleges. As I mentioned above, my parents were always really worried about me not getting into a good school. They requested my former teacher and paid extra money in order for me to get an extra lesson with my teacher every week during my senior year in high school. Therefore, the same repertoire which I practiced everyday for hours and taught by my former teacher by investing in

a large amount of lessons and working bar by bar, I am not surprised about why Steve would be frustrated about the contrast of my playing in auditions and at Bard.

One time in my sophomore year, after finishing playing Weber *Andante e Rondo ungharese* he paused for a while and asked me “I wonder why are we working on this piece over and over for almost a semester? This is the level of playing a normal Juilliard would present in the first lesson if they’re learning a new piece. A good student would work on this piece for only a short amount of time and then move on to another. Before they come to a lesson, they have already memorized the whole piece and come in with their own musical ideas and personal interpretation of it. You can tell from their playing that they feel personal about what they are doing and when they play.” I burst into sobs immediately, feeling devastated, not just about what he told me at that moment, as I have noticed for a while that he was disappointed, but for my incapability to actually understand what he was looking for and to come up with solutions for it. Playing for Steve in lessons made me doubt my intense music training in the past seven years in China, I felt like an idiot in front of him, having completely no knowledge about how I approach music. He then continued to say “How do you practice in the practice room? Do you love music?” I thought for a while as I was never asked with this simple question. I repeated what he said inside my head: Do I love music? I wasn’t confident about it. But do I not care? I definitely cared about music, I can’t imagine myself not playing music after all those years’ investment in it. He asked me, “Could you sing this phrase, I want to hear how you sing it.” I stopped sobbing and started to sing. After he heard me singing the piece, he was really surprised, “It’s so musical and beautiful the way you sing it, it feels really natural to me. I wonder why can’t you match it with your playing? You play how you sing.” Later he said, “You know, from what I heard and

observed in your playing, the instrument and the music you are producing don't feel like coming from your heart; it seems like the instrument is coming from somewhere else, it's coming from another universe and there is a disconnection between your music making and your heart and your physical body." "Music feels like a myth for you that you cannot solve. You need to understand what I talk about and to come up with a way to change it." That wasn't the first time he said to me in that lesson, nor would it be the last time he told me. In the past four years of studying experience with him, he referred back to the same thing over and over.

In addition, what I heard the most were things like "Are you praying when you play?" or "Making music is not praying, you don't pray to be in tune on the highest note, you just need to measure it in our head and you train yourself thinking ahead. You don't pray while playing; music is not a myth. You think while playing, it's something under your control." Sometimes he described himself as a bad teacher for being a "lazy" teacher, he always told me, "You need to be your own teacher. You don't need a teacher if you have something to record yourself and listen to it. You don't wait for the teacher to tell you what to do." I wish he could tell me what exactly he was looking for, tell me what kind of vibrato I needed to have in this phrase, what kind of sound I should play to get the "darkness" and "murkiness" in the beginning of the piece that he was asking for, or to teach me hand in hand how I can approach the string in order to get the powerful sound that he was looking for. What does he really mean when he asks me to express the phrase in order to make it legato? What does he really mean when he says playing and making music in a personal way? Does he mean I need more vibrato? Or is it the way I press down the finger inappropriately? Does he mean playing with more sound and more bow?

One time during a lesson, when I was having difficulty in approaching the technical parts of the piece, I looked at him while I played, hoping he would tell me to stop. Panic occupied my whole body and the tension expanded to my fingers and bow arm. As a result, I messed up at the highest note and I stopped in the middle of my playing. I looked at him and started to apologize for messing up. I was expecting he could yell at me but, as usual, he didn't despite looking unpleasant. He said, "You don't apologize when you make mistakes, you just keep going. I am not like your Asian teachers, you don't play music to please me and actually, you shouldn't focus on what your teacher thinks of you and I am not gonna yell at you for making mistakes. You play music for yourself. It's not the end of the world when you make mistakes." I was mad and confused in terms of his way of sorting me into this category, as one of the Asian students he taught. I often replay these little moments of his conversation with me in lessons in my head. I said to myself, is my lack of knowledge in music playing or my unawareness of what I do being my own personal problem? Was it a result of my past experience of music training with my former teacher in China? Isn't my issue of "playing like a chicken", which he criticizes my playing, caused by my personality? Isn't it unfair for other wonderful and talented musicians who don't play like a chicken, who never apologize and who play musically in comparison with my level of playing just because we share the same ethnicity or nationality? From my logic of thinking, I mostly feel sympathy for other Asian musicians whose playing has to be compared with the problem of my own part.

### *Initiating A New Stage of Approaching Music*

Until later in my senior year of college, I started to gradually feel the difference in my playing. In my practice sessions, I tried to reflect on the terms he uses repeatedly in describing my problems. Every time before I started to practice, I went onto my favourite meditation app, Headspace, to practice mindfulness, which enabled me to rethink my original intention to play music. I tried to ask myself like asking a second person: how does your performance impact on the society and the people surrounding you? The sense of appreciation that was implied in the mediating process allowed me to reevaluate my relation with music making. I imagined my practice of classical music and the benefit of doing it, not only for myself, but for the people surrounding me—as a way to share joy, and happiness through music playing.

I started to see the change in my mind, belief and action. Every time before stepping into the practice room, I tried to cultivate a sense of clarity in my mind upon what I wanted to achieve in my practice session. Playing in front of teachers and people that I used to feel stressed about became something that I looked forward to doing. Like what Steve said, “You play how you sing.” I applied it as my main goal of practicing, I matched how I sang and started to see the difference. Instead of imagining how I should play like what I heard in the albums and be upset about how I couldn’t play like them, I started to hear the sound of my playing in the moment, which gradually came closer to the way I was singing. In this case, being mindful about the sound I produce at the moment became the important factor of my improvement which I learned through the spiritual journey of meditation, of the practice of mindfulness. I observed my transformation in thinking about music and the way I value it. Then, I gradually developed a clear intention of my playing to be thoughtful about my decision-making and my musical

interpretation, which I would apply to a new piece: what fingering I use, what bowings that are chosen in a particular passage, what kind of sound is expected and in what ways can I make this passage the most exciting and energetic part of the whole piece. I realized that I started to be well-rounded in my own musical experiences and knowledge and at some point of my music training, I stopped waiting for my teacher to tell me what to do and what musicality he's looking for.

I came to the realization that music is something approachable if I play it with heart and learn it with joyfulness and excitement. Even though I never felt comfortable about how Steve described my struggle of playing, I tried to accept his comment and understand what he implied in context—my doubt of controlling over what is happening in my playing, the sense of mystery that music felt like for me, and the hopelessness in approaching music independently. All these aspects lead me to either wait for my teacher to teach me or to “pray” while I play. As a result, what he observed was my inability to address the problems on my own and the mentality of not possessing power to perceive music forward. I noticed my active awareness in terms of my physical body and state of mind in my playing which made me feel more calm and less doubtful of myself.

My playing was therefore a reflection of my physical body and my state of mind; when I feel the challenge of my playing, my whole body tends to be tight as there is too much tension in my physical body. My playing reflects on the dedication of my personal thoughts and my own musical ideas of the music. For me personally, moving forward and getting improvement in playing comes hand in hand with being in dialogue with myself and reconciling with myself as I observe my transformation through self-reflection on my past encounters and attitude towards



how I saw music. While practicing and performing in front of audiences was never a moment of joy for me in my childhood, I started to kindle a curiosity in my playing.

I started to hear Steve telling me things like “after all those years of struggle, I finally started to know that you know what you are doing,” and “I can tell that you are passionate about the music you play and you actually like it,” and so on in my senior year at Bard. I stopped saying sorry when I mess up in a phrase. There was less crying and emotional talk with Steve in lessons as I started to be gradually confident about my playing and feel more excited about playing in front of him. I can also tell from his reaction that he feels the same way as me.

In my last lesson with Steve in the spring semester of my fourth year in the beginning of May in 2019. I played the whole Ernest Bloch Viola Suite with three intense movements in front of him. The lesson was in Bito 107, the big dressing room behind CPS, where I had my first lesson with Steve in my college life at Bard. I didn’t expect to perform the whole piece for him, I remember after playing through the whole suite for about thirty minutes, I noticed that I enjoyed my performance, even though it wasn’t flawless. The music which was composed by the well-known Jewish composer Ernest Bloch in the twenty-century, portrayed his Western imagination of the Orient, his imagination of the East. I felt personal about the music as I felt the fun in playing his idea of the East, the pentatonic five-tones mode that is associated with the traditional East folk songs. It was definitely not the real portrait of the East, but it was still enjoyable to play. I looked at him. He asked me, “How do you feel about your playing?” I hesitated, because I couldn’t tell from his expression how he felt about my playing; he looked serious. I then said “Even though I wasn’t expected to play through the whole piece and I feel like I can be more thoughtful in my ways of thinking about the music, I think I enjoyed playing it

for the most part.” Steve said, “Yes, I think so too. The reason I looked serious is because I didn’t want to show you how proud I am, and I want to know how you independently thought about how you actually think you are playing. It feels personal for me, when I listened to you play it. Finally after all those years of trying, I am beyond proud of who you are today and we can finally have some discussions like a real musician to musician about things in the piece. It’s you who helps yourself to become such a good musician, it’s never because of me, it’s never because of your teacher.” I couldn’t help but cry, which I felt embarrassed in front of Steve, but what he said to me made me feel emotional. I remembered that it was a great lesson and the last lesson which marked the end of my senior year. He said at the end of the lesson, before we left the room “I have been waiting for this moment for such a long time; Where you are right now reminds me of the girl playing *Der Schwanendreher* I saw in the audition. All those years I felt doubtful about my role as a teacher and about if she’s gonna change. Now I know everything is worthy and it’s worthy to give it time.”

### ***Experiencing Freedom- Ideas that Convert Me in Music Making***

To research studies on similar topics in advance starting my senior project, I searched online and discovered the work *Soundtracks of Asian America* by Grace Wang who looks closely on classical music as well as pop music genres on Asian and Asian American identity. In chapter two of her book, *Soundtracks of Asian America*, Wang looks closely at the contradictory responses of Asian musicians seeing classical music as a universal language which rejects race, while at the same time having strong negative feelings when receiving comments associating their playing with forms of “Asianess.” In my opinion, conducting fieldwork on the role of race

in classical music is an uneasy task and the force of Wang insights and her writing really pinpoint what is happening. This resonates with my experience as a musician as it gives profound explanations to some unspoken feelings I sense in my music encounters which I will elaborate later.

From my perspective, her ethnographic fieldwork in analyzing the contradictions of Asian American musicians' narratives in this chapter illustrates two critical aspects of this discourse that matter in my project. First, racism is presented through stereotypes and the explicit ideas of not belonging and overrepresentation are internalized and negotiated by the subjects of Asian and Asian American musicians themselves. Secondly, Asian musicians are expected to go through a process of conversion in order to measure up to the international (western) standard of music-making (Wang 2015:81). The second aspect of conversion in musical making inspires me in making connection with my experience of being converted in musical training in the United States. In addition, Anna Tsing in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, describes her discovery of conversion and the process of "assimilative Americanization" occurring in two kinds of Asian American groups. The endorsement of *freedom* that is given to one kind of Asian American as a way of converted Americanization influences my thinking of conversion in relation to Asian and Asian Americans playing music. This also influences my self-reflexive piece that brings about my conversion as a musician in classical music training. My American viola teacher Steve's exercise of freedom in his teaching and the articulation on me as a student "being my own teacher" in my practice room, challenged the authority of the role of teacher in the Chinese music training system I got used to. As a result, my experience studying with my

American teacher and his American style of teaching is one kind of a cultural shock I have tried to negotiate and adapt to in my music training at Bard.

Wang argues that racism exists in classical music and it is shown as the forms of symbolic stereotypes attaching to Asian musicians' playing. More importantly, the factors of *foreignness, proprietary, ownership* and *belonging* are articulated more or less in the Asian musicians' training experience in conservatory (Wang 2015:76). Asianness and Asian kind of performance and sounds in making music are represented as negative comments and are often placed in contrasting the stylistic playing of European origins, such as French, German, Hungarian, Russian ways of playings (Wang 2015:80). Therefore, Asian musicians and Asian American musicians often find their needs to disassociate their Asianness and work hard to strip away their "accent" in their playing (Wang 2015:81). The Asian accent as Wang illustrates in her words that the "Chinese accent" lacks creativity and emotion and is associated with the sound of "wooden" and "cookie cutter," that the Korean accent is implied as a type of fast vibrato producing by Korean players, which is linked to an outcome of the particular pedagogy in South Korea (Wang 2015:80). As a result, Wang explains in her words the vulnerability of being Asian in playing music:

The positive affiliations ascribed to European ethnicities and nationalities in classical music performance create a quandary for Asian and Asian American musicians. For if sounding "Asian" is perceived negatively, then Asian and Asian American musicians need to produce performances that somehow transcend their racialized bodies; their Asianness should not leave a sonic trace on their musical performance. [Wang 2015:80]

To elaborate on her statement, she argues that the international standard of classical music playing, expectations, and what constitutes to be an excellent performance is in favour of European systems and white Americans' ideologies. Considering her words "...the so-called

international standard should also be understood as culturally specific and emerging out of a long Western/U.S. tradition of normalizing and valorizing the standards and techniques of Europeans and white Americans as universal, authentic, and raceless” (Wang 2015:81).

