REMEMBERING MRS. PIAN, MY MENTOR AND FRIEND

BELL YUNG

University of Pittsburgh

It was almost fifty years ago when I first met Mrs. Pian, who shortly thereafter became my mentor when I was learning how to be a music scholar and teacher. After I moved away from Cambridge, I continued to see her at least once every year, visiting her in Cambridge or meeting her elsewhere. Both before and after my graduation we spent time together in many parts of Asia, including Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, as well as at scholarly conferences in the U.S. and Europe. In this essay I want to introduce her as the mentor, colleague, and friend whom I got to know so well, and briefly introduce her scholarly thoughts, which had a profound impact on me. This will naturally involve telling you a certain amount about myself, for which I beg your indulgence.

THE LONELINESS OF A CHINESE MUSIC RESEARCHER

We first met because of music. This is what she wrote in her (unfinished) autobiography:

It was around 1967 that I first met Bell Yung, at that time a Ph.D. candidate in Physics at MIT, and already an accomplished pianist. He was a member, and later conductor, of a Chinese students’ chorus in the Boston area. I had stopped conducting for a long time, partly because of my frequent travels abroad. Once I was asked to give a talk in Boston on aspects of Chinese music, and I wanted to demonstrate some modern settings of Chinese folk songs. So I approached the chorus members asking them whether they could help me by performing a few pieces during my talk. They very kindly agreed to my proposal, and even came to my house for the rehearsals. That was how I got to know Bell fairly well. (20)

The choir she referred to was the Chinese Intercollegiate Choral Society, which had been formed only a year earlier in 1966. The conductor was Peter Ho, an MIT

1 It was the custom for Harvard students to address faculty members by their surname prefaced by Mr., Miss, or Mrs. Hence, she was always “Mrs. Pian” to me and her other students. After I received my degree, she said I should address her as Iris, which was what her family and close friends called her (professional colleagues addressed her as Rulan). I was unable to make the switch, despite her repeated requests that I do so.

doctoral student in Civil Engineering and a superb amateur singer; I was a tenor in the chorus. We had heard of Mrs. Pian as Harvard music professor and daughter of the famous Yuen Ren Chao, and felt honored to be asked to sing some four-part settings of Chinese folk songs. Peter and I were joined by two wonderful singers in the chorus, Josephine Wang, a Harvard Law student, and Maria Tsong, an MIT graduate student in chemistry. That was the first time I stepped into 14 Brattle Circle, little knowing that it would become almost a second home for the next 46 years.

In the fall of 1968, I found myself at a crossroads. Should I proceed with my intended career as a physicist, or do something significant about my love of music? I decided to try the latter and applied to Harvard University’s Music Department. At that time, I had no formal training in music except piano lessons taken since childhood; but with Mrs. Pian’s encouragement, I decided to take the chance, and to my delight was accepted with a full multi-year fellowship. The condition of acceptance was that I take remedial undergraduate courses in Music History and Theory, both of which I wanted to do anyway. I have no doubt that I owed this good fortune primarily to Mrs. Pian, who would act as my “guardian angel” for many decades to come.

When I entered the graduate program in music in 1969, I was like a child in a candy store, trying out for the first time all sorts of goodies that I had long imagined but never thought I could actually taste. I had no idea what I wanted to concentrate on, and instead took a great variety of courses, which in the first year alone included composition with David del Tredici, harpsichord literature and performance practice with visiting professor Gustav Leonhardt, music theory with Larry Berman, music history with Anthony Newcomb, and a directed study on Chinese music with Mrs. Pian. All the courses were challenging for someone who had never taken a single academic music course before, but they were also exhilarating and entirely satisfying.

But studying with Mrs. Pian was something more: it was a transformational experience. Under her personal guidance I read through her book on Song dynasty (960–1279) musical notation, Yang Yinliu 楊蔭瀏 on Chinese music history, two very different studies on the qin 琴 by Tsun Yuen Lui 呂振原 and Robert van Gulik, and other works. As I read, a new musical and cultural world opened up; but more importantly, I learned how to read, how to think, how to talk—all in ways utterly different from my many years of training in engineering and physics. Working with Mrs. Pian was the first step in my long journey of learning to be a musicologist, and, when compared to the other courses I was taking, hers was the one that convinced me that what I wanted to do was musicology—thinking and writing about music rather than performing or composing—and to explore the world of China. I told her of my decision, and she was pleased, and gladly accepted me as her student.

One day shortly after I decided to pursue research in Chinese music, she said to me: “You need to be aware that doing research in Chinese music in North America is a lonely endeavor.” It was an observation pregnant with meaning and implication. I mention it because first, her remark revealed a keen awareness of the challenges that she herself faced and which, consequently, she thought I would face too. Secondly, even at that early stage in my studies, she cared enough about
me to want to alert me to the social and professional obstacles I would be encountering, rather than let me gaze out towards the future all starry-eyed, seeing nothing but scholarly matters. I came to really understand this only years later, and it deserves a few words of explanation.

The scholarly study of Chinese music in North America falls within Sinology on the one hand and Musicology on the other. In Sinology, Chinese music ranks, even today, near the bottom of subjects of interest, as can be observed at annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies, where panels on music rarely draw more than a handful of music specialists. There is a good reason for this: music is regarded by some, even sophisticated scholars, as either fluff not worthy of serious attention, or as too difficult to understand because they don’t know musical notation. When Sinologists are educated in music, it is likely to be European classical music; Chinese music is considered inferior because it doesn’t have a “history,” it doesn’t have easily accessible recordings, and most of all, it is perceived to be simple and less developed than Western Classical music. (This bias is also held by many highly educated Chinese scholars in China.) Chinese music is also perceived as not living up to the high achievements attained within China by, say, poetry, painting, or calligraphy.

In the field of musical scholarship in North America, Chinese music is assigned to Ethnomusicology rather than Musicology (also known as Historical Musicology). The two disciplines carve up the field of musical scholarship into two domains in terms of subject matter, assumptions, ideology, and research methodology. Historical Musicology focuses almost exclusively on European Classical Music and its repertoire, particularly its canons. It emphasizes individual creativity; its aims are, basically, to theorize what makes music “great” through analysis of individual compositions and of whole repertoires, and to construct a history of European Classical Music through the structural and stylistic developments of successive generations of composition. Its methodology includes library research, source studies (especially manuscript studies), paleography, philology (especially textual criticism), style criticism, historiography (the choice of historical method), and musical analysis.

Ethnomusicology focuses on all kinds of music from all other parts of the world, and on the folk and popular music of European-rooted culture—in short, all music not subsumed under Historical Musicology.\(^3\) It assumes that music is largely a social activity and less as a matter individual creativity, and it aims to understand the uses, functions, meanings, and other cultural and social contexts of music. The Society for Ethnomusicology’s official website provides a comprehensive definition of Ethnomusicology.\(^4\)

One may contrast the two disciplines succinctly as follows. For Musicology, European classical music is considered unique in the world for its universally held artistic, cultural, and humanistic value; it is to be treasured for its own sake, and to be recognized as a testimony to the great achievements of the human imagination.

\(^3\) In theory, each discipline claims to include all music; but in practice, this division is clear.
It defines Western culture, along with its great literature, philosophy, art, science, and industry. In contrast, Ethnomusicology attributes no such absolute value to its subject matter; the value of music is relatively determined within its own cultural and social contexts. To most ethnomusicologists, music should be approached objectively without any assumption of intrinsic or artistic value.

