

Performing Hybridity
On the construction of cultural difference in Tan Dun's
Marco Polo (1996) and The First Emperor (2006)

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Abstract

Issues about cultural encounter and interchange in Tan Dun's music have been examined by different theoretical frameworks, with a focus on issues of orientalism and exoticism. These theories can interpret the music from cultural and political aspects, by narrating a relationship between dominant culture and others. However, this narrative may lack a concern for cross-cultural interaction and negotiations, especially from the perspective of China. In this paper, I choose to position Tan Dun and his music in the discourse of cultural hybridization. It offers a discursive approach to analyze Tan Dun's music since it makes us aware of the dynamic cultural fusion in a transcultural vision. This paper explores the following main research question: in which ways give an exploration of (the reception of) Tan Dun's music insight into processes of cultural hybridization and construction of difference? Through musical analysis, this study discusses how Tan deliberately composed music by fusing or integrating different musical materials and cultures. Furthermore, to explore the issues of Tan and his music in the varied cultural sphere, this thesis closely reviews the responses from both the American and Chinese publications and the social press on his works. In conclusion, in Tan Dun's case, hybridity not only exists in the synthesis of musical materials but also is performed by Tan himself and different reception of China and the United States.

1. Introduction

There is a special and significant group of Chinese composers who were born, studied, worked or have settled in European countries or the United States. These composers are familiar with classical art music and have a solid understanding of the local culture. After the classical music training, some of them returned to their native countries to pursue their careers, while others chose to work on the global level. As more and more composers from China, such as Bright Sheng, Chen Yi, and Zhou Long - have gained reputation across the world, both scholars and musicologists have drawn attention to the issues of the co-existence cultures.¹ Yet, most of these composers are in an embarrassing situation today. On the one hand, their international success proves China's international status, and at the same time provides a way to establish Chinese national identity and spread Chinese transitional culture around the world.² Yet on the other hand, it seems that these composers who received music training in the United States or European countries, put in great effort to be known internationally by using the western musical language, while deliberately compromising their Chinese heritage and backgrounds.³

¹ Some of works include some articles in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno, and Lau Frederick, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); some articles in *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West*, ed. Utz, Christian, and Frederick Lau (New York: Routledge, 2013); some articles in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. Yang Hon-Lun, and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Peter Chang, "Bright Sheng's Music: An Expression of Cross-Cultural Experience - Illustrated through the Motivic, Contrapuntal and Tonal Treatment of the Chinese Folk Song the Stream Flows," *Contemporary Music Review* 26, no. 5-6 (2007): 619-33; Leta Miller, "Beneath the Hybrid Surface: Baban As a Tool for Self-Definition in the Music of Chen Yi," *American Music* 37, no. 3 (2019): 330-57.

² Blackburn Tong Cheng, "In Search of Third Space: Composing the Transcultural Experience in the Operas of Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, and Zhou Long," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2015).

³ Yu Siu Wah, "Two practices Confused in One Composition Tan Dun's symphony 1997: Heaven, Earth, Man," in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno, and Lau Frederick (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 70.

Tan Dun has been a representative of these composers. As a Chinese-born composer who received his training at the Chinese Conservatory in Beijing and then at Columbia University in New York City, he is known for combining western art music techniques with Chinese instruments, classics and philosophies. His musical works have raised certain issues. Some of them focus on Tan's identity and biography, others criticize his successful career by accommodating the expectations of the audience and the collage of a disparate culture.⁴ Some scholars believe that Tan Dun has enriched the creation of music and promoted cultural diversity.⁵ Others criticize him for capitalizing on his Chinese background and using his music and traditions to serve western audiences.⁶

These issues about encounter and interchange in Tan's music have been examined within different theoretical frameworks, with a focus on issues of orientalism and exoticism. For example, American music critic John Corbett defines Tan Dun as a representative of neo-orientalism.⁷ These theories can interpret the music from cultural and political aspects, by narrating a relationship between dominant culture and others. However, this narrative may lack a concern for cross-cultural interaction and negotiations, especially from the perspective of China.

⁴ Anthony Sheppard W, "Blurring the Boundaries: Tan Dun's Tint and the First Emperor," *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol.26 No. 3 (2009): 285–326.

⁵ Zhang Jianguo 张建国, "1+1=1, Quaxinde Geju Chuangzuo Guannian" 1+1=1, 全新的歌剧创作观念 [1+1=1, A Review of Tan Dun's concept in opera creation], *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐, 12 (2007) : 23-25.

⁶ Frederick Lau, "Fusion or Fission: The Paradox and Politics of Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Music," in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno, and Lau Frederick (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 39.

⁷ John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Born, Georgina and Hesmondhalgh David (California: University of California Press, 2000), 186.

In this paper, I choose to position Tan Dun and his music in the discourse of cultural hybridization, building on the works of *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*. Hybridity offers a discursive approach to analyze Tan Dun's music since it makes us aware of the dynamic cultural fusion in a transcultural vision.

In Tan Dun's case, he has stated that he wants to be a bridge for the dissemination of Chinese and other cultures, through which he has had to find a way to evolve the collision and mixture of cultures into a new language.⁸ This process involves not only musical integration, but also expectations and participation from China and other countries. To gain insight into processes of cultural hybridization, it is important to explore the composer's responses to his or her cultural identity and the way audiences perceive the music.

1.1 Research question

This paper explores the following main research question: in which ways give an exploration of (the reception of) Tan Dun's music insight into processes of cultural hybridization and construction of difference?

The sub-questions are:

1. What is hybridity?
2. How does hybridity work for analyzing the case of Tan Dun?

⁸ Zhang Daozheng 张道正, "Zai Shijie Wutai Jiang Zhongguo Gushi" 在世界舞台讲中国故事 [Telling the Chinese story in the stage of world], *Jinri Zhongguo* 今日中国, February 28, 2017.

3. How does Tan Dun bring musical material from different cultures together in *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*?
4. In which ways is the reception of his music informed by issues of cultural hybridity?

1.2 Method

This paper will begin with a brief introduction of the concept of hybridity and explain how hybridity works dynamically as a theory. Then, the scholarly debate on Tan Dun is addressed in order to provide the theoretical context. Next, with two case studies of Tan's work - *Marco Polo* (1996) and *The First Emperor* (2006) - this paper will analyze Tan's composition technique and the use of various musical materials, especially the creative expression of Peking Opera. These two operas are based on the western operatic tradition, and premiered in the Germany and the United States, composed and conducted by Tan himself. Through musical analysis, this study discusses how Tan deliberately composed music by fusing or integrating different musical instruments and cultures. The musical analysis shall consist of three parts: a focus on the cast, the libretto, and the use of musical material from different cultures.

These two works have not been performed in Mainland China but still arouse the curiosity in both online media and periodicals there, and hence they are suitable examples of cultural hybridization. Finally, then, to explore the issues of Tan and his music in the varied cultural sphere, this thesis closely reviews the responses from both the American and Chinese publications and the social press on his works by selecting a number of articles on Tan: *Renmin Yinyue* (People's Music), *Yishu Pingjian* (Art

Evaluation) and *Geju* (Opera). These periodicals have published articles on musical critique, research, and reviews. Although they cannot represent the attitude of all music scholars throughout China, they can offer insights into the Chinese perspective on Tan's work. In addition, four articles from *Sina News*, *Sohu News* and *China News* are considered in order to build an understanding of how Tan's two operas have been reshaped by publicity.⁹ Moreover, as Tan moved to New York in 1986 and still lives there, a number of articles from *The New York Times* and the *New York Magazine* are selected on account of their global reach and reputation. By analyzing the content of these reviews, this paper intends to shed new light on the construction of hybridity and cultural difference through music criticism.

⁹ *Sina* and *Sohu* are the most successful online media in the Chinese market, mainly providing news for all Internet users in Mainland China. *Chinese new* is a state-level news agency sponsored and established by Chinese journalists and renowned overseas Chinese experts, providing all aspects of online news in the English version and official Chinese language.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Placing hybridity

This paper positions Tan Dun and his two operas in the discourse of hybridity. Generally speaking, hybridity involves the fusion of two or more different forms, identities, and styles. The prerequisite for hybridity is cross-cultural and cross-regional contact.¹⁰ Hybridity contributes to an understanding of the mixed cultural phenomena, in which attention is paid to the unequal distribution of power around the cultural contacts and how the objects, values, cultural institutions are transformed.¹¹

During 1980s, the term of hybridity was used in the field of post-colonial studies, in which Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have made a great contribution to representing the ‘Other’ in literature as well as in the academia.¹² In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi Bhabha relates hybridity to the idea of a ‘third place’, in which it is no longer just one location for a specific culture.¹³ This area does not provide a new area beyond two cultures, but emphasizes the process of cultural permeation and interaction, including criticism of cultural and economic hegemony.

¹⁰ Andreas Ackermann, “Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism,” in *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 6. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1007/978-3-642-21846-0>

¹¹ Hans Peter Hahn, “Circulating Objects and the Power of Hybridization as a localizing Strategy,” in *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 27.

¹² Ackermann, *Cultural Hybridity*, 22.

¹³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 53.

