



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Of Musical Import: East Meets West in the Art of Tan Dun

Ian Buruma

In Stockholm last fall, walking past a McDonald's, Tan Dun turned to me and said: "Some 20 years ago, I was still planting rice in China. And now I'm conducting orchestras in all the great concert houses of the world: La Scala, the Met, the Berlin Philharmonic. I still can't believe it."

A trim, close-cropped man who likes to dress fashionably in dark colors and black leather pants, Tan Dun is a kind of rock star of the modern music scene. He won an Oscar for the score of Ang Lee's film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." His latest opera, "The First Emperor," starring Plácido Domingo, had its premiere at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2006 and will be revived there this week, with a few changes, mostly to the libretto. Hopping around the world, from Shanghai to Stockholm, from Tokyo to New York, he conducts and introduces his own music to a global audience of rapturous fans.



Tan is based in New York City, but I managed to catch him in Stockholm (between gigs in Shanghai and Rome), where he was attending part of a weeklong Tan Dun festival. We first met in a hotel coffee lounge. It was self-service. He chose to have tea: "Tea is from the inside," he said. "Coffee is from the outside." Tan tends to talk like that, less like a composer than like a mystic. "One plus one makes one" is another one of his sayings, meaning — I think — that his music is not so much a fusion of East and West as an individual expression emerging from the mixture of different traditions. Speaking of his birthplace, he once said, again rather typically: "Hunan is the home of philosophy, of yin and yang, of shamanistic culture. It has good feng shui."

The wise man is also an astute entrepreneur, however. Walking from the hotel to the Konserthus, where the Nobel Prizes are handed out, he was talking in Chinese on his cellphone. After he was done, he turned to me in a state of great excitement. "Just imagine," he said, eyes shining with pleasure. "We've got permission to perform 'The First Emperor' on the Great Wall of China for the Beijing Olympics. We'll have a worldwide audience of billions!" Since then, there have been some doubts raised about this project. In fact, the Chinese government may not let it happen after all, but the very idea of it shows the scale of Tan's artistic ambition.



First Emperor staged at the Met

It has indeed been a remarkable journey from rural Hunan to the audience of billions. Tan was born in 1957. Although his earliest memories, as he relates them in

public, are full of Taoists, shamans and village sorcerers, his parents were professionals in Changsha, the provincial capital. His mother was a medical doctor, and his father worked at a food research institute. But he was partly raised by his grandmother, a vegetable farmer, who told him ghost stories, which he adored. Since traditional music of any kind, folk or opera, was banned during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted more or less until 1976, Tan's main introduction to music consisted of a few permitted revolutionary works.

Like all children of "intellectuals" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was forced to work in the countryside as part of the nationwide "re-education" campaign. "Imagine," he said, "you were told to report to an office and made to swear to leave your family, to feed pigs, to plant rice, for your entire life. I cried. How could I do this for my entire life? In fact, the required length of time depended on the purity of your thoughts." Tan was relatively lucky. Mao died two years after he was sent to a collective farm, and the Cultural Revolution came to an end.

"Everyone experienced bitterness," he recalls now, "but I had fun. The farmers, who were experts in ghost operas, couldn't let anyone hear their songs. But I found a way around this by setting Maoist texts to their folk melodies. Everybody understood the ruse, and they loved it. Since then I became an avant-gardist, not from New York, but from that village in Hunan."

He explained the nature of ghost operas, whose form he has loosely adopted in some of his own works. "The traditional ghost opera," he said, "has three acts: you welcome the ghost, you entertain the ghost, then leave with the ghost." In Buddhist terms, it is about "the last life, our present life and the next life." Religion in rural China, where Tan grew up, is an eclectic mix of Taoism, Buddhism and folk beliefs, mostly to do with nature worship, mediated by people in touch with the spiritual world. That is what he means by shamans.

While composing folk songs, Tan became the village musician, playing on anything he could find: a fiddle, a wok to use as a drum, even agricultural tools. His gift for improvisation, for making music out of anything at hand, is still evident in much of his work. Bowls of water, sheets of rice paper, rocks, stones, anything, can be used to express Tan's musical imagination. Writing about "Inventions for Paper Instruments and Orchestra," commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Los Angeles Times critic Mark Swed wrote that "Tan's contribution is to make everything about the concert experience, even holding a program on your lap, part of the heightened sensations."

