

EVENT REVIEW: CHINESE CHURCH MUSIC SINCE THE TANG DYNASTY

Zhang Zhentao [张振涛]¹

ABSTRACT

This short review is dedicated to the long-awaited event ‘Beijing Symposium of Sinicised Catholic Theology – The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ’ and deals with the historical background of some its events. It is also a personal document filled with statements derived from the given observations.

KEYWORDS

Church music, Tang dynasty, Chinese compositions, Event review

INTRODUCTION

On 16th October, 2021, in Xishiku Cathedral (also known as the North Church), Catholic Archdiocese of Beijing, a concert of Chinese Church Music since the Tang Dynasty was held in the evening, as an event in the “Beijing Symposium of Sinicized Catholic Theology – The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ.” The newly renovated Cathedral, with its full splendour, welcomed over 300 guests from the church and the music academia.

Churches as concert venues are a common European tradition, which is instead extremely rare in China. People usually complain that stage renderings are illusory means that isolate the sound from its original ritual settings and sever the connection with its locations by contextual resetting. Such arrangements, intentional or not, truly compromise the sense of live interaction. However, this concert followed the often criticised “principle of authenticity” that puts the isolated sound back to its cultural site: churches are genuine sites where sacred music is resurrected.

It is practically difficult to hold a concert in an unusual venue, and it is even more difficult to gather a large audience under the pandemic uncertainties nowadays. Yet, greater challenges lie on the ecumenism between the Catholic and Christian churches and singing together – thus, how much courage and fortune was demanded from the organisers!

THE CONCERT

This concert is jointly performed by the Cathojoy Choir from Catholic Archdiocese of Beijing (directed by Wang Fei), the Glory Choir (directed by Liang Runni), the Northern Kunqu Theatre, the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing, together with soloists from the China Railway Art Troupe, Wenjin Guqin Society, Kunqu connoisseurs from Wuxi Tianyun Society, as well as students and faculty members from the China Central Conservatory of Music and the Music Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts. Although without payment, all performers, professional or amateur, devoted themselves to the best sonic condition with their impressive passion.

Sun Chenhui, currently vice researcher in the Music Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, hosted the concert. Her dedicated research in sacred music for decades is reflected in the programme arrangements, making the concert ‘a sounding outcome of her 21 years’ work’. Higher homage should be paid to her piety that is enduring and true to the heart. Her historical sensitivity in fieldwork, documentation, and notation qualifies her as a true guide of listening.

¹ Prof. Dr. Zhang Zhentao [张振涛] is the former director of the Music Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, and a Distinguished Professor of Nanjing University of the Arts. He has written, edited, and published many articles and books. For more information, contact: zhangtao135@163.com.

Sun Chenhui's introduction to the programme was fully academic. According to her, there were three major historical records of Christianity in China: the Church of the East in China from the Tang Dynasty, the Roman Catholic Church from the Yuan Dynasty, and the Jesuit China missions from the late Ming Dynasty. Genuine Sino-Western exchanges have not been initiated until then and lasted over 400 years. Western sacred music was being fused with traditional Chinese music, and local features were gradually fostered into two significant scores in the 20th century: *Hymns of Universal Praise* (1936) and *The New Hymnal* (1980's). *Hymns of Universal Praise* is the peak of the last century's musical, literal, theological, and translational attainments, chiefly edited by Louise Strong Hammond, British Anglican missionary and musician, Bliss Wiant, American Methodist pastor and head of the music department at Yenching University, as well as Yang Yinliu, Chinese musicologist who had both Chinese and Western knowledge and contributed greatly to the sacred music of Christianity in China. As founder of the Chinese Music Institute, Yang must be glad to have inheritors like Sun Chenhui who continues to tell what he only dared to speak of near the end of his life – a deeply planted seed. With such prominent predecessors, Sun's excellent work is not unexplainable.

The programme of this concert was dedicated to works in Chinese style; therefore, those in Western style were excluded. The pieces were organised in chronological order; those from the Church of the East and the Catholic Church for the first half, and those from the Christian churches for the second half. They roughly fell into four categories: (1) proposed sacred songs that set historical texts to contemporaneous tunes; (2) sacred songs composed by Chinese theologians; (3) sacred songs transcribed from Guqin (seven strings) repertoires; and (4) sacred songs transcribed from other sources.