Although Bhabha's theory is established in the context of colonialism and post-colonialism, it still appropriates for the complex world with imbalances of power relations today.¹⁴ It is a way to consider hybrid art as a process, by rethinking the flux of cultural identity, politics and the choice of artistic material, including music. In the examining of the hybrid phenomenon, it is important to be aware of some metaphors, such as borrowing, mixing, and translating,¹⁵ in other words, synthesis, or syncretism, as the composition strategy to intertwine distinct musical resources in art music.¹⁶ Some cases can be exemplified to the term of synthesis and syncretism in the music, such as evoking Asian (Chinese, in Tan Dun's case) sensibilities without explicit musical borrowing elements, forming a collage by quoting or juxtaposing preexistent musical materials and generating a blurred cultural meaning by transforming or assimilating distinct musical recourses.¹⁷

As a cultural concept, the meaning of hybridity is to treat music as a process of negotiating with differences, rather than a single system. Negotiation is often used in the analysis of cultural identity to describe multiple and fluid identity, which can be modified in different ways according to different situations.¹⁸ This view will contribute to a discussion of how Tan responds to his hyphenated identity.

Hybridity has become a popular term in the era of globalization, with music coming from different cultures and listeners less critical of the authenticity of music

¹⁴ Timothy D Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 160.

¹⁵ Ackermann, "Cultural Hybridity," 14.

¹⁶ Yayoi Uno Everett, "Intercultural Synthesis in Postwar Western Art Music: Historical Contexts, Perspectives, and Taxonomy," in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno Everett, and Lau Frederick (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 21.

¹⁷ Everett, "Intercultural Synthesis," 17-19.

¹⁸ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 42-45.

and simply enjoying the mixture.¹⁹ In addition, it is important to be aware that hybridity means different things in different cultures at different times.²⁰ In Tan's case, his music is performed, criticized, and communicated not only in China but also in North America, Europe and other regions. A variety of responses from these diverse audiences, music critics, and the media form a complex array of opinions which may change or reconstruct the original meaning of a piece of music. So the meaning of hybridity changes is culture and time specific.

Furthermore, hybridity can also be a method to simplify categorization or promote musical products in the context of the local or the global music industry.²¹ As a result, we also should recognize how the marketing of hybridity influences and reshapes music and even generates a new form of difference.

2.2 Debates on Tan Dun

After the Cultural Revolution, China entered a completely new stage, adopting an open posture in economy, culture and art. Tan Dun and *Xinchao Yinyue* (New Wave Music) actually represent a dialogue between China and the world since then, now lasting forty years. The New Wave movement is an exciting and colorful time, which is an avant-garde artistic movement that swept across Mainland China in the 1980s.²² Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, and Zhou Long are known to be part of the new wave music

¹⁹ Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 12.

²⁰ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hybridity, So What?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2-3 (June 2001): 219-45.

²¹ Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 150.

²² Tong, "In Search of Third Space," 1.

and they enjoyed that period of great vigor and diversity.²³

After graduating from Columbia University, Tan Dun has had many performances around the world. In 1993 he returned to China for the first time to hold the Tan Dun Symphony Concert, which was in Shanghai and Beijing on December 18 and January 9 1994 respectively, and which included *On Taoism* (1985), *Orchestral Theatre I: O* (1990), *Orchestral Theatre II: Re* (1992), and *Death and Fire, Dialogue with Paul Klee* (1992). Enthusiasts believe that this concert had three outstanding features: the broader concept of sound, the return of primitive art, and the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures.²⁴ “The composer was looking for a new form of musical expression with a distinctive spirit of exploration, which may contribute to the development of Chinese music.”²⁵ The Professor of Central Conservatory of Music Tang Jianping also believes that Tan Dun breaks the stalemate of composition, which is an absorption and application of traditional culture and not limited to pentatonic melody and Chinese instruments.²⁶

Meanwhile, opponents’ criticisms of Tan focus mainly on experimental music and the exploration of new sound from John Cage’s lineage. As Bian Zushan²⁷ said, “I did not hear the power of the storm, the innocence of the lullaby, nor the tears of sadness. I only heard a very general sound in *Water Concerto for Water Percussion*

²³ Jingzhi Liu, *A Critical History of New Music in China*, trans. by Caroline Mason. (Chinese University Press, 2010), 14.

²⁴ Wang Anguo 王安国, “Zai Dongxifang de Lianjiedian shang, wei Tan Dun jiaoxiang yinyuehui erxie” 在东西方的连接点上, 为谭盾交响音乐会而写 [At the connection point between East and West, writing for Tan Dun’s symphony concert], *Yinyue Aihaozhe* 音乐爱好者 6 (1993).

²⁵ Wang, “Zai Dongxifang de Lianjiedian.”

²⁶ Tang Jianping 唐建平, “Ting Tan Dun Yinyuehui Xiangdao de” 听谭盾音乐想到的 [Thoughts after Tan Dun’s concert], *Zhongyang Yinyue Xueyuan Xuebao* 中央音乐学院学报 3 (1994): 51-53.

²⁷ Bian Zushan graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and had long served as the conductor of the Central Paris Dance Company.

and Orchestra (1998).²⁸ Cai Zhongde criticized the strange sounds in the musical work for not bringing any aesthetics and for creating a bizarre atmosphere.²⁹

At the same time, others express concerns about the quotation of Chinese culture and the image of China represented in Tan Dun's music. Tan was accused of portraying the superficial characteristics of Chinese culture, abandoning the deeper-lying spirit.³⁰ Ju Qihong argues that the fifth generation of composers should represent themselves as Chinese intellectuals, who deeply think about history, philosophy, cultural traditions and realism, rather than emphasizing excessive freedom of composition.³¹

Currently, Chinese scholars seem no longer to worry about the image of China conveyed in Tan Dun's works since they believe that there is an element of social responsibility in Tan's works. In a recent article published in 2019, The Professor of Central Conservatory of Music Yao Yaping discusses the composition characteristics of the fifth generation of composers and how Tan Dun 'plays' with music:

Tan Dun has a set of formulas he uses very well, which can be seen in various musical works, such as *Paper Concerto For Paper Percussion and Orchestra* (2003), and *Map* (2004). The method Tan employed is to use the orchestras to accompany and set other operations such as paper, water, or multimedia to attract the attention of the audience. The issue of the relationship between localization and internationalization is involved

²⁸ Beijing TV station's International Double Line interview program, 2001.

²⁹ Cai Zhongde 蔡仲德, "Yinyue Chuangxin zhi lu yinggai zenyang zou" 音乐创新之路究竟应该怎样走 [How should the direction of musical innovation go?], *Zhongyang Yinyue Xueyuan Xuebao* 中央音乐学院学报 2 (1994): 91-92.

³⁰ Cai, "Yinyue Chuangxin zhi lu," 92.

³¹ Ju Qihong 居其宏, "Xinshiji Chuangzuo Sichao de jiqing pengzhuang, dui Zuoqujie sanchang bianlun de huigu yu sikao" 新世纪创作思潮的激情碰撞-对作曲届三场辩论的回顾与思考 [The passionate collision of creative thoughts in the new century, review and reflection on the three debates on composition], *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐, 4 (2005): 5-9.

in Tan's music.³²

Outside of China, the shadows of orientalism and exoticism and a simplistic East/West binary also hover over Tan's work. American music critic John Corbett defines Tan Dun as a representative of neo-orientalism, explaining that fragments of imperialism and colonialism can be found in his works.³³ It is likely that Tan Dun reconstructs an exotic ritualistic past, resonating with the long tradition of operatic Orientalism. Meanwhile, Professor Emeritus of Musicology Ralph Locke questions whether Tan Dun is a writer of exotic music when he is evoking his own people's history for New York's Metropolitan Opera.³⁴

For musicologist Andrea Moore, the strategy Tan uses in his music and career development blurs the boundaries between genres, regions and cultures and combines musical universality and cultural particularity.³⁵ Frederick Lau, an active ethnomusicologist explicitly points out that classical music market is racist and orientalist since the composers emphasize and highlight otherness and exoticism to stake out a market.³⁶ In addition, both Sindhurathi Revuluri and Andrea Moore suggest using the idea of "flexible citizenship" of Aihwa Ong's framework to understand Tan's musical identity, in which Tan is creating a new middle ground between particular identities while also seeking to be a mediator between China and

³² Yao Yaping 姚亚平, "Tan Dun, Zhongguo Diwudai Zuoqujia Yinyue Chuangzuo Texie zhiyi" 谭盾,中国第五代作曲家音乐创作特写之一 [Tan Dun, the representation Chinese fifth generation composer], *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐, 6 (2019): 40-45.

³³ John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other," 186.

³⁴ Ralph P Locke, "On Exoticism, Western Art Music, and the Words We Use," *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft* 69, no. 4 (2012): 318-28.

³⁵ Andrea Moore, "Art-Religion for a Global New Age," *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019): 374-393.

³⁶ Lau, "Fusion or Fission," 38.

the United States.³⁷

It is clear from the above review that scholars differ in their discussion of Tan Dun, with the controversy revolving around ethnicity, the image of China conveyed in his works, and the encounter between China and the world in the global music market. Yet there are other specific issues worth discussing. Does the mission of spreading Chinese culture emanate from the composer's own subjectivity, or is it given implicitly to the music by society? Does Tan Dun's work satisfy the audience's expectations of exoticism? The following analysis of two operas and the reception seeks answers to these questions.

³⁷ Moore, "Art-Religion for a Global New Age." Sindhumathi Revuluri, "Tan Dun's the First Emperor and the Expectations of Exoticism," *The Opera Quarterly* 32, Issue 1 (winter 2016), 77–93.

3. Case Study: *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*

Tan Dun once said:

I am not interested in integrating Chinese culture or American culture in a parallel way. Rather, I often think about what can be shared and integrated from various cultures. These elements can chemically evolve into a new medium and the possibility of new languages.³⁸

Tan, the Chinese-American composer, brings various musical materials and his own individual experience to two operas, *Marco Polo* (1996) and *The First Emperor* (2006). These two operas were composed in the tradition of Western opera.³⁹ The fusion and mixing of different cultures in these two operas range from the libretto to the cast, from the melodies to the instruments.