After Mao's death in 1976, a freakish accident changed Tan's life. A touring Beijing Opera troupe was in a shipwreck, and several members drowned. Tan was sent back to Changsha by the Communist Party to join the opera company as a violinist. Since the traditional operas had been banned for 10 years, their revival was hugely popular. Then, a revelation: Tan heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the radio. Western classical music had also been banned during the Cultural Revolution. It was a spur for him to apply for a place at the just-reopened Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. The competition was fierce, thousands of applicants, a handful of places. He was accepted. But the professors, who had themselves spent years feeding pigs in remote villages as part of their political "re-education," were still stuck in old Soviet models of revolutionary music education.

Then, a second revelation: the British composer Alexander Goehr, married to an Israeli professor of Chinese literature, visited China in the early 1980s and gave a lecture about Schoenberg and Debussy. Goehr, whose father, Walter, a famous conductor, was a pupil of Schoenberg's, is a highly respected composer in the Schoenbergian tradition. The hall was packed with at least a thousand students. One of them was Tan. "People were so hungry," he recalls. "Professor Goehr completely reopened the door for us. It was like hearing the stories of 1001 Nights. We were so fascinated. It was so new to us. Because our beloved professor influenced me so much, I spent years trying to catch up with Schoenberg's atonal music. But it's too easy to lose yourself in a system like that, and I caught cultural jet lag. I remember Professor Goehr telling us to avoid ethnic content, to be neutral and independent. But right after he left, I tried to use Beijing opera and folk music. If you want to be a Chinese avant-garde artist, the safest way is to stick to your grandmother's tone. The most dangerous way is to follow Western music from the Romantics to 12-tone. This period is poison. I could only use the techniques as a recipe for my fusion cooking."

I called Alexander Goehr at his home in Cambridge, England, where he was a professor of music for many years. Goehr remembers the lecture vividly, but not Tan, who was just one face in a thousand. "Actually," he said, "what I warned them against was to do a Chinese version of Western music. Unfortunately my warning had little effect. They have become Western composers with a few temple bells."

I repeated something Tan said about the need for modern Chinese artists to retain a certain innocence. Tan told me how he had tried to avoid being too sophisticated. "If you are too sophisticated," he said, "you lose courage." Theory, he maintained, "makes for more boundaries. Competing with the Europeans, by being more sophisticated, is to resist yourself. One plus one makes one. Yin and yang, inside and outside, honesty and pretension. I have practiced this philosophy for the last 20 years."

Goehr sighed over the phone and said: "Yes, that is what I had hoped as well, that they would keep a freshness, find something different out of their own experience, like Janacek or Mussorgsky. But that hope was a little innocent, too. In fact, because of their success in every other field, the Chinese are now in the same state as people who are not Chinese. They know what the trends are. They are technically excellent, but the overall popularism, which is commercial in origin, will lead to kitsch."

Tan's claim, of course, is that his music does emerge from his experience, from the ghost stories, Buddhist prayers and village shamans of his youth. One of his most striking pieces, a multimedia event for cello, video and orchestra, called "The Map," was actually performed in Xiangxi, a village in rural western Hunan, where Tan once met a shaman, known as "the stone man," who could talk to the winds and the clouds. Out of this encounter, he says, came the music, written for Yo-Yo Ma in 1999. The more-or-less Western sound of the cello is mixed with Chinese folk singing and the sounds of rushing water and clashing stones.



Tan Dun returns to a Miao village in Hunan for his *The Map*

I asked Tan how it was received by the local people. "The farmers were more open than the civilized bourgeoisie," he replied. "They touched the cello, because it was shiny and beautiful and they were worried that it was too cold. They talked to the instrument as if it were alive, in the spirit of the ghost operas."

It is indeed a haunting piece of music, and the drama of the lone cellist, talking, as it were, to the folk singers on a video screen, is powerful. Even the Finnish cellist Anssi Karttunen seems to have been affected by the atmosphere of Tan's dream of old Hunan. He is quoted as follows in the liner notes of the DVD: "My old French cello follows 'The Map' to Xiangxi. It has received great karma from the water there, and has made true connections with the roots of the people there."

In fact, Tan found acclaim for Chinese-flavored pieces long before that. In 1979, he wrote a symphony based on a fourth-century Chinese lament. In 1983, he won his first big award, the Weber Prize, with a string quartet. His visit to Dresden to collect it was his first step into the Western world. Two years later, inspired by his grandmother's death, he wrote an orchestral work, called "On Taoism." These early pieces were, in his phrase, part of his "class struggle" against the atonal system. "I used folk resources to compete with the 12-tone system, as a challenge to Goehr and Schoenberg." In 1989, he wrote "Nine Songs," a musical version of classical Chinese poems, using ceramic instruments, another innovation based on tradition, and Chinese gongs.