Mrs. Pian’s magnum opus, Song Dynasty Musical Sources and Their Interpretation (Harvard University Press, 1967), based on her Harvard doctoral dissertation (1962),5 won the prestigious Otto Kinkeldey Prize, an annual award for the best monograph of the year by the American Musicological Society (AMS, the flagship organization of Musicology). Her book requires some basic knowledge of Chinese history and literature, which very few members of the AMS at that time (or now) possessed. It is therefore not unexpected that although the prize committee recognized her as a serious music historian, the book itself caused hardly a ripple in Historical Musicology.

On the other hand, in terms of subject matter, Chinese music is considered to lie within the realm of Ethnomusicology, which mainly studies music as a living tradition, the overwhelming bulk of which is transmitted orally with little or no musical notation or documented history. Few Ethnomusicologists regarded her prize-winning book as pertaining to the core of their discipline; like their counterparts in AMS, they had (and still have) little interest in obscure music manuscripts dating to a millennium ago, from a culture of which they know little. Sadly, the book’s impact in Ethnomusicology was also minimal.6

Thus, Mrs. Pian’s intellectual loneliness within Sinology, Musicology, and Ethnomusicology was understandable and palpable, and she wanted me to be aware that such loneliness might also await me. The founding of the Conference on Chinese Oral and Performing Literature (CHINOPERL) in 1969 by herself, her father Y. R. Chao, and others, and the founding of the Association for Chinese Music Research (ACMR) in 1986, for which she was also the moving force and a charter member, provided platforms for interaction with North American Sinologists in such fields as linguistics, anthropology, folklore, theater, and popular literature, as well as in music. Access to these platforms alleviated some of her feeling of isolation, and this explains in part why she served both organizations with unmitigated dedication and a sense of mission for many decades.7

With the opening of the People’s Republic to U.S. citizens in the early 1970s, Mrs. Pian began making frequent trips to the Mainland. In the beginning, her purpose was mainly to accompany her father, who was enthusiastically welcomed both into the political establishment and into academia. Later, beginning in

5 While in the title of her dissertation the name of the dynasty was romanized according to the conventions of the Wade-Giles system (i.e., “Sung”), for the book title Gwoyeu Romatzyh 國語羅馬字 (GR), the system developed by her father, was used. She continued to use the GR system in her writing, as can be seen in some of the quotes from her writing in this essay.

6 In the last twenty years, there has been an increasing number of graduate students interested in the study of Chinese music. Feeling very strongly that Mrs. Pian’s book is a must-read for anyone in the field, I arranged for it to be reprinted by The Chinese University Press in 2003. CHINOPERL honored her by making her “Honorary President for Life” and ACMR by establishing an annual prize in her name.
the early 1980s, after her father passed away, she continued to visit almost yearly with her husband Ted, who, as a prominent professor of Aeronautical Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was himself welcomed by professionals in his field.

During those later visits, being no longer in the shadow of her father, she was embraced and respected for her own merits as a prominent Chinese music specialist and an ethnomusicologist from the West. The Chinese musicological world, having been isolated for decades, looked upon her as a beacon of information and fount of insights. She gave many lectures and participated in informal discussions; she brought to China the newest thoughts in musicology and ethnomusicology, and introduced her own work. Each time she visited, she also brought the latest audio and videotaping equipment to record the performances she saw; at the end of her trips, she would leave this equipment behind for still impoverished scholars of music who had no access to them for their own use.

Professor Chen Yingshi 陳應時 of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, who is today a major scholar of Chinese music history, was a young man then. When he learned about the passing of Mrs. Pian in early 2014, he wrote the following that was posted on the Memorial Page dedicated to Mrs. Pian on the CHINOPERL website:

I had never heard of Professor Rulan Chao Pian before the end of the 1970s, as Mainland China was isolated from the West. In the summer of 1979, I chanced upon her book *Song Dynasty Musical Sources and Their Interpretation* in the Beijing Library (now the National Library), and with the help of the *New English–Chinese Dictionary*, I read the entire book, and boldly wrote a letter to her. I told her what I learned from reading it, and raised a number of queries to seek her clarification and advice. Within a month I received her reply, in which she wrote: “In the 13 years since I published the book, no one has read it as closely as you did.” She . . . invited me to be a visiting scholar at the Yenching Institute of Harvard University. . . . Due to political reasons at the time, I could not get a passport, hence was not able to apply for a visa. But I was very grateful to Prof. Pian for her interest and care for my work and for the invitation; even though I was not able to join her, my research was inspired greatly by what I learned from her book. . . . In August of 1980, I met Prof. Pian in person for the first time in Beijing when she visited the Chinese Mainland with her father Yuen Ren Chao. Subsequently, she and I met many times in Beijing and Shanghai when she and her husband Prof. Theodore Pian visited China.

---

8 She continued, however, to be very filial and to invest a lot of time toward making sure that her father’s work was well-known and available. Her own research and writing basically came to a stop when she took on the task of editing her father’s work on music, his personal papers, letters, and other material, in order to assist in the publication of *Zhao Yuanren quanji* 趙元任全集 (The complete writings of Yuen Ren Chao), 20 vols. (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2002–). The reader will remember that when I cited her “Autobiographical Sketches” above, I characterized it as “unfinished.” In the Chinese headnote and at the end of the piece, what was published at that time was described as only the first installment (it covers only through 1969, shortly before she began visiting China). This is just one of the projects she did not have time to finish.
Each time we met, she would tell me about musicological news and academic developments from abroad, which greatly helped my research. Now that she has left us, I want to say to her with my deepest feeling and most profound respect: “Thank you so much for your help in so many ways!”

Chen’s note is a good indication of her influence on Mainland scholars, but also how she responded warmly to a young kindred spirit, and how grateful Chen was. Those visits also inspired her, in turn, by the chance to meet so many music scholars and musicians. The most important of those was Yang Yinliu, the pre-eminent music historian whose books she had read decades ago. When they met in 1980 he was already over 80 years old, and would pass away a few years later. I was fortunate to meet the great man during one of Mrs. Pian’s visits to China when I tagged along as her acolyte.

During those trips on which I accompanied her, I witnessed how she interacted with the older as well as the younger generations of scholars and musicians. Not only did they find in her a precious source of information from and about the outside world, but they were also struck by how different she was from scholars they knew. Despite her reputation, she was unassuming, humble, gracious, and easy to approach. They adored her and she welcomed interaction with a community of musical scholars who shared her interests. It was the first time she felt professionally at home, no longer isolated.

Throughout the years, Mrs. Pian taught me not only how to be a scholar and teacher, but also how to live and how to view the world. One incident during those early years has stayed with me. We were talking about the highly respected and immensely popular mid-twentieth-century novelist and short-story writer, Zhang Ailing 張愛玲 (Eileen Chang), and I told her how much I admired her writing. Mrs. Pian quietly said that she did not, because she found Zhang lacking in humanity. For her, however astute Zhang was as an observer of culture and society, and however clever as a writer in exploiting and releasing the power of language, Zhang was mean-spirited rather than compassionate about the flaws and weaknesses of her characters. At the time, Mrs. Pian’s view struck me as original, and, as far as I knew, one that no literary critic had put forward; thinking through some of the stories, I had to admit that her point was valid, and so I began to look at Zhang’s stories in a new light. It dawned on me only later, after I got to know her better, that her assessment of Zhang revealed her most admirable qualities, her humility and her humanity—she was only too aware of her own flaws and weaknesses, and, because of this, those of others. As a young man sailing through life with little difficulty and full of self-confidence, I was quick to notice other people’s shortcomings, and not shy about pointing them out bluntly and mercilessly. Mrs. Pian, in her ever wise and gentle way, tried to make me more self-aware, and kinder toward others.

