

REIMAGINING THE STORY OF LU YOU AND TANG WAN:  
GE GAN-RU'S WRONG, WRONG, WRONG! AND HARD, HARD, HARD!

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## ABSTRACT

Robert Satterlee, Advisor

In 2006, Ge Gan-ru wrote a melodrama *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* for Margaret Leng Tan. This melodrama, unlike any of his former works and any of the pre-existing contemporary repertoire for vocalizing pianist, is written for a performer self-accompanied by a toy orchestra. *Wrong* is based on ancient Chinese poet Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin*. This twelfth-century poem has as its subject the poet's own tragic relationship with his cousin Tang Wan. The first stanza ends with the word *cuo* repeated three times, which is the Chinese word for "wrong," hence the title of the melodrama. The author's performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* led to the commission of a sequel from Ge Gan-ru based on Tang Wan's reply to Lu You's poem. This companion piece, *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, uses a similar instrumentation: toy piano, toy harp, and toy glockenspiel, as well as other toys the author has collected.

The document first takes a close look at the story of Lu You and Tang Wan, including a thorough analysis of their poems *Phoenix Hairpin*. The next two chapters contain biographical information about the composer Ge Gan-ru and about Margaret Leng Tan, the intended performer of *Wrong*. These two individuals contributed most of the source material for the document. Chapter Four presents a brief history of melodrama. The final two chapters focus on Ge Gan-ru's two melodramas. Chapter Five deals with the collaborative process of Ge Gan-ru and Margaret Leng Tan in creating *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, and discusses the problems the author faced as a subsequent performer.

In Chapter Six the author describes the genesis of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* and shares her experiences collaborating with the composer.

These emotional melodramas challenge not only the listeners but also the performers themselves. By looking at the origins, inspirations, and the creative process of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, this study aims to provide a cultural understanding of this unusual set of pieces by Ge Gan-ru and enhances both the listeners' and performers' experience in reimagining the unforgettable story of Lu You and Tang Wan.

To Dr. Robert Satterlee

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## INTRODUCTION

On February 28, 2010, I had an unusual experience of being on stage, surrounded by an array of toy instruments. These toy instruments varied in size and shape, from a thirty-seven-key concert baby grand toy piano to a palm-sized toy tambourine. I did not use these instruments to perform something lighthearted or playful. Quite the opposite, what the audience heard was a tragic story that happened in China over eight hundred years ago.

It was the story of Lu You and Tang Wan. Composer Ge Gan-ru was so inspired by their story that he wrote a melodrama based on Lu You's heartfelt poem *Phoenix Hairpin*, which has as its subject the poet's own tragic love story. The title of the melodrama, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, was taken directly from the ending of the first stanza of the poem.

*Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* was written for Margaret Leng Tan in 2006. She had initially asked for a piece for toy piano from the composer.<sup>1</sup> One would never have thought that the composer's attempt at writing for the toy piano would turn into a groundbreaking work—a melodrama that calls for a toy orchestra with the voice as a central focus, all performed by one person. My performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* led to the commission of a sequel from Ge Gan-ru based on Tang Wan's reply to Lu You's poem. This companion piece, *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, uses a similar instrumentation: toy piano, toy harp, and toy glockenspiel, as well as other toys I have collected.

By looking at the origins, inspirations, and the creative process of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, the study aims to provide a cultural understanding of this unusual set of pieces by Ge Gan-ru. It can also serve as a helpful resource to future performers.

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<sup>1</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2012.

The document first takes a close look at the story of Lu You and Tang Wan, which includes a thorough analysis of their poems *Phoenix Hairpin*. The next two chapters contain biographical information about the composer Ge Gan-ru and about Margaret Leng Tan, the intended performer of *Wrong*. These two individuals contributed most of the source material for the document. Chapter Four presents a brief history of melodrama. The final two chapters focus on Ge Gan-ru's two melodramas. Chapter Five deals with the collaborative process of Ge Gan-ru and Margaret Leng Tan in creating *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, and discusses the problems I faced as a subsequent performer. In Chapter Six I describe the genesis of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* and share my experiences collaborating with the composer.

This set of melodramas challenges not only the listeners but also the performers themselves. I was struck by several problems as I studied and performed these pieces. What are the various meanings and allusions contained in Lu You's and Tang Wan's well-honored poems, as used in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and *Hard, Hard, Hard!*? The two melodramas require the performer to simultaneously take on the roles of the characters (as a singer and reciter) and multi-instrumentalist. How can the performer justify using toys in portraying herself as the protagonist? The works are unique and cannot be categorized into any pre-existing contemporary music genres. Because of this, there are no performance practice traditions for these pieces. Also the composer tailored each composition for the intended performers, focusing on their vocal abilities, the instruments each performer found, and the capability of the instruments. What were the challenges I faced in dealing with the lack of performance practice traditions and adapting these compositions to my own performing style?

It is my hope that this study will enhance our experience in reimagining the unforgettable story of Lu You and Tang Wan through these contemporary melodramas, both as listeners and performers.

## CHAPTER 1. THE STORY OF LU YOU AND TANG WAN

Born in 1125, Lu You is one of the most important poets of the Southern Song dynasty.<sup>1</sup> He wrote around thirteen thousand poems and became the most prolific poet in the history of China.<sup>2</sup> His poems are not only great in number, but are also “endowed with extensive themes and abundant content.”<sup>3</sup> Known as “one of the greatest patriotic poets in ancient China”,<sup>4</sup> a large number of his poems reflect his love for the nation. His famous poem *Phoenix Hairpin*, however, does not dwell on his political aspirations but has as its subject his own tragic love story.