Therefore, there exists beliefs and expectations on how one musician should sound like; as she says in her work “In this sense, “playing with feeling” indeed, identifying and assessing how feelingful playing sounds is neither natural or given, but structured through social hierarchies within and beyond the realm of classical music”(Wang 2015:83). She borrows the concept of Henry Kingsbury on traditional conservatory culture to argue that music playing, feeling and musical imagination are never free. The social power relationships and the social hierarchies are placed on the practice of music making while disguising themselves in the forms of universalism of music language, meritocracy and as a way of self-expression (Wang 2015:83). Therefore, sounding closely to imaginations of European traits, becomes Asian musicians’ long-term goal if wanting to achieve a higher level of playing and gaining an international acceptance.

In conclusion, as what Wang observes in the narratives of her interlocutors and the narratives of the present prestigious soloists, an imposed expectation is placed on these racialized musicians in terms of their way of expressing themselves and their achievement—through dissociating their playing from their Asian trait and training, and claiming that they are converted through the western ideology and through the searching of soul and therefore they feel emotionally closer to the European cultures in their music making. In other words, these musicians are expected to assimilate themselves to western virtues and European spirits of thinking in music in order to measure up to the western standard of music making. To achieve

this assimilation, they are expected to overcome the past and to go through a transformation from “sounding Asian” to the ultimate goal of thinking closely to European culture (Wang 2015).

Her ethnographic work on Asian American musicians’ internal contradiction and struggle in terms of knowing why they play music in the first place really hits me. Although my American teacher never comments such things like “sounding like Asian” or “Sounding Chinese” or having a Chinese accent in my performance, him being unpleasant about my habits of practicing or my way of thinking and approaching music implicitly conveyed his opinion about my playing under the Chinese system of pedagogy. As a result, in the personal narrative, I elaborate my experience transferring from the stage of music training in China to the stage of receiving authentic classical music in the west. This implies the idea of being educated in a western prestigious conservatory and aiding musicians abroad to the western countries and as the ultimate goal to achieve in the Chinese conservatory music system. “*走出国门*,” a Chinese term which is rendered as walking out of the gateway of mother nation, suggests people’s ambitious goal to go abroad in their participation of classical music. For my Chinese parents, teachers, and people, receiving education in a western style promises an absolute guarantee to a brighter future. However, most of the people overlook the challenge of living and studying in another culture for a musician’s life.

I described my experience studying with Steve at Bard as the experience that shocks me the most. The frustration and doubt in understanding his real intention and what he actually asked for in my music making occupied how I felt about my process of studying with him. For instance, he liked to tell me how his career of teaching many students coming from Asia made him believe that all Asian students have the same problem: to always wait for a clear instruction

from the teacher on how to play a piece and thus have no personal opinion of their playing, nor feel personally attached to music. In my lessons, Steven articulated his difference from “my Asian teachers.” In the personal narrative, I talk about what American teacher Steve said to me when I made mistakes while playing: I messed up at the highest note and I stopped in the middle of the piece. I looked at him and started to apologize for messing up. I was expecting he could yell at me but as usual, he didn’t even though he was unhappy about my playing. He said, “You don’t apologize when you make mistakes, you just keep going. I am not like your Asian teachers, you don’t play music to please me and actually, you shouldn’t focus on what your teacher thinks of you and I am not gonna yell at you for making mistakes. You play music for yourself. It’s not the end of the world when you make mistakes.”<sup>2</sup> My personal experience resonates with the ways Asian musicians and Asian Americans narrate in their music encounters in Wang’s ethnographic work. In my case, an expectation to address the traits of my Asian way of thinking and the music training I received in the past is applied throughout my life studying at Bard.

Tsing in chapter seven of her work *The Mushroom at the End of the World* also illustrates her insight of assimilation and the logic of conversion, focusing on the social and political life of Asian Americans in the context of contemporary American society. She traces the historical movements and political regulations which led to the opposite experiences of two kinds of Asian Americans—Japanese Americans and Southeast Asian Americans—and their contrasting types of “assimilative Americanization” (Tsing 2015:104). Different from what Grace focuses on the stereotypes of Asian musicians and the westernization of classical music that the musicians try to convert to, Tsing’s concept of conversion to Americanization is through the penetration of

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<sup>2</sup> The quotations included throughout my piece of writing are not the exact same wording that my teacher said, but they present similar dialogues with my him at the moment, which can be heard in the recordings and be seen in the note-takings of my viola lessons.

political and religious lives of Asian American. Although her focus has nothing to do with the practice of classical music, her highlight of *freedom* which associates symbolically with American policy in this chapter aspires me in understanding and interpreting the meaning of freedom, what it stands for and how its worked through in my musical training in the United States (Tsing 2015).

*Freedom* symbolizes American democracy, which Tsing illustrates by referring to the narratives of her Southeast Asian refugees who came to the United States in Open Ticket (Tsing 2015). She suggests that their consent to this *freedom* becomes their ticket to enter the United States (Tsing 2015:104).

Thinking through cosmological politics, they were also “converted” to American democracy...they were required to endorse “freedom” and to show their anticommunist credentials. Else they would be enemy aliens: outside the fold. To enter the country, a rigorous assertion of freedom was necessary. The refugees might not know much English, but they needed one word: freedom. [Tsing 2015:104]

As a result, Tsing impies one distinct kind of conversion that is presented in the case of Southeast Asian refugees. A capitalist imagination that is unfolded in this context. Immigrants are imposed to feel, imagine and as a result, become American through the endorsement of *freedom*. Japanese Americans, on the other hand, suffered from discrimination and experienced conversion in a different way after World War II.<sup>3</sup> The cultural aspects of food and language as Tsing implied by bringing her self-reflexive piece of her family background carry the symbolic power to assimilate and to fully become American (Tsing 2015:100). Therefore, compared to the Southeast Asian Americans’ assimilation through the consent to *freedom*, Japanese and Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> In chapter seven “What Happened to the State? Two Kinds of Asian Americans,” Anna Tsing mentioned in the history after World War II, Japanese Americans were forced to assimilate. Oregon’s Japanese Americans’ lives changed as they were put in “War Relocation Camps” (Tsing 2015).



American don't have the freewill to choose what American culture they want to assimilate to. Rather, they represent the kind of immigrants who are forced to assimilate in a hard way. To become fully American, they make their lives through starting over.

Tsing's logic of conversion and endorsement of *freedom* inspires me in relating Steve's pedagogy and the associated assertion of freedom—as the representation of American ideology in my music study. I theorize my conversion and the process to free myself in approaching music as my discovery in spiritual, physical, intellectual and musical aspects—a process of soul searching. Such things include the ideas as “to really hear my sound” as well as mindfulness that are applied to my physical sensations—the tension in my hands, shoulders, fingers and others. The intellectual factor is shown in my decision making such as fingerings, bowings, characterization of the piece, and the kind of sound that I look for. The musical principle of approaching music is suggested in building the connection of my playing with my heart and my state of mind which allows me to be free in bringing out my personal feelings and music ideas to playing.

I attribute my conversion in playing to the American style of music training in the United States. What Steve has been doing in all these years of teaching is a preaching of the idea—“being my own teacher” in my process of studying. In his opinion, teachers in the Chinese music system are implicitly worshipped; they are placed in the highest hierarchy of this music system. His expectation on me was to look for a high level of preparation which brings about my own musicality and way of thinking that I worked on in the practice room, rather than waiting for him to tell me what he thinks the music should be during the lesson. He repeatedly used the

word “feeding” in my lessons. He said to me, “You are not waiting for me to feed you.” “You need to become your own teacher and you need to feed yourself.”

From the anthropological knowledge of understanding, what he was doing upon my music playing was a practice of *disorientation* in culture, analyzed by Arnold Van Gennep and later developed by Victor Turner as one type of *rites de passage* (Turner 1967). Through taking off his role as a teacher and shifting the emphasis to my self-oriented way of learning—he forced me to adopt and initiate into a new role and new status in playing. Through identifying the difference of values, expectations, beliefs and actions in two cultures, he dissolved my own sense of identity and stimulated my ambitious ego to adjust and to overcome the unfamiliarity from one environment to the other. What he has been practicing and suggesting challenged my past experience as a musician, and the authority of teaching in the Chinese/Asian conservatory system. Given a “complete freedom” to be my own teacher and my own authority in approaching music, I was forced to think in a different way and was required to take full responsibility to develop my own kind of musicality. While, as Grace Wang elaborated in her work, that feeling music is filled with social hierarchies, cultural and personal expectations, and therefore, it is never free. I found myself in Tsing’s context, being placed in a consent of *freedom* in playing music, but with an imposed expectation to adjust and convert.

## ***Chapter II: Description of Performances and Musical Profiles***

My fieldwork took place on the island of Hainan City, China between December 26, 2019, and January 3, 2020. I was doing the fieldwork on behalf of a member of the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra of Bard Conservatory of Music while touring with my peers, faculty members, staff of the Bard College, and alumni among other people to perform in the Hainan New Year's Concerts at Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center 海口湾演艺中心 in Haikou City, Hainan province, China. The concerts were at 8 pm on December 31, 2019 and January 1, 2020. In these two concerts, the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra, alongside with China National I Symphony Orchestra Chorus, accompanied four vocal singers, two Chinese indigenous singers, and a Chinese dancer and performed two concerts of *Buddha Passion*, composed and conducted by Tan Dun. Besides the celebration of the New Year Day 元旦 in the Gregorian calendar, the concert series also captured the opening event of the Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center for the opening season of the performance hall.<sup>4</sup> The performance lasted for two hours with a hundred minutes long program and a twenty minutes' intermission.

### ***The 2019 China Winter Tour***

Haikou, the city where we performed, is the capital of Hainan Province. It is located in the south of China and within the South China Sea. Hainan province is well known for having the most popular tourist destinations on the south coast, similar to Florida and Miami in the United States. The literal meaning of the name of Hainan is "South of Sea" which reflects the geography of the province in China. Between 1950 and 1988, the Hainan province was once

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<sup>4</sup> New Year Day 元旦: a three-days official national holiday in the Chinese calendar.

administered as a part of Guangdong Province. Later it became its own separate province as requested by the leader Deng Xiaoping as one of the Special Economic Zones after the opening of China as a significant project of economic reform and modernization.<sup>5</sup> Although it doesn't appear to be directly related to the opening event of the performing venue and the two performances, the modernization project focused on the goal of economic growth in the fields of technical and industrial development and the promotion of the cultural events were related to the construction of art institutes and performing venues.

The Bard Philharmonic Orchestra consisted of a total 92 members, including 2 faculty members, and 28 international students coming from 13 countries and regions.<sup>6</sup> We arrived at the Meilan International Airport 美兰国际机场 at Haikou in the morning of December 28, 2019. The Bard musicians and staff members met with a team of three guides who were arranged by this event at the exit of the airport. Stepping out of the airport, I saw a long line of three big tourist buses waiting for us. In the front of the first bus there was a film crew of an interviewer and a cameraman from the local TV Station Hainan TV 海南卫视 already waiting there. They were introduced to Frank Corliss, the director of the Bard Conservatory, and started to interview him.

Getting on the bus, we soon left the airport and headed to the hotel which we would stay in during the whole tour in Haikou. Although I was hit with the jet lag from over twenty-four

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<sup>5</sup> Deng Xiaoping was the leader of the People's Republic of China from 1978 and 1992 after the death of Chairman Mao Zedong. After the cultural revolution, he initiated the Reform and Opening-up of China 改革开放. He started the modernist project in China through leading a series of market-economy reforms. Hainan, is the largest Special Economic Zone among all.

