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Parallel Destinies: notes from a collaboration

Ngô Thanh Nhàn: scholar, musician, activist by Elizabeth Sayre

Why wouldn’t you be learning this?” Kurt Jung by Elizabeth Sayre

“This is such a beautiful thing to do:” Wu Peter Tang’s music by Elizabeth Sayre

Under Autumn Moon by Joan May Cordova and Kathy Shimizu

PFP doings
What obligations do we carry—to one another, to elders and ancestors, to young people? The question threads through our work in many ways.

Kurt Jung grew up listening to laundrymen who gathered every Sunday on the second floor of his grandfather’s Chinatown store to play the music they loved. Ngô Thanh Nhàn was captivated by the music of itinerant troupes who visited Vietnamese villages and towns to perform for local people. Wu Peter Tang’s first lessons in erhu came from his father and included the “modernized” folk music taught in state-directed music conservatories. Against considerable odds and in different ways, all three men pursued folk arts. They now teach in free programs at public schools, including the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School founded by Asian Americans United (AAU) and PFP in 2005. And every year these artists and their students perform at the beloved Mid-Autumn Festival in Chinatown, created more than 15 years ago by the inspired and fearless organizers of AAU.

Recognizing the loneliness and sacrifices of generations who came before and who made our way possible, young people (led by AAU staff) imagined an alternative. They reclaimed a significant cultural tradition and began Mid-Autumn Festival as a small gathering. Now more than 5,000 people come together to enjoy the celebration every year. Ellen Somekawa, AAU Director, writes: “When we create a street festival, we strengthen connections among people, honor the knowledge of the elders in our communities, activate people, and value our own cultures. This is fundamental to social justice work because if people don’t care deeply about their neighbors, their fellow workers, or themselves, what will motivate them to stand up for each other? And if people are not up for caring about themselves or their neighbors, what happens when it comes time to stand up for those who are defined as ‘other’?” What Mid-Autumn Festival has come to mean to people is described in the exhibition now in PFP’s galleries, Under Autumn Moon: Reclaiming Time and Space in Chinatown.

In Parallel Destinies, an artist residency project supported by PFP this year, Germaine Ingram, Bobby Zankel, and John Dowell created choreography, music, and images to address the experiences of nine enslaved Africans who labored in George Washington’s President’s House in Philadelphia in the 1790s. Using new research (some literally unearthed during recent excavations of the “slave quarters”), they are developing a multimedia performance piece imagining the lives of Oney Judge, Hercules, and others. They are aided by what scholars have to say about the persistence of ring shouts, African traditions of movement, and self-fashioning: folk arts that sustained people and that endure in ever-new forms. Their work, too, pushes us to move past obstacles of injustice, obscured histories, fragmented evidence. It pushes us to ask: How do we enact our responsibilities in relation to painful pasts? How do we remember and imagine those who came before us?

Read between the lines: the conversations with artists and activists excerpted in these pages hint at some of the enormous forces that people have witnessed and endured. It is a hard list: the insidious evils of enslavement and entrenched racism, war and violence destroying homelands, anti-immigrant policies separating families, state-based erasures marginalizing people, draconian development policies crushing communities. In the face of any of these forces, forgetting and compliance would seem to be tempting alternatives. Yet the folk arts work described here reminds us (again and again) how critical change can begin by imagining what freedom, beauty, and justice look, feel, and sound like. In this issue of Works in Progress, people share the model of their own lives: examples of active art-making that values the hopes and the collective imagination of ancestors (known and unknown), elders, immigrants, and youth. In creating movement and music and gatherings grounded in particular folk arts, artists and activists cultivate our best hopes for the world in which we want to live.

These glimpses of PFP’s folk arts education efforts, our artist residency programs, and our community folklife documentation projects hint at the alternatives offered up by courage, compassion, and persistence. Introducing just a sampling of what we’ve been up to at PFP this year, this issue of our magazine reminds us again what we can learn from folk arts and from one another.

In a year of massive assaults on our communities and dwindling resources, we are privileged to join in imagining and cultivating such alternatives—what critical race scholar Mari Matsuda calls “radical pluralism and radical anti-subordination” and Robin D. G. Kelley describes as “freedom dreams.” In small ways, these are efforts to live out our obligations to one another.

We invite your participation as well. For more news about these efforts, samples of what these artists and cultural workers are accomplishing, and information about becoming a PFP member, check out our website: www.folklorepject.org or join us on Facebook.

—Debora Kodish

from the editor
Parallel destinies: notes from a collaboration between John Dowell, Germaine Ingram, and Bobby Zankel

This year, PFP’s long-running “Art Happens Here” artist residency program is supporting a multi-disciplinary collaboration among tap dancer/choreographer Germaine Ingram, jazz composer/saxophonist Bobby Zankel, and photographer/print-maker John Dowell. The three artists are creating choreography, music, and visual environments commemorating nine Africans enslaved in the President’s House, Philadelphia’s White House during George Washington’s presidency. Their collaboration occurs shortly after an excavation of that site occurred, stimulated by prolonged public discussion about how this national and local history should be commemorated. In this very live context, the three artists are exploring how art in general and African diaspora traditions in particular can offer distinct means of imagining the meanings of this place, and the people who lived there. The project encourages reflection on the implications of slavery’s practice in America’s first seat of government, and on our own responsibilities in the light of this history. The excerpts that follow are drawn from conversations recorded at rehearsals and public discussions sharing preliminary work at the Community Education Center (on November 13, 2009) and at the African American Museum of Philadelphia (on December 11, 2009). In addition to the principal artists, dance ensemble members include Alexandria Bradley, Maurice Chestnut and Karen Callaway Williams. Musicians include Daniel Blacksburg (trombone), Ruth Naomi Floyd (voice), Tom Lawton (piano), Mogauwane Mahoele (percussion) Craig McIver (drums), Bryan Rogers (tenor sax), and Anthony Tidd (bass). This phase of the project has been supported by the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, through Dance Advance, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. John Dowell’s involvement has been supported through a study leave and a grant in aid of research from Temple University.

Beginnings

Joyce Wilkerson: [was Chief of Staff for then-mayor John Street] I got involved with the President’s
House around the time of the opening of the Liberty Bell Pavilion. We set up an oversight committee comprised of people from across the city who had really protested and demonstrated and done the research to get the project done, and we worked collaboratively with them and the Park Service. We had decided to fund the excavation. But there was no reason, really, to do it. All the research indicated there was not likely to be anything revealed there because the site had been built over so many times. There were people that were concerned with disturbing the ancestors on the one hand. And on the other hand, a lot of the demonstration was about, literally, covering up history. 

**Jed Levin:** [is National Park Service archaeologist, and one of several scholars with whom the artists consulted as part of their background research]: The people of Philadelphia made this project happen. The National Park Service was definitely reticent to tell this story. This project is about people claiming their history and uncovering a forgotten and suppressed memory. From a technical side, excavators faced the possibility of finding a whole lot of nothing while a whole lot of people were watching. But we came to the conclusion that even if we didn’t find anything, the very fact of looking shows the significance of the story. And by looking, we were showing respect. We had no idea that the foundation of the kitchen house, where Hercules was enslaved, still existed. The extraordinary thing is when you stood on that platform, and you looked down, you saw the curving bowed window associated with the President, and six feet away you saw where one of the men he had enslaved worked. You couldn’t have had a more powerful symbol of the intertwined nature of freedom and slavery in our history as what you saw looking down from that platform. And it spoke to people in ways that words alone don’t convey. It was immediately understandable by people viewing the site. It was undeniable to our viewers.

**Joyce Wilkerson:** And then, near the end of that, it occurred to me that we were about to fill in the hole where the excavation happened, and we really hadn’t done anything with it. You know, there had been hundreds of thousands of people that had looked at the site. Over three hundred thousand people visited the site, and the archaeologists had a platform, and they had this wonderful dialogue going on. And we contracted with John Dowell to make some photographs. It was all very fortuitous.

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Dr. Ngô Thanh Nhàn: Scholar, musician, and activist

Interview conducted & edited by
Elizabeth Sayre

Nhàn tuning a đánh tran at FACTS. Photos: Elizabeth Sayre, 2009
DR. NGÔ THANH NHÀN teaches đàn tranh, a traditional Vietnamese 16- or 17-string pentatonic board zither, to middle school students at the Folk Arts Cultural Treasures School in Philadelphia. The class is part of a residency organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project and Asian Americans United, who co-founded the school and continue to coordinate folk arts and community projects there. Nhàn clearly enjoys introducing his young students to Vietnamese music, food, and culture. I visited his class in May 2009. It was the last day of class, and they were preparing for a school concert. Nhàn gave students the freedom to laugh, talk, and be themselves as he directed a focused rehearsal. The middle-schoolers are learning how to wear and use finger picks on the thumbs and index and middle fingers of their right hands, how to press the strings with their left hands to alter and decorate the plucked pitches, how to read the special notation for the instrument, and how to coordinate with each other as an ensemble in music that is sometimes based on non-metric phrases—that is, in some parts, there is no steady pulse.

Nhàn’s students perhaps have little idea that their teacher witnessed firsthand the de-colonization of Vietnam and the Tết Offensive, and became an antiwar activist in the U.S. in the late 1960s, and is an internationally recognized scholar of Vietnam’s ancient Nôm script—or that Nhàn, like many postcolonial cosmopolitan artists, has expanded the uses and contexts of his instrument, collaborating with jazz, blues, and Asian American experimental artists since the 1970s.

The đàn tranh has features in common with other Asian zithers like the Chinese guzheng, the Japanese koto, and the Korean kayagum. Its origins are unknown, but a similar instrument is depicted on ninth-century temple sculpture. The đàn tranh was used in court music in Vietnam before the 1800s, and in the 20th century was used in chamber music, music for the cải lương or “reformed theater,” and folk music from many of the country’s distinct regions. As with other unfretted string instruments from Asia, the melodic ornaments created through pressing its strings, though often quieter than a given piece’s main melody, are part of a signature sound that corresponds to the tonal and dialect-specific sound of language in Vietnam.

In our May 2009 interview, Nhàn talked about his childhood, his entry into music and political activism, and the scholarship and research that gave him insight into the deep meanings of song lyrics and the history of gender dynamics in Vietnam.

NTN: My name is Ngô Thanh Nhàn. Ngô is a family name; Thanh Nhàn means “pure leisure.” My father had a very hard life, so he wanted the children to be relaxed, to have a good time. He was aiming for a girl; Thanh Nhàn is the name of a girl. When I grew up, everybody thought it was a girl’s name. But I stuck with this name.