Lu You grew up with his cousin Tang Wan, who was the daughter of his maternal uncle Tang Hong.<sup>5</sup> Both Lu You’s and Tang Wan’s families were from Yuezhou, Shangyin county (now Shaoxing, Zhejiang province) and shared similar circumstances: both fathers had worked for the government and lost their positions, and “both determined to study and write poetry rather than enter public life again. Certainly this devotion to poetry influenced both Lu You and Tang Wan, as they had played together as children while their fathers discussed politics, composed

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Lu You,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/350284/Lu-You> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sun Danlin, *Bai Jia Jiang Tan: Lu You*, DVD (Beijing: China International Television Corporation, 2006); my translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Lu You – One of the Greatest Patriotic Poets in Ancient China*, in *Cultural China*, <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/59History520.html> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Bennett Peterson, ed., *Notable Women in China* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 277-78.

poetry, and wrote essays. Both fathers had taught their respective children to write and recite poetry.”<sup>6</sup>

Lu You started writing poems as early as twelve years old, and had already established himself as a poet by age eighteen. Tang Wan also showed great talent when she was young.<sup>7</sup> As they grew older, their friendship turned into deep affection. It is noted that “while they were courting, the two often entertained each other with the delights of poetry.”<sup>8</sup> Encouraged by their parents, whose families were close friends, they were married when Lu You turned nineteen.<sup>9</sup> They were immersed in wedded bliss: having known each other as children, they “shared deep feelings” and “their emotions were perfectly in tune.”<sup>10</sup> “Together they created and recited poetry.”<sup>11</sup> Supposedly a perfect ending for such childhood sweethearts, this bliss did not last long. Lu You was forced by his mother to divorce Tang Wan before their third year of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars have surmised about Lu You’s mother’s reasons for breaking up the marriage.

Barbara Bennett Peterson, the chief editor of *Notable Women in China*, wrote the following:

Perhaps out of envy, or perhaps because Tang Wan did not observe closely enough the feudal rites and rituals expected of a new wife living in her husband’s parents’ home, her mother-in-law began to ridicule her for inattention and became critical of her behavior, saying Tang Wan did not show her the proper obedience. Such a traditional role may

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, 279.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

have felt unnatural for Tang Wan because she had known her mother-in-law all of life, had so often visited her household, and was already a member of the family because she was a cousin long before she was a wife.... For the mother-in-law's part, she had expected Tang Wan to be obliging, obedient, and amiable, but to her surprise Tang Wan was independent within her household. She felt Tang Wan did not show her mother-in-law the proper respect for her place in the family.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Sun Danlin from Bohai University, however, had a different view about Tang Wan. In his lecture on Lu You, which was broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV), he mentioned that Tang Wan's behavior in Lu's family was recorded in Lu You's own writing.<sup>14</sup> One of Lu You's poems shows how Tang Wan was docile, hardworking, and respectful to her mother-in-law. The verse "getting off the bed after the first rooster's crow" denotes how Tang Wan would wake up very early everyday.<sup>15</sup> This is followed by the descriptive lines: "combing and tying up her hair/putting on proper dress," "in the living room sweeping and cleaning," "in the kitchen/food on plates ready to be served."<sup>16</sup> Professor Sun specifically pointed out how it was very disrespectful to the mother-in-law in ancient China's feudal society if the daughter-in-law were to wake up with the hair untied or without proper dress, very different from society today.<sup>17</sup> The poem also discloses how Tang Wan cried every time her mother-in-law was unhappy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Peterson, 279.

<sup>14</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Given how Tang Wan had shown great respect to her mother-in-law as illustrated in the above poem, it is surprising that Lu You's mother would become dissatisfied with Tang Wan. With regard to this Professor Sun provided other reasons. Lu You's mother thought the newly married couple were too close, spending too much time together and thus affecting Lu You's studies.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Peterson wrote that "Tang Wan loved to engage in conversations about poetry with Lu You and passed the time in this scholarly way."<sup>20</sup> Because Tang Wan spent most of her time with her husband, Dr. Peterson added that Tang Wan was also accused of "her lack of conversation with others in the extended family and social community."<sup>21</sup>

Lu You's mother was especially critical of Tang Wan's behavior because Lu You was her favorite son. She believed that Lu You was the most gifted among her four sons, promising a successful career in the future.<sup>22</sup> Before Lu You's mother gave birth to Lu You, it is said that she dreamed about the great writer of the Northern Song dynasty Qin Guan, whose courtesy name was Qin Shaoyou. This dream led her to believe that her child would be a literary giant like Qin Guan. Her son was therefore named after Qin Guan (Qin Shaoyou), with his given name "You" taken from "Qin Shaoyou" and his courtesy name "Wuguan" taken from "Qin Guan."<sup>23</sup>

Lu You was not granted a government position when he took the imperial exam at the age of sixteen. He continued to work hard and took the exam again three years later. With his outstanding literary ability, he was expected to be successful this time and to realize his

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, 279.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

aspiration of reuniting the nation under the Song dynasty. To his mother's surprise Lu You was again unsuccessful. Professor Sun pointed out that Lu You took the exam soon after he got married, and Lu You's mother put all the blame on Tang Wan for Lu You's failure, saying that she had occupied too much of his time and distracted him from his studies. This, explained Professor Sun, was the main reason why Lu You's mother wanted to separate Lu You from Tang Wan.<sup>24</sup>

Another more direct reason why Lu You's mother demanded a divorce, said Professor Sun, was the fact that Tang Wan did not bear Lu You a son. Lu You himself had disclosed, in one of his poems collected in *Jian Nan Shi Gao*, that his mother had great hope to have a grandson.<sup>25</sup>

Bounded by feudal tradition, the heartbroken Lu You dared not disobey his mother and had to send Tang Wan back to her family, "much against his true feelings."<sup>26</sup> His mother was unmoved by Lu You's constant pleading. Lu You missed Tang Wan so much that he secretly "rented a house near his family's compound and installed Tang Wan there, so that he could meet with her. He hoped his mother's anger would recede ..." and she would relent.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, a servant reported all his comings and goings to his mother. She proceeded to the house in which Lu You had installed Tang Wan, not knowing that the couple had just rushed out in fear of her arrival, and she raged at the empty house, now more determined than ever to separate the couple using her rights under feudal tradition.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Peterson, 280.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Lu You's mother then arranged a second marriage for Lu You with a woman from the Wang Clan, who was described as "extremely docile, reserved, and obedient."<sup>29</sup> Tang Wan too was remarried to a nobleman, Zhao Shicheng. Professor Sun pointed out that this innocent couple was indeed separated by the feudal code of ethics.<sup>30</sup>

