

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE MUSIC OF LAM BUN-CHING

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The cultural ambiguity that exists in the most varied aspects of the history and life of Macau, a subject that has been widely studied and already has a huge body of dedicated literature, had (and continues to have) reverberations throughout local society. In the arts, and in music in particular, there springs to mind the case of the celebrated composer Lam Bun-ching (b. 1954), who incorporates this cultural duality in her work, resulting to a large extent from the fact that she was born and grew up in Macau. Ethnically Chinese and resident for many years abroad, Lam has been influenced by the historic and political circumstances underlying the diverse attitudes towards ethnicity, citizenship, heritage and cultural identity that coexist in Macau. The scope of this discussion could perhaps be widened to include another even more complex issue: the precise definition of a Macanese way of life (and quality), which manifests itself in all cultural spheres (literature, music, painting and architecture) and the identity formation among Macanese artists within a context shaped by multiculturalism and the prevailing discourse of Orientalism. Which is to say that an understanding of these multicultural

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characteristics can help us, without the prejudices imposed by ethnic barriers, to define a 'Macanese art'.

The issue of multiculturalism can be better understood if placed in its original American context. According to Turner, "the term *multiculturalism* has come to be used primarily in connection with demands on behalf of black and other minority groups for separate and equal representation in college curriculums and extra-academic cultural programs and events."² Indeed, public education has traditionally been and continues to be the main route for assimilation of immigrants and ethnic minorities to the American political, economic, and social life. The reasons for a multicultural or multiethnic educational reform are explained by Higham as a result of the increasing rage of the less endowed classes which, during the 1960s and 1970s, were left behind by the "consumer-oriented spirit of expansiveness and self-indulgence" of the white majority.³ Nevertheless, multiculturalism does not only limit itself to an educational programme. In the course of the last three decades, the very concept of multiculturalism assumed different meanings and purposes: It has been also read as a social phenomenon and a political ideology.⁴ Some of these issues are not the main concern of this study and, therefore, will be left outside. However, it would be useful to explore some

² Terence Turner, "Anthropology and Multiculturalism: What is anthropology that multiculturalists should be mindful of it?", in *Cultural Anthropology* 4 (Nov., 1993), p. 411.

³ John Higham, "Multiculturalism and Universalism", in *The American Quarterly* 2 (Jun., 1993), pp. 195-219.

⁴ Chan Chi-hou, "A Multi-cultural Case of Macao: The Thesis of 'Maximisation of Difference' in a Globalised World", in *Religion and Culture: Past Approaches, Present Globalisation, Future Challenges* (Macao: The Macau Ricci Institute, 2004), pp. 200-201.

aspects related to diversity as a source of cultural identity, as Higham discusses them. The author deconstructs some misconceptions associated with the multicultural movement (such as the idea of social class differences as a source of identity), arguing that differences between social classes are only significant in mobilising political movements while race, ethnicity, and gender are the only differences that really matter.⁵

The ethno-cultural reconciliation underlying this debate has its problems. Multiculturalism (above all in North America) continues to be seen from an one-side perspective: a set of politically correct measures that attempt to combat the prejudices that exist with regard to ethnic minorities, racial groups and any social group that stands out as being 'different'. However, when a society - in isolating the factors that determine that 'this' or 'that' group is 'different' - defines strategies to combat the prejudices stemming from this difference, it is, at the same time, placing itself in a position of superiority, assuming 'different' to also mean 'flawed' (or inferior), which is not necessarily the case.