<sup>6</sup> On December 26th, 2019, members of Bard Philharmonic Orchestra staying in the United States gathered at the Los Angeles Airport(LAX) and were divided into two flights and respectively filed in two different cities Changsha and Xi'an in China. And from these two different cities, these two groups then transferred to the destination Haikou and reunited at the Meilan International Airport at Haikou.

hours of air travel, I was awake with excitement to look at my hometown China after staying for a year in the United States. I was looking around the views of the city on two sides of the window. The traffic differed from the traffic in Manhattan which reminded me that I was back to a usual city in modern China. Numerous roadsides were under construction and construction workers were spackling the ground of the sidewalks while some parts of the road were blocked and in the pre-construction process. I spotted a great number of new buildings in construction in the distance overcast with clouds: they are cosmopolitan, modern and visually salient in height. What I had seen wasn't unfamiliar compared to the rest of the cities in China where large scale constructions also grew speedily and the growth of commercial centers is measured by days. However, for my colleagues sitting on the bus behind me who came to China the first time, the ongoing city construction was strange and novel. Some people kept turning their heads to capture the views of the city passing behind them while others were making videos of the views on the bus. In 2006, I was ten years old and I traveled the first time with my parents to Hainan Province where we stopped by Haikou, the capital of the province, before heading south to our destination of the trip Sanya 三亚, the southern end of China's Hainan Island.<sup>7</sup> Back then, what I saw on the bus was mostly either farmland or wasteland in the suburbs with nothing throughout the road but plains and a large range of cultivated land and crops. It was wide, quiet, rural and underdeveloped—but thirteen years later, urbanization reached out everywhere through the nation and expanded to the southernmost province of the country.

The hotel where we were staying during the whole trip was Hualuxe Haikou Seaview 华彩华邑酒店, located at the southwestern area of the Haidian Island 海甸岛 where it is separated

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<sup>7</sup> Sanya 三亚, the southmost city of China and one of the four prefecture-level cities 地级市. It has several bays with large beach resorts and is well-known as a popular tourist destination.

from the main part of the Haikou city and serves as a part of the Meilan District 美兰区. The hotel is facing the scenic Haikou River, Qiongzhou Strait at the edge of the island and within a walking distance to the Haikou River. The Haikou Century Bridge 海口世纪大桥 is the main bridge connecting the Haidian Island with the main part of the city and the commercial center across the island. It is the main bridge for people to commute in between the island and the city for work. According to a local taxi driver that I talked to during my stay in the tour, he said that the Haidian Island is described by the local people as a Sleeping City 睡城 because of a great use of residential properties being built in the island. To commute back and forth between the hotel and the performing center where we rehearsed and performed, we rode on the arranged buses and drove through the Haikou Century Bridge above the Haikou River everyday. The scene of the river and the bridge became the regular bus views throughout the whole tour and a primary part of my memories there.

The Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center 海口湾演艺中心 is located in the main part of the city across the island of the hotel and a fifteen minutes' drive. The performing center was originally the government building of Haikou Great Hall of the People 海口市人民大会堂. Located by the roadside of the Binhai Avenue 滨海大道, it is one of the most busiest avenue of the urban area, the arts center surrounds the commercial heart of the city including numerous numbers of shopping malls nearby with walking distance, and a commercial center, the Convention and Exhibition Center 海口会展中心, right across the avenue. My interlocutor Marka Gustavsson, a faculty member of the conservatory who went on the tour with the conservatory, noticed this commercial aspect around the venue and said: "Because it's not like something that they made and it's gonna fall apart tomorrow, they made a big deal out of all the

steps and lights, so they're trying to make a place that people would want to go after they done shopping across the street.”

The performing building is shaped like a circle and is painted completely white. While it's not the most fancy looking in my opinion, it is novel, simply and impressively refreshing, standing out as a remarkable architecture within the busy neighborhood. The first time we arrived at the center for our first rehearsal, I saw some people were finishing the garden landscape and trying to put urban-looking plants and flowers together in the open space outside the building. All the hard work and dedication in completing the final touch of the building is seen as the expression of the government's efforts putting in the hall. Inside, the sitting area accommodates up to 1397 seats and is divided into two floors. Two large screens are installed on two sides of the stage. In 2018, the space was renovated and transformed into a multifunctional performance theater of the present Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center. According to a local news article introducing the transformation and the history of the venue on the Chinese website of the city, the original hall was completed in 1999 as one of the few venues that held the major events, performances, and conferences for important political and cultural aspects of the local communities in Haikou (Wang 2019). After a twenty years' history, the aging of the facilities could no longer support the use of the hall and performance and, as a result, the government initiated the plan to upgrade the venue and transform it into the present venue. Considering the words in translation:

“The Great Hall of the People in Haikou “transformed” into the Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center, making it a high-performance venue that is compatible with the requirements of modern theater and to meet with the needs of the people's spiritual civilization and the requirements of Haikou's urban style. It will make full use of the theater's space location, with stage performance as its core and covering leisure multi-format entertainment and life integrated platforms such as entertainment, art training, audio-visual books, and derivative

products...the boundaries of art are enlarged to enhance the cultural radiation effect of Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center, making it an important cultural tourism destination”.<sup>8</sup> [Wang 2019]

### **The Concert Program of *Buddha Passion***

The concert program of *Buddha Passion* serves as an important role for my study and analysis of the tour and the performance. It is an essential material which displays the completion of Bard Conservatory Orchestra’s (represented as the name-Bard Philharmonic Orchestra) music journey with the affiliation of Tan Dun, whose achievement is recognized as a cross-cultural figure and a contemporary composer in the artistic world. The program represents the internationality and the status embodied in the concert such as the music collaboration, the caliber of the performers, which are rendered in both languages—in Chinese and the translation of English. Also, the program describes the richness of the storylines with metaphors in each act and Tan Dun’s inspirations, tracing back to the ancient mural paintings in the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 in China. As a result, the design of the program reveals the specialization of the production that Tan Dun Workshop invested in the concert program. For me, the significance of the program is beyond its purpose as the product of the concert event—it enables me to tell the story through the text of the description and the visual experience.

#### **1. *Storyline***

The order of the act in concert is as follows:

Act I: Under the Bodhi Tree 菩提树下

Act II: The Deer of Nine Colors 九色鹿

Act III: A Thousand Arms and A Thousand Eyes 千手千眼

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<sup>8</sup> The local news article “Haikou Bay Performing Arts Center-A new check-in artistic site” 文艺打卡地来了——海口湾演艺中心 was translated using google translation tool and later edited by me.



{Intermission}

Act IV: Zen Garden 禅园

Act V: Heart Sutra 心经

Act VI: Nirvana 彼岸

*Buddha Passion* is Tan Dun's oratorio: a choral work for orchestra with no staging of theatrical elements. It is based on the stories of the religious theme of Buddha. The piece is sung in Chinese and Sanskrit. The cast of soloists includes four Chinese classical vocalists (a baritone, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and soprano) and three traditional Chinese musicians (a Tibetan female singer, a Mongolian throat singer playing Dunhuang Jiqin, and a Dunhuang Fantan Pipa player) to portray different roles in the story.<sup>9</sup>

The piece *Buddha Passion* consists of six acts. In the program, the synopsis of each story is equally set up on one page in Chinese and English translation. Each act tells a different story. The *Buddha Passion* involves Tan Dun's searching for humanity in art, and his passion to present the beauty of ancient narrations in the Mogao Caves. More importantly, it demonstrates the universal values and languages of "equality," "sacrifice," "universal love," "forgiveness," and "compassion," in Buddha's philosophical teachings (*Buddha Passion* Program 2019).

The Buddha languages of "equality," "sacrifice," and "love" which are derived from the ancient mural paintings in the historical Mogao Caves, are significant forms of eastern wisdom. Nevertheless, these forms of eastern philosophy transcend the eastern world and speak for the universal experience of all individuals and religions. The metaphor of the stories in *Buddha Passion* implies the diminishing value of the natural world and message—the coexistence

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<sup>9</sup> Dunhuang Jiqin 敦煌嵇琴, an ancient string instrument in the Dunhuang painting, performed similarly to Erhu 二胡. Dunhuang Fantan Pipa 敦煌反弹琵琶, an ancient lute in the Dunhuang mural painting. It is a plucked instrument with four-strings which is played behind the back.

between mankind, nature and multi-species entities that Tan Dun is giving to the world. Deer, birds and all creatures are given humanity; their encounters with humans convey different consequences. As a result, each act suggests important lessons about philosophy and gives voices to all lives. For instance, in the Act I: Under the Bodhi Tree 菩提树下, the story narrates an encounter between a little prince and a mantra. The prince asked the mantra how to save the life of a bird, the mantra enlightens the prince with a message about equality in all lives. In the description of the act, it writes:

Mantra reappears and tells Little Prince that all lives — tiny as an ant or giant as a dinosaur — are equal. With that being true, the Prince ought to place his entire body on the scale in order to achieve balance. Little Prince is enlightened. He walks towards a Bodhi tree as lotus flowers manifest with his every step. He meditates under the tree for 49 days and becomes Buddha. The dead bird revives, hovers around Buddha, and identifies itself as the Bird of All Lives sent by the Mantra. The Ode to Compassion: Equality (Created from and inspired by Buddha's Light Prayers by Master Hsing Yun) rises, lauding "men shall love all creatures and all shall be in harmony" and celebrates the dawn of enlightenment. [Buddha Passion Program 2019]

My interlocutor Frank Corliss—the director of the Bard Conservatory of Music and the leader who takes main responsibility for running the tour—spoke about his opinions of the piece and the messages in related to the ongoing world and the present situation in society:

*[The Buddha Passion] is a mix of east and west and it is an eastern passion. It is also a combination of high and low, serious classical music and beautiful elements of traditional Chinese music like the Tibetan singers and the others. It also shows us a positive light, a really important work by Tan Dun which has a really important message to the world, a larger idea that Bard has—the community service, and civic engagement, contributing to the human world around us.*

*It's a wonderful combination, embracing the whole world of music-making. I was proud because it has an important message for the world, it's about the equality of humankind, worth, dignity, value—powerful messages. Especially those who are under attack, around the world.*

*There is no one country perfect in dealing with each other. So Buddha is powerful, it speaks against the forces right now. I was proud of students for taking part in that and holding that message. I was proud of them living the message themselves in respecting and treating each other.*

In my conversation with him, he spoke about the meaning of *Buddha Passion* and the message of Buddha's teaching in many aspects. As the leader of the conservatory, he expressed from the perspective of the institutional mission the significance of the performance and Tan Dun's collaboration as a service to the community and on the broader scale society. He also took pride in the students of the Bard community for respecting each other in real life, living the messages of the music and of Buddha. As a classical musician himself, he commented on the music as a product which fuses the east and west. *Buddha Passion* acts in this way, combining the structure of a serious classical music convention—the setting of oratorio and the orchestral arrangement of instruments—with the traditional elements of Chinese music. In addition, he also revealed the messages which are powerful in solving the problems and the tension in society like classes, races and relationships between countries. As a result, Buddha, as he described, holds onto the universal language and serves as a powerful figure and an alternative model to mediate social tension and problems.

## **2. Inspiration**

In “Tan Dun talks about ‘Buddha Passion’,” a video published on youtube in 2018, Tan Dun introduced himself in front of the camera and talked about the origin of the composition which was inspired by the ancient paintings of the Buddha sculptures, starting with his visit to the Mogao Cave 莫高窟 in Dunhuang 敦煌: a historical city of Gansu Province 甘肃省 in northwestern China. In the video, he described *Buddha Passion* as one of the most significant

works in his life. He described his journey researching in Mogao Caves and the manuscripts around the world. He said in the video:

*More than five years ago I went to Dunhuang in the western part of China, in the giant desert. We [went] to a lot of ancient caves. In those caves I saw celebrating music paintings about compassion about dreams about peace. In those music paintings, there are 4,000 music instruments and there are more than 3,000 musicians painted. And also it's very exciting [that] more than 500 large orchestras had been painted. It's so fascinating to me and I was very very moved. I said if I could transform this music painting into songs, into today's orchestra, what a journey to me. I went to all of those places (libraries around the world) trying to research what kind of notation what kind of sound could be recaptured for today's orchestra, so I started to compose.<sup>10</sup> [譚盾講述【慈悲頌】緣起 Tan Dun Talks about “Buddha Passion” n.d.]*

In this video, Tan Dun explained his inspiration and journey researching and observing the ancient manuscripts of Mogao Caves. He composed music based on the stories of the mural paintings and replicated the traditional instruments from the ancient stories.

The area of Dunhuang, from which Tan Dun's inspiration was derived from, was an important oasis and crossroad on the Silk Road. The Mogao Caves, located in the area of Dunhuang, is well-known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas 千佛洞. It is a sacred place of Buddha art and teachings and an important religious, historical and cultural site in the history of China (Mogao Caves - UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.).