I was born in Saigon in 1948, on May 1. My father met my mother in Saigon. He was from way up north. He worked in the rice fields when he was 14, and one day he came back home, and all the family had been killed. And so he got scared and he left his hometown. He went to Saigon somehow. And then my mother, she was born in the central part of Vietnam. She had a hard life too, and my grandma had to marry her off in order to get the dowry to feed 18 children. My mother went to the south. She ran away from an arranged marriage, and then she met my father.

ES: Why was your father’s family killed?

NTN: Until the time he died, we tried to figure out what happened. We still don’t know. It was 1928, and so it could have been the French, it could have been robbery, it could have been gangs up in the mountains.

ES: Once your parents were living in Saigon . . .

NTN: My father joined the French army. He never went to school, so he was very low in rank. He married my mother. They lived in the soldiers’ barracks. We lived like that for almost 10 years. I have eight brothers and sisters. I have an older brother who died in 1973–74. Now I am the oldest. I have two sisters, and five other brothers. My father was always away from home because he was in the army. So my mother, when she gave birth to the others, said to me, “What’s the name?” I just opened the dictionary and said, “This is the name…” I named them all.

ES: When did music start to come into your life?

NTN: I grew up with more traditional music because at that time the French hadn’t imported a lot of European music into Vietnam yet. When performing troupes came, they took over the market at night, and then they performed for free. I got used to that, and I loved that life. But my mother was very hard on me. She kept me from running away with the troupes.

They performed dance—they did what’s called reformed theater (cải lương) and traditional theater (hát bội). The traditional classical theater was performed usually in temple, the temple of heroes. Every year they have a festival for that hero, and then you have performers come in and re-enact his life or her life. We would go to the temple and have free food and watch the performance.

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In Vietnam you have the audience squatting and standing in four directions, and you perform in the middle. You have to repeat each act so that everybody sees what is happening in that story. You act a part of the story, and then you turn to the left, and you act that part of the story again, and then you do it to all four sides. And that’s how I got to like them, because of the costumes, the very nice colors, and the stories are very nice, and there was singing and music.

ES: Where do the stories come from? Who are the heroes?

NTN: They are folk stories. Reformed theater uses a lot of folk songs and court songs. Some of the stories have Confucian influences, so the characters have to be loyal to the king, loyal to their partners, and children have to be loyal to the parents. That’s the basics of the story, the moral of the story. And heroes are people who are loyal to the country, or a king—a good king. Some of the court music developed into popular music. There are also other stories besides those of heroes—you have love affairs, you have all these wrenching stories about people who got lost in their riches, and then they lost their love for their children and their wives, and that caused a drama.

The French left Vietnam in 54. My father didn’t have any money at all; my mother had saved some money because she did sewing work, and she built a house in the outskirts of Saigon. We were living in our own home with no electricity for about four or five years. There was a market nearby; there was an elementary school, and also a theater. I just spent most of my time at the theater. And that’s when the influence of European music started. I watched a lot of Indian movies. And in Indian movies, you know, you have to have dance and music in every story. Mostly the story of Rama and Krishna and Shiva—that story was quite popular. I watched those movies and reformed theater and also traditional theater, and then European movies, like “Dancing in the Dark” [a Charisse-Astaire number from the 1953 film The Band Wagon] and Humphrey Bogart. When the Americans came in, we started to have a lot of American music. So I grew up with radio and French music and then American music. Suddenly in the ’60s we started to hear Bob Dylan—the Beatles first and then Bob Dylan. And then we heard Peter, Paul, and Mary from the GIs who were living nearby. They played antiwar songs during that time—that was like ’65, ’66. There were a lot of conflicts during ’65 and ’66, and the changing of governments, and turbulence. The Buddhists were repressed [in Vietnam], and then they revolted, right in the city. My mother was a Buddhist—we were all Buddhists at that time, so we joined in. And I started thinking about bad government and good government, and what they mean to us. And then one day I came back from school, and I saw Thích Quảng Đức, who burned himself right in the middle of the square, and that changed my view about government.

He was a Buddhist monk, very venerable. He burned himself in protest of the Ngô Đình Diệm government. We got involved into politics intentionally, and it started to seep into the story. By the time I was in high school. I started to go to boy scouts. The scout leader was a Buddhist. He got conscripted, and he went away. We had to manage ourselves. So every Sunday I led the troops, and we’d go around and see whatever good we could do. We went into the area where the war was raging, and we tried to help. I spoke some English and asked the Americans for tin roof and tin sheets and wood. We went there and we tried to build houses. And then one day one of the youngest boy scouts [said], “How come when we were building houses for them, people were standing around and looking at us and laughing?” I didn’t know how to answer that. Actually, we didn’t know how to build houses.

We tried to build houses, and when we left, they took apart everything and then rebuilt them themselves. Sometimes we went back to the same place, and the youngest kid was always asking, “How come we’re doing the same thing? Is this the place where we were before?” Then I started thinking maybe helping people on Sunday was not a good solution, because a good solution has to be permanent. You had to think—if you ended the war, then this wouldn’t happen anymore; people could fix it themselves. And so that seeped into the story.

By 1967 I graduated from high school, at the top of the school. I got a scholarship from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); it was called the leadership scholarship. The aim was to create a younger generation of leadership in Vietnam who could speak English. The older generation didn’t go to school, and they didn’t speak English. They thought maybe taking us to the U.S. to learn about U.S. culture and the American way of thinking for four years, we’d come back—yeah, a lot of my friends came back and became deputy ministers, very high level. But unfortunately for us, 1968 came, and then there was the Têt offensive, just two days before we were supposed to leave for the U.S. So, [the trip] was delayed for about a month and a half.

I went to California March 23, 1968. After some seminars for us by the USAID, I was sent to San Jose State. San Jose State was the hub of the antiwar movement. The first day I was there, people were demonstrating in the school against the war, and I saw for the first time the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam flag—we called it the Viet Cong flag—and also the North Vietnamese flag, in college, in a U.S. college! I didn’t see it in South Vietnam; if you had that in your house in South Vietnam, you were in trouble. In April Martin Luther King was assassinated. I had to write something about him. I read his speeches. I read the speech “Beyond Vietnam,” which he gave one year before in 1967, in New York. I read that, and then I read the Geneva Accords between the French and the Vietnamese, and the promise of the U.S. not to intervene in Vietnam, from the conference in 1954. At the end of our classes, Bobby Kennedy got killed, too, and we had to write something about him and his political stance. And so a group of three or four of us started to oppose the war. Right in the first year.

ES: I guess that’s not what the USAID had in mind.

NTN: All my life my mother tried to keep me from going into music and from running away with the performing troupes. I got into high school with high grades, and so I asked my
mother for a guitar at that time. The guy came by with the guitar—$25 or $10 or something like that, and my mother said, “How about $5?” The guy was hungry, but he couldn’t sell it for $5. So, in the end, I didn’t have the guitar until I graduated from high school. When I graduated from high school, my mind had changed already. At that time, after listening to European music and French music, then Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Joan Baez, folk music became interesting and then the antiwar music came in. I went to listen to antiwar music in Saigon in the evening. [Vietnamese] folk music came in. People started to sing folk music again. I discovered that it was very intelligent, very honest, to the point, no skirting around anything. And the sound—the tunes were so new, and so difficult; they came from your speech. Vietnamese popular music at that time was trying to tap into European music, Vietnamese language to European music. It’s so difficult! It’s so unreal, pretentious. That’s why, in high school and at the end of high school, I started to like folk music. Vietnamese folk songs, and then usually song and poetry and music, are one, unseparated. And dialect…

**ES:** Do you mean regional dialects from different areas?

**NTN:** From different areas. The Vietnamese have four or five major, and then many minor, dialects. Hanoi is one, and then Huế, central Vietnam, is one. Saigon is one major group, and then you have the Nghệ An and Quảng Ngãi area, and then the north central part of Vietnam. These folk songs usually go with the dialects—you can’t sing them without using the dialects.

**ES:** Can people understand each other from dialect to dialect? Are they very different?

**NTN:** By studying folk music, I understood different dialects that I didn’t use to understand. We started to understand the nuance of their feelings. Folk music is really intelligent. Folk music is straight ahead, talking about women, talking about sex, talking about men, making fun of men, making fun of women, all that sort of thing. Making fun of monks, about sex, and their bad habits, and making fun of pretentious Confucian types…they make fun of everything. From the Buddha to the kings, yeah! In Vietnam, there is no song that hasn’t been rewritten, recast into funny stories, including the national anthem. People are like that.

When I graduated from high school, I had some money, and I started to learn the dàn tranh. I saw a group playing, and it was so impressive, and I said, “Oh my God, this is really good!” It was a group of dàn tranh playing together. I didn’t appreciate the other musical instruments yet. But the one that impacted me the most was the zither. But the dàn tranh is usually for women. I went into class, and there were all women in the class. I was learning how to play like that for about three or four months. Then I ran out of money.

**ES:** When they play in an ensemble, does everyone play the same melody?

**NTN:** Yes. Some people lead, and there are a lot of variations, and you could play counterpoint. When I went to college in the U.S., in my suitcase there were only books—and

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Qin Qian and Kurt Jung perform at Mid-Autumn Festival.
Photo: Joan May Cordova
Why wouldn’t you be learning this?

a conversation with Kurt Jung

KURT JUNG has performed Chinese and other world musics in the Philadelphia area for more than 20 years. In September 2009 he discussed his passion for Chinese traditional instruments, especially those played and learned in a community setting. His main interest is music “of the people,” created by and for “regular people” who love music and learn it from one another, above storefronts in Chinatown or in local parks or living rooms. Kurt’s family, originally from the Guangdong (Canton) area of southern China, goes back several generations in Philadelphia’s Chinatown. He first studied the erhu (two-string stick fiddle) and yangqin in the 1980s, learning from older men in Chinatown. (He also plays Western violin and Celtic harp.) The yangqin, his instrument of choice, is a delicate-sounding stringed instrument like a hammered dulcimer with origins in Central Asia and the Middle East. It likely came to China along Silk Road trade routes. The yangqin can provide both melodic doubling or chordal support for other stringed instruments played in small ensembles.

Discussing his interest in “world music,” Kurt responds: “Why wouldn’t you be learning this?” “World music” is shorthand for folk, traditional, and popular musics from anywhere, as well as non-Western art musics. Kurt’s question prods us to think about what we need to know to be culturally literate people. This is the question of the century for music education and research at all levels. Western music has affected almost every corner of the globe. Today, some knowledge of Chinese music in all its historical, regional, and stylistic vastness should be near the top of everyone’s agenda. The global study of music exposes the falsehood of stereotypes about regional or national identities. One discovers that exchanges of ideas and adaptation are the rule and not the exception when it comes to culture. Look below the surface of almost any musical instrument identified with a particular region or country, and you will usually discover that it came from somewhere else—and even that “somewhere else” was never culturally homogeneous. Kurt and his erhu-playing colleague Qin Qian are resources for Chinese music and its history right here in our region.