Alexander Goehr was alluding to a musical trend among modern Chinese composers. What makes Tan interesting, however, is not just the music itself but his theatrical flair. As well as a composer and conductor, he is a man of the theater with an extraordinary talent for dramatic effects. Dance, Beijing opera, video art all have their places in his work. He is praised for his theatrical imagination as much as for his music. As the French critic Gérard Corneloup wrote in "Forum Opéra": "Superb lighting, magnificent costumes, sumptuous voices and well-developed characters all participate in the sublime presentation of ethereal music that colors both words and phrases. Tan Dun is, indeed, Puccini miraculously reborn into the 21st century."

Corneloup was referring specifically to an opera in three acts, titled "Tea: A Mirror of Soul." It was first performed in Tokyo in 2002. I heard it in Stockholm. A few hours before the performance began, Tan explained his music to a roomful of Swedish music lovers. He was dressed in a modish black, semi-Chinese outfit and talked engagingly in English about his experience as a farmer in Hunan: "I can remember the young women, planting tea, getting covered in green from handling the leaves, their hands, their arms, their legs. I had an almost erotic fantasy of the soul going green too."

Tea has a certain pedigree in expressions of Asian culture in the West. The most famous modern example is "The Book of Tea," written by Kakuzo Okakura in English in 1906. This work was meant to show the essence of what Okakura, who lived and worked mostly in Boston, regarded as the essence of the Asian spirit. Far less well known is his opera, "The White Fox," based on a Japanese legend and dedicated to Isabella Stewart Gardner, the famous Boston patroness of the arts. In a way, Tan follows in Okakura's footsteps. His art is an attempt to achieve something very few Asian artists have succeeded in doing: to forge something new, and at the same time traditional, by reworking Asian forms in Western idioms.

Tan's opera "Tea" features a Japanese monk from Kyoto, who is actually a prince and becomes involved in a love triangle at the imperial Chinese court. The ancient "Book of Tea," by Lu Yu, plays an important role in his rivalry with a Chinese prince. There is talk of Zen Buddhism, of water, fire and wind, of the "ways of tea." The libretto, written by Tan and Xu Ying, resident playwright for the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater, abounds in phrases like: "though bowl is empty, scent glows;/though shadow is gone, dream grows. . . ." Three female Japanese percussionists produced eerie and extraordinary sounds from rustling rice paper and bowls filled with water. The audience, judging from the applause, loved every minute of it.



Tea performed in Santa Fe

There is no question that Tan uses Chinese culture in his music. The question is which Chinese culture. It may not be a culture that most contemporary Chinese people would recognize. Like the fortune cookie, much of it feels as if it were invented in America. This is not necessarily a bad thing. James Joyce recreated his Ireland living in Trieste, Paris and other places abroad. Distance can sharpen the imagination. I decided to ask Tan about this after his return to New York, to attend a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music of "The Gate," his multicultural opera featuring three theatrical heroines who died for love: Shakespeare's Juliet; Koharu, heroine in the Japanese puppet play "Double Suicide"; and Yu Ji, from "Farewell My Concubine," a Beijing opera about a woman who commits suicide for her lord.

We spoke in his office in Chelsea. He served me a cup of superb green tea from Zhejiang province. "When I came to New York in 1986," he said, "to study composition at Columbia University, I lived downtown. At first I didn't know how to bridge the musical distance between uptown and downtown. At Columbia, you immediately got into the atonal system. But downtown is so diverse: jazz, rock, the Blue Note, the Village Gate, the La MaMa theater. So I got jet-lagged. But I found a way to fix the distance. At night, downtown, I would meet with Meredith Monk, John Cage and Philip Glass. My jet lag between uptown and downtown reminded me where I was from. I looked back to the Eastern music I played before moving to Beijing. It all came back to me through my fascination with experimental music in downtown New York. Greenwich Village taught me about Chineseness from a world point of view."

I asked him what role John Cage played in his development. I had read somewhere that Tan felt an instinctive cultural affinity with Cage's experiments with music made with water, paper and kitchenware. He said: "Before John Cage, I didn't pay attention to Lao-tzu" — the Taoist sage — "or the I Ching. But every time I spoke to Cage, it was as if I were talking to Lao-tzu, not an American, not John. We had dialogues about music in a very philosophical way — everything is an unanswered question."