Marco Polo (1996) was commissioned by the Edinburgh International Festival and premiered on Munich Biennale in Munich Germany in May 7 1996. Then, the opera has been performed in many countries in the Netherlands, the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan. After ten years, a new production was premiered in De Nederlands Opera on November 7, 2008. *The First Emperor* (2006) was commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera, New York City, and premiered at December 21, 2006 in the same opera house. In the following year, performance was shown live in selected movie theatres and two-DVD was released by the EMI

³⁸ Yang Lan 杨澜, "Fang zuoqujia Tan Dun" 访作曲家谭盾 [Interview with Tan Dun], Personal interview. New York, March 22, 1999. <http://eladies.sina.com.cn/arts/1999-7-26/5647.shtml>

³⁹ The earliest opera *Dafine* (1598), libretto written by Ottavio Rinuccini and music setting by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi, was performed in Corsi's palace in Florence, Italy.

Classics.⁴⁰ In addition, Radio Television Hong Kong broadcasted the show on February 13, 2007.

3.1 The libretto

The libretto of *Marco Polo* is based on Paul Griffith's novel *Myself and Marco Polo* (1989). The Opera *Marco Polo* (1996) does not specifically describe Marco Polo's adventures in this journey. Rather, it structures the journey into three layers - spiritual, physical, and musical.⁴¹ The traveller Marco Polo in the opera is divided into two roles - Marco and Polo. In *Marco Polo*, only Kublai Khan and Marco correspond to their real historical characters. The plot of *Marco Polo* is fictitious and does not belong to a certain period of history. As a result, the entire opera is not set in a specific Chinese background.

There are seven scenes in the script, with titles relating to his journey: Piazza, Sea, Bazaar, Desert, Himalaya, the Wall, and the Wall Continued. Geographical journeys and musical journeys are directly related. When the geography changes, the genre of music also changes. The story of *Marco Polo* is a journey from the East to the West, which can also be understood as a spiritual journey centred on the pursuit of faith, or a carnival of music around the world. Except for Himalaya and the Chinese wall that are real locations, other titles have no specific meaning. The script does not set a clear line between the East and the West, but uses Marco and Polo's journey to

⁴⁰ Tracy Carr, "Book Review: The Complete Book of 2000s Broadway Musicals," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2017): 154–54. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.5860/rusq.57.2.6547>

⁴¹ The information from Tan Dun's official website. <http://tandun.com/composition/marco-polo/>

connect them together. That is the reason why it does not question the binary opposition between East and West, even the script is based on the story of an Italian traveling to the East. Meanwhile, Marco Polo's journey is also a spiritual journey. Tan Dun describes that the spiritual journey is a reflection of the three states of the human being- past, present, and future.⁴² It can be anyone's journey, a multicultural experience.⁴³

Qin Shihuang, in *The First Emperor*, is an actual character in Chinese history. The libretto is based on *Historical Records* by Sima Qian (c.145 BC-85 BC) and on the screenplay, *The legend of the Bloody Zheng* (1996) by Luwei.⁴⁴ Tan Dun collaborated with the Chinese writer Ha Jin to develop the libretto. Together, they rewrote the history and while preserving some historical events in the opera, such as Gao Jianli throwing his zheng (Chinese instrument) to Qin Shihuang.⁴⁵

As an emperor of ancient China (Qin dynasty), many of Qin's merits are well-known, such as the construction of the Great Wall, the unification of the currency, and the burning of books and Confucianism. In this opera, the history of Qin is developed into a music-related story, in which the main character looks forward to achieving the spiritual unification of China by an anthem. Then he realizes that the best person most capable of composing the anthem is his friend in childhood, Gao Jianli. Unfortunately, Gao Jianli's mother is killed in the war launched by Qin to

⁴² <http://tandun.com/composition/marco-polo/>

⁴³ Lindsley Cameron, "A Marco Polo Going Backward At Full Tilt," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/02/arts/a-marco-polo-going-backward-at-full-tilt.html>

⁴⁴ https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/first_emperor_fs_35240

⁴⁵ Qian Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burton Watson (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993)

reunite the six kingdoms. When Gao Jianli is brought in by General Wang, he has the word “slave” branded on his forehead. The anthem is finally written, but it is not for Qin Shihuang’s glorious deeds, instead it expresses the suffering and resentment of the people who built the Great Wall. The opera ends tragically, with Qin becoming first emperor of China, the loneliest emperor.

The First Emperor is an opera with a blurry political meaning. Except for the story of a mysterious Chinese emperor (Qin), the opera evokes the memory of another Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, who began the Cultural Revolution during 1966-1976. The Cultural Revolution was a political movement in the history of the People’s Republic of China in which normal school education and countless cultural legacies were destroyed.⁴⁶ Mao Zedong repeatedly mentioned the affirmation of Qin Shihuang’s achievements in many places. In addition, upon meeting the Vice president of Egypt, Mao said that Qin was the first famous emperor of Chinese feudal society.⁴⁷ For Mao, Qin Shihuang was also a symbol of the highest leadership.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is reasonable to link the opera with the theme of Qin Shihuang to politics, together with Tan’s experience as a child during China’s Cultural Revolution.

Considering the theme of the anthem or the tragic ending of Qin, it makes sense to wonder whether Tan’s attitude toward politics is implied in the opera. In fact, Tan never avoids talking about politics. As a child of the Cultural Revolution, Tan’s

⁴⁶ Jiehong Jiang, *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007)

⁴⁷ Chen Jin, *Mao Zedong zhi hun* 毛泽东之魂 [The spirit of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chunbanshe, 1997), 296.

⁴⁸ Ma Yinchun 马银春, *Mao Zedong yanzhongde diwangjiangxiang* 毛泽东眼中的帝王将相 [Emperor in the eyes of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dangan, 2008)

description of that experience has a trace of unrealistic romance. He describes his work in the field, living with local farmers, and feeling the original power of music from nature.⁴⁹ Tan also mentioned in the TV program *Kaijiangla* (Let's Talk) that he had never had the opportunity to listen to symphonies until he was nineteen years old, since Western music was not allowed to be performed during the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁰ It is true that the composition of music during the Cultural Revolution served the politics of that period completely, with productions and performances strictly regulated.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the music of *Yang Banxi* (Model Drama), the main musical form during the Cultural Revolution, represents a hybrid taste, expressing Chinese tradition through standards of Western art music.⁵² Through the depiction of historical stories, Tan re-established his connection with Western art music and Cultural Revolution, and then repeated it again and again in interviews, making this relationships sound more and more reasonable.

The First Emperor borrows the story of a real emperor in Chinese history and maps another controversial figure from modern China. Although the plot of the opera is not exactly the same as history, the goal of unifying the country has not changed. Tan successfully represents the Chinese story in the United States, with a vague sense of nationalism and patriotism towards China. Ha Jin complained that Zhang Yimou, the director of *The First Emperor*, promised that the original opera would have two

⁴⁹ Tan Dun 谭盾, "Rang mengxiang huidao mengxiangde yuantou" 让梦想回到梦想的源头 [Let the dream return to the source of the dream], 开讲啦 Let's talk. *China Media Group*, December 25, 2014. <http://kejiao.cntv.cn/2015/07/31/VIDA1438308267891384.shtml>

⁵⁰ Tan Dun 谭盾, "Rang mengxiang huidao mengxiangde yuantou."

⁵¹ Barbara Mittler, "Cultural Revolution Model Works and the Politics of Modernization in China: An Analysis of Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy," *The World of Music* 45, no. 2 (2003): 53–81.

⁵² Mittler, "Cultural Revolution Model Works," 73.

themes, conflict and patriotism, but in fact, they only emphasized the story of Qin Shihuang's unification of China. In the opera, Placido Domingo sang *Zhongguo* (China) nine times, like a celebration.⁵³ “But what can I do? I was just a worker”, Ha Jin Said, underlining that he originally wanted to highlight the conflict between the individual and the state.⁵⁴ However, Tan believes that these nine China express Qin's emotions upon unifying China. He also appreciates that Domingo contributed a very delicate performance.⁵⁵ This was not the first time Tan had exhibited patriotism in his musical works. The *Symphony 1997, Heaven Earth Mankind* (1997), was composed for the Hong Kong reunification.⁵⁶ He also composed the Logo Music and award Ceremony Music for the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008.⁵⁷ It is clear that Tan Dun does not avoid the collision between his music and politics, rather, he intends to express his national identity or patriotic sentiment through music.

3.2 The Cast

In this part, I will give an outline of the aesthetic and more pragmatic reasons for choosing the particular singers. In the cast of *Marco Polo* (1996), only the Peking opera singer is Chinese, who playing two roles Rustichello and Lipo (see table 1). In history, Rustichello was the cell mate of Marco Polo while he was in prison towards the end of the 13th century. In this opera, Rustichello is a recorder and does not

⁵³ Ian Buruma, “Tan Dun infuses Western music with Chinese traditions,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/arts/04iht-04dunt.12545838.html?searchResultPosition=5>

⁵⁴ Buruma, “Tan Dun infuses Western music with Chinese traditions.”

⁵⁵ Bi yi 毕祎, “Tan Dun tan Qinshihuang” 谭盾谈秦始皇 [Tan Dun talks about The First Emperor], *Geju* 歌剧 9 (2012): 30.