KJ: I was born in Philadelphia. My parents were living in Chinatown at the time [the mid-1960s]. I’m number four of five kids. They used to have a store. My great-grandfather [Jung Sing Lee] started Hong Fook Incorporated. It was on 10th Street, where the On Lok House is now, the senior home, and the hairdresser, Rainbow. It was like a general store. Back in the old days, in Chinatown you didn’t have the big supermarkets that you have now; it was all tiny little stores.

My grandfather [Jung Kay] sold vegetables; he had the general store for a little while. He dealt with John Wanamaker. My grandfather would write all the letters [to China] for him. A lot of people used to meet up on the second floor of our store every Sunday to play these instruments, to play this music. Most of them were laundrymen. At that time the U.S. forbade them from bringing their wives over, and they would send money back to the old country because the economy there was so bad at the time. We’re talking right after the Depression. They used to play a lot of traditional folk songs from what they call the Guangdong area; "Canton" was the British name for the city of Guangdong. Most of the people that came over to the Chinatowns in New York, San Francisco, and Philadelphia are from that area, from the south. That’s why the predominant language is Cantonese among the older generations. A lot of people from Hong Kong came over. It wasn’t till much later that the Mandarin-speaking Chinese came over. And now we’re getting people from Fujian province.

My grandparents, they spoke Cantonese, and my grandmother spoke an off-dialect of Cantonese. I don’t know if you understand how the dialects work in Chinese. It’s one written language, but they say the words differently. The dialects end up having their own flavors.

[Continued on p. 22 >]
Wu Peter Tang playing erhu. Photo courtesy of the artist.
WU PETER TANG, master erhu player, has lived in the Philadelphia area since the late 1990s. He was conservatory-trained in northeastern China and also taught by his father, a well-known specialist in Chinese traditional instruments. The Chinese Revolution altered folk and traditional music education in China in striking ways. Before 1949 the designation of “professional musician” meant that one was a relatively low-status performer for hire; after the Revolution, musicians came to be considered highly trained and respectable artists.  

The history of the erhu, and Peter’s musical history, reflect these changes. The erhu itself is a deceptively simple instrument. This two-string stick “fiddle” apparently derives from instruments introduced into China over the last 2,000 years. Its hexagonal sound box is usually covered with snakeskin. In the past its strings were made of silk, although steel strings (sometimes wrapped with nylon) are commonplace today. In contrast to the Western violin’s bow, the erhu’s bow fits between the strings, and the player bows horizontally, with one surface of the bow on the front string and the other on the back string. The erhu can, and does, play any type of melodic music from anywhere in the world. As a fretless instrument, it can play in any tuning with all the shading and sophisticated ornamentation that may be required. In September 2009 Peter talked with me about his life in music.

WPT: My name is Wu Peter Tang. I am from northeast China. I am music director for Peter Tang’s Chinese Music Ensemble. We have introduced and played Chinese music in the greater Philadelphia area for the past ten years. I am also the music consultant for the Philadelphia School District, and in charge of the Chinese music program for three public schools: Key, Kirkbride and McCall Schools. My main instrument is the erhu.

ES: Is it true that the erhu was a folk instrument?

WPT: Yes, the erhu is a traditional folk instrument with a long history in China. The erhu became a major string instrument just in the last 300 years. The plucked string instruments were invented first, and then later on—about 300, 400 years ago—the erhu and the string instruments took the leading part. They became the major instruments.

ES: There was a time when people didn’t learn the erhu in a conservatory or a school, right?

WPT: Yes, After the People’s Republic of China was founded, the government did a lot of preserving. They really put a lot of money into it. The people just love this instrument. Actually, if we talk about how the erhu instrument moved from the street to the Conservatory, we need to introduce two famous musicians. One is Liu Tianhua [1895–1932], a top musician in Chinese music. He also learned Western music. He played almost every kind of Chinese instrument. He wrote famous compositions for the erhu and some pieces for pipa [Chinese lute]. His biggest contribution was to collect many traditional erhu pieces and then rearrange and edit them for systematized music teaching and practice. The other one was Abing [1893–1950]. ² In China, everybody knows Abing as a great blind traditional musician who composed some famous erhu pieces. He composed the erhu classic called “Moon Reflection in Second Spring.” Abing was an orphan. He was raised in a temple. Someone from the temple taught him a little bit of music and he really liked it. Then he went wandering the streets, performing to make a living. The people loved his music. But it’s hard to make a living when you play on the streets. He was really sick and became blind. But his music was so good! Despite all the hardships he endured, he still composed beautiful music. Today, Abing’s music is among the best-known music taught in Chinese music conservatories.

ES: So, Peter, how old were you when you started playing?

WPT: I started learning from my father when I was six years old. My father, Yu Bin Tang, was an important person in guiding me into the erhu.

He is a highly respected Chinese classical musician, the former Director of the Traditional Music Department of Shenyang Music Conservatory.

ES: Did you learn to read notation from the beginning?

WPT: From the beginning, yes. My father taught me in the same way that other students from the music conservatory learned. It is very systematized. In China right now, they have the same degree examinations as in some Western music. They give you certificates at certain levels. There are nine levels of erhu. I went to music middle school for four years. And then I went to the conservatory for four years. Then when I graduated, I worked for the Beijing Central [Continued on p. 27 >]
Included here is the full text of the "Under Autumn Moon" exhibition. Numbered captions refer to photos by Joan May Cordova, unless otherwise identified. Kathy Shimizu’s block prints are interspersed through the text.

Visit www.folkloreproject.org for the full exhibition.
To live as an Asian in Philadelphia is to be told in many ways that you don’t belong. Our faces are missing from the media. We aren’t represented in government. Our histories aren’t taught in the schools. Even in Chinatown, Asians are too often shoved aside—by the Convention Center with its busloads of out-of-towners, in streets choked with commuters, and by attempts to push a stadium, a prison, and a casino onto the community. But for the past 15 years, there has been a night when the streets really belong to the people, when who we are and what we do takes center stage.

It started in 1995 when a group of Chinese immigrant youth expressed to Asian Americans United (AAU) members their homesickness and their longing for the upcoming Mid-Autumn Festival—a time of family reunification that was all but ignored here in the US. These young people decided to recreate that festival here in honor of the elderly. Four hundred people gathered at the first celebration in the Holy Redeemer parking lot, and a Philadelphia Chinatown tradition began.

Each year, thousands of people crowd the main street of Chinatown for a day and evening of cultural performances, carnival games, arts activities, a lion dance, and a lantern parade. The Festival culminates in a tradition of our own making: a mooncake-eating contest. And most significant of all, the event is community-made: hundreds of volunteers, dozens of businesses, and scores of artists come together to create something reflecting our values and hopes for our slice of the world.

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In working for social justice, we need to build a sense of history and belonging-to-place among our people whose lives are marked by dislocation. For our children to have roots, for our families to have a sense of community, for our elderly to embrace memories and discover the power of passing on meaningful traditions, we must continually fight for the time and space to celebrate.

Over the past 15 years, the Mid-Autumn Festival has become a focal point for that fight. This exhibit of photographs and block prints of recent Mid-Autumn Festivals by AAU members Joan May Cordova and Kathy Shimizu is the first event in a yearlong celebration of AAU’s 25th anniversary. A work in progress, the display will be the basis for other documentation efforts. The quotations included here were drawn from gatherings of AAU members, who reflected on the meanings the celebration holds.

1. 7:30 AM, 10th Street, day of Mid-Autumn Festival (MAF). Following months of work by dozens of people on committees, the festival begins. Ellen Somekawa, Asian Americans United (AAU) Executive Director, draws a chalk map of the festival on 10th Street to show the 10 AM volunteer crew where to set up the tents, art tables, chairs, and the carnival. Photo by Kathy Shimizu, 2009

2. View from Race and 10th Streets in 2008. AAU student volunteers in blue shirts sign in for their shifts. Front row seats are reserved for elders to watch cultural performances on the stage.

3. More than 100 students volunteer to work with AAU leaders to set up and run the Mid-Autumn Festival. College students (former AAU high school youth) return to volunteer, often in new leadership positions, coordinating committees organizing the stage, arts, food, carnival and younger volunteers: MAF is a community and leadership building process. Here, Z. T. Lin, Joseph Tran and Chenne To set up chairs.

4. AAU volunteer Matt Tae hangs a poster created by middle school youth in AAU’s Paths to Leadership summer program. Youth studied Chinatown and Chinatown North and created posters showing what they would like to see changed. They noticed a lack of green in the community and envisioned gardens in the place of vacant lots and food markets in the place of abandoned buildings.

5. Children work on Chinese paper cutting at one of the many arts and crafts tables led by local artists. A team of community-minded artists organizes arts activities for children every year (calligraphy, lantern-making, paper folding, hat-making, print-making, and more).

6. Lantern riddles are a traditional activity in China at Mid-Autumn Festival and other festivals such as the Lantern Festival. The riddles, often using puns, word play, and logic problems are posted on lanterns. Festival-goers who correctly guess riddles receive small prizes. High school volunteer Amy Lee stands beside the lantern riddle booth.

7. At the 2008 Mid-Autumn Festival, Dun Mark, an 86-year old resident of Chinatown, community Tai Chi teacher, and longtime member of the Mid-Autumn Festival Committee, points to the “No Casino in Chinatown” poster. Over 25,000 people signed petitions opposing the proposed casino.

8. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, AAU board member Helen Gym, and AAU co-founder Debbie Wei enjoy performances during the 2008 Mid-Autumn Festival. AAU moved the Mid-Autumn Festival to the main street of Chinatown in an effort to reclaim public space and to assert Chinatown’s right to exist as a community. For too long, Chinatown has been regarded as a tourist destination rather than a residential neighborhood. Bringing elected officials to the Festival is a way of demonstrating the vitality and strength of the community.

9. Mei Mei Dancers perform a Mountain Village Dance. Performers: Christy Levandowski, Maddie McCann-Colvard, Heather McCarty, Lili McElhill, Sophie Sharm, Emily Taylor-Bannan, Becky Wenner. The Mei Mei dancers of South Jersey are all adopted from China. Their performance in the center of Chinatown at Mid-Autumn Festival helps “give them a perspective on their roots,” according to one mother.