Numerous wall paintings and sculptures were painted on the wall of the caves. Mogao Caves is selected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Sites and one of the cultural landscapes in the world. In the website of UNESCO, the description of the Mogao Caves states the cultural, historical, spiritual and musical essence of the site of Mogao Caves in eastern cultures:

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<sup>10</sup> I transcribed Tan Dun's narrative in the youtube video 譚盾講述【慈悲頌】緣起 Tan Dun talks about “Buddha Passion.”

As evidence of the evolution of Buddhist art in the northwest region of China, the Mogao Caves are of unmatched historical value. These works provide an abundance of vivid materials depicting various aspects of medieval politics, economics, culture, arts, religion, ethnic relations, and daily dress in western China. The unique artistic style of Dunhuang art is not only the amalgamation of Han Chinese artistic tradition and styles assimilated from ancient Indian and Gandharan customs, but also an integration of the arts of the Turks, ancient Tibetans and other Chinese ethnic minorities. Many of these masterpieces are creations of an unparalleled aesthetic talent. [Mogao Caves - UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.]

In the same video, Tan Dun explained his passion to bring the ancient music to life, and to the world:

*After five years I finally finished the piece. Then I suddenly realized, my god, music is a fascinating bridge, [it] can bring the distance and come to you. From Dunhuang to Europe, from ancient times to today. You see, the musical bridge is so short and so fascinating and that made me be able to hear those music paintings and to share with you. And music is the ambassador of human beings, it can bring people from different languages from different cultural backgrounds to share. Look at you and me, we hear wonderful wonderful music stories through compassion through the peace journey and that's my Buddha passion. [譚盾講述【慈悲頌】緣起 Tan Dun Talks about "Buddha Passion" n.d.]*

Music, from Tan's perspective, serves as a bridge which links the ancient time with the present world and western audiences. Music is powerful and timeless. It allows the composer to mediate the distance in cultures and acts as a universal language. *Buddha Passion* is a musical work that is culturally essential: it re-engraves the ancient world of the Mogao Caves and narrates the religious and spiritual language of Buddhism and the integration of eastern cultures and musical traits.



Figure 1. An image of the mural painting in Mogao Caves by an unknown painter (Mogao Caves 2020).

### ***Rehearsal Processes***

The rehearsal started on Sunday, December 29th, the day after we arrived in the city of Haikou. In between the first concert on the night of December 31st, we had two and a half days of rehearsals. The rehearsals were separated into two sections each day—starting at 9am and ending at 5pm—each being three hours long and having a two hours slot lunch break in between. Tan Dun led the rehearsals throughout the whole process, speaking in both English and Mandarin. The rehearsal processes were intensive. In the first and a half day, the rehearsals were taken in the form of tutti—with the orchestra in all instrumentation and choir without the presence of soloists. The rehearsal processes were oriented mainly in being familiar with the notes and rhythms in the music in the choir and the orchestra and eventually running through together as a whole ensemble. The purpose was to fix things, such as the intonation, volume, and

coordination, and to be ready for the incorporation of the soloists later when the soloists gradually arrived and joined in the rehearsal processes.

The whole stage, similar in size to the orchestra stage of the Fisher Center at Bard College, was packed with musicians of the orchestra. Marka said “It was a big spectacle.” The chorus ensemble was coupled with the soloists at the front on both sides of Tan Dun framing him as the centrality on stage. The stage was arranged like a regular traditional orchestra setting—with sections of strings, woodwind, brass instruments, and percussion at the back of the orchestra. Behind the orchestra, the singers of the chorus were lined in three lines at the back of the stage in both women and men. More than 150 musicians from all around the world were playing on stage together.

Having worked with the most prestigious professional orchestras such as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO chorus), and New York Philharmonic on this piece, Tan Dun didn’t get impatient working with the orchestra and noticed that the orchestra consisted of mostly students and musicians in the graduate program. Tan Dun was fascinated by how amazing the orchestra musicians were. The China National Symphony Orchestra Chorus had their own rehearsals on the music, led by their own choir conductor and coach in advance of our coming to Haikou. As a result, Tan focused on working with the orchestra closely, but also tried to make the rehearsal processes as fluent and as quick as possible.



Figure 2. Tan Dun conducting in rehearsal (Photo Credit: Shi Huang).

### ***Indigeneity: A Highlight of the Cultural Fusions***

The indigeneity in Act V: Heart Sutra 心经 is the highlight of *Buddha Passion*. The presence of indigenous singers—the Tibetan female singer Zeren Yangjin and the Mongolian male singer as well Dunhuang Jiaqin player Hasibagen in this specific act—was described by every single interlocutor as an essential part of their memory of the concert. The story captures an encounter between a minstrel monk named Kongxian, played by Hasibagen, and a dying



woman named Nina, played by Yangjin, on the Silk Road. The monk sacrificed his last drop of water to the dying woman Nina. The Mongolian singer, with his long black hair tied up on the head—a distinctive indigenous appearance in Mongolian ethnic groups—sang in majestic throat singing, while playing the folk Jiaqin.<sup>11</sup> Followed by the singing of the male singer, the Tibetan vocalist, Zeren Yangjin, told the stories of her sadness with a heart-touching voice on stage, wearing an elegant pure white dress with flowing fabrics. The dress reflected the sense of purity embedded in her singing. Being a player in the viola section and witnessing the duet voices of the indigeneity on stage, the music evoked my emotion in a way similar to soul searching.

The utilization of indigenous elements becomes the most significant part of the work which distinguishes the musical form of Tan Dun's imagination from the works of the west. The ancient elements in the storyline and the indigenous voices that are re-captured in the music make the eastern folk cultures accessible to the world. The indigeneity is verified in every music review of *Buddha Passion* as the most essential music identity of the piece, appealing both eastern and western audiences. Ken Smith in his music review "Tan Dun explores his spiritual side in his Buddha Passion at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre" described the incorporation of indigenous singers writing "This rendered in musical terms the cultural mingling and eventual transcendence the material demands." (Smith 2018).

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<sup>11</sup> UNESCO listed the Mongolian throat singing as one of the finest cultural heritages and practices in the world. On the website, it describes, "The Mongolian art of singing: Khoomei, or Hooliin Chor ('throat harmony'), is a style of singing in which a single performer produces a diversified harmony of multiple voice parts, including a continued bass element produced in the throat...Traditionally performed on the occasion of ritual ceremonies, songs express respect and praise for the natural world, for the ancestors of the Mongolian people and for great heroes" (UNESCO - Mongolian Art of Singing, Khoomei n.d.).



Figure 3. (left) Hasibagen Mongolian throat singing and playing the Jiaqin in rehearsal.

Figure 4. (right) Zeren Yangjin in concert with the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra (Photo Credit: Shi Huang).

### ***Observing Tan Dun's Physical Movements in Conducting***

Tan Dun's style of conducting is shown in his unique type of physical movement. Every part of his body language and his physical movements seemed to be well designed in advance. Besides his intention to demonstrate his ideas in music, his physical movements became his way to showcase himself to the audience and to the public. I noticed his style of conducting in the concert *A Martial Arts Trilogy* at the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts' Sosnoff Theater on September 28, 2019.<sup>12</sup> The concert celebrated Tan's role as the new dean of the Bard Conservatory of Music besides his recognized role as a living film composer. As a result, in the martial arts concert, he conducted the Conservatory Orchestra on the live performance of his film

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<sup>12</sup>An overview of the concert *A Martial Arts Trilogy* on the Fisher Center website <https://fishercenter.bard.edu/events/bcom-tan-dun/#eventoverview>

music including excerpts from the movies *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 卧虎藏龙, *Hero* 英雄 and *The Banquet* 夜宴. As an orchestra performer in the concert, that was my first musical encounter with him and my first experience playing his music under his conducting on stage. In the martial arts concert, he displayed his skills as a conductor and a performer to the audience of the Bard community with his new role as the dean of the institute.

During the *Buddha Passion* rehearsals, he conducted the music using a baton less than with his bare hands. “It’s like a Tai Chi (a traditional Chinese martial arts practice),” he said in a rehearsal, when demonstrating to the musicians on stage his idea in one phrase. He moved both his arms around in slow and graduate motions as he was intimating the flux of the martial art practice with his arms against the invisible force in the air.



Figure 5. Tan Dun conducting the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra in concert (Photo Credit: Shi Huang).

The percussive performance of water flapping and dripping is one of his most essential profiles of music composition. Music critic Richard S. Ginell mentions Tan's creative and generous use of all sorts of tools in his piece and describes the use of water in the basin as Tan's "trademark" in his music review "Tan Dun Passion Bridges Boundaries Of Style And Faith" (Ginell 2019).

This percussive element of water appeared in the performance of *Buddha Passion*, reflecting Tan's musical profile of his idea—"organic water" in composition.<sup>13</sup> The use of water is primarily shown in his pieces including *Water Concerto for Water Percussion and Orchestra*, *Water Passion* and *Earth Concerto For Ceramic Percussion and Orchestra*. It also appeared in the concert *A Martial Arts Trilogy* at the Fisher Center.

In the *Buddha Passion*, the percussionist performed in a similar technique and convention as in the other Tan's pieces—he stood in front of a clear basin of water, playing his finger in rhythms and flapping the water. He tried to imitate the sound of water dripping, which symbolizes the water in nature. The stage was in a complete state of silence. While the percussionist displayed the movements of his hands in the water, Tan Dun, with his eyes closed and his head lowered, was moving his hands and locking his fingers in front of his head as he was meditating and imitating the movement of water in his hands. At that specific moment, hearing the sound of the water dripping while the rest of the orchestra and chorus was in rest, what I could see was him standing and moving his hands in front of his head in the silence. The

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<sup>13</sup> In Tan Dun's professional website, he states his inspiration for the organic water element, "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" (Tan Dun | Compositions n.d.)

playing in the water basin became in my memory, one of the most eye-catching scenes in the *Buddha Passion* on stage.



Figure 6. The percussist, as seen behind the brass section, creates water droplet sounds during the *Buddha Passion* performance (Photo Credit: Shi Huang).

Moreover, his physical expressions were also visible in the Act II: The Deer of Nine Colors 九色鹿 during the performance. When the music got exciting and the chorus was singing in Mandarin with bass drums and the low brass sections hitting the beats heavily in the background, he looked tickled with this specific part of the music as he was hitting the beats with his head and the baton and whispering together with the the chorus the lyrics in the act—九, 色, 鹿, 很, 美, 丽 “The deer of Nine Colors is beautiful”. He then threw his hands to the particular direction of the first violin section in a forceful motion—he made a dramatic cue towards them

with the intention to convey his excitement and the force of the music. That was one of the incredible climax moments in the first half of the concert and Tan Dun looked extremely excited, like he was about to bounce off the podium.

Before the first concert started, the performers in the orchestra and the chorus came on stage and started to warm up. When the time was approaching closer to the time at 8pm, performers on stage were getting anxious, as some of the audience were just starting to come in, yet most of the seats in the audience were not occupied. People came in, as individuals, couples, and big families—adults with their kids, young parents who walked in the front with grandparents carrying their grandchildren behind. The performance was delayed for ten minutes after 8pm for the audience to walk in and sit down. Eventually the whole hall became dark and the lights on stage turned on, meaning the concert was starting and the audience was required to be silent. The concertmaster, Gitta Markó, came in, followed by the Tan Dun. He was dressed in his signature concert attire that he wore in every concert—a formal black Chinese modern tunic suit with white round collar on top. He gradually came up to the stage in hands with the vocal soloists. We sat down after bowing and waited for the audience to be quiet so that Tan Dun would give us his first cue using the baton. Yet the people in the audience were not fully seated: some just came in and rushed to look for their seats in the dark. Tan Dun seemed disturbed as his presence on stage didn't register to the audience that the music was starting in the background. He waited for seconds and then slowly lifted up his arm in the air—it was a sign to start the piece. During the performance, when someone's phone rang in the audience, I saw a few players in the cello section and the first viola section who were sitting near to the edge of the stage, turned their heads to the audience with an annoyed and anxious look on their face as they

searched for the sound from the audience. For many of the audience, it was probably their first time attending a music concert. Being in a music concert was a different kind of experience for a lot of people from the local community. As a result, they weren't aware of their misbehavior.

Frank also expressed a similar kind of opinion about the audience:

*It's again that people who came to the concert weren't used to coming to the concert. It's a sign that people are coming to the concert that they don't normally go and they don't know how to act. You want people, new people coming to the concert, but the downside is that they don't know when to clap and when to turn off their cellphones.*

In contrast, the second performance on the next evening was quiet for the most part. As what I heard from other people after the performance was that the concert hall learned from the first concert and displayed a reminder to be silent and mute their phones on the screen many times throughout the performance.