In the spring of 1155, when Lu You was thirty years old, he visited the Shen garden, located on the east side of his hometown Shangyin.<sup>31</sup> Belonging to the wealthy Shen family, this beautiful garden was open to outsiders during springtime, "as was the custom of the time."<sup>32</sup> Lu You strolled around and, when he arrived at a bridge, ran into Tang Wan and her husband who were walking from the other direction. It was shocking for them to meet in such an unexpected situation after being separated for many years. They did not speak a word,<sup>33</sup> but it was surmised that the silence was filled with their intense and unspeakable emotions.<sup>34</sup> Dr. Peterson wrote, "she glanced at him ... feeling great anguish and sorrow, while he too experienced great torment and grief."<sup>35</sup> It was recorded in Zhou Mi's *Qi Dong Ye Yu* that after looking at each other for a while, Tang Wan turned to her husband, Zhao Shicheng and briefly explained to him what had happened. Zhao Shicheng was a nobleman who could understand and sympathize with Tang

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>31</sup> Wu Yucheng and Wu Yu, eds., *Zhongguo Shici Gushi* (Henan, China: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2003), 178; my translation.

<sup>32</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *Late Poems of Lu You, The Old Man Who Does As He Pleases* (Ontario, Canada: Abadada, 2007), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>34</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD; Wu Yucheng and Wu Yu, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Peterson, 280.

Wan's past. As Tang Wan walked away with her husband, they asked one of their servants to send over some food and wine to where Lu You was.<sup>36</sup>

“They met at a time they should not have been meeting, and then had to separate again when they should not have separated,” Professor Sun sighed in a regretful tone as he continued the lecture.<sup>37</sup> Lu You looked at the food and wine, feeling tormented thinking back over all these years of separation with his true love. He drank the wine very quickly. His overwhelming sadness instantaneously turned into an unstoppable poetic inspiration. Coming out of that was the heartfelt poem *Phoenix Hairpin* which he spontaneously wrote on the garden wall.<sup>38</sup>

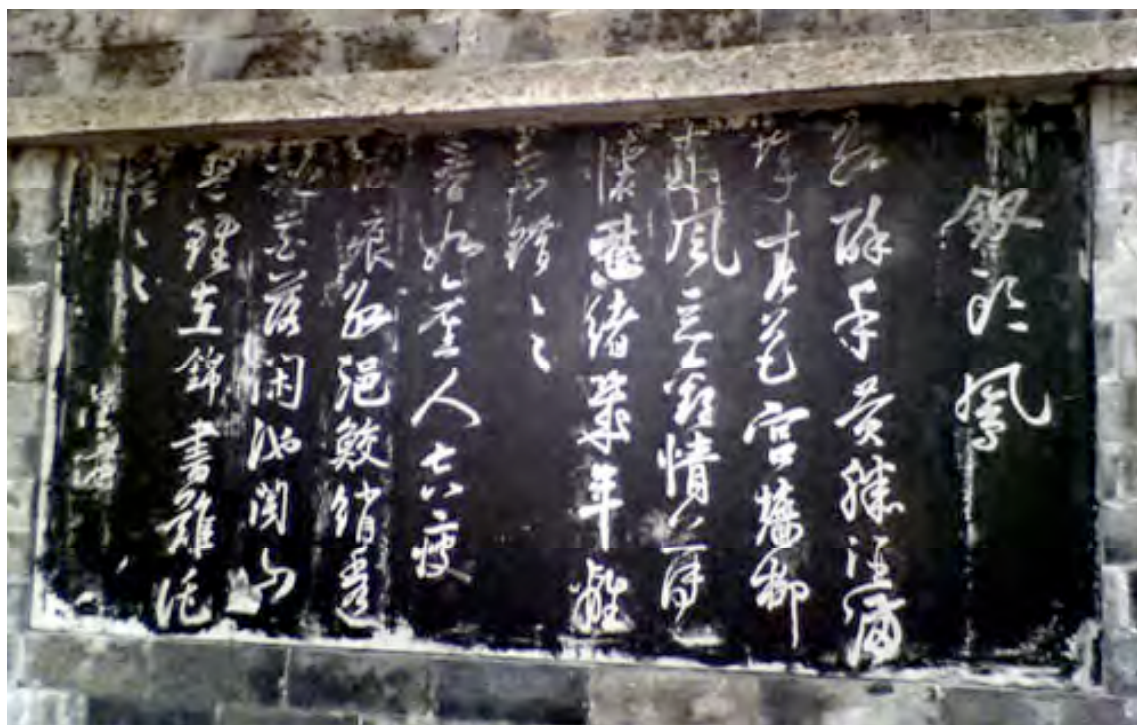


Figure 1. A picture of Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin* extracted from the Cultural China website<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> *The Love Story of Lu You and Tang Wan*, in Cultural China, <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/59H520H11949.html> (accessed May 10, 2012).

### Lu You's Poem *Phoenix Hairpin*

The poem is written in the *ci* form (lyrics form). *Ci*'s origin can be traced back to the Liang dynasty (502-557), which was the third of the Southern dynasties during the era of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The form came into being in the Tang dynasty, then arrived at its peak in the Song dynasty.<sup>40</sup> Originally meant to accompany pre-existing melodies, *ci* developed and became a distinctive poetic art form,<sup>41</sup> “the predominant form for verse of the Song dynasty,”<sup>42</sup> thus the term “*song ci*.” *Ci* poems are named after the tunes to which they are set. Other poets have written *ci* poems set to the tune *Phoenix Hairpin* after Lu You. Therefore, it is important to mention the name of the poet to reference the correct version of *Phoenix Hairpin*. A big difference between *ci* and the other traditional forms of Chinese poetry is the irregular line lengths with different number of characters (syllables) in each line. This is evident in the tune *Phoenix Hairpin* with its syllabic pattern 3,3,7,3,3,4,4,3. “The varying line lengths are comparable to the natural rhythm of speech and therefore are easily understood when sung.”<sup>43</sup>

The following table presents Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin* along with its Chinese Pinyin spelling in the first column. A literal word-for-word translation is provided in the second column

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<sup>40</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “词 (文学),” [http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/词\\_\(文学\)](http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/词_(文学)) (accessed May 10, 2012); my translation.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “ci,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/612077/ci> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

to enable the reader to read the original text without any imposed interpretation. A more idiomatic translation is presented alongside for comparison in the third column. There are many different translations of this poem. Here I have chosen Xu Yuanzhong's translation because it is less elaborate compared to other translations found,<sup>44</sup> again allowing more room for subjectivity and imagination as the original Chinese text intends.