10. 10th Street audience. More than 6000 people – a multiracial, intergenerational crowd – participate in the Mid-Autumn Festival.
11. Between Lion Dance performances, Nathan Trinh and Zhao Gu Gammage listen to their kung fu teacher, Sifu (Master) Cheung, explain the Chinese lunar calendar.

12. Cheung Shu Pui’s Hung Gar Kung Fu Academy lion dancers wait to perform. A lion dance, dragon dance and lantern parade have been features of the festival for many years. The parade through Chinatown engages the broader neighborhood in the festivities, and the lion dancers are important signs of celebration.

13. Yu Jan Wang, from Philadelphia Asian Music and Dance Association, performs a Chinese folk dance. One of many performing groups who fill the stage from noon to 10 PM.

14. Brooms are ready for many late night AAU volunteers who sweep streets, pack up the stage equipment, stack chairs, and organize garbage and recycling, before loading materials for the move back to FACT Charter School where they will be stored until next year’s Mid-Autumn Festival.

15. In 2009, hundreds of people sat through torrential rain to watch all of the evening cultural performances at the Mid-Autumn Festival. Photo by Kathy Shimizu

Excerpts from reflections:

Goals of the Mid-Autumn Festival:
- To promote Chinatown community unity through cultural reclamation;
- To promote pride in Chinese culture and community;
- To engage various sectors of the community in support for a community-wide celebration;
- To promote intergenerational cooperation. —Written by AAU in 1996

AAU has always seen arts and cultural work as a fundamental means for creating social change in our communities. Folk arts in particular can be a catalyst for social change with a power that unites the political fight for social justice with a profound cultural thread which speaks to the heart and the spirit. —Debbie Wei

I see my students eagerly volunteering each year. For them, it’s a way to feel needed and part of the process of cultural transmission in a way that teens aren’t called upon to do. —Gina Hart

People talk about having neighbors. When you come to the Festival, these are your neighbors. —Hon Lui

Today, Mid-Autumn remains one of the most special celebrations for our own family. It has become a tradition that my children look forward to. My own family
now honors Chusok and our Korean heritage. And every year under the autumn moon, I am ever grateful for the AAU family, this celebration, and the new traditions we create together. —Helen Gym

When I help old people, it honors my grandfather. —Andy Zheng

I want the elderly to be happy. —Bai Wei Wu

We knew that working with these youth to establish a Mid-Autumn Festival in Chinatown would not only fill a cultural need, but also could serve to raise the consciousness of the Chinatown community to the fundamental human right to culture. —Debbie Wei

To me this is the greatest thing that AAU has done for Chinatown. After all, the thing is to get people together. —Dun Mark

The festival is the crossroads of community, culture, and family. There is no other place like it. —Alex Buligon

It’s good for the second generation to learn to be in charge of the Mid-Autumn Festival. They learn about culture. They learn about serving the community. And they learn about leadership — about taking responsibility and getting along with their colleagues. —Michael Chow

I want to be part of something that can unite people and make them happy. —Jade Trinh

We’ve been struggling as a community fighting against the development of highways, baseball stadiums, and casinos that only harm and constrain us. Mid-Autumn Festival is our time to celebrate our triumphs and be proud that we’re an awesome community together. —Ally Vuong

If there were no Mid-Autumn Festival, I would probably not be the person I am today. Mid-Autumn Festival connected me to Asian Americans United and AAU.
brought forth my passion for fighting the social injustices faced by minority communities. I am truly humbled by the opportunity to volunteer and plan this festival from my high school years and as I graduate from college. I hope to continue this tradition and pass on to future generations the fundamental cultural and community values that the Mid-Autumn Festival has been founded on. —Maxine Chang

The decorations I like seeing the most are the lanterns some of the kids from FACTS made in art class and brought here tonight to light and to carry in the parade. —Eric Joselyn

I see a big organization that’s trying to help out one big community. —TJ Do

I understand what it’s like for people to immigrate to a new country and learn a new culture so it’s always nice to bring something from home to share. —Mary Banhdith

I think it’s just the fun of it, just the fun of meeting new people. I learn new things every time I come here. —TJ Do

When we create a street festival, we strengthen connections among people, activate people, and value our own cultures. This is fundamental to social justice work because if people don’t care deeply about their neighbors, their fellow workers, or themselves, what will motivate them to stand up for each other? And if people are not up for caring about themselves or their neighbors, what happens when it comes time to stand up for those who are defined as “other”? — Ellen Somekawa

The exhibition is part of PFP’s “Home Place” project exploring ways in which local folk arts address displacement. It is funded by the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage through the Heritage Philadelphia Program, National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Humanities Council and PNC Arts Alive.

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Founded in 1985, Asian Americans United exists so that people of Asian ancestry in Philadelphia exercise leadership to build our communities and unite to challenge oppression. AAU has worked in Philadelphia’s Asian American communities and in broader multiracial coalitions around quality education, youth leadership, anti-Asian violence, immigrant rights, and folk arts and cultural maintenance. For more information: www.aaunited.org

When we create a street festival, we strengthen connections among people, honor the knowledge of the elders in our communities, activate people, and value our own cultures. This is fundamental to social justice work because if people don’t care deeply about their neighbors, their fellow workers, or themselves, what will motivate them to stand up for each other? And if people are not up for caring about themselves or their neighbors, what happens when it comes time to stand up for those who are defined as “other”? — Ellen Somekawa
one đàn tranh. I walked around with the đàn tranh. It looked like a baozooka. So I always got searched everywhere—“What the heck is that?” Everybody thought I was crazy because I didn’t think about clothing, and I didn’t think about how I’d stay in the U.S. I didn’t think about that, just books and . . . a đàn tranh.

During that time, the antiwar time, I went to class, and everybody asked about Vietnam. “What do you think about North Vietnam? What do you think about South Vietnam? What do you think about the peace agreement?” I had to go to the library to read about it in order to answer. There were so many different nuances.

One of my teachers was the venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh. He’s very famous right now. He’s a very good author. I took his class when I was in high school. I read his book when I was in high school. And then I met him in San Jose. He came from France and gave us a talk about peace. I invited him home, and we talked. One of my tutors said that he was a “third force.” He was attacked by the left wing and he was attacked by the right wing. She said, “His proposal for peace will never work. He’s more like a moral leader.” I just learned from her a little bit about how the Americans were thinking about a peace agreement.

But at that time I was also studying music—American music, European music, theory, setting up four voices, I learned all that. I learned piano; I learned guitar. I was also trying to do European music on my instrument, and I had a tough time doing that because the pentatonic scale and twelve notes are too much. Whenever you play a chord, like a major chord, you don’t have a problem. A minor chord, you don’t have a problem. But then you start to have the fifth chord, and you have to hit the B, and the fourth chord, and you have to hit the F. And we don’t have an F, so to speak. If you have an F in there, then Vietnamese music turns into European music, and it doesn’t sound correct. Guitar is a little bit better than piano in that sense.

**ES:** Your exploration was pretty solitary?

**NTN:** Pretty solitary. My teachers didn’t know much about Asian music. In my fourth year I met one of the teachers who was a jazz musician, and then he started to understand me a little bit more. Every year I played at the International Day— you know, they have a performance for all the groups, and I would come in and play some Vietnamese songs. I learned how to perform. I wasn’t a performer before, and learning how to perform is not that easy. In 1997 a group of young Asians got together and formed a group called Peeling the Banana in New York, and one of them invited me into the group. I learned from them how to perform. Also, I learned how to deal with jazz music, and I learned how to deal with blues.

I discovered that jazz and Vietnamese music are very close together. Jazz thinks in sentences; they don’t think of measures. There are no measures. You think of a sentence. You play a group of notes until—OK, that’s a sentence. And then you play the next one with a longer sentence. And then you remember two sentences, and then that’s the story. That’s the poetry of the piece. That’s what I had problems with, writing down Vietnamese music on a European staff with measures. There’s no strong note in the middle of anything. Actually, the Vietnamese were thinking of poetry. Poetry is one verse; then, the next verse is a little bit longer, but it’s still a verse. And then, the next verse is shorter, and it goes like that. Then you have a poem. After you finish a poem, then the piece is done. You’re not thinking about measures. I discovered that jazz was thinking almost like that, too. So, I learned jazz, to play with jazz, and I’m still learning. But playing with jazz is fun in the sense that you have freedom. In Vietnam, when I look at the reformed theater, there are four or five instruments. One is the Vietnamese guitar, which looks like a guitar, but the frets curve so you can pull the notes. And also the đàn tranh, and the moon lute, and other instruments—they play together. They never play together in block chords; they play freely. And then I discovered that Bach’s theory of a good piece is, if every instrument plays nicely, then the piece goes together—that’s all his theory is. If all the voices have their own lines and their own tunes, and they go nicely, then the whole group, the whole block, will go nicely. But mostly the Vietnamese use counterpart—one line and another line could go anywhere . . . a call and then an answer; it goes mostly like that in order to avoid block chords.

**ES:** What happened in the ‘70s and ‘80s?

**NTN:** I was in college; I opposed the war so they wanted to deport me back to Vietnam. The National Lawyers Guild supported us. During that time we formed a group and performed cultural shows about the resistance of the Vietnamese, the history of Vietnam, and the poetry of Vietnam, the poetry of resistance, and things like that. We ran around the country doing that. And then 1975 came. The war ended, and I went back to school to learn linguistics. I learned more about Vietnamese sounds and sound systems. I was playing with a different crowd. One time I played with Pete Seeger. The younger generation came in, and we played in groups, and we played at Asian American festivals, mostly in New York. Some of the Vietnam vets gathered and would do poetry, and they wanted Vietnamese music. That’s why I learned how to accompany poetry with the Vietnamese music, to create a background for American poetry. And Peeling the Banana changed me a lot—the way I performed, how I presented my music. I wrote music and songs, in Vietnamese tradition, trying to use Vietnamese themes or concepts in songs. I had quite a few students. Now they’re all everywhere.

Teaching at FACTS is very nice because they are younger students and very smart. They are keen on music, and probably it’s a good age to do that, to give them some idea about what Vietnamese music is like. I teach two classes, grades 3–5 and grades 6–8. In grades 3–5, eight or nine students, and in the other class we have four. They’re not all Vietnamese, and that’s nice.