⁵⁶ <http://tandun.com/composition/heaven-earth-mankind-symphony-1997-2/>

⁵⁷ <http://tandun.com/>

participate in the journey, but is rather an observer. Tan Dun describes that Rustichello is always performed with a painted face similar to a Peking Opera singer in the score.⁵⁸ Even though Rustichello is not the main character, Tan Dun still believes that it is important to distinguish and define this character.⁵⁹ Before 2008, this role was played by Chen Shizheng, a Chinese-born and New York based director.⁶⁰ When *Marco Polo* was reproduced in Amsterdam in the Netherlands in November 2008, Zhang Jun⁶¹ played this role.

Table 1. The Cast of *Marco Polo*⁶² (2008)

Polo	Charles Workman	Dramatic Tenor
Marco	Sarah Castle	Mezzo Soprano
Rustichello/Li Po	Zhang Jun	Peking Opera Singer
Kublai Khan	Stephen Richardson	Bass
Water	Nancy Allen Lundy	Soprano
Sheherazada/Maler/Queen	Tania Kross	Dramatic Soprano
Dante/ Shakespeare	Stephen Bryant	Bass-Baritone
Chinese/Arabian dancer	Mu Na	

In this role change, Tan Dun did not choose an actor who had experience of studying abroad as, did Shizheng, but chose a Kunqu artist educated in China. Zhang Jun graduated from the Shanghai Theater Academy and has been popularizing and promoting Kunqu opera in China ever since. Was Zhang Jun more suitable for this

⁵⁸ <http://tandun.com/composition/marco-polo/>

⁵⁹ Tan Dun's official website. <http://tandun.com/composition/marco-polo/>

⁶⁰ Chen Shizheng studied Peking Opera in China when he was a teenager and then became a leading actor. Then he moved to the United States. After his role of Marco Polo finished, he began his directing career with *The Bacchae* in 1996.

⁶¹ Zhang Jun is a Chinese Kunqu opera performer. In May 2011, Zhang was awarded the UNESCO Artist for Peace award for his "long-term commitment to promoting intangible cultural heritage, especially Kunqu Opera." He became the only second Chinese after actress Gong Li to be awarded the title since 2001.

⁶² Tan Dun, *Issuu*, http://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573 (accessed April 9, 2020).

role? The answer is that he was not. Even though Rustichello is painted with a Peking Opera singer's face with Chinese Opera vocal style, he still sings in English. The truth was that Zhang Jun's English was not sufficiently good and the audience felt that they may need subtitles.⁶³ Zhang Jun also notes that, "This reminds me of the *Marco Polo* I performed in the Netherlands in 2008. That was the only thing I did in those three months. I did not have many communication with others, since my English is not good."⁶⁴

The target audience of *Marco Polo* is not Chinese, since most performances are outside China. Even though Zhang Jun is an excellent Kunqu Opera performer, we may still legitimately ask why Tan Dun did not choose an actor who can also perform Chinese opera but better interpreting this role in English? If the pronunciation of the performer was not the most important factor, what trait did Tan Dun consider to be more important for the role? In other words, are there any benefits Tan could get from this role changing? The answer is not difficult to see. After Zhang Jun performed in this role, *Marco Polo* received more attention from the Chinese media. They not only appreciated the integration of Kunqu opera with Western opera, but also treated it as a promotion of Kunqu and Chinese culture. Four years later, Tan Dun and Zhang Jun staged *Peony Pavilion* (2010) in Shanghai. The opera is based on Tang Xianzu's literary work, telling a love story challenging feudal rites. The main creative team puts the performance in the real garden. By cooperating with influential Kunqu artists

⁶³ Alan Titherington, "Tan Dun: Marco Polo," May 31, 2009. Personal review. <https://www.myreviewer.com/DVD/115570/Tan-Dun-Marco-Polo/116943/Review-by-Alan-Titherington>

⁶⁴ Zhu Mo 朱墨, "Zhuangfang Zhangjun" 专访张军 [Interview with Zhang Jun], *Shangguan Xinwen* 上官新闻, July 9, 2015. <https://www.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=5684>

in China, Tan earned the reputation of someone who was spreading Chinese culture. Then he has increased his exposure in China through cooperation with well-known Chinese Peking Opera artists.

In *The First Emperor*, the director, choreographer, and two actors are Chinese (see table 2). There is also a Chinese team working for the opera. The director Zhang Yimou enjoys a reputation and influence overseas. His film *Red Sorghum* (1987) had won the Golden Bear at the 1988 Berlin International Film Festival. In addition, the Yin-Yang Master and General Wang are performed by Wu Hsing-kuo and Hao Jiangtian (see table 2). Wu Hsing-kuo is known for both his performances of complex movie roles and his innovative adaptation of Western classics into traditional Peking Opera.⁶⁵

Table 2. The Cast of *The First Emperor* (World Premier)

Emperor Qin	Plácido Domingo	Tenor
Princess Yueyang	Elizabeth Futral	Soprano
Shaman	Michelle DeYoung	Mezzo Soprano
Gao Jianli	Paul Groves	Lyric Tenor
General Wang	Hao Jiang Tian	Bass
Yin-Yang Master	Wu Hsing-Kuo	Peking Opera Singer

The creative and performance teams of these two operas adopt a model in which most performers are from the United States and Europe, and an only few are Chinese. The choice is not coincidental. Tan mentioned that when creating operas, the tradition of opera must be respected. For example, opera has some traditions such as tenor,

⁶⁵ <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%90%B3%E8%88%88%E5%9C%8B>

soprano and mezzo-soprano.⁶⁶ The main body of the opera is a western art form and the next thing to do is to blend different cultures together, rather than simply perform a single-cultural opera. Although there are not many Chinese actors in the team, they stand out. Rustichello in *Marco Polo*, or Yinyang Master in *The First Emperor*, both have a special singing style and appearance. Compared with *Marco Polo*, there are more Chinese people represented in *The First Emperor* and the opera was able to capture the audiences' attention at the international level. The changed roles also indicate that Tan was thinking already about how to develop his career in the music market of China.

3.3 Various musical materials

In the arrangement of various musical materials, Tan shows an interest in a transcultural direction that combines Chinese, European or American musical practices.⁶⁷ The different musical materials in these two operas make an encounter at various levels and layers.

Percussion instruments are widely used in these two operas, with a large number and rich musical colors.⁶⁸ There are four types of percussions for three players in *Marco Polo*; some members of the choir must also participate in the performance (see

⁶⁶ Bi, "Tan Dun tan Qinshihuang," 29.

⁶⁷ Ma Li, "A Musical Journey along the silk Road – Encounter Discovery and change," in *China and the New Silk Road: Challenges and Impacts on the Regional and Local Level*, ed. Pechlaner, Harald, Greta Erschbamer, Hannes Thees, and Mirjam Gruber (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 150. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1007/978-3-030-43399-4>

⁶⁸ The percussion discussed here is the instruments that the composer puts in the percussion list in the score.

table 3).⁶⁹ The first type is a combination of commonly used instruments in western orchestra, such as timpani, bass drum, snare drum, etc. They serve as the basic percussion instrument throughout the musical work. The second is the percussion Chinese cymbals and Peking Opera gong, which fitting for Peking Opera style with a colorful sound. Another type of percussion carries clear geographic information, such as Tibetan bells. The last category is a mixture with special sound colors, such as flexatone, tambourine and tubular chimes and so on, which originated in the musical practices of funk music, children's entertainment, and church bell.

Table 3. The percussion instruments in *Marco Polo*

Players	Percussion Instruments
Player 1	Tabla drums, Water gong, Tambourine, Bass drum, Crash cymbals, Cow bells, Chinese cymbals, Snare drum, Triangle
Player 2	Flexatone, Tubular chimes, Tamtam, Bow, Bongos, Slapstick, Crash cymbals, Peking Opera small gong
Player 3	Timpani, Bow, Xylophone, Bass Drum, Chinese small drum, Peking Opera small gong, Peking Opera big gong
Additional Percussion Instruments	Tibetan singing bowls Pairs of Tibetan bells (or finger bells)

In *Marco Polo*, Tan Dun presents a musical journey, including India, Tibet, Mongolia and China (see figure 1). Starting with this musical journey, he discovers a collage of different cultures by adding such elements as Indian sitar, the Tibetan horn, the Mongolian chant, and the Chinese Pipa.⁷⁰ In the Himalaya scene, Tan Dun chooses the Tibetan horns, which are played by brass players and supported by two French

⁶⁹ https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573

⁷⁰ The pipa is a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments.

horns and two trombones. Consequently, musical instruments from different regions are combined together to form a compound sound effect.

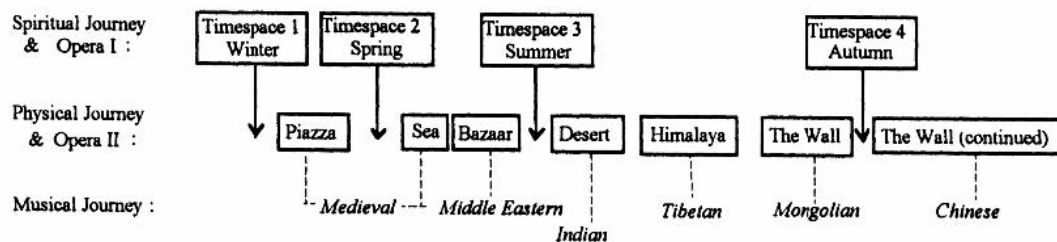


Figure 1. Musical Journey of *Marco Polo*⁷¹

In “The book of Time Space: Autumn” of *Marco Polo*, Tan uses the *guomen* (transition or musical interlude) of the traditional Peking Opera Yutang Chun (see example 1).⁷²

Example 1. Tan Dun, *Marco Polo* (1996): “The book of Time Space: Autumn”, mm. 82-87

⁷¹ https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573

⁷² https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573

Guomen is one of the main categories in Peking Opera, serving as melodic preludes, interludes, and postludes for arias.⁷³ There are some slight changes of guomen without directly quoting the melody. First, Tan changes the original time signature of 1/4 to 4/4. Second, the rhythm changes from the eighth note to the sixteenth note. Third, the melody is slightly adjusted. Furthermore, it does not directly follow the accompaniment instruments of Peking Opera, such as Jinghu (a Chinese bowed string instrument) and Chinese gong, but uses Western woodwind and string here. Yutangchun is one of the most famous repertoires of Chinese Peking Opera, and even if Tan modified the material, it is easy to identify for Chinese people and also creates a hybrid form with deliberate instrumentation. Meanwhile, the use of Peking Opera also corresponds to the theme of musical journey, where Marco Polo arrived in China. These show that Tan does not use the original Peking opera materials directly on the Western Opera; rather, he looks for an exploitative form of cultural change.