Tan would not be the first Asian artist to have reimported, as it were, Asian traditions from Western sources. Many Japanese rediscovered Zen in the 1960s by reading the American beat poets. But Chineseness from a world point of view is precisely what many Chinese in China didn't like about "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." However slickly made and beautiful to look at, this kung-fu movie, with Tan's score and Yo-Yo Ma's sinuous cello, smacked to them of a fantasy tailored to Western taste. It could also be read the way I read it, as a nostalgic dream of overseas Chinese about a China that never was. But in fact Tan deals less in nostalgia than in juxtaposition, throwing elements from different cultures together.



Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Tan likes to say that he is like Marco Polo in the West. Or as he put it in an interview: "I'm a Marco Polo going backward from East to West." What is perhaps his most famous opera is actually titled "Marco Polo" and features, apart from the Venetian explorer himself, Dante, Shakespeare and Mahler. The libretto is in English and Chinese, with smatterings of Italian and German. And the music ranges from Beijing opera to bits of Mahler. Completed in 1996, this work earned Tan the Grawemeyer Award for composition. Since its debut in Munich the same year, the opera has been performed all over the world.

Tan told me that when he writes his music, he has no specific audience in mind. But there is no question that the exoticism of his work is perfect for a globalized

market hungry for new and unusual flavors. Tan expressed this perfectly in an interview with Hong Kong radio: "It's not just listening to music. Also, the way we're eating dinner, no more just French, Italian; we eat Mexican, Cantonese, Russian, Indonesian, Japanese. . . ." In Stockholm, he told me how globalization offers new opportunities to artists, like himself, "not to standardize, or neutralize, but by giving people a chance to be seen."

The danger of Tan's huge commercial success is that it leads to a decorative, rather superficial kind of Chineseness. It is hard not to cringe a little when hearing such fortune cookie lyrics (in "Tea") as: "In tea mind—/ woman makes life art,/man makes art life." I asked Tan about the commercial constraints on his work, and he gave a very candid answer: "It is inescapable. You can't avoid being commercialized. I don't want to be, but I cannot resist it. I'm pushed that way. If my name is not a brand of Chinese culture in the avant-garde, Peter Gelb is not going to be behind me at the Metropolitan Opera."

Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Met, is known for his keenness to make opera more popular and has worked to open up a rather hidebound institution to a wider audience through television and video screenings and by bringing in famous filmmakers to direct operas or commissioning hot composers. He met Tan Dun while serving as president of the worldwide classical-music division of Sony. I sat with Gelb in his small, rather airless office deep in the bowels of the opera house. We spoke with half an eye on a television screen, showing the dress rehearsal of Prokofiev's "War and Peace," with 227 extras, 118 chorus members, 41 dancers, four chickens, one horse and one goat.

"Look," he said, when I asked him about the risks of what Alexander Goehr calls popularism, "most successful composers craved popular success. It's only in recent decades that popular success was thought to be unseemly. But this is changing with composers like John Adams and Tan Dun. Tan is theatrically savvy, an entrepreneur in his instincts. He thinks visually. In his best pieces he has found an interesting balance between accessibility and originality."

Gelb's concern, as a manager who wants to "encourage popular success without compromising high artistic ideals," is to make sure that Tan "continues to pursue that direction and not to become too derivative." He paused. I asked: Derivative of whom? "Of himself."

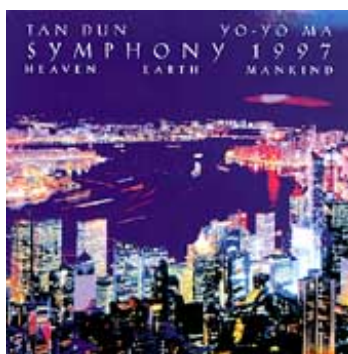
Tan's most ambitious opera to date, "The First Emperor," was not actually commissioned by Gelb, but he was manager of the Met by the time it was performed and has worked hard for a successful revival this month. Like all Tan's operas, it is visually spectacular, with a Beijing opera singer, a phalanx of imperial soldiers, Chinese drums, an aluminum staircase with stones suspended from ropes representing the Great Wall of China and Plácido Domingo as the warlord who unified China in the third century B.C. The producer of this spectacle was Zhang Yimou, the director of such classic films as "Raise the Red Lantern" (1992) and "To Live" (1994). The music, borrowing a little from Puccini here, a little from Bernstein there, mixed with Chinese operatic effects, gongs and various improvised instruments using water, paper and stones, is the usual eclectic multicultural mix that Tan specializes in. The libretto, written with the novelist Ha Jin, is heavy with references to yin and yang. While the opera was still in production, Tan told The New York Times that "opera will no longer be a Western form, as it is no longer an Italian form. In the shamanistic sense, there is no East or West; all is human. Plácido and Zhang Yimou are also shamans."