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<sup>44</sup> Xu Yuanzhong, trans., *100 Tang and Song Ci Poems* (China: China Translation and Publishing Corporation), 235.

Table 1. Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin*

Original text	Word-for-word translation	Xu Yuanzhong's translation
<p>《钗头凤》 <i>chai tou feng</i></p> <p>红酥手， <i>hong su shou</i></p> <p>黄藤酒， <i>huang teng jiu</i></p> <p>满城春色宫墙柳。 <i>man cheng chun se gong qiang liu</i></p> <p>东风恶， <i>dong feng e</i></p> <p>欢情薄。 <i>huan qing bo</i></p> <p>一怀愁绪， <i>yi huai chou xu</i></p> <p>几年离索。 <i>ji nian li suo</i></p> <p>错，错，错！ <i>cuo, cuo, cuo</i></p> <p>春如旧， <i>chun ru jiu</i></p> <p>人空瘦， <i>ren kong shou</i></p> <p>泪痕红悒鲛绡透。 <i>lei hen hong yi jiao xiao tou</i></p> <p>桃花落， <i>tao hua luo</i></p> <p>闲池阁。 <i>xian chi ge</i></p> <p>山盟虽在， <i>shan meng sui zai,</i></p> <p>锦书难托。 <i>jin shu nan tuo</i></p> <p>莫，莫，莫！ <i>mo, mo, mo</i></p>	<p>hairpin (on the) head/ phoenix</p> <p>pink/ tender/ hands</p> <p>yellow/ <i>teng</i>/ wine</p> <p>full/ city or town/ spring/ color/ palace/ wall/ willow</p> <p>east/ wind/ evil, cruel or ferocious</p> <p>blissful/ relationship/ thin [or weak, fragile]</p> <p>a/ bosom [or mind] (of)/ sad/ emotions [or thoughts]</p> <p>a few/ years/ separation/ loneliness [or rope]</p> <p>wrong, wrong, wrong!</p> <p>spring/ like /old or before</p> <p>(the) person/ empty [or in vain]/ thin</p> <p>tears/ stains/ red [or rouge]/ wet/ 鲛绡=sheer silk/ through</p> <p>peach/ blossoms/ fall</p> <p>vacant, not in use [or quiet]/ pond/ pavilion</p> <p>mountain/ oath or vow/ even though/ (still) there</p> <p>brocade/ book [or letter, epistle]/ difficult/ hold or support [or entrust, deliver]</p> <p>no, no, no! [or don't, don't, don't!]</p>	<p><b><i>Phoenix Hairpin</i></b></p> <p><i>Pink hands so fine,</i></p> <p><i>Gold-branded wine,</i></p> <p><i>Spring paints green willows palace walls cannot confine.</i></p> <p><i>East wind unfair,</i></p> <p><i>Happy times rare.</i></p> <p><i>In my heart sad thoughts throng,</i></p> <p><i>We've severed for years long.</i></p> <p><i>Wrong, wrong, wrong!</i></p> <p><i>Spring is as green,</i></p> <p><i>In vain she's lean,</i></p> <p><i>Her silk scarf soak'd with tears and red with stains unclean.</i></p> <p><i>Peach blossoms fall,</i></p> <p><i>Near desert'd hall.</i></p> <p><i>Our oath is still there, lo!</i></p> <p><i>No word to her can go.</i></p> <p><i>No, no, no!</i></p>

The opening verse consists of a pair of three-syllable lines (*hong su shou*, *huang teng jiu*) and a longer, seven-syllable line (*man cheng chun se gong qiang liu*). The first line *hong su shou* (pink tender hands) has been commonly interpreted as a woman's hands, referring to the poet's lost love Tang Wan.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, all the translations I found interpreted *hong su shou* as Tang Wan's hands which offer the *huang teng jiu* (yellow *teng* wine). However, Professor Sun gave another interesting interpretation, saying that *hong su shou* was a local specialty dessert in Shaoxing that was frequently served in the royal palace. The dessert's shape resembled the hands of Buddha and thus the name "pink tender hands":

The dessert *hong su shou* and the yellow *teng* wine, such a high-class dish and drink served in the court, are like the attractive green willows surrounded by the palace wall, something I could watch from afar but could no longer reach. [This second interpretation seems to] flow better. Therefore, when you, Tang Huixian [courtesy name of Tang Wan], came by my side, you were indeed like those green willows, as much as I still like you and miss you, you have belonged to someone else.<sup>46</sup>

The following pairing lines, *dong feng e* and *huan qing bo*, can also be interpreted two ways. *Dong feng* (east wind) is commonly known as the spring wind in China. *Dong feng e* can therefore be translated as the strong, destructive spring wind and *huan qing bo* as the lover's broken relationship. Like most interpreters however I believe *dong feng* is used to imply Lu You's mother. The word east, as Professor Sun explains, refers to the master or the host. In traditional Chinese families, the master or host would sit on the east side of the dining table while the mother-in-law would live in the east side of the house.<sup>47</sup> "It is because of [my] mother

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<sup>45</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



that we become *huan qing bo*, that we lose our short but extremely memorable relationship,” continued Professor Sun as he revealed the meaning of the entire verse.<sup>48</sup>

The meaning of the next two pairing lines, *yi huai chou xu* and *ji nian li suo*, is more straightforward. The Chinese character *huai* (怀) has a radical that represents the heart, and the word directly means bosom, which is close to the heart. The same word *huai* can also refer to the mind in Chinese, since the mind is closely related to the heart (and the bosom) when it comes to emotions. The word *chou* functions as both a noun and adjective, meaning sad or sorrow; the following word *xu* can simply mean a train of thought, or it can be illustrated as a mental or emotional state.<sup>49</sup> I therefore interpret *yi huai chou xu* as “my [or our] whole heart and mind is filled with sorrow.” The next line *ji nian li suo* can also be read two ways. The word *suo*, if used as a noun, means a big rope. If we adopt this meaning for *suo*, *ji nian li suo* can be read as “for all these years we have been separated from the rope that ties us together.” When used as an adjective, *suo* becomes all alone or insipid.<sup>50</sup> *Ji nian li suo* then means “a few years of separation and loneliness,” which is how this line is generally interpreted. Here Lu You has cleverly chosen the word *suo* to be put together with the word *li* (separate or separation) to create two interchangeable but related meanings.