Multiculturalism, in ideal terms, presupposes the existence of an attitude of spontaneous acceptance and tolerance that strives to eliminate the idea of difference, so that balance and room for diversity might exist. The 'different/flawed' equation mentioned above is directly connected to an attitude of superiority that, as we know, is a characteristic feature of colonialist culture. In Macau, however, a different phenomenon has been

⁵ For more information see John Higham, *art.cit.*

observed, based on factors we need not go into here, whereby a very fine line appears to separate the various existing cultures, which establish extremely indistinct limits, of which tolerance and acceptance are an integral part. The consequence is an authentic 'cultural ambiguity', in which the contrasts co-exist in harmony, be it in linguistic, moral or social terms. The 'one foot here and the other over there' stance; a nostalgia for the East and West that is reflected in a never entirely peaceful dualism (in which the non-acceptance of self is an integral part) and that Portuguese poet Mário de Sá Carneiro (1890-1916) captured in poetry: "Eu não sou eu nem sou o outro, sou qualquer coisa de intermédio: Pilar da ponte de tédio que vai de mim para o outro."⁶ I think, therefore, that it is fair to say that perhaps the most pre-eminent feature of Macanese culture is this multiculturalist stance. And this overcomes ethnic differences. As Chan affirms, "Unlike the West, Macao's multi-culturalism has a different nature and agenda of its own. Macao's multi-culturalism is, without doubt, tied up with its long history of unique cultural dialogue between people of the East and the West. It rests not plainly on its demographic composition, but most significantly on its history."⁷

What brings these thoughts to the surface is the chamber opera *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of the Nomad Flute* by Lam Bun-ching, which was premiered in New York in January 2002 and performed at the Hong Kong Arts Festival in March of the same year. The work, which is approximately 70 minutes long,

⁶ Mário de Sá-Carneiro, "O outro", in *Dispersão* (Lisbon, 1914). "I am neither me or another but rather something in between: pillar of the bridge of boredom that links me to the other." (Free translation)

⁷ Chan Chi-hou, art. cit., pp. 209.

was composed for bass (King Zuoxian), soprano (Cai Wenji) and a Beijing opera actor (who simultaneously performs the roles of the Storyteller, Han Messenger, Cai Yong and General Han), accompanied by a 'multicultural' instrumental ensemble comprising Western and Eastern instruments: the clarinet, oboe, dizi (Chinese bamboo flute), violoncello, pipa (Chinese lute), guqin (a seven-stringed Chinese zither similar to the Japanese koto), zhonghu (a type of two-stringed Chinese violin, larger than the erh-hu), Western percussion and traditional Chinese percussion. As with the composer, who left behind an innocent childhood spent amid the narrow streets, baroque churches, Buddhist temples and monuments linked to a distant past, Wenji is also obliged to abandon her homeland to live amongst the nomadic 'barbarians' of the north.

Between two worlds

The opera *Wenji* recounts the legend of the Chinese poetess and musician Cai Yan Wenji (c.178-?), the daughter of a celebrated Han dynasty statesman. Cai Yan is kidnapped from her parents' home by a barbarian nomadic tribe from the north. After twelve years of captivity, during which she marries the heir to the tribal throne and gives birth to two children, Cai Yan is rescued in the name of her father by General Cao Cao (155-220), and free to return home. Though she is finally able to return to her own people, her heart is heavy at having to leave her children at the frontier. The tale of this brave and warlike woman, which evokes contrasting sentiments – maternal love versus filial

love, self-identity and sense of belonging – has been told through various genres, including poetry, drama, painting and music.

However, it is in poetic form that it is probably best known, a cycle of 18 stanzas entitled *Eighteen Songs of the Nomadic Flute*, on which the bilingual libretto (the opera is sung in English and Chinese) of Lam Bun-ching's opera is based.

It was always thought that the cycle had been written by Cai Yan herself, though this theory is now somewhat discredited. A later version, written by a certain Liu Shang, a poet who lived during the latter half of the 8th century, is said to have gained a certain amount of popularity in the 9th and 10th centuries. This version probably would have been used as the basis for the texts that have come down to us today and the 18 scrolled paintings produced by an unknown Ming dynasty artist. The paintings are currently at the New York Metropolitan Museum. Irene S. Leung, in her historical essay on the cycle, states:

Despite the lack of concrete details surrounding Lady Wenji's captivity and even her captors, her twelve-year ordeal became a legend. What also made Wenji's story remarkable is the survival of two powerful and heartbreaking poems that were attributed to her. These poems were written in the first-person narrative. In them, the protagonist voiced her grievance against fate as she endured captivity on the frontier and separation from her own flesh and blood. She returned to China only to discover that her entire family had already passed away and her home was abandoned and left in ruins. One of these poems goes on to say that she kept on living only for the sake of the people around her.⁸

⁸ Irene S. Leung, "Between stories and their tellings: The legend of Wenji's captivity and their historical significance" [Internet], available at <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/wenji/historical/essay.html> [accessed on 15/4/2003].