Not all the critics were impressed. Anthony Tommasini wrote in The Times: "His music does sing. And sing. And sing. On and on. . . . Mr. Tan's goal in this work, it would seem, was to create a ritualistic and hypnotic lyricism. But 'The First Emperor' gives soaring melody a bad name." Peter Davis wrote in New York magazine that "the lyrical set pieces in 'The First Emperor' are couched in a sickly sweet Americana idiom that sounds rather like watered-down Copland or Bernstein with a dash of Hollywood banality. Parts of Act Two, in fact, become so operetta-ish that I half-fancied Domingomight break into a song from Lehar's 'Land of Smiles.'"

Qin Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor, might seem a strange choice for a tragic hero in a spectacular opera. He ordered the building of the Great Wall, killed his critics, was the first recorded book burner in history and set the tone for the most brutal Chinese rulers to come (including Mao Zedong, who much admired him). In fact, however, although he was depicted through the centuries in China as a monster, he became a symbol of patriotic pride after the Communist revolution. Tan's opera is decidedly ambiguous on this front, reflecting in a way the ambivalence that many Chinese feel about Chairman Mao. On the one hand, the opera is about the conflict between the ruler and the court composer, Gao Jianli (sung by Paul Groves). The emperor wants to be glorified; the composer wants to express himself. But the opera is also punctuated by rousing choruses rejoicing in a unified China.

Ha Jin, who now lives in Massachusetts but experienced the horrors of Maoism first hand, as did Zhang Yimou and Tan Dun, was not initially enthusiastic about the project. He told me on the phone that he didn't like the idea of Qin Shi Huangdi, whom, like most Chinese, he saw as a symbol of harsh oppression. But his wife is a fan of Domingo's. And Tan "persuaded me by saying it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Asian-Americans. And I thought it might be O.K. — not to celebrate the First Emperor but to highlight the conflict between the individual and the state." So he accepted. Tan would send him texts in Chinese and Ha Jin would send back the revisions in English. But it didn't quite turn out the way Jin hoped. He explained: "Zhang Yimou said there were two themes: conflict and patriotism. In his movie, 'Hero,' — also about the First Emperor, for which Tan wrote the score — "they highlighted one theme, patriotism. That's the problem. I just wrote one line about China being united. Domingo sang it many times, 'China! China! China!' like a glorious moment, a celebration. But what can you do? I was just a worker."

I asked Tan in Stockholm why he took on commissions that would obviously require a show of Chinese patriotism. Putting on "The First Emperor" for the Beijing Olympics would certainly have to be a patriotic gesture. He also wrote "Symphony 1997," featuring Yo-Yo Ma as the soloist, for the official celebration of the handing over of Hong Kong. Peter Gelb claims responsibility for bringing the two stars together. Ma, he told me, "was interested, because he wanted to create music with ancient bells." The first time I asked Tan about his relationship with the Chinese government, he gave the examples of Shostakovich and Prokofiev in the Soviet Union. He said: "A major commission from China is still focused on patriotic things. Like Shostakovich, sometimes we have no choice. But you can still express yourself. By doing 'Symphony 1997,' I could study bronze bells and introduce Yo-Yo Ma, as well as Western concepts, to China. There's a way to educate the Communists without using their methods." On the same occasion, Tan claimed that "The First Emperor" "reflects my own life, and that of Shostakovich."



Symphony 1997

I found the comparison with Shostakovich odd, and told him so. After all, Tan was not confined to China but free to go and work anywhere he liked. Unlike Shostakovich, who had to contend with Joseph Stalin, Tan was not forced to do anything. We let the matter rest. Later, I asked him the same question at his office in New York. This time he gave a very different answer. "To me," he said, with an impish smile, "it is the way for shamans to behave. I want to be playful,

like a child, teasing the world, teasing the whole system. That is Taoism. It is not about political or cultural messages. It is a performance. Performance art.”

I suspect that this time he was telling the truth. Finding his stride, he continued: “I have no ego. The ego is to illustrate philosophical strangeness, to be a musical Taoist.” While I was mulling this over, he shifted in his chair and said: “And you know what? This strangeness helps my business. I have always worked with the best orchestras in the world. And never once did one of them fail to ask me back.” I can quite believe it. Whatever it is that is behind Tan’s extraordinary success, it surely isn’t innocence — or a lack of sophistication.

Ian Buruma is the Henry R. Luce professor at Bard College. His novel “The China Lover” will be published in the fall.

This article appeared in The New York Times on May 4, 2008 and at Japan Focus on May 12, 2008.

Created by Datamomentum