What follows and ends the first stanza is the word *cuo* repeated three times, which is the Chinese word for wrong. Professor Sun expressed that the key to the verse lies in the word *cuo*,<sup>51</sup> which I believe is perhaps the crux of not just the verse but also the entire stanza. *Cuo*

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> *iCIBA Dictionary*, s.v. “绪,” <http://www.iciba.com/绪> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> *iCIBA Dictionary*, s.v. “索,” <http://www.iciba.com/索> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

symbolizes not only the separation that was wrong, but also the fact that “you no longer belong to me,” that “my mother treated you in such a way,” and that “I obeyed my mother and deserted you,” which are all implied in the first stanza. “How should we interpret this ‘wrong’?” asked Professor Sun as he continued: “Was it being in love that was wrong? Was it the separation that was wrong? Or was it the meeting this time that was wrong? It was none of the above, but instead, a very complicated and tormented kind of helplessness that Lu You was experiencing. [It] was wrong, nothing can be done, nothing can be said, and nothing can be clear whatever I [or we] say.”<sup>52</sup>

The second stanza employs the exact same syllabic pattern (3,3,7,3,3,4,4,3) with the same number of characters on each line. The first line *chun ru jiu* is simply translated into “spring is like before,” following by the second pairing line *ren kong shou*. Here it reminds Professor Sun of a popular Chinese saying which describes how the flowers are the same flowers every year, but a person becomes different as years go by. Even though spring is still as green and beautiful as before, “you, my former wife, my beloved wife, Huixian you have changed. You have become thin and wan”—which is how Professor Sun tried to describe what Lu You meant by the first two lines.<sup>53</sup> In his lecture, Professor Sun specifically drew the viewers’ attention to the word *kong*,<sup>54</sup> which is placed between *ren* (person) and *shou* (thin). The word *kong* by itself means empty, and some read it literally as “the person becomes empty and thin.” When *kong* is placed before a verb, however, it can mean in vain, and the Chinese word for thin can function as a verb. Professor Sun made a point that as thin as Tang Wan is, it is all in vain. “This again

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

expresses Lu You's extreme sadness and his complex emotion since there was nothing he could do about it."<sup>55</sup> The line that concludes the first verse, *lei hen hong yi jiao xiao tou*, describes how Tang Wan's crying makes her rouge form red stains on her sheer silk clothing or kerchief. *Jiao xiao* is a term commonly referring to thin silk.<sup>56</sup> Various sources wrote that Tang Wan was in tears when she met Lu You in the garden.<sup>57</sup> Professor Sun imagined that seeing Tang Wan in tears reminded Lu You of how she was mistreated by his mother and how she had often cried after they were married.<sup>58</sup>

Ending the poem is *Tao hua luo, xian chi ge. Shan meng sui zai, jin shu nan tuo. Mo, mo, mo!* The direct translation of *tao hua luo* is "peach blossoms fall(ing)." The word *xian* has multiple meanings, depending on the word to which it is connected. Immediately followed by *chi ge*, which can either mean pond and pavilion or the pavilion by the pond, *xian* here can mean quiet, empty, vacant or not in use. Both Xu Yuanzhong and Professor Huang Xinqu use the word "deserted" for *xian* in their translation of the poem. Professor Huang Xinqu's translation "deserted here are the ponds and pavilions"<sup>59</sup> portrays how the ponds and pavilions are left unoccupied and are therefore empty and quiet. In her translation Dr. Peterson uses the word "idle" instead, which appropriately conveys the inactive and lifeless state of the pond and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> *Online Xinhua Dictionary*, s.v. "鲛绡," <http://xh.5156edu.com/html5/275112.html> (accessed May 10, 2012); my translation.

<sup>57</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD; Wu Yucheng and Wu Yu, 179.

<sup>58</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>59</sup> Huang Xinqu, 汉英对照: 《钗头凤》陆游, in 爱思英语学习网 (aisi yingyu xuexi wang), <http://www.24en.com/column/huangxinqu/2011-04-25/133365.html> (accessed May 10, 2012).

pavilion: “Pond, pavilion are idle here.”<sup>60</sup> The falling peach blossoms and the idle pond and pavilion set up the scene for what comes next, while they can also serve as a metaphor for Lu You and Tang Wan’s broken relationship. It is the same pond and pavilion, just like their faithful love, but it is different, because of the uncontrollable circumstances which fill them with loneliness. The next two four-syllable lines, *shan meng sui zai, jin shu nan tuo*, sum up the entire stanza. The word *shan* (mountain) and the word *meng* (oath or vow) are used together as a Chinese expression to signify a vow that is as firm as the mountain. The literal translation for *jin shu* is brocade book. *Jin shu* here is however commonly interpreted as love letter(s) or epistle(s), or simply the two lovers’ dignifying love. *Nan* is the Chinese word for hard or difficult. *Tuo* again has more than one meaning. Here it can mean hold, entrust or deliver, which can all make a convincing statement for the line *jin shu nan tuo*: Even though our vow is as firm as the mountain, it cannot *hold* our love/ We cannot *entrust* our love to our oath, as firm as it is like the mountain/ Even though our solemn vow stays firm like the mountain, there is no way for our love to be *delivered*. It is impossible to know what the poet was thinking when he wrote the line, but he could have consciously chosen the word *tuo* for all the different but relevant meanings that he was trying to convey. Professor Sun gave an elegant interpretation combining the last five lines: “... [T]he flowers blossomed and fell year after year, now that our relationship is broken, even though there is still that charming, attractive peach garden, and there remains the elegant, pleasing pond and pavilion, but who, between you and me, would have the mood and interest to admire and enjoy their beauty? Ah, no, no, no!”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Peterson, 281.