In the 8th century version, in which other incorporated nuances can already be found, probably the result of changes added from the popular oral tradition, the sad ending is replaced by a warm welcome from family who help Wenji to overcome her ties of maternal love and reintegrate herself into Chinese society.

In Lam Bun-ching's opera, Wenji is faced with a terrible choice. After she is rescued, she asks in despair, "Shall I go back?" thereby voicing her deep-felt anguish, split as she is between two worlds: on the one side, the love for her homeland and her family and, on the other, her feelings of devotion, developed during her years of captivity, for her husband and 'barbarian' children. To get a better idea of the story, here is a translation of the first and last stanzas:

At my birth, the world was still at peace,/After my birth, the fortunes of the Han declined./Heaven in its heartlessness sent down disaster,/Earth in its heartlessness made me suffer these times./Weapons of war, day after day: all the roads unsafe,/People all fled for their lives, lamenting in anguish./Clouds of dust darkened the fields: the barbarians thrived,/My resolve was defeated, my honour was lost!/The times brought new customs, not to my liking,/I was brutally dishonoured, but to whom could I complain?/An air on the reed pipe, a tune on the zither -/Full of a resentment about which no one knows!" (...) "The barbarian reed pipe comes from the barbarian regions,/Its melody is still the same but now adapted for the zither./This eighteenth tune: the song may now be finished,/But its echo lingers and its mood is without end./Thus one knows that the marvellous subtlety of music is part of the work of Creation,/Sadness and joy each follow the heart of man through all its changes./Barbarian and Chinese: different regions, different ways./The abyss between heaven and earth: sons in the west, mother in the east./The grief it has caused me is so vast it fills the sky:/Even the immensity of the cosmos is too small a container!⁹

⁹ Translation by Wilt L. Idema (Harvard University) and Beata Grant (Washington University, St. Louis) downloaded from Wilt L. Idema, "Writing Women in Imperial China", in *Radcliffe Institute Fellows: Wilt Idema* [Internet], available at <http://www.radcliffe.edu/fellowships/profiles/idema/> [accessed on 6/4/2003].

Lam Bun-ching's multicultural roots

Composer, pianist and conductor, Lam Bun-ching was born in Macau in 1954 and began her musical career as a pianist, studying with Maria Margarida Gomes (1902-?), the sister of Macanese historian Luiz Gonzaga Gomes (1907-1976). She gave her first public recital at fifteen years of age. In 1976, she graduated, in David Gwilt's class, with a Bachelor of Arts from the Hong Kong Chinese University. She then won a scholarship that opened the doors to the world of composing. At the University of California in San Diego, under the guidance of Bernard Rands, Robert Erikson, Roger Reynolds, Pauline Oliveros and Thomas Nee, Lam Bun-ching furthered her studies and definitively embraced the career of composer. After many years of study, she obtained her Ph.D. in 1981 and was immediately invited to teach composition, music theory and piano at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle (1981-86). Awarded the Prix de Rome in 1991, throughout her career Lam Bun-ching has been awarded top honours at important events linked to composition, including the Aspen Music Festival (1980), the Northwest Composer's Symposium, and the Hong Kong Conservatory Art Songs Competition. At the first international competition for composers held in the People's Republic of China - The Shanghai Music Competition - she was awarded the highest distinction by the event's organisers. She has also won many scholarships, awards and commissions for new works in the United States, of which the most notable have been from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer, the King Country Arts

Commission and the Seattle Arts Commission. In 2002, she received the Guggenheim Fellowship award, which is given to artists of recognised talent.