For *The First Emperor*, Tan uses four players for percussion (see table 4). In addition, there are some typical Chinese instruments such as Large Chinese Drums, pairs of stones, ceramic chimes and Giant Bronze Bell on stage. At the beginning of the opera, the ceramic chimes are struck by stones. Tan explained that when he was preparing for the composition of *The First Emperor*, he made an in-depth study on the music of the Qin Dynasty. Through his communication with the dean of the Shaanxi Museum, Tan learned what Qin's music is like.⁷⁴ The music of the Qin Dynasty era is the sound of the earth, in which the water tank is tapped and tiles are the main way of

⁷³ Nancy Guy, *Peking opera and politics in Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 176. <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip052/2004023670.html>

⁷⁴ Bi, "Tan Dun tan Qinshihuang," 30.

making music. Ceramics and stones are the most important instruments in Qin ear.

These are all placing in the stage of *The First Emperor*.

Table 4. The percussion instruments in *The First Emperor*.⁷⁵

Player 1	Timpano, Waterphone, Tibetan Singing Bowl, Large Cowbell, Watergong, Small Chinese Crash Cymbal, Small Chinese Gong
Player 2	Tibetan Singing Bowl, Small Brake Drum, Small Chinese Crash Cymbal
Player 3	Waterphone, Slapstick, Large Woodblock, Tibetan Singing Bowl, Tamtam, Large Brake Drum, Triangle, Large Chinese Crash Cymbal, Snare Drum
Player 4	Bass Drum, Large Crash, Cymbal Tamtam, Tibetan Singing Bowl, Large Chinese Crash Cymbal

There are some traditional Chinese musical instruments and ceramic instruments in *The First Emperor*, such as a 15-string guzheng, and some pitched ceramic chimes. In the scene where Gao Jianli teaches the princess how to play guzheng, the combination of guzheng and harp is lyrical and beautiful. The harp imitates the playing techniques of the Chinese musical instruments pipa and guzheng. Such attempts to use Western musical instruments with Chinese musical instruments can often be seen in Tan's works. Tan himself responds to this by saying:

Guzheng must be embedded in the symphony, in which the structure, scale, timbre, and instrumentation of Western musical instruments can be changed around guzheng. Only after adjusting the combination of Western musical instruments, it is the time to add the performance of guzheng.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/marco_polo_33573

⁷⁶ Wang shanshan 王珊珊, "Woyao gao Geju yiding shi zhongguoren shuo le suan" 我要搞歌剧，一定是中国人说了算 [I want to compose opera, it must be determined by Chinese], *Yinyue Luntan* 音乐论坛, 2017(11):52.

In addition to traditional Chinese musical instruments, *luogujing* (Chinese percussion notation) is also cleverly adopted in *The First Emperor* (see example 2). Luogujing can accurately express the rhythm pattern, instrumentation, and melody. It can also be read through the mouth, which is convenient for memory and teaching.⁷⁷

Example 2. Tan Dun, *The First Emperor* (2006): Act I, Scene 1, mm.125-129

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Yin-Yang Master, Shaman, and Chorus. The Yin-Yang Master part is written in a staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a rhythmic pattern of notes with dynamic markings (f, fp, sfz) and the lyrics 'Kuang teilei tei chitei tei'. The Shaman part is written in a staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a rhythmic pattern of notes with dynamic markings (f, fp, sfz) and the lyrics 'Who will be? Who will be? be the next?'. The Chorus part is written in a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a simple harmonic accompaniment.

In the luogujing of Peking Opera, “kuang” corresponds to the *dalu* (Large Chinese Gong), “tei” corresponds to the *xiaoluo* (small gong), and “yi” corresponds to the rest. In *The First Emperor*, luogujing is recited by the Yinyang Master and Chorus. It requires the singer to recite in an exaggerated way, in which there is no strict rule for the notation. The example shows how the luogujing is employed in the opera. The Yinyang Master recites “kuang tei lei tei yi tei tei,” which is served as a vocal line and becomes a fix melody.⁷⁸ In *The First Emperor*, Tan Dun uses the vocabulary of luogujing for vocal performance, which in contrast to the traditional singing style of Western opera. The use of luogujing may arouse the interests of audiences who are unfamiliar with Peking Opera. However, such uses are not enough creative for

⁷⁷ Frederick Lau, “Transmission of Music in East Asia,” in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, ed. Robert C Provine, Yosihiki Tokumaru, J. Lawrence Witzleben (New York: Garland, 1998)

⁷⁸ Nancy Yunbwa Rao, “Chinese Opera Percussion from Model Opera to Tan Dun,” in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. Yang Hon-Lun, and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 171.

Chinese audience. Instead, it intensifies the construction of the difference between Peking Opera and Western opera.

3.4 Hybrid vocal-style

In the vocal style, Tan Dun successfully explores a hybrid voice by using the technique of Peking Opera. The singing style makes Peking Opera differ from other operas. Spoken arts in Chinese opera are called *bai* (speech); dialogue in Kunqu, as in Peking opera, is spoken in an artificial stage language called *yunbai* (rhyme speech).⁷⁹ Yunbai has stronger musical rhythm.⁸⁰ There are two kinds of yunbai expression - Chinese or English in Tan's Opera. The expression of yunbai in English is a characteristic method. Since the phonological characteristics of English are quite different from that of Chinese, the singing style of yunbai in English is thus more based on imitating the vocal feature of Peking opera artists. By moving up or down the tone at the end of the sentence, it is possible to create a sound close to the yunbai. The actual effect is a certain distance from yunbai, which further strengthens the concept of voice- cultural hybridity.

Yunbai is used at the beginning of *Marco Polo* for the lyrics "I have not told one half of what I saw." This lyric is marked by using Peking Opera style in the score. Tan cuts the full sentence off, attributing the recital to Marco and Polo. In 1996

⁷⁹ Lindy Li Mark, "Kunqu in Yangzhou Then and Now," in *Lifestyle and Entertainment in Yangzhou*, ed. Lucie Olivová B, Vibeke Børdahl (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), 237.

⁸⁰ Chengbei Xu, *Peking Opera (Introductions to Chinese Culture)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60.

premier, the character Water also explores this vocal-cultural hybridity.⁸¹ By destroying the fluency and rhythm, it obtains the hybrid sound effect. The result differs considerably both from the original Peking Opera and yunbai.

The use of yunbai is also continued in *The First Emperor*. The introduction of opera is a one-man show of Yinyang master. Before the curtain opens, the Yinyang master performs in front of the stage and explains the background of the story with yunbai. In addition, for the Yinyang master, the costumes, *lianpu* (facial makeup), *chang* (sing), *nian* (speech), *zuo* (dancing) and *da* (combat) are arranged according to Peking opera.⁸²

The strong references to Peking Opera come from Tan's individual experiences. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he entered the Hunan Opera Troupe as a fiddler in 1976 as a farmer musician. He has noted that Peking Opera is a thing that flows in his blood because he emerged in the opera culture during his work in the Hunan Opera Troupe.⁸³ His work experiences in the Hunnan Opera Troupe also enriched his musical recourses.

Through the use of different musical material of Peking Opera, *The First Emperor* constructs an ambiguous image of China. It may not be Tan's original intention to arouse political thinking. In fact, the willingness to spread Chinese music to the world is the topic that Tan has repeatedly reiterated in various talk shows and interviews. He said in one interview that *The First Emperor* is regarded as a Chinese

⁸¹ Christian Utz, "The Rediscovery of Presence: Intercultural Passages through Vocal Spaces between Speech and song," in *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West*, ed. Utz, Christian, and Frederick Lau (New York: Routledge, 2013), 58.

⁸² Wang, "I want to compose opera," 52.

⁸³ Bi, "Tan Dun talks about The First Emperor," 29.

opera, noting: “When the ideas, skills, and philosophy of Chinese become an influence source for Germans, Americans, and Europeans, Chinese music could truly enter the world stage at that time.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Bi, “Tan Dun tan Qinshihuang,” 30.

4. Critical reception of *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*

Both Chinese and American journalists have contributed critical opinions in the controversial reception of these two operas, in which the mixture of different cultures is a strong aspect capturing their attention. The following section will address an analysis of these reviews in their own historical context and then make a connection between them.

4.1 Nationalism and national pride

From the perspective of China, four articles are selected from three Chinese online media - *Sina News*, *Sohu News*, and *China News* respectively. The readers of these three online newspapers include not only the Chinese mainland, but also overseas Chinese or emigrants. Meanwhile, four articles for evaluating these two Opera - from *Renmin Yinyue* (People's Music), *Yishu Pingjian* (Art Evaluation) and *Geju* (Opera) - are addressed here.⁸⁵ All are state-funded national and provincial journals and their readership includes professional musicians, music lovers and the general public in China.