**ES:** On your trips back to Vietnam, did you study regional music,
and did you see changes?

NTN: I see a lot of changes. In the old days when I grew up, some of the folk songs that were in the traditional theater were really hard to master. The younger generation has dropped some of that music because it was so hard. In the old days, they studied really hard. When I went home, I followed some of the music from the northern part of Vietnam, like ca trù — it’s really good. I studied that. We recorded it, and I was trying to get one of the ca trù troupes to the U.S. to perform. Chèo is also a kind of folk theater with singing and dancing. The older generation is really good, and I learned how they moved. Now we are trying to do a book on classical theater. I go to old books, and I look at the oldest book to see how theater was formed at that time, and I try to revive it and see what happens. I’m older now; I can’t run around and try to learn everything.

Now I understand more about Vietnamese music, and I understand more about how the language and the music go together. I use that as a way to create music. I write a poem, a nine-word poem, a nine-syllable verse, and then I try to put that into music. The way to do it is to read it over and over and over, and then you start to see the nuances of the language, and then the music comes around with it. Then when you put it into music, it’s natural, it’s like it was born with it. That’s how I think Vietnamese poetry is. There’s one form with two-syllable verses that has hundreds of songs in Vietnam. [He recites.] It means, “Who brought this blackbird across the river so that it flew away?” Out of nowhere it doesn’t make any sense. But if you look at the geography of Vietnam, there are a lot of rivers, and the younger generation usually think of a boat as a way to get away from town, just like Americans think of a train. You know, in the old days a train was the way to get away from town. In Vietnam if a girl gets into an arranged marriage and wants to escape, the boat is a carrier of freedom. So that is the meaning, and that’s why there are hundreds of different songs based on it.

I used to perform in different situations, and I created a different tune for different occasions. Recently, they asked me to play a piece at the U.N. So I chose a Buddhist mantra of rebirth, and I tried to put that into Vietnamese music because the chant is almost always using Vietnamese language, and from the language they go into music. I put the music and the chant together.

ES: When you teach the children here, do you talk to them about language?

NTN: Not yet. I have a different way of teaching, because the song is language already. If you start with language, then some children who are not Vietnamese may not be able to pronounce it. They express it through their fingers, and they start to learn about the properties of the instrument, and how the instrument expresses itself, and the technique to change that, to personalize your expression. For the pentatonic scale, there are ample places to personalize your music, and each master will have a different way.

ES: Do you feel like you identify with one region more than another?

NTN: My father was from the north, and I heard him talking every day, and my mother is from central Vietnam. Sometimes, when I was young, I would try to mime them, to make a joke, and when they yelled at me, I tried to mime them to make them laugh. I understand a little bit more now because I’m also an expert in the old script of Vietnam [Nôm]. I standardized it so that it’s been put into computers, and now they’re trying to do a project with Temple [University] in order to revive this script. All the old books are in great danger of destruction, and so we’re trying to put it on the worldwide web to preserve it. In doing so, we discovered books about theater, books about music, books about all sorts of life stories, and about the culture of Vietnam, and so I understood more about regional differences, more than just musical ones.

There are stories behind it—the reasons why people go to a region, how they settle into a place, how they settle their differences, how the land was different in a village, which part of the village is richer than the other part of the village, which class of people are downtrodden, which class of people are rich. And the rich—what the rich are doing to rice, and to pork, and to chicken food, and all that sort of thing. Some of the books tell you a little bit of those stories, and then you understand more about folk song. Because that’s the story behind the simple sentence, “Who brought this blackbird across the river so that it flew away?” You know, at the beginning it makes no sense, but then it makes sense [when you know more about Vietnam].

There are generational differences, and there is a revolt against traditions that are oppressing women. In new songs they’re always singing about women who cross the river, who get married to a different guy; this guy who is a musician is writing about his love story, and his girlfriend is going to get married to somebody else. It has nothing to do with anything. If you look at one piece, it is irrational. But then you read the tradition, and you see that Vietnamese women were always revolt ing against that. When I went to Vietnam, I went to a boat. This was a boat of farm products; they sell at the river market. I sat down and talked down to the wife and husband. The wife was very smart; she was dealing with everything. She was keeping the money; she went out and traded, and then came back, and said, “Do this, do that.” The man has to keep the boat; you can’t leave women with the boat. So the man has to stay in one place; the women do politicking and trading and bring food home. In the Vietnamese tradition, on the river, women are the ones who manage things. And in the Vietnamese tradition, Vietnamese women always hold the finances of the family.

Then you look at Vietnamese history, and you say, “Oh, you know, the first kings of Vietnam were women—two women.” Then you discover that below them there was an army of women. When you look at the drums and all this sort of thing in the tradition, the Vietnamese were matriarchal at the beginning. That’s why there was a clash

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The Cantonese-speaking ones and the Mandarin people—they’re so off that they can’t understand each other. They usually call that “the duck talking to the chicken.”

**ES:** Did your grandfather play music when people came over?

**KJ:** He actually sang—he would sing the falsetto voices of the Cantonese opera. He used to know a lot. He would come in, they would play mah jong, they would eat lunch, and they would sit around in a circle and play these musics. Some of the people knew how to read the music; others did not. Some of it was done by rote memory.

There was one guy that just bought a guitar and restrung it like the Chinese instruments, and was able to play it like that. You kind of just improvise on what you don’t have.

**ES:** Did your parents play music or sing?

**KJ:** No, my father doesn’t play Chinese music. They learned to play Western music. My father plays the guitar. Each one of us, when we were growing up, they had us play different instruments. My sister played the clarinet, I played the violin, and my brother played the sax.

We learned in school. I had private lessons. But I learned all my Chinese music from the Overseas Chinese Association. The older people that were there, they were trying to pass that on to the younger people. The people that I learned from are no longer living. I was in college when I met Qin Qian. Her family is from the Guangxi province. My family’s from Guangdong. They’re right next to each other, so she can actually speak the dialects that we speak as well as Mandarin. She’s very well known throughout the whole world, and in China. Her husband is from Philadelphia. He brought her back. It was just a stroke of luck that we met each other at a concert.

I do know a little bit about how to play the moon guitar [yueqin], and the zhongruan—it’s mostly a bass instrument. You hit the notes one at a time, and it just keeps the time. Of course, I don’t play it as much because we don’t have the players to play Chinese music. So most of the time I just concentrate on the yangqin. But I do know how to play the violin, and that was actually my first instrument. And later I took up the Irish harp, the Celtic harp. I always liked the harp. One day I met a man in Audubon, New Jersey, who teaches the Irish harp. I contacted him, and I started learning. We became very good friends.

**ES:** Did you go to school and high school in Philadelphia?

**KJ:** I grew up in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. My parents moved out of Chinatown—only because of the housing. I don’t know if you know the history of Chinatown, but we’re always fighting for housing, and there’s just no room. We go back to Chinatown every weekend to visit family. My wife’s family lived down in Chinatown, also. I play the guitar at the local Catholic church [Holy Redeemer at 10th and Vine streets] over here every week, and I direct the music there. Mostly it’s folk musicians. That’s why I was so excited about the FACTS school [Folk Arts – Cultural Treasures Charter School]. Because in traditional education, you only learn about Western composers: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. I think I know enough about them, took enough courses in them. I took a course in world music, but I wish there was a little more in schools—I mean, how many African composers, how many South American composers do you know? There’s just so much more out there. Why wouldn’t you be learning this? We’re a country of multiculturals. Why wouldn’t you be learning about Jewish klezmer music or some other type of music? I’m glad the school districts are moving away from the Shakespeare type of thing. I mean, it’s great to know about Shakespeare, but there’s just so much more out there . . .

**ES:** We should learn about Western music as just one of the world’s traditions.

**KJ:** It’s not just Western music; it’s a certain type of Western music. We’re missing all the Bulgarian music, music from Hungary, Romania, the gypsy music, or Turkish music. There’s just so much more out there than what kids are learning in school, and the traditional do-re-mi, the Western scale. I’d rather have my children learn about Latin rhythms and something different. You know? It’s like eating meat and potatoes all the time, when there are so many different flavors and foods out there that you could be trying—learning about other people, where they’re from, their traditions, their culture, their art.

What about the music of the people? That’s what fascinates me. A lot of folk music—it’s usually played by people who are ordinary citizens. They aren’t musicians who are playing for a living, but they’re working in the fields or something. This is their form of entertainment; this is the way they express themselves. That, to me, is so much more than the average composer telling the world,
“This is how it should be done.”

I’d like to see if I could pass that on. There are some Chinese music programs within the city now, but it’d be nice to teach kids who really want to learn. And there are things in the folk traditions they don’t do in the classical traditions. There is such rigidness, especially in Chinese music. There’s the village music, and then there’s the music that came out of the imperial court, which was so rigid, and you have to play it a certain way.

I’ve got a lot of friends in the different venues; I go for different types of music. I play with a string quartet. An old violin teacher of mine called me up and said, “Do you want to play?” We performed at a couple weddings, and that was really nice. Then I have another set of friends who just play Irish folk music. We would go to the Irish Center [in Mount Airy], and just play Irish folk music, or play at the ceilis [informal gatherings of Irish musicians, dancers, singers, and storytellers]. I have other friends who play Appalachian music and bluegrass, and they meet in a little gazebo in Medford. Anyone can go to these things. You bring your instrument, and you start playing. They go around the circle, people pick out songs, and they just play. Other than that, we play in our homes. Sometimes we play colonial music—every once in a while, I’ll play harp at the old City Tavern. Then, the whole Chinese world, where I play with Qin Qian. I’m usually very busy, along with my church music. It’s become all-consuming, but it keeps my fingers going. Now that I have kids, it’s a little harder.

ES: When you were learning the traditional Chinese instruments, who were your most important teachers? KJ: The president of the Overseas Chinese Association at that time was Johnny Kuo. I don’t what his Chinese name was—everyone knew him as Johnny. He was the type of person who wouldn’t charge you any money. It wasn’t like taking lessons. You’d call him up, and say, “Can I take lessons?” And he’d say, “No, no, come on over, I’ll show you.” And he’d show you, and you’d sit there. He would start out with the most simple of traditional melodies, and you would just listen, and you’d do what he did. You’d go back and forth. Eventually he started giving me sheet music and I’d learn from that. It was a traditional style of teaching.

ES: Have you gone back to China?
KJ: Yes, I have. I have a set of first cousins over there. My father’s oldest brother had a family in Hong Kong, which is now China. They decided to stay after the takeover in ’97. That’s where I get my supplies from—it’s really hard to get a lot of the things here. But I did get my instruments I have a collection of them at home.

ES: When were you over there, did you get a chance to see some performances?
KJ: Everywhere we went, they’d have these little bands. For some reason, whenever they saw Americans, they would start playing “Auld Lang Syne.” I don’t know why they’d do that. I just laughed! There’s so much good Chinese music out there, and they’re playing “Auld Lang Syne.” I must have gone to three different cities where that happened to me.