---

Some very minor modifications have been made to the original.
LIFE AT 14 BRATTLE CIRCLE

The period of our most intense interaction was in 1976 when I was under pressure to finish my dissertation on Cantonese opera by that September in order to begin a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at Cornell. I ensconced myself in the basement of 14 Brattle Circle for most of that year. The Pians’ house at that time had not yet been expanded and renovated (that took place shortly thereafter): the upstairs consisted of two bedrooms, a study, a living room-dining room, and a small kitchen. I remember we often had dinner in the tiny but bright “mud” room that led to the back courtyard. Between the study and the living room was a narrow and rather steep and dark staircase leading to the basement. To the left of the lower landing was a small toilet and space used mainly for storage. To the right was a large rectangular room serving as a joint second study-library (the front part being Ted’s and the inner part Mrs. Pian’s), with a double bed in the middle. The walls were completely lined with books and file cabinets.

This cave-like basement room was where I slept and, mostly at night, worked on my dissertation, struggling with the demons of writing: organizing thoughts, putting them into words, and wrestling with the nuances of writing about the arts and humanities—demons I later witnessed at work in my own graduate students. I was handicapped not only by not being a native speaker, but also by needing to cleanse myself of certain aspects of my prior training: formed by an undergraduate degree in Engineering and five years of graduate training in Physics, my thought processes tended to be more fact-based, overly orientated towards logic, narrowly deductive, and positivistic. I hasten to say that I am not trying to define here a scientistic mode of thinking—plenty of scientists would not subscribe to the above characterization—but only certain habits that I had developed. This is where Mrs. Pian came in: ever patient, ever gentle, ever understanding, she slowly drew me out of the arrogant and argumentative attitude in which I had cocooned myself, always insisting on holding the upper ground of logic, and “proving” that my view was correct. I remember once when, in the heat of our discussion, I exclaimed in dismay “How can you be so illogical!” She laughed out loud in great mirth—I think that was one of the very few times she lost the self-control that was otherwise so characteristic of her.

Some of the most memorable moments during those nights occurred around midnight or a little later. As I was deep in my thoughts working through some sentences, I would hear her slowly climbing down the steep stairs from the kitchen; then she would emerge as an apparition in the doorway with a tray of some goodies, either xifan (rice porridge) with the obligatory condiments, or Western cookies and milk, and implore me to take a break and have some nourishment. We would, of course, then chat away on all kinds of topics, sometimes for hours, until dawn nearly broke. Thinking back, those were the moments when I learned the most from her.

During those early days of writing, she gave me many insights, insights that had little to do with music, but rather with thoughts, words, language, and communication. At that time, when I was exploring the music of Cantonese opera, my mind, exploding with new ideas, ran wild with ever-changing speculation, interpretations, and theories. I would excitedly try to explain to her what I had in mind, probably quite incoherently, and she would quietly say: write them down. The message was threefold: first, using written words to express...
thoughts and feelings is the fundamental tool of a scholar; master it. Secondly, writing in a string of words is essentially linear, while the jumble of thoughts in one’s head is multi-dimensional; for better or for worse, one has to adjust the thoughts, possibly even modifying or distorting them, in order to express them in words. Thirdly, the linearity of language is in fact an effective check on the clarity and validity of one’s thought, and hence a tool in the thinking process. These insights may be obvious to readers of this article, but at the time, they were exactly what I needed to set me straight.

When, years later, I studied the great music philosopher Charles Seeger’s writings on music, speech, and speech about music (musicology), his ideas and Mrs. Pian’s echoed one another. Putting thoughts into strings of words in order to communicate is a task that faces all scholars. But for musicologists, the fact that music also moves linearly in the time dimension (but with other fundamental differences from speech) adds to the complexity, confusion, and challenge. Mrs. Pian’s dual training in music and language gave her special insight into this matter.

Mrs. Pian and her husband welcomed me into their home as part of the family. During the day, I would emerge upstairs to eat, play piano, chat with Mrs. Pian, and meet many of the Pians’ visitors. I got to know Ted, and the three of us had many pleasant moments over the small dining table in the mud room. Some precious moments were when the two of them talked on mundane matters; I simply sat back and enjoyed listening to her mellifluous Mandarin. I observed that, when Mrs. Pian spoke to Ted in Mandarin, her voice register dropped a notch, with a rich alto timbre, almost a contralto. Because my Mandarin had problems in the most basic aspects of pronunciation, the initials, finals, and tones of words, I tended to speak to her in English, and she very understandingly followed suit. However, when we discussed matters related to Chinese music, I couldn’t avoid Chinese. But she never overtly corrected me. More than once she even tried to put me at ease by saying that her Shanghainese and Cantonese were not as good as my Mandarin.

14 Brattle Circle was mostly quiet in the daytime with the Pians away in their respective Harvard and MIT offices. I enjoyed browsing through Mrs. Pian’s library, her 100+ photo albums, and most of all, playing her Everett upright piano, which sat in their living room at the time. Often, when they returned home from their offices or from food-shopping and found me playing, they would tip-toe around the house trying not to disturb me. When I finished a piece, Mrs. Pian would thank me for filling the house with beautiful music.

I happened to be working on the late Schubert piano sonatas at the time, and I think she truly liked hearing me play, even though, as an amateur, I played only passably well. Years later, I read in her autobiographical sketches that Schubert was one of her father’s favorite composers, and no doubt hers too, as she was greatly influenced by her father in her musical taste. Our mutual love of European classical music was a special bond between us. Even though both of us chose to work professionally in Chinese music, we both grew up surrounded by European classical music; that love remained with us.

Many years later, after Ted passed away in 2009, Mrs. Pian’s health declined rapidly; she became quite fragile and spent most of her days sitting on the living room couch, often dozing off. I visited her about twice a year, on or around her birthday in April, and in the fall. During those visits, I would bring my laptop and read her my latest writings, show her images of music making, and play music files
for her. But I think she enjoyed most when I played the piano for her; she always perked up and clapped energetically after each piece. At the time, there were two pianos in the house: the upright had been moved to the basement to accommodate a baby grand Kohler inherited from her father. The latter, unfortunately, was quite unplayable because the pin block could no longer hold the tension of the strings. I could only play the upright in the basement for her while she remained upstairs. Because of the way the house was set up, the sound transmitted upstairs quite well, but she could not see me. Once, early in 2010, when I was playing for her in the basement, she forced her caretaker to help her struggle down the spiral staircase to the basement, something that she had been told not to do. She quietly sat behind me, watching me as I played, and insisted that I play one piece after another. During later visits, she never did come downstairs again when I played the piano for her.

In 1977, the Pian house was extensively renovated, which resulted in a much-expanded basement as well as a larger dining room and kitchen. The greatest change was in the basement: a new full bathroom was built; the original basement room where I spent months writing became a dedicated study for Ted; a newly-built part, even bigger, became a dedicated study for Mrs. Pian. The two studies formed an L-shape, with a “cathedral” ceiling for the space between them, opening to the main floor living room and dining room. An entire wall at the elbow of the L-shaped space, facing south, had an enormous window installed, about 8 feet wide and 12 feet high, running from the basement all the way to the ceiling of the main floor. Because it was situated between the two wings, the window spilled light throughout the two studies. A spiral staircase was built from the space upstairs connecting the living room and dining room to the downstairs landing that connects the two studies.