Both concerts were full house, packed with almost no empty seats. The thing in common in these two performances was how people showed their excitement at the end of the Act III: A Thousand Arms and A Thousand Eyes 千手千眼, which was also the end of the first half. The trumpets were playing, accompanied with the heavy beatings of a giant Chinese flower drum and the singing in the background, as the music was approaching the climax of the piece. Many people stood up right away in the audience. They clapped and screamed for Tan Dun and all musicians on stage and the clapping lasted for more than ten minutes.

This specific passage was Tan's musical profile of the piece; it came back again at the very end of the whole piece in the final movement Act VI: Nirvana 彼岸. What was different from the first half was the musical contrast which transferred from a complete silence to a buildup of excitement at the end, and the comprehensive range of sounds and skills in the



oratorio singing. In the final movement, the music portrayed in Mogao's many mural paintings, the scene when Buddha was telling his disciples that he would enter Nirvana. In the program of the concert, the synopsis of this act states:

Act Six: Nirvana

The mural Nirvana reappears onstage, recalling the Prologue. Buddha solemnly tells his disciples that he would soon enter Nirvana. Everyone weeps, however Buddha speaks calmly and compassionately, wittily imparting his wisdom on life and the other shore: "The scenery in life is as beautiful as poems and paintings." The inspired disciples engage in a lively exchange with Buddha on the philosophy of life and the human mind. In grief, the disciples request whether they can ask one last question, and Buddha agrees. The disciples ask Buddha, "Are you God?" Buddha answers, "No, I am not." "Are you the Son of God?" "No, I am not." "Are you sent by God?" "No, I am not." "Please enlighten us: what are you?" "I am... awake..." as Buddha closes his eyes and leaves for Nirvana. Moon and sun disappear. Mountains and rivers shudder. All goes into darkness. Bells toll. The Ode to Compassion: Heaven Earth Mankind rises, accompanied by a shining moon. [*Buddha Passion* Program 2019]

The picture of the mural painting, which Tan Dun's inspiration was derived from, was displayed on top of the story description of the program. In the painting, the Buddha is located in the center of the painting with his six disciples seated in lines on both sides. Each disciple is characterized differently in the painting as they distinguish each other in expression and with the instrument in hands. Like the story of the act suggests, the painting conveys the state of peace and compassion, as well a sense of coexistence and faithfulness among Buddha and his disciples.

On stage, the Buddha (Yupeng Wang in baritone) whispered 我是...觉悟... "I am...awake..." Then he dropped his voice as he died and ascended to Nirvana. The music vanished into a complete silence, symbolizing the moment of darkness and the disappearing of the moon and sun. Later, the music transferred to a different mood, with choral singers standing up and ringing the bell on their hands to imitate the sound of the bell tolling—the ode of compassion begins. Considering the words in the synopsis, "Bells toll. Ode to Compassion:



Heaven Earth Mankind rises, accompanied by a shining moon” (*Buddha Passion* Program 2019). The music turned to the last page of the act, indicating the real end of the piece—the moment of fanfare. The tension in music dynamic and instrumentations kept building up. With the association of the repetitive strong strikes on the Chinese drum and the orchestral sounds, the chorus singers sang in fortissimo throughout the end, as they were highlighting and sustaining the glorious moment in the piece.<sup>14</sup> The music celebrated the final result of glory and of joy. All these components on stage evoked the internal impulses of the audience. As a result, the success of the concert gained Tan Dun, soloists and the rest of the musicians more than five encores. Tan Dun led the soloists and returned back to the stage for many minutes.

Although noticing that what Tan inserted at the end of the music was popular and in some way clichéd, it worked out perfectly in this performance. As a result, I was not surprised by how the audience reacted. As a player in the viola section myself, listening to it while playing it on stage, the music also stimulated my emotion as I felt the same kind of optimism, joy, and satisfaction as the audience did in regard to the music. After the performance, I found myself singing over and over the rhythm on the way back to the hotel as it stuck in my head that I couldn't get over.

Tan Dun's physical movement makes his conducting on stage visually dramatic. Being a conductor and leading his own music, his facial and physical expressions showed how passionate he was in his music as he really believed in the music he wrote. He always tried to convey his effort to convince the musicians and the audience of his belief and embedded musical identity.

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<sup>14</sup> Fortissimo: an Italian music notion, referring to the dynamics of the music, meaning that the musical phrase is very loud.

My interlocutors all spoke about Tan Dun's enthusiasm and his presence throughout the rehearsals. Frank recorded his impressions for Tan Dun in the rehearsal:

*I remember his energy, enthusiasm and childlike wonder and childlike joy in making music, energy putting in the rehearsal and performance. When he's there, he's really there with you, which is so impressive, he was teaching the musicians how to play better, he was showing them this way or that way in playing.*

My interlocutor Marka narrated Tan Dun's interaction with the musicians in a similar way:

*During the rehearsal process, he's really open-minded, candid, and honest. He's not pretentious, he's really famous for various reasons and substantial. He's like a celebrity, But with us, that's what he really wants to be, with no hierarchy. He's a professional musician and a good person to work with, he treats people well and has a lot of patience. His rehearsal process is always respectful to the musicians and he knows that brings the results and I agree with him. A lot of people don't believe that, like some well-known musicians who insert power over hundreds of people. His working process is honest and straightforward and he doesn't overpower. He's clear about the musical process. He knows what he's doing and has a clear idea and musical intention of what he wants to hear. That's what musicians like, that's what our pride depends on.*

For Marka, she observed many virtues such as respect, candidness, honesty and clarity in musical intention that a musician should possess as a professional musician in the musical world.

As well, Tan Dun's interaction with musicians with no sense of hierarchy is for Marka, one significant aspect being the role as a well-known musician.

For me, what I personally like about him is the sense of expression present in his body movements and on his face, because as some classical conductors are stoic in conducting, his style shows how passionate he is in his music. However, he was overly expressive in his body gestures, which is not a typical technique used by a conductor. Although he was clear about what he wanted and how well displayed his idea with passion, he over-exaggerated some aspects. He was sometimes more focused on expressing a motion instead of leading the music through beating the time to the orchestra. Moreover, during the rehearsal processes, he demanded the

instrumental musicians in return with the same kind of physical moving as he did, which was closely in the consideration of the visual aspect for the audience, but unnecessary from the aspect of the actual musical playing. For instance, he asked the orchestral players to move their bodies in certain exaggerated ways, as doing so looked good from the perspective of the audience. As a result, what his style of conducting communicates to me in my own observation on stage was—it's about him as a conductor to get the attention of the audience. In other words, I sensed a heavy involvement of his desire to showcase in his movements; he was more expressive for himself rather than for the orchestra. Even accounting for his clear sense of enthusiasm, his compliments to the orchestral players in some parts of the music with a deliberate imitation on speaking with an exaggerated Italian accent as a Chinese-born composer—"Fan.tà.sti.co.!!" sounded clichéd from my perspective.

Moreover, Tan Dun enjoyed being captured in the visual aspects of his physical movements. During the soundcheck in the afternoon before the concert, the Bard Philharmonic Orchestra was told to dress in formal concert dress as we had a photoshoot section with Tan Dun and the whole orchestra before the soundcheck. Tan staged his own photoshoots as he asked the photographer of the concert to focus on capturing his physical movement on stage. He said to the photographer, "Could you come over to this side of the stage, so that you could capture me conducting the orchestra?" and he pointed out the spot right at the back of the second violin where the left side of the stage was. Later he asked "Right now I would like to have a visually dramatic photo. Could you capture my excitement as I jump on the podium when I conduct?" We then had our instruments ready and pretended to play, Tan gave a dramatic cue to the orchestra by bouncing off the podium with his intensive facial expressions.

My friends who had some knowledge of conducting, expressed their opinions on Tan's conducting: he demonstrated his passion for music in physical movements rather than leading the orchestra. In other words, the conducting should be expressive in moderation. His role being a composer made him over communicate his musical ideas in gestures. The role as a conductor should mediate the instrumental aspect of the orchestra rather than focusing on the self presence in conducting. "He was too self-expressive," as one of my friends said. His over exaggeration in physical movements were described as awkward and funny by some students in casual conversations outside the rehearsals. Tan Dun's emphasis on the visual aspect of body gestures during the rehearsal processes, moves away from the primacy of sound, specifically the *intonation-oriented* aspect that my interlocutor Michael Knox mentioned as closely associated with classical music training.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the opinions of what I heard imply the tension between his physical movements and the classical convention of conducting, his personal preference more on performing himself rather than for the orchestra, and the nature of difference between being a composer and a conductor—which require different kinds of skills in music communication.

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<sup>15</sup> The conversation with my interlocutor Michael Knox will be presented in elaboration in Chapter Three.

### ***Chapter III: Charisma and the Transformative Forces of the Buddha Passion***

*“You never forget where you came from and always go towards where you want to be. Just his [Tan Dun’s] way of saying that I am in the classical music world now, but I will always be influenced by and keep returning home to China and incorporate traditional Chinese music. I am rooting myself at home in classical music. At the same time, I am always moving away from it, (from)classical music. Tan Dun’s sense of selfness is always there, his tradition is always there.”[Michael, Fieldnotes, 03/12/20]*

*He’s not a conductor, he’s not just a composer, he’s a creator, artist, and visionary.  
[Michael, Fieldnotes, 03/12/20]*

#### ***The Cultural Leader and Charisma***

Michael is a second-year double bass player in the five-year Bard Conservatory of Music program. In addition to studying bass in the conservatory, he has taken classes in anthropology and has declared it as his major. When I asked him if he was interested in being interviewed for my ethnographic project, he agreed with no hesitation and showed his excitement by saying, “I would like to be in your project, I would like to be studied, let’s do it!”

I spoke with Michael in the evening of Thursday, March 12th, after the orchestral rehearsal was cancelled and the operatic concert *Salome* was postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We decided to meet in one of the meeting rooms at the corner of New Kline, facing a spacious view of the rugby field where the annual commencement takes place. Before starting the conversation, he told me about his first ethnographic project, a comparative study on the cultural system of the music program at Bard College and the Bard Conservatory of Music he completed for Anthropology 101, Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, which allowed him to experience what it’s like to conduct fieldwork. He was curious about my project on the identity of Asian Americans in classical music.

From the beginning of the conversation, Michael praised Tan Dun for his ways of speaking, conducting, living, and thinking. Michael freely expressed his “obsession” with Tan Dun many times during the conversation and his willingness to *adopt* his musical ideology:

*I wanna be part of the piece, and part of his vision, (to) use me in that vision. I ideally adopted his thinking and obsessed with a lot of things after the martial rehearsal and the lecture last semester.*

*He's not a conductor, he's not just a composer, he's a creator, artist, and visionary.*

In addition, Michael also gets excited and intensely emotional while summarizing some of his favorite speeches that were given by Tan Dun inside and outside of rehearsal:

*Specifically [the equation] one plus one equals one, he [Tan Dun] says “the capitalist would say one plus one equals three, scientists say two, but the artist says one plus one equals one.” I am obsessed with that...*

*Another quote he said, at the lecture, that resonates with me is like you never forget where you came from and always go towards where you want to be, just [Tan Dun's] his way of saying that I am in the classical music world now, but I am always being influenced by and keep returning home to China and incorporating traditional Chinese music. I am rooting myself at home in classical music. At the same time, I am always moving away from it. Tan Dun's sense of selfness is always there, his tradition is always there.<sup>16</sup>*

In this case, Michael sees Tan Dun as a charismatic figure possessing great power in various ways beyond his current recognized position as a composer and conductor. Tan Dun's musicality and spirituality resonate with Michael's idea of what it means to be a musician. In Michael's eyes, Tan Dun is an influential leader who is competent to enlighten and convert people to his musical world through the messages in music. Max Weber's theory on charismatic authority can be successfully applied to Michael's opinions and insights about Tan Dun. Weber, in the

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<sup>16</sup> In this context, Michael referred to the lecture given by Tan Dun before the concert *A Martial Arts Trilogy* on September 28, 2019.

beginning of the section “Charismatic Authority” in *Economy and Society*, gives an explanation of this term:

The term “charisma” will be applied to a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.”...How the quality in question would be ultimately judged from any ethical, aesthetic, or others such point of view is naturally entirely indifferent for purposes of definition. What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his “followers” or “disciples.” [Weber 1978: 241]

What I found crucial in this definition is that the *qualities* of charisma vary in different settings and circumstances. *Leaders* are defined as individuals of higher status who possess personality, virtue, and skills and who have *divine missions* (Weber 1978:245). Their charismatic qualities are essentially defined by people who are their “followers” and “disciples” in Weber’s words (Weber 1978: 241). In other words, it’s crucial for followers to see if their leaders possess exceptional power or not. Sociologist Paul Joosse, in “Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma,” extends Weber’s concept of charisma into the contemporary period, suggesting that charisma is accessible and applicable in different religious settings, not just Christian, as well as in political, military, and other kinds of cultural contexts (Joosse 2014:271). Regarding the concepts of charismatic authority, Tan Dun can be understood as a charismatic leader regarding his exemplary personality and personal experiences in the cultural context of performance.

