

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Unit of Assessment (UoA): 39

Title of case study: Changing the Landscape of Contemporary Music by Integrating Chinese and Western Elements

(1) Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

While Western classical music has been interacting with eastern musical cultures for centuries, it is only in recent decades that a repertoire has been established attempting to incorporate Chinese influences. The creative endeavours of Professors Victor Chan Wai Kwong, Chan Wing Wah, and Wendy Lee have yielded more than a hundred new musical works integrating Western and Chinese elements, and this has allowed Chinese musicians, audiences, and music educators access to an expanding repertoire that reflects their own roots and societies. The innovative and distinctive perspectives adopted by these three composers have expanded the horizons of new music, helping to promote Chinese culture worldwide, and effecting a societal impact that extends far beyond the works themselves.

(2) Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The synthesis of Chinese and Western artistic concepts and elements, especially in post-tonal musical contexts, has become a major trend among concert composers of Chinese descent since the 1980s, resulting in a global wave of musico-cultural dialogues in the contemporary art music scene. Conventionally and correctly characterized as a place where “East meets West,” Hong Kong is an ideal location for such cross-cultural creative endeavors.

While serving at the Music Department at CUHK, Professors Victor Chan (1989–date), Chan Wing Wah (1986–2007), and Wendy Lee (2008–date) have explored multiple opportunities to draw together Chinese and Western artistic concepts and elements, resulting in over a hundred items of creative output, many of which employ genres and instrumentations rarely found in contemporary art music.

For example, the modern Chinese orchestra — a neo-traditional ensemble seldom featured in the works of émigré Chinese composers in the West — provides an exciting and colorful terrain for experimentation. Due to the unique acoustic characteristics of many Chinese musical instruments, composers writing for this kind of ensemble are confronted by various challenges, including issues about tuning and overall balance.

For vocal works with Chinese lyrics, the economy of words, the lexical contour and the tonal basis of Chinese languages can present a challenge when attempting to capture the expressivity of the text through the music. To overcome these technical and aesthetic challenges, the three Hong Kong-based composers developed their own approaches and solutions, distinguishing them in important ways from other Chinese composers in Mainland China, Taiwan, and other countries. Representative works since 2000 include:

Music by Victor Chan Wai Kwong

In *Holy Communion Setting* (2018) [3.1], the first Cantonese-English setting of its kind, specific attention is paid to the Cantonese tones of the Chinese texts, which have often been neglected in Cantonese sacred music at the expense of intelligibility. This focus does not, however, compromise the integrity and coherence of the music.

In *If Heaven Too Had Passions* (2009) [3.2], a choral work drawing on a Tang Dynasty poem, commonly-used text-setting devices, including text repetition, dissection and re-ordering, are completely abandoned. The music behaves like an uninterrupted recitation of the poem, with each syllable carefully paced to make its unique appearance at an appropriate point of time in the music.

Music by Chan Wing Wah

In Symphony No. 8, *This Boundless Land* (2006) [3.3], an unusual combination of choir, organ, and Chinese orchestra is used to articulate the composer's desire for a utopian world of peace and love.

In *Over Ten Thousand Mountains* (2002) [3.4] for *bang-di*, *sheng*, *erhu* and *zheng*, the use of imitative counterpoint, ostinato, and free tonality imbues the traditional sound of the Chinese instruments with a fresh, contemporary energy.

Music by Wendy Lee Wan Ki

In *Black Lacquer* (2010) [3.5], a double bass solo by Wendy Lee, “shiny” harmonics, “nerve-racking” pizzicati, and other unique timbres are adopted to capture the impenetrable power suggested by the lacquer of a piece of exquisite Chengdu lacquer-work, analogous to the unbreakable bond between us and our close ones.

(3) References to the research (indicative maximum of 6 references)