PROPOSED SACRED SONGS THAT SET HISTORICAL TEXTS TO CONTEMPORANEOUS TUNES

The *Éloge de la Sainte Trinité* (*All Heav'n Worships in Great Awe*) from the Tang Dynasty was the earliest sacred song of Christianity in China; together with the Xi'an Nestorian Stele, they had over 1200 years of history. The tune is transcribed by Chen Yingshi in Shanghai Conservatory of Music, from *Shuiguzi*, a Tang Dynasty ancient pipa tablature discovered in Dunhuang by Paul Pelliot (Pelliot & Chavannes, 1911). The text is set to this tune by Li Hongfeng, the historian in the Music Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts.²

It may be questioned whether such a combination of texts with tunes is true to history. Almost all ancient songs are used to be poems and lyrics set to pre-existing tunes and optionally accompanied by instruments. In the Chinese context, this practice is convincing enough to set the text from a Tang Dynasty stele to a Tang Dynasty tune played on Tang Dynasty instruments, which would have become a branch in the pluralistic sounds of the Tang Dynasty.

My Promises Are Above is similarly arranged. In the year 1600, Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit missionary, presented a Clavichord as a tribute to the Ming Dynasty court and wrote *Eight Songs for Western Keyboard*, a set of Chinese poems notifying Christianity. They are set to tunes from *Mozi's Elegy* (墨子悲歌) and *Boya's New Method* (伯牙新法, 1609) by John Thompson, a contemporary American Guqin musician.

Wu Li (Yushan), the composer of *The Mass Music – Corrected Scores of Heavenly Music* (天乐正音谱·弥撒乐音), was the first to compose Catholic hymns in the Qing Dynasty, who studied theology, philosophy, and Latin language in St. Paul's College of Macau. His settings of Mass and sacred hymns to folk tunes and ancient songs comprised nine cycles of Southern and Northern tunes and 20 chapters of pseudo-archaic chants. *The Mass Music* performed in the concert was set to folk tune *Yizhijhua* (score edited by Liu Youheng).

² Introductions to each piece were taken from Sun Chenhui's live comments on the concert.

Some months ago, Sun Chenhun obtained a four-volume score written in the Chinese language with staff notation and Gongche notation in the 18th century from the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Its first three volumes were traditional Chinese music pieces, while 13 pieces of church music were found in the fourth volume, an evidence of the Sinicization of sacred songs in churches in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These scores were notated by Jean Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793), a French Jesuit missionary who had dwelled in Beijing for 42 years before he completed his *Mémoire sur la musique des Chinoise, tant anciens que modernes* in 1774 (Amiot, 1769), the earliest book dedicated to Chinese music. In the 20th century, François Picard (1991) from Sorbonne Université rediscovered the scores posted from Beijing over two centuries ago. From Beijing to Paris and back again, *Ave Maria* from the fourth volume is sounded again two centuries later in their original location, in the church that witnessed the Sino-Western communication through history.

Another piece from Amiot's *Musique Sacrée* (1779), *Lord's Prayer*, was also set to folk tune *Liuyejin*, found in his *Divertissements chinois 3^e cahier: La merveilleuse harmonie de tous les sons rassemblés*. The magnificent sound of the newly assembled pipe organ in Xishiku Cathedral emanates unusual tastes to Chinese tunes. Times have changed – pipe organs that were quite rare in Yang Yinliu's times become increasingly common nowadays. Back then, only few churches had pipe organs that were mostly ruined in the riots (e.g., one was smashed up in Qingdao during the Cultural Revolution). Now, churches are regaining their giants as well as their players. Wang Jue is such a young musician who arranged and performed this piece.

Padre Aureo Castro Nunes e Castro (1917–1993) was born in Portugal, who founded the “Grupo Coral Polifónico” in 1959 and the “Academia de Musica de S. Pio X” of which he became director in 1962. His compositions combined Chinese and Western styles. *Nostalgia* is a piano solo piece imitating Guzheng composed in the 1960s. Although a foreigner, Father Aureo Castro's lifelong mission to China has resulted in his proficiency in Chinese music and his compositions that combined it with Western style.

SACRED SONGS COMPOSED BY CHINESE THEOLOGIANS

Undoubtedly, these songs made up the majority of the programme.

Golden Breaks the Dawn, perhaps the best-known hymn in Chinese style worldwide, was composed in 1934 by Hu De-ai, a student in the music department at Yenching University, harmonised by Bliss Wiant, and included in the *Hymns of Universal Praise* (1936). Zhao Zichen (1888–1979), the most influential theologian in China, wrote the text that was translated into English by Mildred A. Wiant in 1946 and became the first hymn composed by Chinese authors to be included in American hymnals.

Holy Night, Blessed Night is known as the Chinese counterpart of *Silent Night*. The text was written by Priest Zhu Weiyu and Wu Jingren in Suzhou, originally to the melody of *Silent Night*. Yet, a poem by Chinese priests deserved a Chinese tune, and Shi Qigui's composition fulfilled it.