Michael was aware of his diverse backgrounds throughout our conversation. He is a white American originally from New Jersey, a professionally trained classical bass performer, and an anthropology student at a liberal arts and sciences college trained to possess great

self-awareness. Michael is drawn to Tan Dun's identity in different ways. Michael described Tan Dun as "a figure with a non-Western background," an influential living composer of 21st-century contemporary music, and the Asian equivalent of John Williams.<sup>17</sup> In terms of Michael's anthropological knowledge, Tan is an indigenous "ethnic-other" who represents the authority of exotic traits of Asian culture and is highly visible in American mainstream society and the Western musical world. In other words, Michael sees Tan Dun as a charismatic figure in the contemporary music world, an embodiment of the cultural "other" and cultural difference who has proven himself in Western society at the same time, has successfully broken the conventions of classical music. In addition, Michael explained to me why the performance in Hainan was successful. While the second concert gained more than five encores for Tan Dun and the orchestra, for Michael, the success of the performance had less to do with the audience's appreciation than the orchestra's musical experience and the value we place on our affiliation with Tan Dun, whose cultural background Michael is acutely aware of.

In another book, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, Max Weber has more to say about the power of charismatic leaders: they assert themselves by proving to their followers their ability to complete *divine missions* and perform *miracles*.

The charismatic leader gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life. If he wants to be a prophet, he must perform miracles; if he wants to be a war lord, he must perform heroic deeds. Above all, however, his divine mission must "prove" itself in that those who faithfully surrender to him must fare well. [Weber 1968: 22]

Tan's strength in composing for indigenous voices draws upon the authority of Chinese tradition which qualifies him as a charismatic leader of cultural difference. He is viewed by Michael as a

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<sup>17</sup> Tan Dun is labeled by students in the Bard Conservatory of Music in their casual conversations, as an Asian version of John Williams due to their shared background as nominated living composers living in the United States, specializing in writing film music and once trained in traditional conservatories.



*prophet* of contemporary music, a charismatic leader who has *missions* to complete and who is capable of performing *miracles* in music.

We agreed that Tan Dun's compositional process and methods of collecting inspiration are, in some ways, a form of doing fieldwork. Our shared experience as professionally trained classical musicians and ethnographers led to a mutual resonance of playing music and conducting fieldwork—they both require the practitioner to possess sensitivity, intentionality, and awareness of the ongoing world. To write the *Buddha Passion*, Tan Dun traveled around the world to research the ancient manuscripts of the ancient Dunhuang culture and spent time in the Mogao Caves to study mural paintings, a process described in the program notes of the Hainan concert and on Tan Dun's own professional website. Michael explained his reasoning for thinking of Tan Dun as being a natural fieldworker:

*He actually does fieldwork. He's an anthropologist in a lot of ways, like he does it really academically, intellectually, and he is also rooted in his own experience and not academic at all. That's what makes fieldwork what it is. You come in with this academic, intellectual perspective and you realize I need to live this experience and practice this thing, these people, what you're writing for.*

Michael suggests that conducting fieldwork is more than a process of intellectual and academic study and doing it shouldn't be moving away from *living* the *experience* and *practicing* the idea in one's lifestyle. As a result, Tan Dun's music making and encounters with indigenous people match with the anthropological spirit of fieldwork which requires a sensitivity for one's cultural heritage and a passion to bring cultural differences to life. For Tan Dun, composing the *Buddha Passion* and recapturing the sound of the ancient world is his musical way of bringing the mural paintings in the Mogao Caves to life.

Michael further shared with me one moment when he felt the most attached musically and emotionally to the piece during the performance:

*For me, that [Act V: Heart Sutra] was the most beautiful piece of all. I usually come to the performance space, and the music can be so beautiful. I am functioning as part of the orchestra so [my] emotion was kind of detached, so that we can just be caught as the wheels and get the messages called. During the fifth movement, when the Tibetan and the Mangolian throat singers were singing, and the bass was just having this octave slide with a pizzicato, brass sliding, imitating a crying sound, I started to cry uncontrollably during the performance and that never happened before.*

After saying this, Michael kept on saying this act was one of the most beautiful and touching in his life. He described his encounter with the music as part of the performance and tried to convey to me the authenticity of his emotion. He said, with no doubt and hesitation, “Really, it actually opens my heart, that’s how I open my heart to compassion.” Then, he immersed himself into his thoughts and went into a deep reflection for several seconds.

Sitting in front of him at the corner of the table and witnessing that moment when Michael opened his heart, I felt the intensity of his emotion. He got really into the conversation and was excited to describe this special part of his experience in the performance. There was a seriousness in his voice as he reflected on that moment of the performance, just as if the music, that specific phrase of the piece—the folk singers performing alone at the front of the stage, while the orchestra was silent, except for the bass section—pizzing glissandos—was happening right in front of him. He later said,

*This is easily...the most ..special...moment... I had... in my life, [he articulated every single word while he said it] like I can’t even. I, I...[he paused and then sighed, and waited until seconds later to calm his emotions].*

When talking to Michael, a wonderful student trained in both classical music and anthropology, I was touched by the depth of his insights about Tan Dun, the experience of performing in China and his generosity in sharing his vulnerable emotions with me.

### ***Ritual, Ritual Symbols in the Performance of Buddha Passion***

Turner's theory of ritual and ritual symbols was manifested in the performance of the *Buddha Passion*. In "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," of collected essays in *The Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner defines the meaning of ritual, referring to particular events and circumstances which link to the performance or practice of beliefs. Rituals have, in his words, "reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers." Turner interprets his general meanings of symbols and defines what a symbol is in a field site:

[T]hat a "symbol" is a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or a representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. The symbols I observed in the field were, empirically, objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures, and spatial units in a ritual situation. [Turner 1967:19]

Further in the essay, he explains in depth the intimate relationship of symbols and rituals and as part of what he calls social processes and associated with human needs:

For symbols are essentially involved in social process. I came to see performances of ritual as distinct phrases in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes and adopted to their external environment. From this standpoint the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field. The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior. [Turner 1967:20]

Turner describes a ritual performance as one phase in the social processes through which groups and individuals negotiate their social actions to adapt to external circumstances. In the practice of a ritual, symbols are revealed as active forces; they are manifestations of human needs,

sentiments and circumstances. Going through internal conversion is part of the ritual performance. The factor of internal conversion is reinforced in his argument in another book, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual: Symbol, Myth, and Ritual*. In his introduction, Turner demonstrates the essential role of religion and rituals:

I became convinced that religion is not merely a toy of the race's childhood, to be discarded at a nodal point of scientific and technological development, but is really at the heart of the human matter. Deciphering ritual forms and discovering what generates symbolic actions may be more germane to our cultural growth than we have supposed. But we have to put ourselves in some way inside religious processes to obtain knowledge of them. There must be a conversion experience. [Turner 1975: 31]

Rituals (in or out of the context of religion) are intimately involved in cultural lives and in the human heart and the process of experiencing conversion is inevitable. Turner's idea of ritual can be applied to understand Michael's narrative of his musical experience while performing the *Buddha Passion* on stage, as well as in his clear admiration for Tan Dun, whom he sees as a charismatic leader in many ways—his spiritual mind, indigenous authority, physical movement, speaking style, and musical ideology. For me, it is interesting to notice that Turner's idea of rituals and religion and Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and its origins in religion reinforce each other.

The musicality and the associated indigenous voice in the Act Five: *Heart Sutra* witness the power of music to stimulate emotions. In *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner describes the idea in anthropological literature, as he says “ritual symbols are stimuli of emotions” (Turner 1967:29). Marka described her memory of the musicality of the Act Five Heart Sutra and the emotional satisfaction she felt, while articulating the folk elements and the aspect of indigeneity embodied in the act:

*I like it and what is special about it is the folk incorporation that he used as part of his research and his music that makes the piece interesting. The man sang with harmonic, and folk instruments joined on stage. The incorporation with the orchestra is unique, it's hard to do it in a compelling way, the music we played*

*technically was not that difficult but idiomatically to do this mixture that feels authentic, compelling and truly musical, that's the major strength for Tan Dun. For me, to have performed this piece, the synthesis of these folk materials with the concert music that is western, the story and the eastern cultural and religious tradition...the way to bring out their traditional music with the concert music, is emotionally satisfying.*

Besides her mention of emotional satisfaction in the folk incorporation, Marka's response in this context also unfolds many kinds of aspects. She was clearly aware of the fusion in the piece—it is a *mixture* of folk elements and western concert convention, and a *synthesis* of spiritual, religious and musical traditions of eastern traditions. The folk incorporation with the orchestra is unique in a way that makes the musicality in *Buddha Passion* authentic. As a result, authenticity makes up the major strength of Tan Dun's musical career. It is involved as a significant condition in determining one's musicality.

For Michael, who spoke about his experience performing on stage and narrated particularly the intensity of his sentiment in the same movement, the musical phrase becomes a ritual symbol, as it stimulates his sentiments and fuses his head and his heart. From my perspective, his emotional attachment to the music as well as Marka's during the performance belong to Turner's sensory pole of meaning—*emotional stimuli* and *orectic quality* (Turner 1967: 29).

Turner's language in the chapter "Some White Symbols in Literature and Religion" in *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual: Symbol, Myth, and Ritual* concludes with the existence of *Kavula* in Ndembu ritual and demonstrates the great force of ritual symbols in the natives' worship. The description of Ndembu's ritual reinforces my understanding of the theory of ritual symbol and its expression of values in cultural context. *Kavula* is a supernatural being; it is also an embodiment of an evil and "terrifying being" who possesses human qualities. *Kavula*

“threatens” but at the same time “promises” hope and returns with positive outcomes when worshipped with loyalty and good faith (Turner 1975:199). Turner observes the power of this supernatural object, and how Ndembu people navigate their belief and relations through the worship of *Kavula*. He describes in the text:

Ndembu know, if they are prepared to suffer and endure to the ultimate degree, even to symbolic death (a feature of many kinds of ritual), that restorative processes will the sooner come into operation. Like all primitive and peasant communities they have a sensitive awareness of cyclicalness, of successive phases of drought and rain, of heat and cold, of hunger and plenty. Because they trust in the supersession of phases inimical to human welfare by phases of prosperity, they can in ritual feel emboldened to represent in symbols the humiliation, poverty, and death of their ritual subjects [Turner 1975: 199].

This part of the description gives powerful meanings to the *Kavula*. The function of *Kavula* is shown in their ritual processes of practice, unfolding the indigenous desire to overcome human suffering as well as natural conditions. From my own point of view, the example of *Kavula* and its association with symbols as shown has a compelling connection with my own case of study.

In regard to Turner's description, it is symbols such as “humiliation,” “poverty,” “death,” and “hunger,” and tendency of human nature to pursue faith and promise which convinced Ndembu people to their practice in ritual and believe in *Kavula*. In my own case of study, the performance of *Buddha Passion* is a contemporary form of ritual and a timeless event in the social processes, unfolding multiple symbols of culture, social aspect and spiritual and emotional minds. My interlocutors demonstrated to me how music, acting as the dominant symbol, moves musicians to beliefs and actions with active forces on stage. Music possesses the potential power to transform and convert groups and individuals. In the words of Tan Dun, music acts as a *bridge* and an *ambassador in human beings*, mediating people in distance and connecting people together (譚盾講述【慈悲頌】緣起 Tan Dun Talks about “Buddha Passion”

n.d.). Thus, music is spoken in an universal language, so as the messages of life embodied in the stories. The language of Chinese and Sanskrit being employed in the music, by no means reduces the transformative force of the story and music to the audience. The metaphor of the stories and the element of indigeneity are other kinds of ritual symbols. They associate with the compassion that is contained in the figure of Buddha, navigating the emotional and spiritual mind of my interlocutors and the audiences. These ritual symbols are close to my participants' hearts; they are significant expressions of humanity, sentiments and culture.