Chinese online newspapers adopt almost the similar propaganda method and attitude towards the two operas. *Sohu News* and *China News* published the performance of *Marco Polo* in de Nederlandse Opera (National Opera & Ballet) on

⁸⁵ *Renmin Yinyue* (People's music) is a musical periodical sponsored by the Chinese Musicians Association. It can reflect the latest developments in performance, education and other research of Chinese. *Geju* (Opera) is hosted by the Shanghai Opera House and provides operatic information for professional musicians, composers and opera lovers.

17th November 2008.⁸⁶ *Sohu News* describes how Tan is doing an artistic experiment, aiming to integrate Chinese opera with Western opera, while finally East and West react symbiotically and construct a new form of opera.⁸⁷ Before the world premiere of *The First Emperor* (2006), the article published on *Sina New* writes that: “Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou open up a new future in opera.”⁸⁸ The cultural exchange in *The First Emperor* is also the main point discussed by China news: “There is no insurmountable gap between Eastern and Western culture. Tan Dun’s music transcends cultural differences and forms a new culture based on integration and innovation.”⁸⁹

Interestingly, some Chinese media even called the performance in the Netherlands the world premiere of *Marco Polo*.⁹⁰ This is clearly an error. Except for the staging of *Marco Polo* in Hong Kong in 1997 and *The First Emperor* in Hong Kong in 2007, neither of these two operas has premiered in China mainland. In addition, even though both operas are available in DVD format, there are actually not many Chinese people who have had the chance to watch the performance. In this case,

⁸⁶ Zhu Yuan 朱渊, “Tan Dun, Yi Zhongguo Zhexue yinling Geju Make boluo rongru kunqu” 谭盾：以中国哲学引领歌剧马可波罗融入昆曲 [Tan Dun, Leading Opera Marco Polo into Kunqu Opera with Chinese Philosophy], *China News*, November 06, 2008.

<http://www.chinanews.com/cul/news/2008/11-06/1439841.shtml>

⁸⁷ Zhang Yu, 张裕, “Make boluo helan shangyan, tandun, rang kunqu shenjin Geju” 马可波罗荷兰上演 谭盾：让昆曲渗进歌剧 [Marco Polo in the Netherlands, Tan Dun: Let the Kunqu infiltrate to Opera], *Sohu News*, November 26, 2008. <https://cul.sohu.com/20081126/n260860028.shtml>

⁸⁸ Zhang Lushi 张璐诗, “Tan Dun Zhang Yimou Lianshou Qinshihuang Yao kaituo Geju xin jumian” 谭盾张艺谋联手要开拓歌剧新局面 [Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou cooperate to open up a new future for opera], *Sina News*, July 03, 2005. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/c/2005-07-03/0958769014.html>

⁸⁹ Liu Hong 刘宏, “Qinshihuang yu dongxi wenhua zazhong” 秦始皇与东西文化杂种 [Qinshihuang and hybrid of east and west culture], *China News*, January 04, 2007.

<http://www.chinanews.com/hr/hwbz/news/2007/01-04/848820.shtml>

⁹⁰ Zhang, “Tan Dun Zhang Yimou Lianshou.”

since these online newspapers are used by the general public, they can easily affect or even mislead the audience's judgment.

Zhong Qian, from *Geju* (Opera), draws a comparison between Tan's *Marco Polo* and another Opera, *Marco Polo* (2018).⁹¹ *Marco Polo* (2018) was commissioned by Guangzhou Opera Houses.⁹² As cultural exchange products falling under the Belt and Road Initiative⁹³ between China and Italy, the opera is sung in Mandarin Chinese and performed by actors from China, Italy, Denmark, Belgium and the United Kingdom.⁹⁴ After the premiere in Guangzhou, *Marco Polo* (2018) returned to Italy in 2019. Qian believes that even though these two operas tell the similar history of Marco Polo, Tan's *Marco polo* is more suitable as a Chinese cultural business card to communicate with the world. The fusion of Peking opera singing with the postmodern composition style in *Marco Polo* (1996) transform Chinese culture to other countries, and let the world recognize the development of contemporary Chinese composers, Chinese music, and Chinese culture.⁹⁵

The comparison of the two operas is not a question of their quality. It seems as if the most significant merit is whether the operas are able to spread Chinese culture to the world or reflect the status of China on the global stage. Meanwhile, Chinese online media also unanimously focus on the integration of Peking Opera with

⁹¹ Zhong Qian 钟骞, "Xiaoyi Zhongxi Ronghede Geju" 小议中西融合的歌剧 [The discussion on the operatic fusion of Chinese and Western], *Yishu Pingjian* 艺术评鉴 02 (2018): 152-153.

⁹² In order to reach an international team, this opera involves the script created by Wei Jin, music composed by the German composer Enjott Schneider. They perform the story of Marco Polo's journey through China on the Guang Zhou, China.

⁹³ The Belt and Road Initiative is a global development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 involving infrastructure development and investments in nearly 70 countries and international organizations.

⁹⁴ Zhong, "Xiaoyi Zhongxi Ronghede Geju," 152.

⁹⁵ Zhong, "Xiaoyi Zhongxi Ronghede Geju," 153.

Western Opera. These are not coincidences. In this case, the two operas become cross-cultural products shaped by their reception and publicity. Zhu adds,

Zhang Jun serves as a representation of Peking Opera in *Marco Polo*. He neither come to perform Peking opera nor studied western opera. Rather, Zhang is able to combine the traditional Western opera and Peking Opera, and thus produced a new direction for opera.⁹⁶

Zhang Jianguo's opinion of *The First Emperor* in *Renmin Yinyue* (People's music) is extremely positive. By discussing the value of this opera from the historical and artistic perspective, Jianguo believes that this work integrates almost all the musical expression methods of Tan Dun with the use of various traditional instruments, the essence of Tan's 1+1 philosophy.⁹⁷ He also illustrates: "The success of *The First Emperor* reflects the universality of the influence of Chinese economy and culture on the world today, as well as the important position of Chinese history and art in the world's mainstream media."⁹⁸

Some journalist holds a half-positive/half-negative attitude toward the libretto and the use of Chinese instruments. For example, in Ren Haijie's *A Brief Comment on the First Emperor*, he praises Tan's musical creation in the opera but was somewhat dissatisfied with the script.⁹⁹ His reason is that Tan Dun, allegedly, did not follow historical facts and had a misunderstanding of history.¹⁰⁰ Liu Shirong also comments

⁹⁶ Zhu, "Tan Dun, Yi Zhongguo Zhexue yinling Geju Make boluo rongru kunqu."

⁹⁷ Zhang Jianguo 张建国, "1+1=1, Quanxinde Geju Chuangzuo Guannian" 1+1=1, 全新的歌剧创作观念 [1+1=1, A Review of Tan Dun's concept in opera creation], *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐 12 (2007): 23-25.

⁹⁸ Zhang, "Quanxinde Geju," 25.

⁹⁹ Ren Haijie 任海杰, "Lueping Qinshihuang" 略评秦始皇 [A Brief Comment on the First Emperor], *Geju* 歌剧 5 (2009): 56-59.

¹⁰⁰ Ren, "Lueping Qinshihuang," 58.

that the sounds made by Gong and chorus only arouse the interest of American audiences; these applications lack the delicate process of music for audiences familiar with Chinese music and culture.¹⁰¹

As Yayoi concludes, there is not that much content about operatic aesthetic in the Opera's reception in China.¹⁰² On the one hand, Jianguo and Haijie appreciate Tan's operatic innovations, believing that their success can reflect an equal dialogue between China and the world. On the other hand, doubts about the operas' scripts and the use of Chinese musical instruments actually flow from previous debates, in which scholars have worried about the opera not taking on a social responsibility and even conveying a bizarre image of China. Haijie adds,

In the process of writing libretto, it is better not to deviate too far from historical facts. The libretto should not mislead the public, especially the younger generation. Otherwise, after a few years, the Chinese ancient history in the minds of our young people will be like a batch of fake antiques.¹⁰³

Actually, in Chinese reception site of Tan Dun's operas, nationalism plays an important role here. First, the cross-international exchange of music meets the national sentiment and appeal for spreading Chinese culture, while it also enhances national pride. Second, the national identity influences the professional journalists' evaluation, with an overemphasis on the social-political level. Nationalism is a

¹⁰¹ Liu Shirong 刘诗嵘, "Tandun de Geju: Qinshihuang" 谭盾的歌剧秦始皇 [Tan Dun's opera: the First Emperor], *Renmin Yinyue* 人民音乐 1 (2008): 46-47.

¹⁰² Yayoi Uno Everett, "The Anti-hero in Tan Dun's The First Emperor," in *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera: Osvaldo Golijov, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, and Tan Dun* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 195.

¹⁰³ Liu, "Tandun de Geju: Qinshihuang, 47."

collective mentality in which people think they are showing their loyalty and responsibility to the country.¹⁰⁴ Through the ideal of national identity, the country maintains the national status and constructs national pride. This kind of national pride is particularly evident in the cultural exchanges between China and the world, in which the specific manifestation is the appeal of spreading Chinese culture. The cultural exchange between China and the United States or Europe needs to be put in a political and historical context. In this context, China's attitude towards Europe and the United States has undergone *Quanpan Xihua* (total Westernization) to *Yangwei Jinyong* (critically absorbing all useful things from foreign cultures for national use). With the development of economy, China also hopes to gain a more active international image and greater international influence.¹⁰⁵ Finally, they turned to encouraging international exchanges for promoting Sino-Western cooperation.