Her works have been performed with great success at music festivals in Japan, Austria, Belgium and Hong Kong. Besides her activities as a composer, Lam Bun-ching has equally devoted herself to the work of conductor and pianist. Her style is defined by her varied use of voice as well as instrumental timbres; she manages to achieve great transparency and lyricism without, however, forsaking the avant-garde techniques she learnt in California. Always attracted by Chinese painting, calligraphy and poetry, she has drawn more heavily on these sources in her more recent compositions.¹⁰

Lam Bun-ching regards Macau's traditional culture as being of great importance for her intellectual and artistic development. In an interview for a Macau newspaper,¹¹ she refers to Maria Margarida Gomes as having been "extremely influential on my training and development (...) She opened my 'ear' and my soul to western music. I also owe to her much of what I know about style and interpretation (...) The Gomes family (...) was one of Macau's most well-known families (...) I am well aware that my weekly lessons were like retreating into an oasis of culture and tranquillity. (...) To me (...) they are a symbol of an era, of Macau's past." On the issue of the two worlds and of the dialectic underlying the musical convergence of East and West, Bun-

¹⁰ Harrison Ryker, "Lam Bun-ching", *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 262-263.

¹¹ Severo Portela, "Saudades de Macau" (interview with the composer), *Ponto Final*, 2.VIII.2002, pp. 10-11.

ching states that both East and West are of equal importance within her work and, as regards multiculturalism, she sees herself as existing in one world made up of various layers, though she appears to have little interest in making changes to that which already exists.

On the subject of Macau, where she was born, Bun-ching reveals that the city was her inspiration when she wrote *Saudades de Macau* for symphony orchestra. Commissioned in 1987 by the Macau Cultural Institute, the piece is divided into five movements, each of which linked to one aspect of the history and life of the city. According to the composer, "it reflects my recollections of Macau, its atmosphere and surroundings. Specifically, each one of the five movements is associated with a particular place, with a historic event, or to some aspect of daily life in the city where I was born and grew up." Following on from 'Prelúdio' comes 'Praia Grande', a poetic place frequented by lovers; 'Jardim Religioso' illustrates the peaceful co-existence of Macau's many religions. The fourth movement, 'Fortaleza do Monte', recalls the historic battle in 1622 in which the Dutch were defeated and, finally, 'Canção de Embalar' is dedicated to the children of Macau. The work was first performed in Macau in 1990 by the Macau Sinfonietta under the direction of the composer and then in Beijing by the China Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra (1990, conducted by Veiga Jardim) and San Francisco by the Women's Philharmonic (1993, conducted by Victoria Bond). The piece has been performed again in Macau (October 2002), during the 16th International

Music Festival of Macau, with the composer herself conducting the combined forces of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and the Macau Orchestra.

Macau would also be the inspiration behind another symphonic work. In 1999, for the occasion of the Macau Handover ceremonies, the composer completed a commission for the Central Government entitled *The Millennium Fanfare*, an orchestral work which she describes thus:¹² “My Macau piece is a very simple,” she says. “It makes use of the repetitive elements in Cantonese music, the whole piece continues to accumulate, like what Chairman Mao had once said: let a hundred flowers bloom... It’s in three large cycles, each cycle has 11 measures, repeated three times, then the whole piece is repeated again, having to do with the number 99.” The work was performed in Beijing for the Handover celebrations and in Macau at the Cultural Centre by the China Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra. The following year, it was performed at the Macau Arts Festival by the Macau Chamber Orchestra.

To better understand multiculturalism, it is first necessary to understand the true significance of ‘culture’. In the broadest sense, we could define it as our collective set of experiences which determine the way we act, think, judge and understand the world around us. Multiculturalism is a product of colonialism, stemming from the reciprocal influences exercised by different ethnic groups. In spite of the countless ideas and definitions that currently exist with regard to the subject, I think it is true to say that each one of us possesses our own understanding of the significance of multiculturalism

¹² Letter dated 25th November 1999 to the author of this article.

today. This perception is becoming ever more substantive as we learn through co-existing with other cultures.

And could it be that in *Wenji* Lam Bun-ching sees a mirror image of herself?¹³

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