I went over to them and said, “Can’t you play something a little different? Play some Chinese music!” Then they played some stuff. But I did go see an opera, Peking opera. That fascinated me. The opera musicians are not like your classical music musicians. They’re as folk as you get. They know the opera; there’s no painted, and get everything done, it takes to put together an opera, just to get the costumes, to get the faces painted, and get everything done, it takes a long time. It’s not easy to do. My father-in-law loves it; he’ll sit there for hours and watch Chinese opera. But the younger generation—they would never listen to that. That’d be very uncool to listen to.

There was a history [of Chinese folk music], at least in Chinatown. There are still some groups out there that play on their own. There are people who play in their houses. There’s a man who owns a pharmacy up on Arch Street. I knew the lady that used to live above him. She would hear the Chinese instruments going at nighttime, so she knows that he plays. But they don’t perform; they play for themselves at home.

ES: Among the Chinese folk musics that you play, do you have favorite songs or favorite styles?
KJ: Look in my book [Traditional Chinese Music for the Western Musician]. There’s one piece that we play all the time. It’s called “The Butterfly Lovers.” That was composed for Western orchestra.

The big thing in China now—there’s a change, the merging of the two instruments [erhu and violin]. Yo-Yo Ma with the Silk Road Ensemble—I don’t know if you ever heard any of the stuff that he does, but he’s merged them. That’s going on with Chinese music: the merging of the two sets of instruments to create different sounds. They are also teaching Western and Eastern music in schools in Taiwan and China. You’ll have a band with a cello, a pipa [lute], a guzheng [board [Continued on p. 26>]}
I was considering Bobby Zankel:
I started talking to Bobby about it. At night. And that’s the impetus of I had a lot of emotional encounters photograph. Those were the two. But see it and Independence Hall in one see the Liberty Bell, and you could see the Bourse building where I could that took quite a bit to engineer. And I actually found a window in the Bourse building where I could see the Liberty Bell, and you could see it and Independence Hall in one photograph. Those were the two. But I had a lot of emotional encounters dealing with that, shooting that thing at night. And that’s the impetus of putting the project together. And then I started talking to Bobby about it.

Bobby Zankel: I was considering trying to create and try to fund a number of interdisciplinary projects and the idea of focusing on the President’s House seemed like the best one to me. Then I called John and Germaine.

John Dowell: He said, “Oh yeah, we could do the thing!” And then Bobby got ahold of Germaine, and we all started talking. And we all started doing research. And so it’s been expanding ever since. And I’m very excited about it because it’s taken me out of where I normally would be. I’m really feeding off of Bobby and Germaine, back and forth, and back and forth. But how does one paint courage? You know, how do you have that emotion? How do you paint the wonder? You know, I mean, we are here!

Germaine Ingram: One of the things Jed Levin said was, here you had this black hole and emerging from this black hole is a sort of awe, a kind of wonder, that encouraged people to see things—to see history in different ways, to ask different questions, to challenge the conventions that we’ve all believed in or, that were completely irrelevant on our radar. And that juxtaposition of this notion of black hole and awe and wonder is just a powerful image for all of us.

Bobby Zankel: This site is so filled with images and people’s lives and history. And the whole story of America is sort of in that hole, you know—the good, the bad, and the ugly, and the potential for good and bad. So it really struck me very deeply. I guess for me the issue is what those slaves are thinking about. I was most interested in the mind of how people could endure slavery, and what it’s about. But the scholars [Jed Levin, Katrina Hazzard Donald, Guy Ramsey, Danny Dawson] all talked about understanding how that African American culture emerged in the United States, and it’s such an amazing triumphant story, that it really, really gripped me. And really understanding the complexity—especially in the year of Obama—seeing this grand thing of America’s history, it’s really so fascinating. And we all benefited from the research of Edward Lawler who has found these biographies of nine slaves in that house. We know their names. We know things about them. At first I was thinking of the slaves. One would be Dignity—you know, as sort of archetypes. But even better than archetypes is to be human beings that have descendents. Those nine slaves are really the fathers of the country. So, trying to deal with this—I’m not a period musician, you know. I’m a modern musician, so I wasn’t interested in doing—and I think we all agreed on this—a period piece, but yet the idea of trying to create a narrative without a thorough text! Music is about notes. Dance is about movement. But to really make them convey this complex story and these complex emotions without just saying “This happened, and that happened, and he did this, and he did that” is so challenging and really exciting.

John Dowell: Yeah, we all talked about this in the very beginning. We have an idea but we’re not illustrators. And how can we use this to really build something that goes beyond the story, and to be inspiring...

Germaine Ingram: At first, we knew more about what we didn’t want this to be than actually what we wanted it to be. It really gave us this opportunity to try out ideas, to explore, to sort of bump up against each other’s perspectives and ideas on how to express what we’re feeling about this important place and important event. But one thing we all agree on is that it needs to be very place-based. Not site-specific, but place-based. We want it to tap into the specificity of the site, and not just have it be about nine slaves at any place. That’s one of the reasons that John’s images are just such a unique asset to this—the original images, the way he’s manipulated them, and the way that he’s sort of using those images to evoke other images and spirits and provocations.

John Dowell: Spirits, that’s it!

Germaine Ingram: We know a little bit about these slaves, and it creates a situation where there’s both a license to imagine what they did and what they felt, but also a responsibility not to be ahistorical or stupid about what we try to convey about them and their lives.
John Dowell: What I did is that I took the original photographs and I went to cyanotypes, 'cause that blue thing is a strange feeling for me. So I did those first. And then I started finding out a little about ring shouts, And then I start having all these imaginations about different things. I imagined that when George went away, Hercules performs. I know he would cook a magnificent meal. Like that portrait of him— he would just do his thing. So to me, that was sort of very inspiring image-wise. So I did the cyanotypes. And then I start thinking about doing some paintings and then drawings about imaginary things. I kept thinking there's a wonder thing. Like, they were paying respects. I mean, of course, when you're having parties among the [enslaved Africans there], and there's also communication— people getting ready to run away or not, and transmitting information back and forth. It made me conjure up all these kinds of things. And that's how I started painting. And then I did a bunch of drawings. Every time we have a rehearsal I make more notes... 

Bobby Zankel: You know, there's so many levels. This story is just profoundly interesting and evocative. One big way to look at is just the idea of destiny. How does somebody come and have their body and their lives taken from one continent to another continent and adjust? What forces interplay? What is the idea of destiny? Are we blind victims of fate or do we have control? Are we empowered over our own lives? What's the story there? And I think the actions of those slaves, particularly Oney Judge and Hercules, who we know escaped, are expressed in this song, and the punchline is, "My destiny belongs to me."

Liberty or love,
Broken heart but freedom.
Touch my Delia's tender cheek
Hold my rascal Richmond nea...
Or write myself a destiny
That takes me God knows where.
Strut my dandy ways,
Or live each day in shadows.
Where's the justice in a world
That makes a prideful negro choose...
'Tween heath and wretched cave,
Between fugitive and slave?

Germaine Ingram: That's the beginning of the song that will be the basis for this dance on salt that will take place in a sort of very small space. I'm thinking a costume that is a cross between chef's coat and straight-jacket, so that the movement is very contained, until he [Hercules] ultimately makes the decision to leave.

I combs her hair
Most every night.
Teasin' de nits and tangles,
Freein' dem steely barbs.
I combs her hair
Most every night
Scared dat she fuss and Holla,'
Yell that I tugs too hard.
I combs her hair,

(Continued on p. 26 >)
I scrub my limbs 'til knuckles fray
On a stormy day,
And say I smells like
And I takes dem fallen
I combs her hair
That I's a hoodoo.
In the full moon I dreams
Most every night.
That makes her set me free.
Most every night.
Gently I ease the tangles.
Gently I combs her hair.

I wears her scent
From chin to foot.
Serving all day the white folk
Seeps in my every root.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.
Blind man to tell between us
For him be hard to know.
I wears her scent.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.

When I be's wid my man
He treats me cold.
He turn his head away
And say I smells like
massa's hound dog.
On a stormy day,
I scrub my limbs 'til knuckles fray
But missy's scent
No missy's scent
Don't go away.

Reflections

Joyce Wilkerson: I think one of the
struggles working with the President's
House and wanting to focus on the
lives of the enslaved Africans, was trying
to figure out what they thought—why
they did what they did. And so, for me,
this is very powerful, because you know
you don't know.
And to have people actually
go into their lives and think and try
to figure it out is a real gift.
We've worked with the historians and just
have the tiniest bit of real, hardcore,
documented evidence. So it's a gift
to have you really explore it for us.

Dottie Wilkie: I mean, the last
song you sung, I know you put me
there. It put me there. You know, I
felt that. And the last piece that he
did, the last song, “Destiny.” I feel
that also. And the music—“I'm
free, but am I free? Where am I?”

Joyce Wilkerson: And then,
with John’s artwork—there’s the
role of place, and how important is the
foundation? And is it the end,
or is it just a jumping off point for
understanding what actually happened
at the house? And so, to have it filled
in kind of puts the place in perspective.
Having John just use the place as a
starting point, and filling in some of
what happened is very powerful.

Germaine Ingram: That’s one of
our motivations here—giving
people this additional window, the
window of art, as a way into this topic,
will inspire them to learn more, to
think more, to consider what their
individual responsibility is with regard
to this significant body of history
that was covered for so long.

Bobby Zankel: We’re all abstract
artists. And on the one hand we have
the responsibility to tell a story with
integrity, but yet, it’s not going to be
a period piece or a historical drama.
We hope that the emotions and the
feelings and the content will create
and generate a feeling. It might make
you just want to go and read a book
about it, just because you might’ve
loved the piece. You didn’t know what
it had to do with the President’s House.

That particular instrument came
out of the folk arena. If you go to
China, you’ll see people—the only
way I can describe is by comparing
it to a guitar—you’ll see people
in the villages there, sitting in the
park, with one erhu playing and
people singing along with it. I also
saw that in Beijing. That certainly
didn’t come from formal education
on that particular instrument.
But it eventually entered into the
imperial court, and that’s when
you got the blend of the folk and
the slow imperial court music. The
instrument I play didn’t enter into
until the 1600s. That’s pretty late for

zither], and a trumpet, or whatever.
When the Chieftains went to
China, they took Irish instruments
and played along with the Chinese
instruments. They realized that they
were the same—the two sets of
instruments had very similar timbres,
and they played the same keys, D
and A. The erhu, the two strings
are the D and A strings; it’s the
two middle strings of the violin.

ES: The contemporary music
conservatories in China are
relatively new, aren’t they? I mean,
50 or 75 years ago, you didn’t go to
conservatory to learn erhu, did you?