Mrs. Pian had all the walls lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, with her desk placed in the middle of the room. At one end of her study, next to the window and near the elbow of the L, was the upright, stereo, and all the recording equipment; at the other end was a cot where she sometimes took breaks from work. After I moved away from Cambridge, I still visited the Pians frequently, often staying for several days; when I did, I always slept on this cot. It was thus known as “Bell’s corner.”

Because her study was long, and connected directly to Ted’s study without any wall to divide the large L-shaped space, there often were drafts. She devised an ingenious method for cutting down the draft by dividing the room with homemade curtains: large pieces of cotton cloth draped over bamboo poles, the ends of which rested on the book shelves on opposite walls. The top edge of the pieces of cloth were sewn into a tube for the pole to go through, so that the curtain was secured and could slide back and forth to open or close. The cloth she used was called Indigo Print Cloth (lanyin huabu 藍印花布), a product originating from China’s rural culture that dates back over a millennium. It has an indigo base with an abstract design of white printed “flowers.” Since this cloth was her favorite, she would buy reams and reams of it every time she went to China, and had made it into blouses, skirts, pillow cases, bed and sofa covers, sofa cushion pockets, and,

\[10\] See the 1982 photo taken in Shanghai of her wearing such a skirt while standing with Chinese colleagues posted on the CHINOPERL website (see the dedication to this issue for details).
of course, the improvised curtains. Whenever she felt a draft she would draw the
curtains that were hung on either sides of her work area. The curtain between her
desk and “Bell’s corner” also came to provide me with some privacy at night. I
have come to think of the Indigo Print Cloth as her “brand”: simple, plain (su素),
rustically refined, modestly elegant. Her very gestalt.

The old upstairs study became a dedicated guest room, as was a small basement
storage room, officially known as the “dungeon.” Mrs. Pian welcomed her
students for stays ranging anywhere from a few months to several years. They were
as fortunate as I was to enjoy her generosity: the extensive private library, a
comfortable home life, and stimulating conversation. The ones I know best are
Joseph Lam (now at the University of Michigan), Yu Siu Wah (The Chinese
University of Hong Kong), and Lei Liang (University of California at San Diego).
Lam stayed in the “dungeon” for two years in the late 1970s, Yu in the upstairs
guest room off and on for four or five years in the 1980s, and Liang in the upstairs
guest room for eight years in the 1990s.

The greatly enlarged house also created more room on the main floor for
entertaining guests. The much expanded dining room had an extendable table that
could seat up to twelve people. When there were more guests, Mrs. Pian would
further extend the seating capacity by adding another table. On so many occasions
guests sat around and enjoyed her delicious cooking. Some of the favorites that
came to my mind included smoked chicken, sweet and sour fish, and the Ten
Fragrant Vegetables (shixiang cai十香菜). After a sumptuous, leisurely, and lively
dinner, the guests then retired to the living room and sat on three long sofas and on
the floor that surrounded a large round coffee table. Completely occupying one
large wall of the living room was the entire set of the Siku quanshu四庫全書(The
complete imperial library in four sections), a gift to her by a family friend, the
eminent Hu Shi 胡適, on the occasion of her receiving the doctorate, placed on
shelves specially built for the purpose behind a sofa. The fourth side has the
fireplace with a very long mantelpiece that displayed many photos and
memorabilia, above which hung an ink brush landscape painting by her
dissertation advisor and later colleague Lien-Sheng Yang 楊聯生. In this august
setting, guests would continue to chat away over tea, lounging around in the sofas
or on the carpeted floor, into the wee hours of the night, when, to everyone’s
delight, Mrs. Pian would magically produce a big pot of hongdou xifan紅豆稀飯
(red bean porridge).

The spacious house also allowed formalized monthly gatherings called
Kangqiao Xinyu康橋新語(New Dialogues in Cambridge), organized by her and
her close friend, the writer and poet Loh Wai Fong陸惠風. For these gatherings,
notable local scholars and visitors from China were invited to give presentations
on a variety of subjects related to China. The gatherings would attract a huge
crowd, sometimes numbering up to fifty or sixty, completely filling every seat and
square foot of floor of the living room and dining room. These and other
occasions, when family, students, colleagues, and friends gathered to partake of
the Pians’ hospitality, generosity, warmth, food, and the rich intellectual milieu,
were captured beautifully by her friend Loh in a poem in Chinese he offered Mrs.
Pian on her eightieth birthday:
Forever young as an orchid at Ten-Eight (18)
— For Rulan at her Eight-Ten (80th) birthday, by Loh Wai Fong, 4.19.2002

Your home is a Great Home11—everyone’s home
On the walls are calligraphy and painting
On the tables are tea and snacks
On the sofas are guests so fond of conversing
That they often ignore the flowers and moonlight in the yard
Your home is everyone’s Great Home and a Home of Experts
What occurs in this Great Home
Is a bit like fairy tales
That’s why it is Everyone’s Home
With a heart so wide and deep
It can accommodate many arguing voices
This one’s words strike to the left and the right
That one’s discourses fly up and down
Laughing and cussing in great abandon
No time for tea and congee
Then Ted’s eloquent and commanding silence asserts itself
And you butt in with a wise word here and there
We are all like rudderless boats
Floating in the capacious warmth of your smile
Permit me in the midst of your forever-young smile
To toast your old-style kindness and gentleness now so rare
We thank you for a friendship that has always retained its vigor
We wish you forever young as an Orchid at Ten-Eight12

BEING “IN-BETWEEN”

In 1978–1979, Mrs. Pian was a visiting professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong; I also started teaching at the same university that year. We therefore spent quite a bit of time together. One memorable experience was how she and I got to know the great qin master Tsar Teh-yun 蔡德允13 and took lessons from her together.

11 Dajia 大家 here is rendered as “great home,” but its other meanings include “everyone” and “an expert in their field,” as the translation tries to reflect.

12 The English translation, by Bell Yung with input from Loh Wai Fong, hardly does justice to the original Chinese, here reproduced with slashes instead of line-breaks, preserving the traditional characters of the original: 十八如蘭的年華，惠風賀如蘭八十壽，二〇〇二年四月十九日。你的家是大家的家／牆壁上有詩有畫／桌子上有餅有茶／沙發里的客人好談話／常坐負院子裡的月和花／你的家是大家的家／這家裡的事／有點像神話／這才叫大家／是寬廣的心靈／容得下許多人吵架／我的話左衝右突／他的論飛揚上下／有時候連笑帶罵／來不及喝粥喫茶／這時候／學滿能的沈默／常有你精采的話／都是無能的船／總在你溫厚的笑容中蕩漾／許我在你長春的微笑里／掬一杯消失中的舊式的溫厚／感謝你，百季如春的友情／祝賀你，十八如蘭的年華。

13 On Tsar, see Bell Yung, The Last of China’s Literati: The Music, Poetry and Life of Tsar Teh-yun (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
Mrs. Pian started taking lessons on the qin way back in 1959 when she had a short stay in Taiwan, as she once wrote:

During this trip I also took my first lessons on the Chinese zither, the chyn [qin], from Mr. Uang Jenn Hwa [汪振華]. The tone of the instrument was so soft that I could practice on it next to my parents’ bedroom at night without disturbing them. Considered from the point of view of historical source materials, including the large body of musical examples in notation, the chyn is of course one of the oldest and most important musical instruments in China. However I never thought seriously about playing it until I saw an old instrument in a second-hand musical instrument shop in Japan which I purchased at a very low price. Later, a chyn repair man in Hong Kong examined it and said it was at least three hundred years old.¹⁴

When I became her student in 1969, she immediately introduced me to the literature on the qin, as well as to whatever recordings she had (few were available at the time). She did not teach me how to play because, being exceptionally modest, she felt that she was not good enough to do so. In 1977–1978, the young Chinese music historian and accomplished qin musician Cheung Sai-bung 張世彬, who was teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong at the time, spent a year as a visiting scholar at the Yenching Institute at Harvard, sponsored by Mrs. Pian. I was a postdoctoral fellow at Cornell then but visited Mrs. Pian often. During those visits, I met Cheung and, for the first time, had a chance to talk to an accomplished player and heard him play. He told Mrs. Pian and me that his teacher was the legendary qin master Tsar Teh-yun.