John Ching Hsiung Wu was a renowned jurist who translated the *Book of Psalms* into Chinese poetry in an archaic style, for which an oriental composer Jiang Wen-ye (1910–1983) composed a musical cycle in Chinese style. In 1938, Jiang also set *Ave Maria* to *Xijiangyue*, a tune attributed to Ou-yang Xiu from the Song Dynasty, which became his most popular hymn.

Father Li Zhen Bang was a pioneer of Chinese-language sacred music, who obtained a master's degree and PhD in the Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra from 1953 to 1959 and founded the Music Department at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan where he became dean in 1983. His compositions combine plain texts with simplistic tunes. The hymns *Ricci Matteo* and *Gloria* from his *Common Mass* were performed in the concert.

The last piece in the programme was *Agnus Dei* composed by Xie Xiangmin, a contemporary composer graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He composed his first Mass in 2020 based on Jiangnan style, of which *Agnus Dei* is the last section.

SACRED SONGS TRANSCRIBED FROM GUQIN REPERTOIRES

The concert staged Guqin songs in their original form before the performance of the arranged sacred songs. *Yangguan Sandie* (阳关三叠) was found earliest in *Zheyin Glossed Tablature* (浙音释字琴谱) in 1491, and the version in *Guqin Primer* (琴学入门) compiled by Zhang He in 1864 was most popular. In 1932, Yang Yinliu arranged it into *Friends of Years with Just One Heart* with three stanzas and harmonised it in 1934. The version performed in the concert was Wang Di's transcription of Guan Pinghu's rendering. I used to listen to this piece when the Music Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts compiled the album *Heritage: In Memory of a Chinese Music Master Yang Yinliu*. My first time listening to its live performance deepened the impression of Yang's middle-aged times.

Creator's Artistic Brush from *The New Hymnal* was arranged by Chen Zeming in Nanjing Union Theological Seminary based on a Guqin piece *Pingsha Luo Yan* (平沙落雁). Chen, a Guqin connoisseur, arranged it into the four-part choir in 1956 and wrote a heptameter poem to it in 1982. The Guqin piece was found earliest in *Authenticity of Archaic Sound* (古音正宗) in 1634. The version performed in the concert was Wang Di's transcription of Guan Pinghu's rendering of the tablature in the *Series of Guqin Studies* (琴学丛书).

The earlier generations tried to combine some most elegant archaic Chinese music with Western hymns, where Guqin repertoire became a good choice. The study of Guqin comprises solo playing and singing accompaniment, and the latter is more suitable for arrangements. A Guqin song *Yuge Diao* (渔歌调) or *Jile Yin* (极乐吟) popular in the Ming and Qing Dynasties was based on Liu Zongyuan's poem *Fisherman* (渔翁) from the Tang Dynasty. It usually serves as an introduction to the large Guqin cycle *Ainai* (欵乃). In 1929, Yang Yinliu arranged it into a hymn *Nature Glows with Colours Rare*.

SACRED SONGS TRANSCRIBED FROM OTHER SOURCES

Can folk songs be arranged into sacred songs? We answered in the affirmative. When *The New Hymnal* called for outstanding works in Chinese style nationwide, a hymn based on a folk song of the Buyi people was accepted. *Haohuahong* was originally a tune of the Buyi people in Guizhou, which was arranged by Pei Huizhen, a local musician, into a four-part hymn *May the Divine Life* in 1982.

When Sun Chenhui arranged the programme, she chose a rarely performed old Chinese hymn entitled *Lord Before Our World Was Formed*. The problem was that its information is scarce and its provenance obscure: text by Wu Yushan, in iambic recitative, marked *Yundan*, arranged by Qiu Changnian in 1920. What is iambic recitative, what is *Yundan*, how to sing it, and who is Qiu Changnian?

Fortunately, Yang Yinliu's *Priliminary Research on Linguistic Musicology* (《语言音乐学初探》) provided a source of this tune. He notated the archaic tunes of slow recitative and fast recitation of *On a Spring Occasion* (春日偶成) by Cheng Hao from the Song Dynasty in Wuxi. The slow tune highly corresponds to *Yundan* and has an almost identical melody to the old hymn *Lord Before Our World Was Formed*. In the concert, Chen Qian, chair of Wuxi Tianyun Society, chanted the slow recitative in Wuxi Mandarin and then read the fast recitation in the local Wuxi dialect.

Also, Gong Hongyu's study reveals who Qiu Changnian was (Gong, 2020). He discovers that Louise Strong Hammond (1887–1945) noticed the striking similarities between Chinese literature recitatives and early Gregorian chants, so she collaborated with Qiu Changnian, a bookman in Wuxi, to compile a Christian hymnal based on Chinese poetic recitatives, where Hammond transcribed, arranged, and translated Qiu's recitatives. Her English version of the slow recitative of *On a Spring Occasion* was reset to Wu Yushan's (1631–1718) poem in the *Hymns of Universal Praise* in 1936 and became the hymn *Lord Before Our World Was Formed*. Finally, the lineage has been found, truth clarified, and mysteries solved. What a miraculous song that involves Sino-Western cultural fusions and recalls the long-forgotten recitatives!