KJ: It depends. There was formal
education in music in China at one
time. Under the communist rule,
when they destroyed everything they
thought was bourgeois, the fancier
instruments were considered the
instruments of the rich, and they
destroyed them. Had it not been
for Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan,
where a lot of musicians escaped
to—they preserved that culture…

ES: Especially the court
music, would you say?

KJ: Yes, the court music. So the
more expensive instruments, the one
that Anna Chan plays, the guzheng—
that’s a court instrument. That was
originally developed by monks and
brought into the imperial court very
early. There’s a little bit about that
history [in my book]. The erhu was
not in the imperial court during the
earlier times. As a matter of fact,
they thought it was a toy [laughs].

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kurt jung/ continued from p. 23
Singing and Dancing Ensemble under the Central Government in Beijing.

ES: You worked for them as a musician? For how long?
WPT: Yes, as a professional musician for four years. During that time, I toured the country giving performances. Sometimes the group also toured overseas. After that I went to Eastern Europe for a couple of years.

ES: Where did you live?
WPT: In Romania, for almost six years. I played music, and I had good relations with George Enescu Music Institute. I played with the Radio Symphony of Central Romania. I played the concert to celebrate Hong Kong going back to China in 1997.

ES: During your education, did you have to learn other instruments and Western instruments also?
WPT: Yes, I learned piano, and also I play the string bass.

ES: And you had to learn Western theory, Western harmony?
WPT: Yes, in most conservatories we learn the same system. In the Chinese conservatories, we use the Russian system. It’s just a little bit different.

ES: How do you think things were different for you as a musician than they were for your father? Do you have different taste in music than your father’s generation? Are there different things that you like?
WPT: Each generation’s music is different because the society is always changing. The erhu music has been changed and improved in a very dynamic way in its playing technique, music arrangement and performance. Before, they would have to sit down to play the erhu. But now people could be standing up, and they move and play at the same time. It’s the same with the other traditional instruments. Young girls are playing and dancing at the same time. Before, on the stage you just interpreted the music. Now they also try to have more communicating with the audience. They try to influence the young audience.

ES: Tell me a little bit about the Chinese orchestra.
WPT: It’s a really big group. The bigger ones can be the same size as the Philadelphia Orchestra. Chinese instruments are divided into four categories, and the whole orchestra system—the Chinese traditional music system—is very mature: the plucked strings; the bowed strings, like the erhu; the woodwinds and the percussion. When you say “the bowed strings,” it’s not only erhu we’re talking about. There’s gaohu, which is higher pitched. And also there’s zhonghu, which is lower pitched. In the string family, they have all different kinds. But most are related to the erhu. The erhu is the major one. I think one difference is that in the Chinese orchestra, they have the plucked strings, but the only similar thing in Western music is the harp. They do not have the same kind of plucked strings. It’s like you press the string, and then you vibrate it. The Chinese orchestra also uses a string bass—the same as the Western bass

The percussion section includes traditional Chinese drums and cymbals as well as other different kinds of percussion. And, then, of course, the woodwinds are the bamboo flute and the sheng [a multi-pitched set of bamboo pipes with reeds]—the traditional Chinese woodwind instruments. They are made out of natural materials. The scale is pretty much similar, but the instruments are totally different. It’s all Chinese traditional instruments. The Chinese instruments were passed on for generations and generations. There are some Chinese people who have wanted to alter them, but once they did that, it never sounded the same. You just can’t change it.

ES: What kind of changes do you mean?
WPT: For example, the long bridge instrument, the guzheng [board zither], has a pentatonic tuning. That’s a beautiful instrument. But it’s very hard to change keys. For example, a piece of music I may decide to play in G, and in the middle we change to D, and in the end we go to E major. But the guzheng only plays one key. A lot of people have tried to do something with this, like with the harp.

ES: Create something so you can change keys quickly?
WPT: Yes. But for Chinese musical instruments it’s very difficult to change anything. The tone color is changed. People say: what the ancestors pass along to you, you just can not change it.

ES: What’s some of your favorite music, your favorite compositions, or your favorite styles of Chinese music?
WPT: There are many different styles of Chinese music. My favorites are “silk and bamboo music” (Jiangnan sizhu) and Cantonese music which uses the higher-pitched erhu (the gaohu). Silk and bamboo music is a famous musical style from China. “Jiangnan” means the area around Shanghai. “Si” is silk. “Zhu” is bamboo. If you say “Jiangnan sizhu,” I think most Chinese people, they know what you are talking about. Cantonese music is Guangdong yinque. “Guangdong” means Canton. “Yinque” is music.

ES: You came to New York first, in ’99, and you came there from Romania. Tell me how things were for you in New York.
WPT: It’s the same problems as any people coming to this country. All the culture shock and difficulties, and how to make a living being a musician. I tried to think about how I could make a living in this country. When I would go in the subway, the train station, I saw a lot of musicians. Some of them are really professional musicians, I can tell. They make a living. They take everything people give them, and they play wonderful music. Even American musicians—it’s hard for them to make a living. I’m very lucky to have moved to Philadelphia area. People have started to recognize me, and they love my music, and my group is getting bigger. I have a lot of performances each year. In 2004, I received the Pew Fellowship in Arts.

ES: When you were in New York, did you do other work besides music?
WPT: Yes, I was learning to make Japanese food, sushi. I had to pay to learn; you even had to pay for lunch. They call it sushi school, but actually you just work for the restaurant. And they teach you. But that’s OK! My first job was as a Japanese sushi chef. They make food more like art. My hands are pretty skillful but the only thing I was worried about was that this kind of job involved using the knife very often—and if I cut my fingers then I could not play the erhu anymore!

ES: When did you start teaching in the Philadelphia schools?
WPT: The Chinese music program in Philadelphia School District started in early 2005. The purpose of the program is to let the young kids know about not only Western culture. We also wanted them to be exposed to different cultures and values as well. Through learning about music, they can fulfill this goal. We started with two schools at first; then later McCall School has joined the program too. It was
very difficult to set up at the beginning. We opened the doors to all kinds of students interested to learn. Most kids, they never saw this kind of instruments before, never even heard of it. The first day when I tried to introduce those instruments, they said, “What’s this? Those are instruments? For music?” But after some period of time, the students are able to have the chance to participate in many community performances, such as the Asian American Heritage Festival and Chinese New Year Celebrations each year. One of my students Daniel Jiang, was awarded the first place in his instrument category in the 2009 After School Talent Show at the Kimmel Center, in a program organized by Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative. I feel very happy when my students are able to achieve. I am very grateful to the School District’s Music Department to be able to have such a meaningful program for the students. And the school principals and staff have also been giving me great support.

ES: Other than their not being familiar with the instruments, do you feel there’s any difference between teaching American kids and teaching Chinese kids in China?

WPT: It’s a lot different because the educational style is different. Chinese people, when they make a decision to let their kids learn something, they really want them to be number one, to be professional. But in America, people care more about the experience rather than becoming professional. For example, I saw that my students carry a lot of things on the same day: Chinese violin, Western violin, flute, and drumsticks. Oh my God, how many things do they learn? You have to practice. You have to go back home and practice. In America, they don’t do it that way. I guess the mentality is different. Chinese parents really want to emphasize the principle, the discipline of the kids. They think that when you learn music, when you learn something, it’s also that you’re learning how to be a person. It’s not only playing. Your teacher is like another father. They teach you not only the skills of music, but they also teach you values, how to be a human being, how to have good discipline, and all those things. With the public school students another thing is very difficult. They make their own decisions about learning Chinese music. If they don’t want to learn, nobody can push them. So I try to have good relations and encourage the students. It’s also the lack of practice that makes it difficult, because they can’t bring the big instruments home. In learning music, the beginning is interesting. In the middle, it’s boring and hard.

ES: And then later it gets interesting again.

WPT: Yeah, yeah. But kids are kids.

ES: Tell me about your group.

WPT: It’s the Peter Tang Chinese Music Ensemble. I feel very lucky that I have met other professional musician friends and that we have a chance to play together. These musicians have given me a lot of support. Some are my coworkers from Beijing, the top musicians from there. We made a CD together after I got the Pew Fellowship.

ES: Have you done any new types of collaborations with other ensembles or other musicians?

WPT: I have played some Chinese violin with Western violin. We played a Western piece, like the Czardas. Sometimes for the school programs we have to do a combined piece. We use Chinese instruments to play Western music. Sometimes Chinese musicians play with a Western group. I have tried this a lot. I played “Moon Reflection” with Central High School’s orchestra from Philadelphia. It’s a Western orchestra and they used my erhu as the solo. I also did a pre-concert series for Tan Dun’s visit to the Philadelphia Orchestra. He has a very famous concerto, The Map. When the Philadelphia Orchestra played The Map, we did a pre-concert series at the Kimmel Center. Now I am much more into teaching. I want to pass on my skills and specialties to the younger generations in America. In order for me to do that, it’s good to learn more about the education system here, and about music.

ES: The Chinese, or Chinese American, students here—do you feel like they have a special relationship to the music? Are they interested in learning about their heritage?

WPT: Yes. And a lot of times their parents like them to play because that will bring back their memories. They don’t want their kids to adopt 100% Western culture. They want to distinguish their traditions as well, so they really like that.

ES: Tell me the three schools where you’re working.

WPT: Kirkbride, McCall, and Key School. Philadelphia is a special area, especially for culture, and also for multicultural arts and I felt very lucky and grateful that many people have been giving support to me and to Chinese music. But I have a dream for the future. Now China has become an important country, with relationships with the United States, and I think a lot of people want to know about Chinese culture. Maybe we can make a Chinese music school. There are a lot of kung fu and language schools. I think if we added Chinese music school it would be such a beautiful thing to do. I would say it’s a good thing to pass it on…

Resources for further exploration


Wu Peter Tang’s website: www.easternmelody.com

Notes


2 See Lau, p. 26-27, 48-49, who points out that scholars differ regarding Abing’s story. Also see Stock.

3 A composition for violin by Vittorio Monti, based on the Hungarian national dance.
with Confucianism—it was a patriarchical society trying to impose on a matriarchical society. People lost land, lost their property, lost their heritage. They revolted, and that’s why. The women started to revolt.

Today, when you look at farmland, the women are always going out to the market and going out to trade. The man has to stay home to till the land, to keep the thing in place. That’s his job. The diplomatic job is for women. All of this is linked to that simple verse. It has a depth to it; it has a reason to it. That was a nice discovery, when I went to the boat and I found out how things work. It’s practical, it’s natural, and there’s no discussion about it.