When Mrs. Pian and I arrived in Hong Kong in September in 1978, we immediately paid a visit to Tsar and asked if she could be our qin teacher. At age 73, Tsar did not easily take on students; she nevertheless readily accepted us without hesitation, no doubt in part because of Mrs. Pian’s pedigree as Yuen Ren Chao’s daughter, and her being the mentor to Cheung Sai-bung, who turned out to be Tsar’s favorite student. Thus began a memorable three months in which Mrs. Pian and I took joint lessons from Tsar laoshi. Once a week, we journeyed from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the New Territories to Tsar’s tiny apartment on Hong Kong Island, first taking a train, then a ferry, then walking several blocks through busy North Point streets.¹⁵ Several years later, in 1983, Mrs. Pian visited Tsar laoshi and accomplished the unimaginable feat of persuading her to be videotaped while playing the qin. Tsar laoshi, who normally would not even allow anyone to audiotape her, let alone videotape, somehow succumbed to Mrs. Pian’s persuasion. Mrs. Pian carried her bulky videocassette recorder (the technology having progressed from half-inch open reel tapes in the early 1970s to large cassettes), tripod, and other accessories. With the assistance of

¹⁴ Pian, “Autobiographical Sketches,” p. 17. She later donated this instrument to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and it was later proven by a team of experts to be indeed from the late Ming dynasty.

a student of Tsar laoshi, she recorded almost one hour of Tsar laoshi’s playing, one of the most valuable audio-visual documents of twentieth-century qin music.

I think Mrs Pian was attracted to the qin in part because of its historical and cultural significance in China, and the intellectual potential and challenge it offered to a Chinese music researcher. But I think her first love in music was still European classical music, which she was exposed to at a very young age. Whether it was listening to or playing the masterpieces, or performing her father’s compositions and arrangements, she grew up with this music, which resonated at her deepest emotional core.¹⁶

Not only did Mrs. Pian and I share a love of European classical music, the graduate training that we received in the Harvard Music Department was quite similar despite the twenty-year difference (only in the early 1980s did the Department’s direction undergo a major change with its embrace of Ethnomusicology and other fundamental developments in musical scholarship). Despite the conservative atmosphere and curriculum of the Music Department, we were fortunate to have individual faculty members who were forward-looking. Mrs. Pian was influenced by Richard French and particularly by Otto Gombosi, who introduced her to Curt Sachs and others with broader views on music than most musicologists possessed at the time. She later studied with the young and enlightened John Ward, who became her dissertation advisor. My professors twenty years later were David Hughes, Nino Pipirotta, and the now more mature John Ward, who introduced me to the writings of Charles Seeger and to the man himself when he came as a visiting professor.

Mrs. Pian and I shared another common trait: an innately scientific mind that affected our approach to musicological study. She mentioned in her “Autobiographical Sketches” that from her childhood she excelled in mathematics and physics at all levels of schooling, that she contemplated moving in that direction in college, and that her three sisters’ professional fields were chemistry, mathematics, and astronomical physics, respectively (12). Their mother was a Japan-trained Western medical doctor, while their father held degrees in mathematics, physics, and philosophy, and became one of the most important linguists of the twentieth century. Mrs. Pian’s analytical articles on Peking opera (Jingju 京剧), particularly the dense and complex “Text Setting with the Shipyi Animated Aria” (1972),¹⁷ show her scientific mind. My own work on Cantonese opera, particularly on tune identity and the role of linguistic tones, was greatly inspired by her work. I would like to think that she welcomed me as her student not only because of our shared love of music, but also because she found a kindred scientific mind, and that later she appreciated my work because of theoretical and methodological leanings that she recognized as similar to her own.

¹⁶ For her own account of some of her early exposures to European classical music, see Pian, “Autobiographical Sketches,” especially pp. 3–4.
Our graduate training in Western music history, our love of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European classical music, and our shared scientific mindset, led both of us to similar approaches in musical research. For example, Mrs. Pian once made it clear that her research interests leaned towards “text” rather than “context,” not that she did not recognize the importance of the latter. Not only did this leaning reflect her training in music history in Harvard’s Music Department, but also, I suspect, was linked to her love of European classical music, where her fondness for individual masterpieces naturally led to a concentration on the text (that is, the compositions themselves). I thoroughly shared her leaning, probably for very similar reasons. She believed, and told me as much, that certain kinds of Chinese music, most notably that of the qin and Kunqu, have sophisticated structural and stylistic characteristics and refined aesthetics that are just as worthy of theoretical analysis as those of European classical masterpieces. She once said that the world of Chinese music embraced the myriad musical genres that were included in both Musicology and Ethnomusicology. I think her point was clear: some kinds of Chinese music can definitely withstand close scrutiny and analysis in their own right just like some of the masterpieces of Bach and Beethoven.¹⁸ Relegating Chinese music part and parcel to Ethnomusicology shows ignorance and bias. Her scientific mindset naturally also made detailed analysis of musical sound appealing and exciting.

Mrs. Pian’s interest in “text” went against North American Ethnomusicology, which places great emphasis on “context” instead. At the same time, she also had strong views on the “divide” between “text” and “theory”; many ethnomusicologists, like their counterparts in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences in North America, tend to privilege the latter over the former. To Mrs. Pian, an important goal in studying Chinese music is to expound on, recognize, and write about its artistic value. Such work is possible only if one carries out deep reading of the “text” which, in the case of music, means deep listening of individual compositions and/or performances and analysis of the musical notation. This kind of approach resonates with the predominant approach in the study of Chinese music in China, where context and theory tend to be less important than text compared to Ethnomusicology in North America. It could be said that Chinese scholars view Chinese music in much the same way as Western musicologists view European classical music, a view with which Mrs Pian and I can identify.

In 1998, I and thirteen others were asked by the editors of the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music to write about our background, training, and research, thus representing a cross-section of ethnomusicologists at the turn of the millennium (the results were published in vol. 10). In my opening paragraphs, I described myself as an “in-between kind of person,” meaning that I feel simultaneously at home and a visitor whether I am in China or in the United States; that my musical background straddles both Chinese and Western music; that my intellectual orientation and thought processes are shaped by both science

¹⁸ For an example, see Joseph S. C. Lam’s article on a masterwork of Kunqu elsewhere in this issue.