### ***Practicing Asianess in Classical Music***

Asian American studies scholar Grace Wang in her ethnography *Soundtracks of Asian America* generates the complication of musicians' perception and the implicit tension embodied in the Asian musical narratives and participation. On one hand, musicians tend to argue that classical music is a universal language and the classical music world is free of racism, while downplaying the ethnic characteristics of Asianness in their musical making. "Sounding Chinese" becomes a criticism that many of these musicians seek to deflect in their playing (Wang 2015:67). On the other hand, Asianess becomes a solution for my interlocutors—both music insiders and amateur listeners—to challenge the exclusivity of high culture and elitism associated with classical music. It expands the diversity of classical music available in the "commercial landscape" (Wang 2015:95). Wang describes the underlying decline of this musical genre in the West and the difficulty of attracting new audiences to classical music. Her argument that classical music is exclusive and elitist is reflected in my interlocutors' voices, considering her words "A number of these attempts aim to counter elitist perceptions of exclusivity and

irrelevance by challenging the boundaries that consecrate the high status of classical music and diversifying the range of repertoire and concert setting” (Wang 2015: 90). She suggests the promotion of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” as the essential goal of classical music programming, in the specific context of American society. Owning one’s cultural origin and declaring one’s ethnic capital are essential in the political and cultural project of race and ethnic diversity. Thus, enriching concert programs becomes musicians’ intentions to seek out potential new audiences (Wang 2015: 85).

Drawing attention to racial and ethnic distinctions can be a powerfully productive way in the practice of classical music. Consider the example of Yo-Yo Ma, who has successfully labeled himself as the embodiment of multiculturalism. He performs the music of different cultures all over the world, while articulating his cultural heritage, which led to his Silk Road Project. Ma is considered the most influential contemporary figure in the American context of multicultural society. Wang explains the meaning of Ma’s incorporation of his cultural heritage in music performance:

Given the appeal that exploring one’s ethnic heritage holds within U.S. frameworks of multiculturalism, a “return to roots” represents a familiar discursive trope that Asian American musicians, including Yo-Yo Ma, have drawn on to differentiate themselves and to promote specific performance programs and recordings. While such programs depend on essentialized understandings of musical interpretation, they also represent attempts to convert Asianness into a form of ethnic capital in classical music. [Wang 2015: 90]

Their cultural heritage and foreign ethnic origin are used strategically to gain visibility in the musical industry. Wang suggests that Tan Dun’s and other Chinese composers’ attempt to associate their ethnic origins with their music “marked the group’s first attempt to make ethnicity an explicit part of the public narrative” (Wang 2015: 91). Her Asian interlocutors spoke about



the success of integrating Chinese compositions in musical events, which are described as “enjoyable” and “pleasurable” experiences according to white Americans (Wang 2015: 91).

Wang again describes powerfully the contemporary music compositions in classical music convention, as she refers directly to Tan Dun and other composers in similar conventions:

The emergence of China in the global culture of classical music and the acclaim gained by Chinese composers, such as Bright Sheng and Tan Dun, have led Chinese and Chinese American musicians to marshal claims of intimate understanding—whether sincere, strategic, or both—to promote their performances of such works. [Wang 2015:94]

Wang suggests that in the globalization of classical music, ethnic identity is not only an efficient strategy to gain visibility and to consolidate one’s own brand in music marketing, it is also a powerful way to assert ethnic power. Asian and Asian American musicians who play indigenous Asian compositions claim powerful ethnic capital (Wang 2015:92). They quickly adopt the roles and responsibilities of “cultural broker[s]” (92) and “cultural mediators” (65) between the East and West in the field of classical music culture.

Yoshihara Mari in her cultural history *Musicians from a Different Shore* also provides insights about the engagement of Asian and Asian American musicians in classical music. She explains that ethnic origin is an essential advantage in Asian musicians' careers as it expands their social networking and brings them to the attention of a potential group of classical music consumers in Asia. She highlights the central role that classical music plays in the way her musician informants navigate their identities in the United States as well as in the east Asia countries where their ancestors originated (Yoshihara 2007: 81). She discovered that some of her interlocutors perceived their relationship with Asian countries as complicated: they felt that Asian countries imposed expectations on them when they performed for local audiences

(Yoshihara 2007: 97). Asian American or Asian musicians who have diverse “hybrid” multicultural upbringings and identities experience struggle and a sense of discomfort due to the mismatch of their self-identification and the general perception of nationality or ethnicity imposed on them by the Asian audiences (Yoshihara 2007: 98).

The performance of *Buddha Passion* can be sorted in Mari’s category of performances—an ethnic/nation-based event. In her chapter “Roots and Routes of Asian Musicians,” Mari writes “In these events, the talent, success, and visibility of Asian and Asian American musicians serve as a symbol of ethnic and national pride for the ethnic, immigrant, and/or expatriate community” (Yoshihara 2007: 95). Later in the chapter, she indicates that Asian musicians who enjoy visibility in their career are viewed as a source of pride for Asians communities, writing “Asian and Asian American musicians who have family and social ties to Asia and have achieved visibility in their work are often invited to perform in their home country where they receive warm welcomes. Because Asian audiences tend to admire greatly their compatriots who are advancing their careers abroad.” (Yoshihara 2007: 97).

This insight reflects the appearance of Tan Dun and the Chinese soloists in the *Buddha Passion* concert and is captured in the concert program. Tan Dun’s biography highlights his great influence and successful worldwide career, focusing specifically on his triumphs in the Western artistic world. The biography describes his education, his training in the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and later at Columbia University, where he earned a master degree in composition.<sup>18</sup> The biographical content highlights Tan Dun’s awards and honors, received from various organizations, from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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<sup>18</sup> After graduating from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the top traditional conservatory in China besides the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, he came to the United States to pursue a master’s degree in composition at Columbia University and then based his career in New York and settled down in America.

(UNESCO) to the artistic-and-music industry of the authorized international academies. In English translation, the text reads:

The world-renowned artist and UNESCO Global Goodwill Ambassador...has made an indelible mark on the world's music scene with a creative repertoire that spans the boundaries of classical music, multimedia performance, and Eastern and Western traditions. A winner of today's most prestigious honors including the Grammy Award, Oscar/Academy Award, Grawemeyer Award, Bach Prize, Shostakovich Award, and most recently Italy's Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement, Tan Dun's music has been played throughout the world by leading orchestras, opera houses, international festivals, and on radio and television. [Buddha Passion Program 2019]

The length of the biographies of each Chinese classical vocalist is brief but they describe their successful careers as classical musicians. For instance, the biography of Yunpeng Wang, the baritone who plays the most significant role of the performance, says:

Featured on the cover of *Opera News* as one of "opera's exciting new voices," Chinese baritone Yunpeng Wang is quickly gaining international recognition on both the opera and concert stages of the world. A graduate of Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and The Manhattan School of Music, Wang first rose to international attention after winning three different prizes at Plácido Domingo's 2012 Operalia Competition. Same year, he entered the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. In 2017, he was awarded the Martin E. Segal award at Lincoln Center by the Metropolitan Opera. [Buddha Passion Program 2019]

In this resume, Wang is featured as one of the most extraordinary Chinese classical vocalists in his generation. His Chinese-related music training is represented by his degree from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. The biography stresses his appearance on international stages, emphasizing Western organizations and competitions such as his work with the Metropolitan Opera and prizes from the significant opera houses. The words "international attention" and "international recognition" capture his successful career and acceptance as a classical operatic singer for mainly Westerners. The other three vocalists are described similarly share Wang's

mark on the international stage. Trained in the foremost traditional conservatories in China, either the Shanghai Conservatory of Music or the Central Conservatory of Music, these vocalists have won awards in international competitions and have made their debuts in Western opera houses playing important roles. As a result, engaging in performances related to ethnic or national events become Asian musicians' mission as well as their resource to expand social networks and gain recognition in career (Yoshihara 2007: 96).

### *A Practice of Exclusivity*

Every interlocutor I talked to picked up on the noisiness and chaotic state of the audience during the first concert. They interpreted the chaotic reaction of the local audience as a “cultural thing” in China which they heard more or less from their Chinese colleagues and other musicians with similar experiences. As a native Chinese musician who witnessed similar audience behavior during my previous experience as an orchestral musician in The National Youth Orchestra of China (NYO-China) on tour in China, I can attest to the accuracy of this interpretation.<sup>19</sup> We performed our first concert in The National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, with pianist Olga Kern and under the baton of Ludovic Morlo. Like the audience during the first performance of the *Buddha Passion* with Tan Dun, the Beijing audience was noisy, as people talked throughout the concert and clapped in between the movements. The audience consisted of people of different ages and different types, with a dominant group of children and students in primary school with their parents and grandparents.

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<sup>19</sup> During two weeks in July in the summer of 2017, I attended a new classical music orchestra program. The National Youth Orchestra of China (NYO-China), along with other 105 young native Chinese musicians. We performed at Carnegie Hall in the United States and then went on an inaugural season tour to three cities in China.

Marka was the first staff member who I approached through e-mail and asked for an interview about the China tour. She replied to my email within a short period of time and we met the next day in an office of the conservatory. Before meeting her, my sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence about whether my interview questions were convincing enough or not was lingering in my head. However, the conversation with Marka went surprisingly well and I appreciated her thoughtfulness and openness in thinking about and interpreting the China tour for me. Even though she is not an anthropologist, she gave me informative insights and was as thoughtfully aware of her surroundings and experiences as any anthropologist, which boosted my confidence and excitement in contacting and talking to my other interlocutors.

Marka described her role as a supportive colleague of other staff members on the tour. She described her role on stage as different from those of the other staff members in the background. Her role was to be a “grown-up musician,” to create *stability* and *reassurance* during the orchestral rehearsals by offering help with practical issues in playing, for instance, and providing musical ideas during the rehearsal process. Although going on the tour wasn’t required, she chose to be part of the event as she sensed that it was her responsibility to be present for her students and colleagues. It was also exciting for her to travel to a part of the world that she doesn’t normally see and to perform an important piece composed by Tan Dun. The only time she had performed in China before this tour was when she was in Beijing years ago. She performed as a violist in a string quartet, playing a piece of contemporary music, a totally different experience from the concert of the *Buddha Passion*. The type of audience, as she described it, was “a really small and narrow audience who were completely quiet and all music lovers and nerdy.” As a result, the audience she had was a really quiet audience and different

from the audience for the *Buddha Passion* concert. That audience, which filled the house, comprised diverse types of people—the young and the old, the rich and the poor, devotees of classical music and those who have no interest in it.

Marka noted the exclusive engagement of the elite and wealthy class in music concerts in America and compared the media coverage of concerts in the United States and China:

*Here [in the U.S.] major cultural institutions don't get a lot of TV attention from major media, that's not where they get their publicity that way. It's more elitist. Here, the Met and a lot of other major musical institutes, increasingly they seem to be an accessory of the really wealthy class, because of the price of the tickets and the way it's advertised. In China, with this particular project, there are TV stations, attention from local media tv, signs, pictures, advertisements all over the city, everywhere. I interpret that everyone who sees that feels part of it.*

In comparing the publicity and social attention given music concerts in two cultures, she pointed out that the performance of the *Buddha Passion* drew attention not only from the local TV station, but also from major media stations such as Hunan TV (Mango TV) in China. She mentioned the presence of concert posters everywhere on the streets of the city. In contrast, the concert culture in major classical music institutes in the US such as The Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center appeals to a narrow group of people with particular *taste*, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). As a result, the classical music concert culture can be seen as a form of high culture. The price of tickets becomes a critical factor that verifies the innate quality of high culture and cultural capital in classical music.

In the article “How Cultural Capital Emerged in Gilded Age America: Musical Purification and Cross-Class Inclusion at the New York Philharmonic,” the authors Accominotti, Khan, and Storer focus on the emergence of cultural capital in the era of the Gilded Age and demonstrate how social distinctions were defined and changed through the musical culture of the

time. The essay gives a comprehensive definition of the nature of cultural capital, which for me, applies to the contemporary period:

Purification in the realm of objects breeds social closure in the realm of groups (Weber 1978; Parkin 1979), and the distinctiveness of culture allows it to become a resource for social status: its value comes from the fact that it is not shared. [Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018:1745]

This explanation reflects what Marka describes as the tradition of classical music concerts as an elite engagement. The price of tickets is the innate economic capital in the concert culture, and it plays an important role in excluding people of lower status with lower salaries from attending classical music performances. As a result, classical music becomes a form of distinctive culture, a marker of high social status, and in Marka's words an "accessory of the really wealthy class." In this case, the *value* of classical music engagement is appreciated by a select group of people. The classical music is exclusive and not shared. Michael also described the wealthy class engagement in The Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College:

*It's really different from the audience in the Fisher Center where old, pretty wealthy white people are. And they are coming for that experience.*

In this context, Michael talked about the quietness of the audience in the Fisher Center compared to the audience in China. However, what he sensed but did not mention are the unspoken codes of etiquette in the western convention that convey social status and privilege in the consumption of the *experience*.

