

Never Far Away

Bright Sheng

A few years ago, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter asked me that as a composer whether I thought myself as Chinese or American. Being a cultural migrant, over the years I have also grappled with this old yet forever new question: what defines cultural identity, the land you grew up in, the musical language you speak, or your current nationality? This prompted my aspiration to look back on how Chinese music culture had emerged.

My research started from the early 1990's, about ten years after I had moved from China to the United States, when I started to contemplate and re-evaluate what is considered Chinese culture. After years of exploration and many extensive field trips back to China, I made the startling conclusion that, contrary to what I had been led to believe while growing up in China, for thousands of years, what we now consider Chinese culture have been constantly shaped by cultures surrounding China, whether through the paths of the commerce (such as the Silk Road) or through military expansions of the Chinese empires; and Chinese music culture itself always has been a hybrid or fusion. In Tang Dynasty (618-907), for instance, eight of the ten music genres categorized by the imperial court were not 'authentic' Chinese music; they were the music from neighboring cultures spreading from the desert of Central Asia to the sea waters of Southeast China.

I then asked myself: is there a 'pure' culture per se? Aren't living cultures evolving ones continuously drawn from and influenced by one another?

In linguistics, pidgins and creoles refer to languages developed out of necessity by people who do not share a common tongue in a specific geographic area, a kind of 'contact language'. At this initial state, the communication (called pidgin) can be quite simple, only to fulfill the needed verbal interaction. Yet once the language is used long enough, especially when children learn it as their first language, it can develop into an affluent language with a far more complex structure and richer vocabulary—the emergence of a creole—before it becomes a fully mature language.

I feel this phenomenon could also be pertinent to describe my compositional career: I am now at a point of my life about half of which I have lived in China, the other half in the U.S. But all my life I have been striving to better my knowledge and understanding of both Western and Asian cultures, in the hope that my work would reflect and exhibit this personal obsession—to obtain an evolving musical style, fused from different cultures, expressive enough for me to effectively communicate my thoughts with the listener while keeping the character of each work individual, determined by the sources from which the composition is drawn.

It has been an arduous journey.

Of course, the easiest way of a fusion is to compromise a little of both and to produce a style that is *Chinoiserie*. But that is like mixing *maotai* (the best Chinese liquor) with the best California red wine. The result is usually unsatisfactory and superficial.

The opposite of that, a true fusion, must come from the deepest roots of both cultures. When these two seeming opposites meet at their most original end, a true transformation occurs; and the outcome is not only natural but enriches both. I believe this can happen: a creative artist, who has gained a profound understanding of the cultures and becomes so deeply embedded in them, would create such works that all the cross-cultural elements, which have filtered through him, would transpire in the work without his deliberate attempt. And it would happen most genuinely and spontaneously. After all, he is trying to create compositions, not to identify his cultural belongings. Moreover, audiences from both cultures would enjoy the compositions of their own artistic value and no one would need words explaining to one audience about the other culture.

Bela Bartók, the great Hungarian composer who unified ‘high culture’ of Western European Classical music tradition with ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ peasant folk music from his region, believed that a composer could even write works without trace of real or imitated folk materials but still pervaded by the spirit and atmosphere of his native culture. He considered this the ultimate goal for the composer—he has truly absorbed his native music quality, and so, like a poet, he has mastered his mother tongue.

If your native culture is still the inspiration of your work, you are never far away from home.

So, to the *World Journal* reporter’s question, I humbly replied: “I feel 100% Chinese *and* 100% American.”

When I was small, I was told a story about a garden of treasure with a secret entrance. So everyone searched and searched for this garden, until, after a very long time, the door finally opened itself yet there is no treasure in the garden! But the experience of searching has taught people lessons about life. I like this story because writing music is like searching for the garden of treasure. In the end, maybe the purpose is the searching itself, through which I learn about how to compose as a Chinese and as an American.