- 3.1 **Victor Chan Wai Kwong. *Holy Communion Setting* 聖餐禮文樂章 (2018) for chorus and pipe organ;** commissioned by the Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal) in 2018; first put into liturgical use by the by St John’s Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop of Hong Kong; subsequently used in the 20th anniversary celebration of the inauguration of the Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal) as a Province, the chief occasion for which the setting was composed; recording by the Provincial musical establishment, the HKSKH Collegium Musicum Sacrum, accessible via YouTube.
(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA6Ive3IAoyvCHMk-I72MOw>)
- 3.2 **Victor Chan Wai Kwong. *If Heaven Too Had Passions* 天若有情 (2009) for chorus and piano;** commissioned and premiered by the Taipei Chamber Singers in 2009; subsequent performances on numerous occasions including the Asian Composers’ League Conference and Festival in 2011; published in *Music Unlimited* (2010, ISBN: 978-986-86911-0-0).
- 3.3 **Chan Wing Wah. *Over Ten Thousand Mountains* 逾萬山 (2002) for *bang-di*, *sheng*, *erhu* and *zheng*;** commissioned and premiered in Argentina by the Chinese Music Virtuosi in 2002; subsequent performances in Hong Kong and overseas; published in CD by RTHK in 2005.
- 3.4 **Chan Wing Wah. *Symphony No.8: This Boundless Land* 蒼茫大地 (2006) for choir, organ and orchestra of Chinese instruments;** commissioned by the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in 2006 and premiered in 2007; received CASH Golden Sail Award in 2007; subsequent performances in Hong Kong, China and USA; published in CD under the title 蒼茫大地 by Hugo Productions Ltd. in 2008.
- 3.5 **Wendy Lee Wan Ki. *Black Lacquer* (2010) for solo double bass;** commissioned and premiered by Xu Li (principal bassist of the Macau Orchestra) in 2010; subsequent performances in China, USA, and Canada; published on a DVD by Beijing Dong Fang Audio and Video Corp in 2011. Set piece of the Maggini Double Bass Competition in China in 2018.

(4) Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The output of the faculty has impacted the following beneficiaries:

1) Performers and Audience

Performers and audiences worldwide now have access to a repertoire that incorporates Chinese elements, including musical ideas, societal events, and linguistic features. Chinese musicians and audiences can therefore experience works that authentically reflect their roots, while foreign counterparts are offered new ways of accessing and understanding the native cultures embedded in the works.

Chan Wing Wah’s *Over Ten Thousand Mountains* was composed for an unconventional quartet comprising the *bang-di* flute, *sheng* mouth organ, *erhu* fiddle, and *zheng* zither. According to Loo Sze Wang, the performer who commissioned and toured the work, “Chan Wing Wah’s use of imitative counterpoint, ostinato, and free tonality imbues the traditional sound of the Chinese instruments with contemporary energy that is unprecedented by any other works in the Chinese music

repertoire” (Source 5.4). Likewise, his work *Symphony No. 8*, which combines organ and choir with a modern Chinese orchestra, was considered by Yan Hui Chang, Artistic Director of Hong Kong Chinese orchestra, as “a model for later composers and inspired many other works that combine Chinese and Western instrumentations,” which “allowed musicians from different traditions and training to exchange their musical thoughts and expertise, hence fostering cultural exchanges and conversations through rehearsals and performances of the work.” (Source 5.1). Indeed, its sustained popularity among performers is clearly evident in the fact that it has occasionally been transcribed for various instrumental combinations and performed in both the original and transcribed versions even years after its composition (2006). Within the assessed period, for example, the third movement of the symphony was performed in a version arranged for choir, piano, and *Dongxiao* vertical flute by Bel Canto Chorus, Hong Kong in October 2015.

Inspired by the tragic Wenchuan Earthquake, Wendy Lee’s *Black Lacquer* for solo double bass was made a set piece in the Maggini Double Bass Competition in China held in July 2018. Jury Chair James VanDemark, Professor of Double Bass at Eastman School of Music, commented that *Black Lacquer* “is brilliantly written in a compelling and evocative yet distinctly contemporary style,” and “should easily become a staple of the contemporary repertoire for the double bass” (Source 5.9). Kelvin Ng, a winner of the competition, opined that *Black Lacquer* “should be performed by us all frequently” (Source 5.10).

A significant addition to the Anglican liturgical repertoire, Victor Chan’s *Holy Communion Setting* is the first Cantonese-English setting of its kind, which successfully achieved a balance between linguistic intelligibility and musicality. According to Felix Yeung, Provincial Music Director of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, “organists and choir members appreciated his effort in making sure that the melody contour matches the inflection of the Cantonese language on the one hand, and at the same time creating a musically fulfilling and beautiful setting of the liturgical text”; among the performers, “one of the service organists expressed to” Yeung “that she enjoyed playing this setting as she played it more often”. (Source 5.6). Additionally, the dozens of Chinese vocal/choral pieces stemming from Victor’s research on “Music and the Chinese Language” have received hundreds of performances in concert halls, at international festivals, and over the radio. For instance, *If Heavens too Have Passion* is regularly featured in the repertoire of Taipei Chamber Singers. The piece was performed on numerous occasions including “New Trends of Contemporary Chinese Choral Music” Conference and Festival (2009), “Asian Composers’ League Festival and Conference” (2011), “Musicarama Contemporary Music Festival” (2016), and published under “Music Unlimited” (Taipei) in 2010, along with repeated performances under the extended “Music Unlimited” series.