<sup>61</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

The poem closes with the last three words, *mo, mo, mo!*, rhyming with *cuo, cuo, cuo!* that end the first stanza. *Mo, mo, mo!* can be translated into “no, no, no!” in English, and according to Professor Sun, they revealed “Lu You’s long accumulated rancor and his severely wounded heart.”<sup>62</sup> Professor Sun concluded how Lu You’s emotion was in communion with the surroundings in his poem *Phoenix Hairpin*, that Lu You “entrusted his infinitely deep feelings to those silent and speechless surroundings, letting them interpret his unspeakable emotions.”<sup>63</sup> I agree with Professor Sun that this is a “truly refined, vivid and touching” poem,<sup>64</sup> despite how spontaneously and instantaneously the poem was written.

The story did not end there. Tang Wan saw the poem soon after Lu You wrote it. At that moment a multitude of feelings surged up in her heart and all the memories she had with Lu You crowded into her mind.<sup>65</sup> Even though she had been remarried for many years, she had never forgotten her first love.<sup>66</sup> The heartbroken Tang Wan became very ill. From her bed she wrote the following poem in response to Lu You’s poem.<sup>67</sup> This *ci* poem is set to the same tune, *Phoenix Hairpin*, and therefore has an identical form and syllabic pattern as Lu You’s poem.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Peterson, 281.



Figure 2. A picture of Tang Wan's *Phoenix Hairpin* extracted from the Cultural China website<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *The Love Story of Lu You and Tang Wan*, in Cultural China, <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/59H520H11949.html> (accessed May 10, 2012).

Tang Wan's Companion Poem *Phoenix Hairpin*Table 2. Tang Wan's *Phoenix Hairpin*

Original text	Word-for-word translation	Xu Yuanzhong's translation
<p>《钗头凤》 <i>chai tou feng</i></p> <p>世情薄， <i>shi qing bo</i></p> <p>人情恶， <i>ren qing e</i></p> <p>雨送黄昏花易落。 <i>yu song huang hun hua yi luo</i></p> <p>晓风干， <i>xiao feng gan</i></p> <p>泪痕残。 <i>lei hen can</i></p> <p>欲笺心事， <i>yu jian xin shi</i></p> <p>独语斜阑。 <i>du yu xie lan</i></p> <p>难，难，难！ <i>nan, nan, nan</i></p> <p>人成各， <i>ren cheng ge</i></p> <p>今非昨， <i>jin fei zuo</i></p> <p>病魂常似秋千索。 <i>bing hun chang shi qiu qian suo</i></p> <p>角声寒， <i>jiao sheng han</i></p> <p>夜阑珊。 <i>ye lan shan</i></p> <p>怕人寻问， <i>pa ren xun wen,</i></p> <p>咽泪装欢。 <i>yan lei zhuang huan</i></p> <p>瞒，瞒，瞒！ <i>man, man, man</i></p>	<p>hairpin (on the) head/ phoenix</p> <p>the world/ condition or situation/ meager or frail</p> <p>human/ kindness, sensitivity or sympathy/ evil or wicked</p> <p>rain/ send away/ 黄昏= dusk/ flower(s)/ easy (to)/ fall</p> <p>dawn/ wind/ dry</p> <p>tear/ stains or traces/ remain(ing)</p> <p>desire (to)/ write/ heart/ matter</p> <p>alone/ speaking/ incline or slant/ rails, fence, or balustrade</p> <p>hard, hard, hard!</p> <p>(each) person/ become(s)/ separate or apart</p> <p>today/ is not or unlike/ yesterday</p> <p>sick/ soul/ always/ like/ 秋千=swing/ ropes</p> <p>horn/ sound/ cold</p> <p>night/ 阑珊=waning</p> <p>afraid/ people/ 寻问=inquire or ask</p> <p>swallow/ tears/ pretend (to be)/ happy</p> <p>hide, hide, hide!</p>	<p><b><i>Phoenix Hairpin</i></b></p> <p><i>The world unfair,</i></p> <p><i>True manhood rare,</i></p> <p><i>Dusk melts away in rain and</i> <i>blooming trees turn bare.</i></p> <p><i>Morning wind high,</i></p> <p><i>Tear traces dry.</i></p> <p><i>I'll write to you what's in my heart,</i></p> <p><i>Leaning on rails, speaking apart,</i></p> <p><i>Hard, hard, hard!</i></p> <p><i>Each goes his way,</i></p> <p><i>Gone are our days,</i></p> <p><i>Like ropes of a swing</i> <i>my sick soul groans always.</i></p> <p><i>The horn blows cold,</i></p> <p><i>Night has grown old.</i></p> <p><i>Afraid my grief may be descried,</i></p> <p><i>I try to hide my tears undried.</i></p> <p><i>Hide, hide, hide!</i></p>

Tang Wan's poem seems more personal and direct compared to Lu You's poem, with little use of metaphors and less ambiguity than Lu You's. This difference is especially obvious in the way she opened the poem. The first two lines, *shi qing bo* and *ren qing e*, brutally talk about the frailness of the world and the evilness of mankind, fully expressing her long suppressed anger and distress towards the feudal code of ethics which formed the society.<sup>69</sup> The “*bo*” and “*e*” here are the same two words as Lu You's “*dong feng e, huan qing bo.*” These two words, especially “*e*,” which means evil, are strong negative words. By saying the east wind is evil, Lu You lessens the impact of the word. Tang Wan, however, directly calls humankind evil. The third line *yu song huang hun hua yi luo*, translated as “the rain sends away dusk, causing flowers to easily fall,” symbolizes both the poet as a victim and her tragic state. According to a Chinese article on the *Baidu* website, flowers during a rainy nightfall are often used in Lu You's poems as a symbol. By borrowing this symbol and applying it to herself, Tang Wan shows the tacit connection and understanding she has with Lu You.<sup>70</sup> Professor Sun interpreted the first three lines by asking “how could the flower of love bear the cruelty of the world and humankind?”<sup>71</sup>

The next verse starts with another pair of lines that connects to the line before: *xiao feng gan, lei hen can*. “Even though the morning wind has dried the rain from last night (and the traces it had left on the flowers), it cannot dry my tears from crying the whole night, sleepless,” translated Professor Sun.<sup>72</sup> Comparing tears to rain is common in traditional Chinese poetry.