Tan's two operas assume responsibility for dialogue with the world, acting as an agent for China to communicate with the world. The success of Tan's opera in the United States has enabled the people of Mainland China to reinforce national pride and national identity. However, if national appeal is exploited in an improper way, it will make the local music market more dangerous. When Chinese philosophy, history, and instruments encounter other countries in music, an international or hybrid musical product is automatically defined. Under this circumstance, the aesthetic meaning of music is less important or even ignored. In Tan's case, even though his two operas are

¹⁰⁴ Wai-Chuang Ho, *Culture, music education, and the Chinese dream in Mainland China* (Singapore: Spinger, 2018), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Frances Guo, "China's Nationalism and Its Quest for Soft Power through Cinema," Doctoral Thesis for PhD in International Studies, University of Technology, Sydney, 2013. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/28056/2/02whole.pdf>

not for specifically tailored to the Chinese audience, they have received strong public attention. The media is involved in reshaping the meaning of music. In order to emphasize cooperation between China and other countries, such phrases as “international opera” and “integrating of Peking opera and Western Opera” are used. Ironically, most Chinese are inspired by the publicity of media, even though they do not have chance to watch the performance. As a result, the expectation of spreading national culture provides a special market for hybrid music, in which composers gain the privilege of waving the national flag to evoke national pride.

National sentiment also influences the music critics’ analysis. These journalists are professional musicians and music critics.¹⁰⁶ In their music reviews, they could conduct a more comprehensive analysis from professional knowledge such as the perspective of operatic composition technique, rather than being mired in a discussion of whether the libretto respected ancient Chinese ancient history.

4.2 How Tan responds to his identity?

The identity of the Tan is the departure point for cultural hybridization. The initial discussion of hybridity also focused on emigrants. Tan’s experience challenges geographical and cultural boundaries. National emotions and national pride are only part of his cultural identity. He likens his national identity to a perfume: “What is my perfume? That is Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, the Chinese landscape and Chinese

¹⁰⁶ Zhang Jianguo is a professor in the Music Department of the Art College of Huzhou Normal University in Zhejiang Province. Liu Shirong is the former deputy dean of the Chinese National Opera, and Ren Haijie is a member of the Shanghai Musicians Association.

culture.”¹⁰⁷

There are other composer responses to his national identity. Samson Young,¹⁰⁸ from Hong Kong, mentions that the nature of race is a kind of troubled and also a dangerous resonance. He illustrates an embracing individual story during his undergraduate years in Sydney, Australia, in which he was asked by classmates why *Chineseness* could not be heard in his compositions.¹⁰⁹

Whether or not national identity poses unfair demands on Chinese composers and artists in their artistic endeavors is an open question. In fact, the burden mentioned by Samson does not come from the *Chineseness* self, but from Samson’s inquiry into his cultural identity. Identity is always fluid, in which the analysis of it needs the concept of negotiation. Identity negotiation is the process of the subject looking for himself, and it is also a strategy of expression to survive the state of one’s perpetual cultural hybridization.¹¹⁰

Both the negotiation of identity, the pursuit of national identity, and the strategy of expressing in a mixed status can be found in Tan’s case. Tan chooses to carry out artistically his lived status of self-hybridization. It is based on the identification of his nation and looks for a new identity applicable to any and all boundaries. Therefore, there are two identities to be found in Tan’s case. One relates to his conservatory

¹⁰⁷ Tan, Dun 谭盾. “Yong ZhongGuowenhua de xiangshui yinling shijie” 用中国文化的香水引领世界 [Leading the world with perfume with Chinese culture], *Pudong Fazhan* 浦东发展 5 (2009): 19-21.

¹⁰⁸ Samson Young is a Hong-Kong artist, working primarily in the mediums of sound performance and installations. His compositions, paintings, installations, broadcasts, and performances cover topics such as the past and present of military conflicts, identity, immigration, and political boundaries. He received his Ph.D. (composition) degree in music from Princeton University in 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Samson Young, “The Voicing of the Voiceless in Tan Dun’s ‘The Map’: Horizon of Expectation and the Rhetoric of National Style,” *Asian Music*, no. 1 (2009): 83.

¹¹⁰ Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, *Houzhimi Lilun yu Wenhua Rentong* 后殖民理论与文化认同 [The postcolonial theory and cultural identity] (Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 2007), 6.

training in western classical music and the awards won in the United States and Europe.¹¹¹ The other emanates from his own region and culture, which was built on both musical and biographical terms.¹¹²

Tan Dun described his own experience, “When I studied in New York, I always wanted to integrate himself with Western modern music. Nevertheless, he found it is more difficult to integrate into the ‘trend’ than to change the ‘trend’.”¹¹³ Changing the trend does not mean to establish a new style, rather, he gains recognition by emphasizing cultural identity. He also describes, “In Europe and even Japan, everyone thinks I’m an American composer. But in America, I’m a Chinese composer.”¹¹⁴ On the one hand, it shows that how composer receives his mixed identity. On the one hand, it also reflects that in the process of cultural hybridization, in which Tan tends to wander between different identities to obtain a balance and recognition.

4.3 Blurry expectation and binary

To offer another perspective of performing cultural difference in *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*, the following part explores the American Journalists’ criticism of *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*.

¹¹¹ Moore, “Art-Religion for a Global New Age,” 375.

¹¹² Moore, “Art-Religion for a Global New Age,” 375.

¹¹³ Tan, “Yong ZhongGuowenhua de xiangshui yinling shijie,” 21.

¹¹⁴ James Oestreich, “The Sound of New Music Is Often Chinese: A New Contingent of American Composers,” *The New York Times*, April 1 2001.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/01/arts/the-sound-of-new-music-is-often-chinese-a-newcontingent-of-american-composers.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>

Journalists from *New York Magazine* and *The New York Times* responded to these two operas with incisive criticism. Patrick J. Smith and Peter G Davis commented on the US premiere of *Marco Polo* that was performed in New York City Opera on November 8, 1997. Anthony Tommasini and Allan Kozinn evaluated the world premiere of *The First Emperor* in The Metropolitan Opera.

Patrick J. Smith points out there are many appreciations of *Macro Polo*, commenting, “Chinese musical instruments and Indian musical instruments on stage at appropriate time, expressive conducting by Tan Dun, a variety of vocal techniques of Chinese opera singer.”¹¹⁵ Smith adds:

The cast of *Marco Polo* includes a former member of the Chinese Opera, Chen Shizheng, in several roles (Rustichello/Li Po), and his bridging of the vocally expressive gap between East and West is similarly echoed by the Western singers in the cast, who employ a variety of vocal techniques as well as traditional operatic singing to tell the story.¹¹⁶

In the contrast, Peter G Davis opens his review with an extremely unsatisfied tone, “‘Marco Polo’, Tan Dun’s latest, is not worth the time it would take to decipher.”¹¹⁷

Tan’s wildly eclectic score intends to embody a musical journey by blending a plethora of Eastern and Western style. Unfortunately, the musical materials are unmemorable and the stop-and-start synthesis never sounds convincing. One is finally left with the sensations of being trapped in some kind of exotic international-airport mall confronted by a dizzy array of tacky souvenirs.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Patrick J Smith, “Opera Review, Marco Polo’s Voyage to a World of Ideas,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1997.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/11/arts/opera-review-marco-polos-voyage-to-a-world-of-ideas.html>

¹¹⁶ Smith, “Opera Review.”

¹¹⁷ Peter G Davis, “Dun For,” *New York Magazine*, November 24, 1997.

¹¹⁸ Davis, “Dun For,” *New York Magazine*.

Even though Peter writes glowing reviews on *Marco Polo*, their reviews all reinforce binaries of east and west. It can be seen from such phrases: “gap between East and West”, “kind of exotic international-airport”, and “a plethora of Eastern and Western style”.

Anthony Tommasini, comments on *The First Emperor*, gives a number of reasons for being disappointed: “The melody is too long and slow; the vocal lines are cloying; even the score is an enormous disappointment.”¹¹⁹ Allan Kozinn was also dissatisfied, “The main complaint being that it droned on relentlessly.”¹²⁰

Mr. Tan’s approach to operatic lyricism and vocal writing seems ill-conceived. The more *The First Emperor* sounds like *Crouching Tiger* the better; the more it sounds like updated *Turandot*, the more tedious it becomes.¹²¹

From Anthony’s review, his disappointment comes from the similarity with Puccini *Turandot*, the underlying meaning is he was not expecting an opera similar to *Turandot*. Surprisingly, he thought the more *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the better. Although *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* won the Oscar Award, but it still failed survival in the reception. After the “Crouching Tiger Concerto” that performed in Paris at the Présences festival in 2002, it is accused that resorts the notion of scandal in contemporary music.¹²² Jonathan Goldman explains that this is a typically reaction to a symbolic in the process of cultures interacting.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Anthony Tommasini, “A Majestic Imperial Chinese Saga has its Premiere at the Met,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/23/arts/music/23empe.html>

¹²⁰ Allan Kozinn, “Downsizing a Larger-Than-Life Warlord,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/arts/music/12empe.html?searchResultPosition=32>

¹²¹ Tommasini, “A Majestic Imperial Chinese Saga.”