¹⁹ Here “theory” refers to “cultural theory,” not “musical theory.”
and the arts. I explained that, at the time, I was also in-between “literally as well as figuratively in the sense that I hold joint appointments at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Hong Kong, shuttling between two continents, two cities, two cultures, two universities, two music departments, and two sets of colleagues and students.” I am pretty sure that, among ethnomusicologists, I am hardly unique. However, if I had a chance to talk to Mrs. Pian about this matter, I think she would also have described herself in similar terms, and that she and I share a sense of “in-betweenness” because of our background, upbringings, and education.

**JOI DE VIVRE**

Mrs. Pian’s dissertation advisor in the Music Department, John Ward, a highly respected music historian of Renaissance Music who also had a serious interest in popular culture and oral traditions, appreciated and admired Mrs. Pian’s work. He welcomed her warmly into the department first as a graduate student and then as a colleague, and in 1970–1972, he collaborated with her on jointly teaching a path-breaking course in two parts, called “Music and Ritual” and “Music and Narrative,” respectively, taught in consecutive semesters. Highly progressive and forward-looking for the rather conservative Music Department, these courses fulfilled Harvard's recently installed undergraduate general education requirements, and ended up with enormous enrollments of about 100 in each. These courses laid the groundwork for the eventual establishment of an Ethnomusicology Program at Harvard that emerged many years later. For this new course, Mr. Ward and Mrs. Pian drafted me and a fellow graduate student, Susan Youens, as teaching assistants.

Mrs. Pian and Mr. Ward began brain-storming about the course years ahead of time, and started preparing its syllabus in the fall of 1970 for the launch of the course a year later. Throughout that year of 1970–1971, the four of us had weekly lunches (the two professors picked up the tab) to discuss the ideas behind the course, its content, structure, lectures, readings, and audio-visual materials. For the rather green graduate student I was at the time, having the opportunity to spend an hour or two each week with two eminent scholars and teachers was a true luxury. Not only did I learn from hearing the two of them tossing back and forth ideas on the innovative course, but it was even more fascinating to be in their company on a casual basis, listening to their conversation on every kind of topic. The course itself had to have been the most thoroughly prepared one in all my academic experience and it taught me much that I put to use in my own teaching later on.

It was the preparation and teaching of “Music and Ritual” that made the strongest impression on me, capturing as it did so much of Mrs. Pian’s intellectual and musical adventurousness, her fearless embrace of new ideas and technology, her hard-working nature, and her overall *joie de vivre*. Allow me to dwell on it a little.

The course focused on the nature of music and its relationship to ritual, broadly defined, and in so doing introduced the students to six diverse kinds of ritual. Two of them were to be seen and heard right in Cambridge: Hare Krishna chanting at Harvard Square and the Sunday Service at the Harvard Memorial Church. The
others hailed from far-flung corners of the world: Navajo Curing Ritual, Confucian Sacrificial Ritual, Spanish Flamenco Dance, and English Morris Dance. The selection was carefully made: each form has a rich historical depth that continues today in a contemporary guise, while taken together they address music and ritual not only involving diverse cultural backgrounds, but also different social strata and thus reflected a variety of cultural and social contexts. For example, nothing could be more different from each other than Confucian Sacrificial Ritual and English Morris Dance, or Hare Krishna chanting and the Harvard Memorial Church service. Examining these diverse genres provided a comprehensive understanding of what ritual is and the nature of the music that is an integral part of it. One path-breaking aspect of the course was the extensive use of original audio-visual sources. The early 1970s were still the early days of video technology; generous use of non-textual material in teaching, particularly visual material, was not yet common. Our Navajo material was from Wesleyan’s David McAllester through Mr. Ward, who was also responsible for Flamenco Dance. Mrs. Pian already had material on Confucian Ritual from Taiwan, but set out boldly to learn the latest technology and videotaped excerpts of Hare Krishna chanting, services at Harvard Memorial Church, and Morris Dance.

I remember her work collecting this material well, because I was her fieldwork assistant. In those days video cameras and recorders were separate items, each bulky and heavy; I carried the recorder and she the camera. The two of us squeezed into the cramped choir loft of the Harvard Memorial Church to shoot what was going on at the altar, or camped out on the street corner of Harvard Square as bald-headed, bare-footed, orange-robed men chanted their mantras, clinked their little bells, and swayed back and forth. In the early 1970s, the Hare Krishna movement was at its height, and could be seen in the Square at almost all hours of the day, every day. I suspect that the curious looks of the passersby were directed more at Mrs. Pian and me than at our subjects.

The most memorable experience, and one that throws Mrs. Pian’s personality into the sharpest relief, was how we went about preparing the Morris Dance unit. Morris Dance is a folk tradition from England that dates to the fifteenth century. In addition to reading about it, Mrs. Pian tracked down a Morris Dance group that met and practiced regularly in Boston. She dragged me to their practice sessions in order that we could learn how to do it—we were employing the principle of observation-participation, in ethnomusicological parlance. We didn’t just do it once, but stuck to it for half a year, becoming quite proficient. Traditionally an all-male activity, a Morris Dance set consists of six dancers, divided into two rows of three. When performing on ritual occasions, they wear special costumes: white shirts and medium-length pants; knee-high socks and heavy shoes; red, green or blue belts that crisscross their chests; hats bedecked with flowers; etc. As they dance and prance hither and thither, each holds high a wooden stick or a wooden sword, lightly striking those held by other dancers. Little bells were tied around their ankles to produce rhythmic tinkling sounds at each step and jump. One dance we liked particularly required each man to wave a white handkerchief in the air as he danced.

Mrs. Pian and I must have made quite an odd pair amidst these burly men, a feisty middle-aged Chinese woman with her youthful acolyte. Still, we must have impressed them with our enthusiasm in order to persuade them to accept us into
the group. I was told that, as a little boy, I had been quite a dancer, mastering such social dances as the foxtrot, waltz, mambo, cha cha, etc. I became self-conscious as I grew older and stopped what seemed to me a somewhat silly activity. Yet how could I not give in to Mrs. Pian’s enthusiasm and be helplessly drawn into the Morris Dance? I remember how she would plunge in with great gusto, hopping, waving her arms high, flipping white handkerchiefs wildly, and laughing like a little girl. It was infectious: soon I was doing the same, my initial reserve and shyness melting away. When we actually taught the course, I think we enjoyed the Morris Dance unit the most, not only because we had become so personally involved and could demonstrate on the spot in front of the students, but also because, out of all the units, this one suited Mrs. Pian’s personality most closely.

I witnessed this sense of fun in her on other occasions, including the Frolic held at each annual CHINOPERL conference, at which Mrs. Pian would not miss a chance to sing some of her father’s songs. Established early on, the Frolic was the last item of the conference, when the paper sessions were over and the obligatory sumptuous Chinese banquet was winding down. Then members would show off their performance skills. Occasionally, professional performers visiting from China such as Wei Xikui 魏喜奎 (1926–1996) attended, and we were treated to intimate displays of their virtuosity. Mostly the Frolic was a very informal affair with rollicking fun, including CHINOPERL members Kate Steven’s Jingyun dagu 京韻大鼓 and Perry Link’s xiangsheng 相聲. This description of an item at the 1985 Frolic that I myself wrote should make that point well enough: “The finale was provided by the Liu–Chao–Yung trio, formed by Chun-jo [Liu] of Minnesota, Rulan [Chao Pian] of Harvard and myself. Having debuted in Toronto six years ago, we contributed our ‘talents’ again this year by singing ‘The Table of Initials, The Table of Finals, and The Four Tones, a suite of three songs for three voices composed by Y. R. Chao in 1930.’” Mrs. Pian’s sense of fun—no, abandoned joy—was particularly obvious in Hong Kong, her very favorite city, attested by her accepting a position of visiting professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1975, 1978–1979, 1982, and 1994. In the spring of 1975, I happened to be there also, doing fieldwork on Cantonese opera. During those four months, we spent many days together, in the flat that the university provided her, in countless restaurants, in night markets, in teahouses, and in theater sheds in remote villages in the New Territories or on outlying islands. She was most keen to come with me when I conducted my own fieldwork, hauling her videotaping equipment along. When I was taping the blind

---


21 See the photos from 1988 and 1991 from the Frolics or preparation for them, posted on the CHINOPERL website.
singer Dou Wun 杜煥 singing *naamyam* 南音 in Fu Lung Teahouse in the Sheung Wan neighborhood from March to June of that year, Mrs. Pian came to listen several times, once bringing her videotape equipment and making a 30-minute tape.