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<sup>69</sup> *Baidu Baike*, s.vv. “钗头凤·世情薄，” <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1431962.htm> (accessed May 25, 2012); my translation.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



Contrasting the ability of the wind to dry the rain to the inability of the handkerchief to wipe off tears, however, is Tang Wan's original idea, and it fully conveys her continuous grief.<sup>73</sup>

The following two lines, *yu jian xin shi* and *du yu xie lan*, describe how Tang Wan wanted to write to Lu You what was in her heart, and she leaned towards the rail talking to herself, wondering if she should write to him. From the closing line *nan, nan, nan!* (hard, hard, hard!), it is obvious that she did not write to him eventually, again because of the cruelty of the feudal codes.<sup>74</sup> The repeated word expresses the grievance she had been nursing all those years. Along with the two opening lines, it suggests how it is hard to live in this unkind world, but it is even harder as a woman.<sup>75</sup> This “hard” also sets up the next stanza, which implies that “it is especially hard as a divorced woman who is remarried.”<sup>76</sup>

The second stanza again starts with an explicit statement *ren cheng ge, jin fei zuo, bing hun chang shi qiu qian suo*. This verse is regarded to have high artistic value because it describes the lovers' relationship both spatially and temporally.<sup>77</sup> *Ren cheng ge* describes how they both have gone their own way (the spatial dimension). *Jin fei zuo* then addresses the temporal factor, describing how today is unlike yesterday. The *Baidu* article on Tang Wan's poem comments on the line thus: “from yesterday's happy marriage to today's lovesickness, from yesterday's being forced to divorce to today's being forced to remarry. This is so unfortunate! But the misfortune

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<sup>73</sup> *Baidu Baike*, s.vv. “钗头凤·世情薄.”

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

continues ...”<sup>78</sup> “... [B]ecause of my yearning day and night, and how I was too sentimentally attached to the past, I have become ‘*bing hun chang shi qiu qian suo*’....,” said Professor Sun as he interpreted the verse.<sup>79</sup> Here instead of the commonly used term “*meng hun*” (dream soul), the word *meng* has been replaced by the word *bing* (sick). After so many difficult and sleepless nights, the dream soul has turned into a “sick soul.”<sup>80</sup> Word by word, as illustrated in table 2, Xu Yuanzhong efficiently translates this line into “like ropes of a swing my sick soul groans always.”<sup>81</sup> This line discloses how Tang Wan had become mentally and physically ill. Even worse, she had lost her freedom to be sad and to cry after she was remarried.<sup>82</sup> This is vividly portrayed in the remaining lines: *jiao sheng han, ye lan shan. Pa ren xun wen, yan lei zhuang huan. Man, man, man!* As Professor Sun phrased it, “I can only send my love through the chilling horn sounds (*jiao sheng han*) in this quiet long night.”<sup>83</sup> *Ye lan shan* (the night waning) further reveals Tang Wan’s sleeplessness. Because she had been awake, she not only could hear the horn, but was also aware that the night was coming to an end. After a long sleepless night, and supposedly another restless day, she unfortunately “had to swallow all her tears, trying hard to smile and act like she was happy” (*yan lei zhuang huan*) because she feared that her sorrow would be known (*pa ren xun wen*).<sup>84</sup> The last three words, *man, man, man!* (hide, hide, hide!),

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>80</sup> *Baidu Baike*, s.vv. “钗头凤·世情薄。”

<sup>81</sup> Xu Yuanzhong, 237.

<sup>82</sup> *Baidu Baike*, s.vv. “钗头凤·世情薄。”

<sup>83</sup> Sun Danlin, DVD.

<sup>84</sup> *Baidu Baike*, s.vv. “钗头凤·世情薄。”

echo with *nan, nan, nan!* (hard, hard, hard!) in the first stanza. “Since the detestable feudal ethics does not allow the existence of pure and dignifying love, I will just hide it deep inside my heart. Therefore the more she hides, the more she shows her undiminishing and faithful love to Lu You.”<sup>85</sup> The three statements of the word “hide” further reinforce the passive role and unheard voice of a woman like her in feudal China.

Even though Tang Wan wrote this poem as a response to Lu You’s poem and utilized the exact same form, their poems are very different in style. Lu You skillfully blended his surroundings and his emotions, and the result was an elegant but sophisticated picture leaving much room for interpretation. Tang Wan, on the other hand, boldly revealed her long suppressed emotions, speaking plainly with hardly any metaphors or elaborations. Her pathetic life translated itself into a beautiful piece of poetry through her heartfelt and vivid poetic expression. The poem was transparent without any reservation, as if she were proclaiming her final statement before death without holding anything back. The poem was also depressingly dark compared to Lu You’s poem, as if there was no reason for her to live except to suffer. Indeed, she became increasingly ill and died soon after she wrote the poem.<sup>86</sup>

Some forty years later, the seventy-five-year-old Lu You “once more visited the Shen garden and recalled his earlier meeting with Tang Wan, who by this time had been dead many years and was buried on Mount Guiji.”<sup>87</sup> He wrote the following two poems (translated by Burton Watson):

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Peterson, 282.

<sup>87</sup> Watson, 29.

*Slanting sunlight over city walls,  
 painted horns mournful;  
 in the Shen garden, no longer  
 the old pond and pavilion.  
 Green ripples of spring under the bridge—  
 they wound my heart,  
 waters that once held the image  
 of a startled swan!*

*Dreams shattered, fragrance vanished—  
 forty years:  
 Shen garden willows are old,  
 they scatter no more fluff.  
 I too will one day  
 be dust on Mount Gui,  
 but still I shed tears to see  
 the place she once was.<sup>88</sup>*

(Lu You, *Shen Garden, Two Poems*)

When Lu You was eighty-four years old, he once again visited the Shen garden and wrote his last poem commemorating Tang Wan (translated by Dr. Peterson):

*The flowers of Sheng  
 Garden are fair as  
 brocade,*

*Many knew me in  
 times long past,*

*They knew too, that  
 Beauty in the dust is laid:  
 Why must our dreams  
 vanish so fast?<sup>89</sup>*

(Lu You, *Chun You*)

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>89</sup> Peterson, 282.