¹²² Jonathan Goldman, “Musimarch 2002. Causeries and Round Table Discussion: Chronicle of a

Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte attended to the rehearsal of *The First Emperor* in Shanghai, then comments: “*The First Emperor* is not typical. It is a bold and risky venture that could have an impact on the problematic futures of the Met and opera in America, and even on relations between China and the United States.”¹²⁴

Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte believe that the cooperation between Tan and The Metropolitan Opera is a risk and problematic adventure since it challenges the tradition of opera and related to politic history. Jay Nordlinger believes that the opera house wants *the First Emperor* because of the appeal of the exoticism; however, he was not confident if the work would endure beyond the initial interest and excitement.¹²⁵

It is important to note that the political inclination of the newspaper. When face the stories of China, the tone of *The New York Times* are mostly negative, which are mainly focus on the political frames and ideological frames.¹²⁶ The large negative picture of China involves the issue of human rights, economy and trade, security issues.¹²⁷ So, when the story about unification of China is presented on the American stage, speculations about Chinese politics and human rights are instantly activated,

Partially Imagined Event,” *Musiques contemporaines*, vol. 12, no. 3, (2002): 45-56.

¹²³ Goldman, “Musimarch 2002,” 47.

¹²⁴ Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte, “For Tan Dun’s ‘First Emperor,’ the Met Does a Way-Out-of-Town Tryout,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2006.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/arts/music/for-tan-duns-first-emperor-the-met-does-a-wayoutoftown-tryout.html?searchResultPosition=9>

¹²⁵ Jay Nordlinger, “A First Emperor with Lessons to Learn,” *The New York Sun*, December 26, 2006.
<https://www.nysun.com/arts/first-emperor-with-lessons-to-learn/45704/>

¹²⁶ Zengjun Peng, “Representation of China: An across time analysis of coverage in The New York Times and Los Angeles Times,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 14, no. 1 (2004): 53-67.

¹²⁷ Liping Tang, “Transitive representations of China’s image in the US mainstream newspapers: A corpus-based critical discourse analysis,” *Journalism* (2018), 1-17.

even beyond the music self. Bear this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why Lois B. Morris and Robert Lipsyte just watched the rehearsal and then suggested that opera may affect the relationship between China and the United States.

There are also other reviews in *The Journal of Musicology* and *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera* (2016). Anthony Sheppard and Yayoi Uno Everett hold the opposite opinions on the comparison between *The First Emperor* and *Turandot*. Anthony points out how the European operatic past and the works of Puccini shaped *The First Emperor*, evidenced in the thematic material, the patriotic anthem theme and the use of divergent *tinte* (stylistic “colors”).¹²⁸ Nevertheless, Yayoi Uno Everett argues that *The First Emperor* differs from Puccini in four aspects:

- 1) (T)he lack of direct quotation of Chinese folk melodies; 2) the lack of whole-tone based on other “impressionistic” harmonies; 3) melodic contour and slides based on *qinqiang*¹²⁹, 4) more subtle use of leitmotifs, and; 5) timbral expansion through the addition of indigenous instruments.¹³⁰

Rather than continuing a discussion of a comparison between *Turandot* and *The First Emperor*, I am interested in the action of invariably comparing them. The action of comparing *The First Emperor* with *Turandot* returns us to the context of orientalism and exoticism. The portrayal of the submissive oriental female, the borrowing of the Chinese folk melody *Molihua* (Jasmine), the appropriation of pentatonic throughout

¹²⁸ Sheppard, “Blurring the Boundaries,” 285–326.

¹²⁹ *Qinqiang* is the representative folk Chinese opera of the northwest Province of Shaanxi, China, where it was called Qin thousands of years ago.

¹³⁰ Everett, “The Anti-hero in Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor*,” 190.

the opera, all of these position *Turandot* in the discourse of Orientalism.¹³¹ From Said, we know that Orientalism is a western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.¹³² Following this discourse, the Orientalist musical style becomes a “distorted imitation”, in which an insufficient East is constructed to satisfy Western superiority.¹³³ Thus, the expectations of orientalist opera or exotic music may be interpreted politically, through the terms of hegemony, stereotype, and misrepresentation.

The issue of exception also lurks in these reviews, with Sindhumathi arguing that American Journalists expect something in line with an exoticist opera.¹³⁴ Since the expectation of an orientalist opera may open up the controversial debate on orientalism, American journalists may want to get avoid accusations of imaging the East by saying that they do not expect an opera like *Turandot*. In addition, in Anthony Sheppard’s view, Tan’s work is exotic as a result of the composer’s identity and his choice, since Tan initiatively embraces conventions from the orientalist tradition.¹³⁵ In other words, Tan actively provides the imagined space for the American audience, in the process being guilty of a kind of self-orientalism. However, according to the analysis above, he carefully considers the use of materials, rather than simply juxtaposing or randomly using them. Yayoi also points out that the composition of

¹³¹ Ralph P Locke, “Reflections on Orientalism in Opera (and Musical Theater),” *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 6 (1993): 13.

¹³² Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 3.

¹³³ Nasser Al-Tae, *Representations of the Orient in Western Music* (London: Routledge, 2010), 18.

¹³⁴ Revuluri, “Tan Dun’s the First Emperor,” 84.

¹³⁵ Sheppard, “Blurring the Boundaries,” 292.

The First Emperor is based on Tan's 1+1=1 philosophy, which is in essence a kind of musical hybridity.¹³⁶

4.4 Reflection of reception

Chinese and American journalists have different understandings of the two operas.

Marco Polo and *The First Emperor* are an act of international cooperation for China, a Chinese success in the international market, and a conversation between Chinese and the world on equal terms. Of course, the premise of this is that Tan is a composer from China and that his opera is a Chinese opera or represents contemporary Chinese music. However, China's view of international cooperation has not been able to survive the reviews in the *New York Magazine* and *The New York Times*. What the Chinese are proud of, the fusion of Peking Opera and Western opera, is still an expression of exoticism.

At the same time, it is necessary to note that the expectation of transcultural music might build a dangerous music market, both nationally and internationally. National pride and national sentiment enable local people and professional journalists to choose national identity and participate in the process of spreading Chinese culture. The exploitation of ethnicity and traditional culture became a glorification. However, we may not know where it can illuminate, or how it is interpreted.

¹³⁶ Everett, "The Anti-hero in Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*," 190.

5. Conclusion and further research

5.1 Conclusion

This paper has explored the issue hybridity from three perspectives: Tan Dun's response to his hybrid identity, musical synthesis and creation in *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*, and national/transcultural collision and interaction in the reception of these two operas.

First of all, cultural identity is a strategy of expression for Tan to survive in the state of perpetual cultural hybridization. He does not take national identity as a burden or unfair demand; rather, it is his recourse. For example, Tan Dun seeks creative sources from Chinese cultural traditions and history for the libretto. He also shows an interest in expanding his career from China to the world, before returning to China. Zhang Jun's performance in *Marco Polo* in 2006 successfully increased exposure for *Marco Polo* in online newspapers in China. The opera is interpreted as a successful cross-cultural product, blending Kunqu Opera with Western opera. In *The First Emperor*, Tan chooses to collaborate with the Chinese famous director Zhang Yimou, Peking Opera actor Wu Hsing-kuo, Spanish Opera singer Placido Domingo, reflecting a tendency to target both local and international market talent with Chinese traits.

After going through identity negotiations, Tan Dun has found a balance in his hyphenated identity by performing hybridity in his compositions. During the creation of *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*, Tan successfully constructs an opera world decorated with other cultural material based on the Western operatic tradition. In the arrangement of musical instruments, Tan tends to allow various musical instruments

intertwine to produce a new acoustic experiment. When other music materials are added, Tan modifies them to different degrees to make them more suitable for opera. The Beijing Opera materials used come from Tan's personal experiences, such as the guomen, yunbai, luogujing, among others. And other materials also intertwine with the development of the plot or follow the music, rather than an unreasonable juxtaposition. Furthermore, the use of yunbai and luogujing in these two operas is a certain distance from original Peking Opera, which further enhances the concept of cultural difference.

Tan's two operas also enjoyed a fascinating reception, in which both Chinese and American journalists and scholars participate in the construction of cultural hybridity by offering their complex opinions. Here, Tan's music serves as a mirror, and everyone sees their own limits and sees others through their own limits. Although the two operas were not premiered in Mainland China, Chinese media unanimously packaged the two operas into cross-cultural products. National emotions and sentiments are reflected here. The publicity of online media and music reviews, driven by national sentiment, failed to conduct a more comprehensive musical analysis from professional knowledge. At the same time, national pride may also serve to establish a dangerous music market which is only for the purpose of spreading traditional Chinese culture.

The reviews of the American journalists try to avoid accusations of exoticism and orientalism. On the one hand, they constantly strengthen the binary opposition between East and West, even if they show appreciation to some degree of the hybrid

vocal style. On the other hand, by trying to identify similarities between *The First Emperor* and *Turandot*, they want to show that Tan actively provides exotic and works for the American audiences' imagination. So an expectation of exploring primitive and ancient China does not stem from American audiences, but from the composer himself.

To conclude, the world we live in is replete with examples of cultural exchanges that transcend national borders. The juxtaposition of any culture can easily lead to controversial discussions. After the musical work is completed, who will receive it, where it will be perceived, and which part will be discussed, are all factors that contribute to construct the cultural hybridity.

5.2 Further research

Since it is difficult to establish a standard and unified evaluation system for the understanding of hybridity, the discussion of transcultural phenomena is all the more fascinating. If discussing hybridity makes us feel comfortable, it may be because we have placed our expectations to understand the part of the culture that we are not familiar with. How can we transcend our own ideology and overcome our limitations, for appreciating art that does not entirely belong to our culture? This may be another issue worth considering in the twenty-first century.

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