That spring was special because several of her former, current, and future students happened to be in Hong Kong. These included Joseph Lam, who was an undergraduate student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong at the time and would become her student in Music at Harvard a few years later, and Nishimura Masato, a graduate of the University of Tokyo who was working in Hong Kong and would a year later enroll as a Ph.D. student in Harvard’s Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations studying under Mrs. Pian and Patrick Hanan. In addition, Conal Boyce, who finished his doctoral dissertation that year on the recitation of Song *ci* 詞 under Mrs. Pian’s guidance, was living in Taiwan at the time and came to visit Hong Kong briefly. Mrs. Pian was happiest when surrounded by her students. She was game to try anything new, and bustling Hong Kong had much to offer.

One late night after an evening of Cantonese opera, Mrs. Pian, Nishimura, and I wandered around the Mongkok night market, and she wanted to sample street food from the stalls. She sat like other clients on a very low foot-stool, practically squatting, and lustily sucked out meat from snails and other mollusks. Another night after an opera, Mrs. Pian, Joseph Lam, and I felt like having a midnight snack. So we went to the fancy Hong Kong Hotel Coffee Shop near the Tsimshatsui ferry for coffee and black forest cake, and continued to chat into the wee hours. From that point on, “Black Forest Cake at Hong Kong Hotel” became a symbol of the good life. During the annual Bun Festival on Cheung Chau Island, she, Nishimura, Conal Boyce, and I made a day-long expedition, had fresh fish and shrimp along the promenade by the bay, and watched the “Flying Colors” (*piaose* 飄色) parade, in which little children dressed up colorfully as legendary historical or operatic figures were raised high above our heads, as if they were flying in mid-air. Ted joined her in Hong Kong occasionally, and sometimes came along on our excursions. As the hour passed midnight, Ted would gently suggest that it was time to head home and rest. Mrs. Pian would protest and insist on going to yet another coffee shop so that the night of revelry could continue.

On those occasions, it was almost as if she were a little girl, her students were her older brothers, and Ted was the father, looking after us with tolerance and indulgence, and trying to make sure that we didn’t misbehave or overtire ourselves. One night long after the clock struck midnight, when we had just finished yet another round of black forest cake at Hong Kong Hotel, Mrs. Pian, full of energy, announced that the night was young and we should do something else. Ted at that

---

22 See Bell Yung, “Voices of Hong Kong: The Reconstruction of a Performance in a Teahouse,” *Critical Zone* 3 (2008): 37–57. On the CDs that had been produced from this project by 2012, see Chuen-Fong Wong’s review in *CHINOPERL Papers* 31 (2012): 251–56. See also Yu Siu Wah’s article in this volume.

23 See the 1975 photo of her in Fu Lung Teahouse posted on the CHINOPERL website. Unfortunately, the early generation of portable video equipment had many problems. Only after a few short years the half-inch magnetic tape started disintegrating, and we lost most of the images.

24 See the 1975 photo of her and Nishimura posted on the CHINOPERL website.
point put his foot down and insisted that they should return to their flat at the Chinese University. Reluctantly and disappointedly, she gave in. These memories of her boundless and infectious enthusiasm have stayed with me and remain as clear as ever.

**LANGUAGE TEACHING AND MUSIC RESEARCH**

Mrs. Pian’s background, interests, and training helped her to develop her own pedagogical method of language teaching. She describes the textbook her father wrote and she supplemented in her “Autobiographical Sketches” (13–14), noting that it was difficult for both teacher and student, but also “a very efficient way to gain both the active and passive use of the language.” At the end of this section, she notes that her work with this text introduced her to “the methodology of structural analysis” and goes on to say that her “experience in working with such language issues also had some effect upon my musicology studies later on,” but does not go into detail. Her intimate knowledge of the workings of Chinese and of linguistic theories provided her with insights into the workings of music and of musical research, and these are reflected in several of her publications. The most notable of these is the afore-mentioned “Text Setting with the Shipiyi Animated Aria,” in which she successfully employed the methodology of structural analysis.

Mrs. Pian also pioneered research that straddles language and music, particularly the nature of, and issues related to, oral and performing literature. Although the Chinese people have placed great emphasis on the written word since antiquity, they also developed and preserved rich traditions of oral literature, ranging from elaborate and complex systems of drama and narrative to simple, short, idiomatic sayings. Not only songs but any genre of spoken performance has performative and musical elements that are suppressed when those words are represented in written form only. These elements—tonal inflections, rhythmic patterns, dynamic levels, timbral manipulations—must be taken into consideration in order for oral literature to be fully appreciated and evaluated. Oral literature served the literary and artistic aspirations of the majority of China’s illiterate and semi-literate population for centuries; yet until recently it failed to receive the scholarly attention it deserves. To rectify that neglect, CHINOPERL was created. Music specialists tend to ignore oral literature because it is not labeled as “music” and much of it does not sound particularly “musical” to their ears. Mrs. Pian was among the first to study these forms from a musicological perspective. No one disputes the fact that speech and music are wedded in song; Mrs. Pian showed that there is also music in speech.

At the time I first met her, she had already published her prize-winning book on musical sources of the Song dynasty (1967), and was deeply involved in her research into Peking opera, joined later by work on Peking Drum Song (*Jingyun dagu* 京韻大鼓), the Northwest folksong genre *hua’er* 花兒, and other traditional performing arts in modern China, which she published through the 1970s and 1980s. These works of hers represent two distinct directions of research, involving different source materials, theoretical assumptions, analytical methodology, modes of thinking, and scholarly outcomes. Her study of music history adhered, on the one hand, to her mastery of a long tradition of historical musicology at Harvard University (in which she was originally guided by John Ward), and, on the other, to
the centuries-old tradition of historical studies among Chinese scholars (which she had learned about from Lien-Sheng Yang). She consulted sources exhaustively in Harvard’s own Yenching Library, as well as libraries and archives in Japan and Taiwan. (Mainland China was inaccessible at the time.) Her rigorous training in Western Musicology also provided insights that helped her in interpreting the millennium-old musical theories and musical notation of China.