2) Music Educators and Composers

The faculty output has significant contributions to composition pedagogy. Notably, *Over Ten Thousand Mountains* was frequently used as an example in composition workshops, such as the Chinese Instrumental Writing Lecture Demonstration organized by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB), which was attended by over 150 participants including secondary music students, teachers, and composers held in December 2017. According to the organizer, Fung Chi Hong, Curriculum Development Officer of the EDB, the work is “one of the best pedagogical examples” available for the teaching and learning of Chinese instrumental composition, and the lecture enabled the participating teachers to “further extend [their] students’ musical experiences through arranging Chinese ensemble music for students to perform, help students to appreciate music critically[,] and provide more creative and elaborated ideas to students.”(Source 5.5)

3) Beyond the Musical Community

The impact of the compositions extends beyond the musical community. For instance, Victor Chan’s *Holy Communion Setting* enabled the local Anglican communities to sing in Cantonese and English simultaneously during communion services. The work was used liturgically in the 20th anniversary celebration of the inauguration of the Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal) as a Province, an event attended by over 3,500 participants held in October 2018, and by St John’s

Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop of Hong Kong. According to Felix Yeung, many other Chinese-speaking parishes “are preparing to add Professor Chan’s Communion Setting into their repertoire” by organizing “workshops and training sessions” for the congregation members (Source 5.6), bringing the work to over 30,000 members of the church. Recordings of all the movements of the work performed by the Collegium Musicum Sacrum under the Hong Kong Anglican church have also been officially uploaded to YouTube; as of 11 August 2019, the piece has been viewed 16861 times.

Chan Wing Wah’s *Symphony No.8* was the centrepiece in officially supported concerts commemorating the 20th-anniversary of the establishment of the HKSAR held at the Herbst Theatre and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, which, serves the social function of bringing together Hong Kongers and Hong Kong Chinese Americans (Source 5.3.1). Conveying the key message “reconciliation through forgiveness and love” (Source 5.3.1), the piece was well received: “the ending is followed by non-stop applause, and it seems that the work has deeply resonated with the audience” (Source 5.3.1). The piece was later performed in a concert held at Zhuhai Opera House in December 2018; co-organized by the Arts, Sports, and Tourism Bureau of Zhuhai (Guangdong, China), the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong, and the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Macau, the concert brought together musicians and non-musicians from the three cities. (Source 5.3.2)

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Testimonial letter (1/4/2019) by Yan Hui Chang commenting on Chan Wing Wah’s *Symphony No. 8*: <http://bit.ly/2YGGAYk>

5.2 Video recording of an arranged version of Chan Wing Wah’s *Symphony No. 8*, 3rd Movement, by Bel Canto Chorus, Hong Kong (Performed on 5 October 2015): <http://bit.ly/2YK9Vkz>

5.3 Press coverage and reviews on the performances of Chan Wing Wah’s *Symphony No. 8* in the US and Zhuhai, China:

5.3.1 US Performances

- "Hong Kong's Oldest Choir in US Handover Celebration." *South China Morning Post*, 24 June 2017: <http://bit.ly/2YJJeIv>
- *Ta Kung Pao*, 17 July 2017: <http://bit.ly/2ZVYTVX>

5.3.2 Zhuhai, China Performance

- The Cultural Affairs Bureau, Macau, 31/12/2018: <http://bit.ly/2Mf56sY>

5.4 Testimonial letter (28/2/2019) by Loo Sze Wang commenting on Chan Wing Wah’s *Over Ten Thousand Mountains*: <http://bit.ly/2OOzYCn>

5.5 Testimonial email (14/1/2019) by Fung Chi Hong commenting on Chan Wing Wah’s *Over Ten Thousand Mountains*: <http://bit.ly/31si6yK>

5.6 Testimonial letter (31/1/2019) by Felix Yeung commenting on Victor Chan’s *Holy Communion Setting*: <http://bit.ly/2KHQCvO>

5.7 Press coverage and review on the performance of Victor Chan’s *Holy Communion Setting* in the 20th anniversary celebration of the inauguration of the Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal) as a Province: “教省二十周年慶典 10.6 舉行。”*Echo*, 30 September 2018, <http://echo.hkskh.org/issue.aspx?lang=2&id=3401>

5.8 Official recordings of Victor Chan’s *Holy Communion Setting* uploaded (on 14,15 August 2018) by the Hong Kong Anglican Church to YouTube: <http://bit.ly/2ORDT1D>

5.9 Testimonial Letter (30/12/2018) by James VanDemark commenting on Lee’s *Black Lacquer*: <http://bit.ly/2YV2mqz>

5.10 Testimonial Letter (30/12/2018) by Kelvin Ng commenting on Lee’s *Black Lacquer*: <http://bit.ly/2McTnec>