SOME IMPRESSIONS

Generally, the concert has a very Chinese style overall. Far from adhering to the Western style of torment and salvation of souls willing to undergo suffering and trials, the music sound was not confined by the visceral complex of sinful feelings and conscious deliverance. The means by which Chinese folks dissolve their realistic stresses is not profound harmonies and sophisticated polyphonies on the pipe organ, but instead a pentatonic austerity. Although the Chinese sacred songs are accompanied by the pipe organ's magnificent timbres, they do not get thicker or heavier, in which we cannot hear agony or struggle. There is no such culture of sinful feelings in the Chinese world, but there is consciousness, conscience, and pity. Musicians love the style of Bach's Masses, but the masses cannot hold their nerve on such music – they hope to sing for their heart in their own way. The style of tunes that suit the believers' identities came from the composers' deep understanding of the Chinese laity.

It reminded me of the Mass in village churches that I visited in fieldwork sessions. Tired peasants, wrinkles on their faces and hoes in their hands, came to church and sang together the sacred songs as plain as water that rinsed their fatigue. Without such experiences, one cannot understand why Chinese sacred music has taken on such familiar tunes in a plain style.

Sun Chenhui's comments were both academic and realistic, both profound and palpable, and always informed of a classical hint of sorrow connected to the vicissitudes of historical figures in touching pathos. The salvage for memories became a narrative of remembrance. People sometimes thought that pious believers were gone – no, in fact, they are always around. Without this concert, Sun Chenhui's devotion would still have remained unseen. It also fulfilled her wish to demonstrate what Chinese Christian music has been through and what is still present to be heard and seen. Substantial fieldwork added to the historical depth of the concert programme as well as to the credibility of her comments.

Taiwanese scholar Chen Chi-nan frequently says that the mainstream of historians is to find a wing in place A, another wing in place B, the antennae in place C, and the abdomen in place D, then piece them together, and call it a butterfly, while anthropologists see whole butterflies in fieldwork (Liu Yonghua, n.d.: 23). However, Sun Chenhui has demonstrated the common pursuit of historians and anthropologists – she “found a wing in place A”, “another wing in place B”, and then the antennae and the abdomen from all places nationwide and worldwide. Significantly, she not only assembled them together but also breathed life into all pieces on the spot – “Constantly dancing butterflies stay to play/ Unrestrained, the lovely orioles cry.” (Poem by Du Fu)

The year 1985 saw the reopening of Xishiku Cathedral after the Cultural Revolution; it was also the first year when I came to college in Beijing and had my very first Christmas abustle and astir with huge crowds – one of the series of unexpected events in the good old times in the “1980s”. I clearly remembered that Christmas night with all-Western music. Now, 36 years later, I'm here again (in the first row) to listen to Chinese sacred music of a totally different style. As Sun Chenhui (2021) wrote in her comments, “It is no exaggeration to say that this concert has been waited for seventy years and was anticipated for twenty years.” For me, this is a concert I have waited for 36 years.

REFERENCES

Amiot, Jean Joseph-Marie. 1769. *Mémoire sur la musique des Chinoise, tant anciens que modernes*. Paris: L'imprime du Parlement.

Pelliot, Paul and E. Chavannes. 1911. Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine. *Journal Asiatique*: 499–617.

François Picard. 1991. *La Musique Chinoise*. Paris: Minerve.

Sun Chenhui. 2021. Comments on the concert. Unpubl. material documenting the event on 16 October.

Gong Hongyu. 2020. In the Shadow of Yang Yinliu—— Louise Strong Hammond, Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry, and the Indigenization of Christian Liturgical Music. *Huang Zhong*, 2: 37–47.

Liu Yonghua: Translator's Introduction of *Le Retour de Martin Guerre / The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis (1928—), unknown edition, 23.

Zemon, Natalie. 1984. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

APPENDIX

SOME PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE EVENT PRODUCED BY THE 3 LITTLE LAMBS STUDIO. BY COURTESY OF THE COMPANY'S PHOTOGRAPHERS.



Figures 1–4: (From left to right and from above to below): on a spring occasion, poetry chanting, tune by Chen Qian; Creator's Artistic Brush by Chen Zemin, the Glory Choir directed by Liang Runni; Ave Maria, Choir from the Catholic Archdiocese of Beijing directed by Wang Fei; All Heav'n Worships in Great Awe, solo singing by Fenghao, imitation of a five-string lute pipa as found during the time of the Tang Dynasty played by Sun Chenhui.