Her interest in modern China took her on field trips first to Taiwan, and later, after the opening of the People’s Republic, to many parts of the Mainland. As noted earlier, in the early 1970s, she was among the first ethnomusicologists to embrace the new technology of videotaping in her ethnographic work. The result was a rare and precious collection of videotapes of traditional performing arts that she captured in the 1970s through the 1990s, before these genres began to be strongly affected by the changes brought about in the Reform Period. These materials are now deposited at Harvard and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

A common thread running through Mrs. Pian’s research projects was her theoretical interest in musical notation and its relation to issues of transcription, analysis, performance practice, and the social contexts of music. For example, her study of Chinese music history was accompanied by detailed and careful research into historical systems of notation and the issues that arose when these old notations, which preserved compositions from as early as the tenth century, were transcribed into Western staff notation. These studies of early Chinese musical notation and music theory were among the first ever done, and were consulted by Mainland scholars after her book became known to them, as we have seen above.

Her study of modern China focused on Peking opera and several types of narrative songs and folk songs. As a specialist in language, she naturally was interested in translating the texts of these musical genres to serve a Western readership. I remember that when she was a visiting professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1978–1979, she assigned herself the task of systematically researching four Peking operas, the first step being translating the text, followed by complete transcription and analysis of the music. These four operas were The Fisherman’s Revenge (Dayu shajia: 打漁殺家), The Trial of Su San (Yutang chun 玉堂春), The King’s Farewell (Bawang bieji 霸王別姬), and The Capture and Release of Cao Cao (Zhuofang Cao 捉放曹). Of these only her work on the first and third of these plays was published. She published similar articles on examples from a number of narrative song genres. Many of these articles were published in this journal; others appeared in various festschrifts that are not as readily accessible. This body of research should prove to be of lasting value in furthering the mission of CHINOPERL.

As for Mrs. Pian’s research on Peking opera, the most important pieces address fundamental issues concerning its structure and creative process in performance as an operatic genre that predominantly uses “pre-existent tunes” rather than new musical compositions. Her first article in the series, “Rewriting of an Act of Yuan Drama, Lii Kwei Fuh Jing, in the Style of the Peking Opera: A Field Worker’s Experiment” (1970), probes the creative process based upon a dialogue between herself and an experienced Peking opera professional. This was followed by her most important and substantial article, “Text Setting with the Shipyi Animated Aria,” which addresses a similar issue but uses a totally different methodology: rather than relying on the words of an insider, she approached the same question
from an outsider’s point of view, much as a linguist analyses a language that is not his native tongue, or a scientist analyzes a physical phenomenon. The article meticulously examines and analyzes multiple performances of a tune to illustrate how a singer manipulates its details so as to enhance the comprehensibility of the lyrics and sharpen the aesthetics of the music, while at the same time preserving the tune’s “pre-existent” identity so that it is recognizable to the listener and thus its dramatic function is properly served. In a third article, “Aria Structural Patterns in the Peking Opera” (1975), she examines several widely-used patterns according to which pre-existent tunes are strung into a song passage, each pattern reflecting a particular musical and dramatic structure. Many of the ideas in these articles and in articles on narrative songs are concisely and efficiently addressed in her “Text Setting and the Use of Tune Types in Chinese Dramatic and Narrative Music” (1993).

The use of “pre-existent tunes” and the lack of a Western-style composer often leads people unfamiliar with Chinese opera to conclude that its music has little or no originality: singers merely parrot tunes from play to play. On the contrary, research spearheaded by Mrs. Pian has shown that there is, in fact, a great deal of originality if one looks into precisely how much of each tune was “pre-existent,” understands the tune’s transmission process, and recognizes its relation to the text. Mrs. Pian’s articles show that, when it comes to understanding and assessing the music of traditional Chinese opera, one needs to move beyond the commonly accepted notions of tune identity and musical “originality” that are derived largely from theories of Western classical music, and instead come to a more nuanced understanding of how originality and individuality operate within certain defined constraints and how the whole process can be described as “creativity within bounds.” Her work showed the way for her students and others to continue to revise our understanding of creativity within the context of Chinese opera.

Although Mrs. Pian was not the first one to write about Chinese music in English, she was the first to write with scholarly rigor. Because of her bi-cultural background, her training in Western Musicology, and her experience as a Chinese language teacher, she was particularly sensitive to issues of cross-cultural communication: how to express and convey her understanding of a Chinese subject matter to an English reader. Mrs. Pian told me when I was still her student that the choice of translation of opera titles, song titles, terminology, and in particular technical words, is very important, for they determine the readers’ initial comprehension of the intercultural concepts being introduced. While writing about Chinese subjects in English for a Western readership, the easy solution is to simply use the transliterated form of the original Chinese name or term. However, she believed that finding a suitable—even if only approximate—translation into ordinary English vocabulary would make the treatment more reader-friendly, help

---


26 Two earlier publications that attracted some attention are John Hazedel Levis, Foundations of Chinese Musical Art (Peiping: H. Vetch, 1936); and Bliss Wiant, The Music of China (Hong Kong: Chung Chi Publications, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1965).
to capture the meaning of the name or term that she wanted to convey, and emphasize what the two cultures share in their arts at a deep level despite surface differences. She said she would be the first to admit that it was not possible to find an absolutely equivalent term in the arts from one language to another, from one culture to another, particularly since, even among “natives,” a term may be understood differently.

This is a controversial viewpoint, as evidenced by the criticism of well-established scholars who advocate the use of pinyin transliterations of terms rather than English terms. But on this point, Mrs. Pian refused to compromise. The principle she adhered to is that in cross-cultural communication, it is better to emphasize common ground than to highlight differences. Thus, in her study of Peking opera, she insisted on using the term “opera” rather than the transliteration of a Chinese word. In doing so, she wanted to stress the importance of music that Chinese indigenous theater shared with Western opera. Likewise, she used the word “aria” to refer to sung passages in order to stress their central role in performance, which she felt was analogous to the importance of arias in Western opera. She recognized, of course, that an “aria” in Peking opera differs from an “aria” in Western opera in fundamental ways, which she took pain to explain in detail in her articles.

The phenomenon of pre-existent tunes—their use, nature, dramatic functions, their structuring within an opera, and how they behave in a performance—and their relationship to the text, are almost unique in the world of operas; yet it is found in practically every regional opera throughout China. It is certainly among the most characteristic aspects of Chinese music. Mrs. Pian’s creation of the term “aria-type” and other associated English translations capture the essence of the phenomenon.

**EPILOGUE**

In the spring of 1979, Mrs. Pian gave me a book that she brought back for me from China. This was her inscription:

> It is not so important to put my name in the volume as it is to let you remember where it came from. Yang Yinn-liou [Yang Yinliu] took this off his shelf together with several other books and gave them to me when I visited him this January. I won’t say he has as much hope in me as I have in you. At least I am giving it to you with the same earnestness.

Her inscription reflects upon her modesty, and also fills me with shame, for I doubt that I’ve lived up to her expectation. When I visited her in the fall of 2012 and told her that I would be receiving an Honorary Doctorate from the Chinese University of Hong Kong that December, she was obviously very pleased. I’ve often wondered whether her reaction to that news might indicate that I did live up to her hope in me. But that doesn’t matter. I think what she valued most was that I became her friend. At the end of her “Autobiographical Sketches,” she actually concluded with two sentences about me: “He used to consult me on all matters large and small. Gradually through the years, I have come to consult him even more on all matters small and large” (20). The last sentence, of course, is pure exaggeration; to me
those two sentences primarily display her humor and cleverness in sentence construction. But the feeling she expressed moved me greatly. During the last few years of her life, I visited her twice a year. As I walked in the door of 14 Brattle Circle, the gleam in her eyes the moment she saw me enter always seemed to make everything okay for both of us.