**Resources for further exploration**


**Notes**

1 A National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) offensive in 1968 that was widely seen as a turning point in the war, leading to U.S. withdrawal.

2 Ch Nôm is the ancient “ideographic vernacular script” of the Vietnamese language (http://nomfoundation.org). For a thousand years—from 939 CE, when Vietnam won its independence from China, into the 20th century—much of Vietnamese literature, philosophy, history, law, medicine, religion, and government policy was written in Nôm script. This heritage is now nearly lost: fewer than 100 scholars worldwide can read Nôm. Nhàn has been a leading scholar in its preservation. See http://nomfoundation.org/index.php and http://www.temple.edu/vietnamese_center/NomScript/index.htm for some of Nhàn’s work in this area.

3 Cải lương is a form of dance-drama that, beginning in urban Vietnam in the early 1900s, updated classical theater in combination with amateur art music. The “reformed theater” incorporated stories from many sources. The primary instrumental accompaniment was an ensemble of Vietnamese strings, but Western instruments were also used.

4 Vietnam has 53 ethnic minorities, four major language areas, and a wide variety of regional musical traditions.

5 See their website http://www.myspace.com/peelingnyc

6 Nhàn is one of the musicians on the Billy Bang recording Vietnam: Reflections. See http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=18185. Nhàn was organizing and educating about Agent Orange in this era as well. See http://www.vn-agentorange.org/index.html

7 Ca trù is a type of chamber music for poetry, with claps, đàn dầy (a four-string lute), đàn tranh. The lead singer, usually a woman, takes any poem from the audience and puts it into a song. She paces the song with the claps and leads the other instruments.

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**parallel destinies / continued from p. 27**

but now you know there’s a President’s House because your feelings were stimulated. I think many of us respond to art emotionally. The kind of thing we do—modern jazz and percussive dance and John’s paintings—are not literal. So we may not be the best place to get the full story, but we would like to be a place where you can get an emotional catharsis, and then be stimulated to do the research about this. That’s the way I see it.

Ife Nii-Owoo: I want to remember, in particular, that experience. I want to learn the lessons of that experience and understand how I can move above and beyond that experience. And what I have learned from that experience, and what I have read and studied, is that we as African American people have gotten out of there, and only through a great struggle, we have been able to reach out of that experience to become accepted as human beings and as full citizens in this country.

**Brenda Dixon Gottschild:** It’s not even about the President’s House, but about us “in the President moment.” And us in the present moment. And us finding a way through the art that moves us. What does it mean to be a person of color living in a non-post-racist moment? What does it mean to be a white person living in a non-post-racist moment?

None of the quotations or lyrics included here can be used or quoted without express permission of the artist or speaker.

**For more information about the President’s House excavation, see:**

Avenging the Ancestor’s Coalition: http://avengingtheancestors.com/

Chinese history. It actually came out of Persia and the Middle East. I don’t know if it was a folk instrument—I guess it would have been because they brought them through the Silk Road. The instrument I have is a full concert-size yangqin. The ones they used to play are much smaller. Those are the ones they used to play above the store, these tiny high-pitched instruments.

A whole set of music was developed for all the instruments. Now there’s more formal education. In Taiwan they have formal training. I don’t know how long ago it started, maybe 20 years ago. Not too many people were playing those instruments, though, even in China. In China, most of the focus was on the Western instruments, but there’s been a revival. Everyone wants to go back to that root now. You see a lot more people playing Chinese instruments now and having formal training. But the communists had to put the universities back together and try to invite the people from Taiwan and Hong Kong to teach there. A famous artist here in Philadelphia—Shen Li—was asked to go back to China to teach, but he’s just so embittered because they killed off all those painters that he wouldn’t go back. He’s one of the last to teach that particular style of painting. Some musicians went back and did teach because they wanted to preserve the culture. If they didn’t, they knew that it wouldn’t survive in China.

You hear the orchestras now playing a lot of Cantonese folk songs. They’re just grabbing a lot of different music, anything, just to get something different out there. You can even see it in the recordings they’re putting out now. Maybe 20 years ago, no one thought about putting that music out; they were considered folk songs. Most people were putting together the particular classical pieces that are associated with each instrument. The erhu has a whole set of music that’s associated with it. The guzheng has a set of music associated with it, and the yangqin, same thing. But now you hear them playing different versions of it. What used to be played on the erhu, they’ll play it on the yangqin now, using that same theme and melody, and doing some different things. Otherwise, you would have the same recording over and over again, like the same people playing the same classical music over and over again. I noticed that in the recordings I got back in the early days when I was learning about all this stuff, you would just hear some of the pieces that were very classical—that’s it, that’s how you play it. Now it’s all over the place.

ES: The erhu seems so versatile. It seems like you could play anything on it.

KJ: Every once in a while Qin Qian goes out to the jazz clubs. She starts playing jazz on erhu. Her husband happens to be Jewish; she would go to the synagogue and play Jewish music there. On the erhu. She plays Irish folk music, Irish jigs and reels, on the erhu too. But that’s what makes it a lot of fun to play along with her, because she’s able to cross those boundaries, whereas other players are more classically oriented. They play the music one way, and that’s the way it is. She has the nerve to bring her erhu and start playing along. We’ve done some things together too. I would get my harp out, and she would just say, “Here, teach me how to play this.”

ES: What is it like playing Chinese music for different audiences?

KJ: In Chinatown they will know if you’re playing a wrong note or not. They will know, or they will know if it’s a variation, so you can’t fake your way through it. Whereas an audience who doesn’t know the music, if you hit a wrong note, they don’t know the difference. But those people in Chinatown—we make sure we practice really well so it’s all there, especially in the more classical type of pieces. A lot of times, over at our church, we incorporate the Chinese instruments into the services. Some people are shocked. It’s a Chinese Catholic church—it’s all Chinese. We have Masses in Mandarin, in Cantonese, and in English. I don’t play for all the services, just for the English one. It’s a different type of music; even Chinese religious music is different.

Half of my family’s Protestant, and the other half’s Catholic . . . the other important part is traditional Chinese folk religion. My in-laws follow the traditional Chinese folk religion. So we get exposure to all of them. A lot of these traditions from the folk religion are now incorporated into the Mass and into the Catholic tradition. As long as it doesn’t go against the teachings, they don’t care. We do all those things, like the ancestor veneration.

ES: How do you incorporate the Chinese traditional instruments? Do you play European-style hymns?

KJ: No, no, no, they’re all Chinese hymns. They were written in China. I guess you could play European-style hymns with Chinese words. We do sing those things. But now they’re actually composed by Chinese composers. Some are from back before the communist government took over. They still sing those hymns. The church was persecuted. It’s still persecuted over there at this point. They held on to a lot of those hymns that were written either by the missionaries or by the Chinese—but it’s interesting that they still play those, and then they have the more modern ones that are written now. They use the Chinese scale. So the music is different; you can hear the Chinese scale.

They actually go to a seven-note scale now. The pentatonic scale was the original scale that they used in the imperial court system. They ended up going to a seven-note scale, but there’s a flatted seventh, so it’s just a little different. And you hear the fourths and thirds that you don’t hear in Western music. You would say, “Boy, that does sound Chinese.” The melody is very Chinese. And then they’re mixing some of the Western scale in there—what would make sense in a Western scale. We sometimes use Chinese
instruments as well as the organ, or we use the Chinese flute or that type of thing. ES: How old is that church? KJ: [Holy Redeemer] was started in 1941. The story goes that Cardinal Paul Yü Pin was kicked out by the Japanese. He was the bishop of Nanking. He was very good friends with Cardinal Dougherty, who was the bishop of Philadelphia at that time. Yü Pin had nowhere to go; there were all these Chinese people here; and they said, “Why aren’t you converting all these people?” In honor of Cardinal Yü Pin, Cardinal Dougherty gave his 50th Jubilee money to build our church. The original church was modeled after a Chinese mission church. The stained glass windows all have Chinese saints, and everything has to do with China. The Christ figure that’s in there is Chinese. Unfortunately, it’s not the way it looked originally. I don’t like the fact that they changed it so much—I sort of like that old feel, you know? My parents still go back there. The Chinese Christian Church, the local Protestant church, is the one that the other half of the community goes to, so we have a choice. We also have two temples in Chinatown. There’s a temple over on Race Street, and there’s one on 10th Street, but you can’t tell because it looks like a regular house. Monks live at the one on Race Street. That is an interesting set of music, too. It’s this meditative hum, and they have these different cadences. Probably some people feel that it’s boring, but I find it to be fascinating.

Chinatown’s very small in Philadelphia—we’ve been boxed in. Politically, we haven’t been able to expand. We only have about 200 votes in the city elections, so they don’t really care about us. But amazingly, with only 200 votes and very little political clout, we’ve been able to ward off certain things just by the mere pressure we’ve exerted and the mere publicity of certain injustices. That’s how it’s done. AAU [Asian Americans United] has done an excellent job where most Chinese people would just shut their mouths. They’ve actually transcended that culture and were able to speak up and say, “This is wrong!”

It all started with the city trying to put [the Vine Street Expressway] through the church—our church. And we fought that off. They compromised by putting it underneath. When they built the Gallery, they cut us off in the south, so we couldn’t expand that way. They also cut us off by the Metropolitan Hospital, east, so we couldn’t build out that way. The other side is the Convention Center, and we can’t build out that way, so the only way to go is north, and they were going to put the stadium north, to box us in. But we fought that off. The original federal prison was supposed to go up in Chinatown too, so we fought that off also. Chinatown has a turbulent history of dealing with the city.

It’s sad. But they’re also doing it to other communities, too.

Resources for further exploration


Online:
The Wesleyan University Virtual Instrument Museum is a source for all the instruments mentioned in this interview and more: http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/

The Grinnell College Music Instrument Collection is another resource, for example, see Erhu: http://finearts.grinnell.edu/FMPro?-db=world_music_room&fp5-&lay=entry-&sortfield=name-&sortfield=inventory_id&amp;use_on_web=yes&collection=world&category=c_hordophone&max=10&-skip=18&-find=&-Format=/instruments/format_files/worldinst_record.html&-max=11&-skip=18# (Or: http://tinyurl.com/ydv8bj3)

Philadelphia Chinatown’s history: http://www2.hsp.org/exhibits/Balch%20exhibits/chinatown/chinatown.html
about the philadelphia folklore project

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the experiences and traditions of “ordinary” people. We’re a 23-year-old independent public interest folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, concerts, workshops and assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. This work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural and artistic expression, and work to protect the rights of people to know and practice traditional and community-based arts. We work with people and communities to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge processes and practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215.726.1106)

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