My interlocutor David Shein also expressed a similar impression for classical music concerts.<sup>20</sup> As an associate vice president for academic affairs and the dean of studies at Bard, he has gone on every single conservatory tour to Europe, Asia, and Cuba in the past 15 years.

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<sup>20</sup> The quotations throughout my conversation with David Shein come from my note-taking during the conversation. They were not transcribed from a recording and therefore do not reflect the exact wording he used. However the quotations convey the spirit of our dialogue and capture the keywords of interlocutor used during the interview.

During those tours, the conservatory orchestra was conducted by Leon Botstein. The 2019 winter tour was David's second time in China with the conservatory, but this time, it was conducted by Tan Dun. Without having much knowledge of classical music when compared to the conservatory faculty on the most recent tour to China, David described his feelings about the classical tradition as an outsider and his first experience attending a classical music concert. He described sitting in the audience during the performance of the *Buddha Passion* and paying attention to the audience and the reaction of his colleagues, faculty members of the conservatory. He found the experience interesting and amusing. "It's interesting to see that. Seeing how Frank and Erica got upset with the Chinese people really amused me." He described that going to a concert in the U.S. is like going to a "fancy dinner" for rich white people, while the concert of the *Buddha Passion* was "accessible."

Describing his first experience of going to a classical music concert, he said he wasn't aware that he was not allowed to clap in between the movements and didn't know anything about the rules: "You never know the rules if you haven't gone to a concert before. Nobody tells you how to act in a concert." What he suggested here is the unwritten norms of etiquette that accompany the classical music tradition in the US. He shrugged his shoulders while he described feeling judged by the well-dressed white people who sat around him. He said, "if you want to change the audience, you need to change the rules." By articulating the "vibe" of the concert when describing his personal encounters in both cultures, and his self-identity as coming from the working class, he implied his sense of feeling excluded from classical music culture in America.



Speaking of the tradition of classical music in American society, my interlocutor generated that most Americans lack access to classical music, that the norms of etiquette are unspoken, that concerts feel like “fancy dinners”, and that they felt excluded because of their class status. Attending classical music concerts is seen as an elite engagement, an experience of the white American wealthy class. Consuming classical music is shown as a *taste* of an exclusive social class (Bourdieu 1984). Through the eyes of my American interlocutors, either professional musicians or amateur listeners, explained the cultural shock they encountered during the China tour. Their observations and insights communicate a challenge of classical music convention in American artistic industry. The aspect of challenge is particularly highlighted in Marka’s narrative:

*[Some people think that] musicians who attract too much public attention must give the public exposure away because it’s cheapening the traditional convention, but actually maybe not. What else can you do with your talent that’s a more important experience to people than just two or three people? Who else is? [She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head] So I don’t know, I appreciate that.*

While she was expressing this idea, I felt the difficulty and vulnerability of being a student pursuing classical music when the western audience for classical music is dwindling. Marka shared with me her insight not only as a professional viola player who enjoys her active performing career within and outside the nation, but also as a teacher. For me, Marka’s insights were disheartening, I felt her sense of disagreement, her voice against such traditional norms of classical music engagement, as well as an implicit disappointment with reality.

## **Conclusion:**

The *Buddha Passion* exemplifies Tan Dun's musical project—to create a hybridity of the Western classical tradition and Eastern ideology and musical traditions. The composition symbolizes the multicultural phenomenon, authenticity and Tan Dun's assertion in ethnic capital in the global market of classical music, leading him to “return to roots”—a discovery of Chineseness (Wang 2015:90). The term “hybridity” is essential in the discourse of cultural identity. It first emerged in the colonial racist context as a negative term to define races and to distinguish those who broke down boundaries and who were considered “impure” in the 19th century (Hybridity n.d.). Hybridity suggests the white Europeans' project of categorizing and distinguishing racial others and forbidding racial mixing in order to preserve the superiority of whites (Hybridity n.d.). The idea of hybridity can be adjusted and applied to contemporary society. According to the Oxford Reference's summary on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity,

[H]ybridity refers to the process of the emergence of a culture, in which its elements are being continually transformed or translated through irrepressible encounters. Hybridity offers the potential to undermine existing forms of cultural authority and representation. [Hybridity n.d.]

Bhabha's theory shows how hybridity can describe the emergence of a new culture in the postcolonial context. Hybridity has the power to intervene authority in cultural context and to redefine cultural difference, identity and hierarchies.

The *Buddha Passion* is a product of hybridity as well as a cultural performance of hybridity. It indicates Tan Dun's musical mission to generate an emergent form of musical culture, replacing the dominant tradition and authority of classical music. In other words, through the assertion of his ethnic capital and indigeneity, Tan Dun is in his own way constructing a new hybrid form and cultural expression of music that is based on the spirit of European culture and

that incorporates his strength of indigenous musicality. The music symbolizes an integration and fusion of both forms of traditions—a product of neither pure Chinese music, nor pure music in the classical convention.

Multiculturalism becomes the central mission in the global era of the classical music industry, especially in the context of American society for which it's a central project in the cultural and political profile of America. The awakening of multiculturalism leads to a rising consumption of exotic tastes and ethnic authenticity in the artistic industry. In this environment, the *Buddha Passion* demonstrates its transformative power to challenge the existing conventions and authority of Western classical music. As a result, it becomes a sample of the musical future, conveying the message of what it looks like and where it will turn to.

The concert of the *Buddha Passion* was a cultural scenario and event that aimed to create common cultural references with people in the Chinese local communities and with the world. Playing and performing the *Buddha Passion* was a cultural experience rich in visual, auditory, physical, historical, philosophical, and spiritual significance. The casts of the event indicated the Chinese government's mission to establish internationality within the cultural life of the city and to create cultural references with the local community. In regard to Tan Dun's achievement, one way to become famous is to associate one's ethnic heritage in music making. This strategy is verified by Wang (2015) and Mari (2007), who insistently suggest that building one's own brand on the characteristics of Chineseness is a strategy musicians can use to achieve visibility in the Western artistic industry.

For a ritual, specifically in the form of a musical performance, to successfully move people to action and convince them to believe on stage, the role of the leader in the performance,

in this case Tan Dun, is extremely central. The performance of *Buddha Passion* is transformative; it is an expression of culture, and of humanity, of religious terms of ritual, mediates tension with profound musicality. As a result, charisma is essential in Tan Dun's mission. To become a leader, he must show to the world and his followers his charismatic authority and unique personality as well as his ability to perform and to lead. Possessing charismatic authority becomes in this circumstance a powerful way for an individual figure in a cultural context of ritual to move people to action and to internal conversion. Thus, rituals and charisma are two important factors determining the ultimate success of the *Buddha Passion*.

## *Conclusion*

My American informants esteemed Tan Dun's musical world and his charismatic personality highly. However, as a native Chinese I have never viewed the career of Tan Dun with the same level of admiration as my American teachers and colleagues. Throughout the process of finishing my project, I have been thinking of the reason why I don't possess the same level of admiration as my interlocutors. Although his status in the artistic world and his achievement as a Chinese composer in the western world, a big part of myself feels a kind of resistance to his profound personal charisma. I interpret that part of resistance as my Asianess and my familiarity with his use of traditional instruments and notations in music.

Moreover, my resistance to Chinese traditional music can be seen as an expression of my past encounters in my music training. When I was in the Chinese music conservatory, we were given negative impressions on traditional music practice. Traditional instruments were viewed as a practice of vulgar taste by people around me. In contrast, the practice of classical music was considered noble, elegant, and an association of good taste. As a result, this contrast impacted the way I perceived Chinese traditional music as a student. People who practiced classical music perceived traditional Chinese instruments as the practice of the lower class. In other words, there exists a cultural hierarchy regarding the practice of Chinese traditional instruments and of classical music, leading to a tension between these two practices. This tension was shown in the way students formed social bonds. Therefore, I recall my memory in the music school surrounded with only friends playing classical music instruments. We would sometimes make fun of the sounds the Chinese instruments made. For instance, my former viola teacher would

demonstrate to me one musical phrase in lessons, he said 你这个片段, 听起来像隔壁琴房里唢呐的声音, 我还以为你要去做白事, 奔丧, 我听不出一一点古典的美。 “What you just played in this phrase of the piece sounded like Suona from the practice room next door. People who didn’t know this piece in the audience thought you were in an event of white (funeral), playing the music of death.<sup>21</sup> I don’t hear any elegance and beauty of classical tradition in your playing.” The way my former teacher described my sound of playing, as parallel to the sound of Suona which was unpleasant, cheap, and poorly produced, impacted my way of perceiving Chinese traditional music.

Richard Curt Kraus in his book *Pianos and Politics in China* describes the impressions of two kinds of music practice as metaphors of social class. Chinese music, as he describes:

Most Chinese music can fairly be called “poor man’s music”; popular instruments are simple, inexpensive, and accessible to ordinary people...This gave Chinese music considerable flexibility, but also a tradition of low performance standards when judged by the professional criteria that emerged in this century. [Kraus 1989:19]

In contrast, he captures the presence of piano in Chinese households in the rising of the urban middle class in contemporary China:

The piano is an instrument for virtuoso display, leaving little room for the understated amateur ideal of Confucian art. A piano is expensive, well beyond the means of most Chinese families, and it is the quintessential musical instrument of the Western bourgeoisie. Of course, the attraction lies in the antithesis: because the piano embodies qualities opposite to China's own music, it has been seen by modernizers as the proper vehicle for musical progress. [Kraus 1989:23]

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<sup>21</sup>白事奔丧: meaning events of white/death. The color of white symbolizes occasions related to death and funerals in Chinese tradition and is considered a sign of bad omen.

唢呐 Suona: A kind of Chinese double-reed horn that produces loud and high-pitched sounds. It’s usually performed in outdoor events and can be seen performing in funerals and is associated with the sound of death. In this context, the teacher suggests that the sound was unpleasant, just like the sound of Suona.

Speaking of my own experience, Kraus's description explains in force and with accuracy, the symbols of class that are associated with these two types of musical practice in Modern China.

In addition, my adviser Michele Dominy suggested discussing my resistance, which can be seen as a religious expression of my successful indoctrination, my passion for classical music and as well my defence of classical convention. Her interpretations in some way explain the idea of "overrepresentation" which I associate with Tan Dun's visibility and characteristics of Asianess in my impression.

Although there are some parts of me feeling resistance, and defending the tradition and the "purity" of classical music, I as an anthropologist and a Chinese musician, am aware of the unfair impressions and bias given to the Chinese traditional music. I also acknowledge what Tan Dun's musical mission means in the global music market and in the diminished desire of the audience in western mainstream society. *Buddha Passion* marks an emergence of a new form of music, as well a new form of culture that is inevitable—the culture of "hybridity" in Homi Bhabha's idea (Bhabha 1994).

Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" and "the third space" helps me to further understand the significance of *Buddha Passion*'s hybridity and classical music. In the literary criticism "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity," Nasrullah Mambrol elaborates on Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity," and "the third space," and provides me a new way to perceive the cultural identity, cultural difference. "The third space" can be seen as the space of cultural hybridity—a space of "ambivalence" and "contradictory" (Mambrol 2016).

In the article “Bhabha’s Hybridity and the Third Space in Postcolonial Discourse” (unknown author), it describes:

Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a *productive*, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new *possibility*. It is an ‘interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative’ (Bhabha 1994) space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorisations of culture and identity. [Meredith.Pdf n.d.:2]

“The third space,” as described, is a space of ambivalence, a space of hybridity which releases cultural identities from the established definitions of culture and identity and as well existing prejudice. It foresees an “international culture,” standing against the exoticism of cultural diversity and multiculturalism (Mambrol 2016). These ideas of “hybridity” are potential in reinforcing the “hybridity” in the *Buddha Passion* performance and its new musical form. Therefore, *Buddha Passion* can be perceived as a safe space of “hybridity,” containing new possibilities, and embracing new forms of cultural meaning (Meredith.Pdf n.d.:2). At this stage of my project, I would like to convince myself, like an anthropologist talking to a third person, with the idea that to be open minded and well-prepared for the many possibilities of cultural meaning in the near future, that classical music will be a practice of the “international culture,” that classical music will be a safe space of ambivalence, challenging the exoticism of cultural diversity and existing identities.



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