Lu You died the year after, in 1210.<sup>90</sup> Their dream of love had been shattered and vanished, as Lu You himself described in his late poems. However, their story has lived on throughout eight hundred years of Chinese history and has served as a source of great poetic inspiration.

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<sup>90</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Lu You.”

## CHAPTER 2. THE VANGUARD OF THE CHINESE AVANT-GARDE:

### GE GAN-RU

When one talks about Chinese composers in the United States, one expects to hear names like Chen Yi, Tan Dun, Zhou Long and Bright Sheng. These composers are regarded as the first generation of post-Cultural Revolution Chinese composers who came to the United States in the 1980s. At one point they all studied with the pioneering Chinese American composer Chou Wen-chung and earned their doctoral degrees in composition from Columbia University. Despite the relative renown and well-deserved recognition of these figures, there is an additional composer, Ge Gan-ru, who is equally if not more significant in the history of Chinese composers in the West.

In 1983, Ge Gan-ru was invited to the United States to study at Columbia University, a year before Tan Dun arrived in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Besides being the first Chinese composer to be invited to Columbia University, Ge Gan-ru is honored as “China’s first avant-garde composer” by the *New Grove Dictionary*.<sup>2</sup> His revolutionary solo cello piece *Yi Feng* (Lost Style), written the year before he left China, represents “the first avant-garde composition in China’s music history.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Weihua, “Ge, Gangru,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/42538> (accessed February 8, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography, <http://www.geganru.com/biography> (accessed February 8, 2012).

### **The Life of Ge Gan-ru—“The Product of Momentous Circumstances”<sup>4</sup>**

Born in 1954, a year after Chen Yi,<sup>5</sup> Ge Gan-ru grew up in a non-musical family in Shanghai. When he was eight or nine years old, he was brought to an orchestral concert and heard violins for the first time. He immediately loved the instrument and asked his parents if they would buy him a violin, and began studying the instrument.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike many Chinese musicians who decided on their music career very early, the young boy did not intend to become a musician.<sup>7</sup> This started to change during the Cultural Revolution when he was eleven years old.<sup>8</sup> Because all schools were shut down, Ge Gan-ru recalled spending most of his time practicing the violin at home: “There was no school and violin was the only thing I could spend time with. The more I practiced the more I felt I wanted to be a musician.”<sup>9</sup> Western Music was prohibited during that time. With hardly any printed music available, he had to learn the music from his own hand-copied scores.<sup>10</sup> The practicing too was done in secret. He practiced with a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography; Joanna C. Lee, “Chen Yi,” in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/48452> (accessed February 8, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 2, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru,” *Tudou* Web site, <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/ZsyvBnDgxN0/> (accessed June 10, 2012); my translation.

mute and his parents “made sure the windows were shut tight when he practiced.”<sup>11</sup> The Cultural Revolution which interrupted everyone’s education became the first momentous circumstance in Ge Gan-ru’s musical journey. Had it not happened, Ge Gan-ru said he probably would not have become a musician.<sup>12</sup>

More unexpected circumstances followed. After a few years of devotion to the violin, the seventeen-year-old Ge Gan-ru was sent to a farm on Chongming Island to be “re-educated,” planting rice and being involved in other physical labor.<sup>13</sup> The practicing, however, did not stop.

Every night I would walk in total darkness on open fields to a secluded water irrigation station about 45 minutes away from where I lived. But that was my happiest time because I was able to practice violin. It was impossible to practice violin where I slept because I shared the room with 10 other people and everyone was exhausted after a day of hard work.<sup>14</sup>

A few months later, Ge Gan-ru had his first “significant encounter” at the camp: he unexpectedly “met and became a pupil of one of the best violin teachers in China who was also forced into hard labor at the camp.”<sup>15</sup> His violin lessons, too, were given secretly, often in a barn, “since my teacher was also sharing a room with many people.”<sup>16</sup>

A year later, Ge Gan-ru was called to play in a newly-created ensemble, “entertaining

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Freed, liner notes to *Chinese Rhapsody by Ge Gan-ru*, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, conducted by José Serebrier, BIS Records BIS-SACD-1509, CD, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2012; Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>16</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2012.



fellow workers with revolutionary songs every night.”<sup>17</sup> This “odd ensemble,” as Ge described, consists of not only western instruments like flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, French horn, violins, cello, accordion, but also Chinese instruments (bamboo flute, *pipa*, and *erhu*).<sup>18</sup> Here he had his second significant encounter: the accordion player later becomes his wife.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the two significant encounters, Ge probably had never thought that planting rice in the fields would lead to planting seeds for his composition career. “Ge showed a great interest in arranging music for the ensemble in spite of a lack of training in music theory. That was his first experience in anything close to composing.”<sup>20</sup>

Ge Gan-ru was admitted as a violin major at the age of twenty when the Shanghai Conservatory reopened. His urge to compose, however, increased in the next three years.<sup>21</sup> In 1977, he made the crucial decision to switch to composition, studying under notable composer Chen Gang whom Ge greatly values as his “life-long mentor.”<sup>22</sup>

When Ge Gan-ru first started composing, he struggled with his own compositional ideology. “As students we were only really allowed to arrange folk tunes rather than compose original music. I wanted to *create*, not just arrange, but it was difficult because there wasn’t that tradition and because of the political issue. You were expected to write for political purposes, not

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<sup>17</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>18</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Freed, liner notes to *Chinese Rhapsody*.

<sup>20</sup> Ge Gan-ru’s biography, liner notes to *Lost Style by Ge Gan-ru*, performed by Frank Su Huang, Margaret Leng Tan, Kathryn Woodard, and The Shanghai Quartet, New Albion NA134, CD, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>22</sup> Ge Gan-ru’s biography, liner notes to *Lost Style*.

to express yourself,” Ge Gan-ru disclosed in his interview with Barry Witharden.<sup>23</sup> He also made a striking comment in his interview with Vivien Schweitzer: “We don’t have composers in Chinese history.”<sup>24</sup> “The music we listen to is inherited, not created by an individual person,” added Ge.<sup>25</sup>

The time came when “China began to open up” and “foreign musicians occasionally visited, sometimes leaving behind scores and tapes.”<sup>26</sup> Ge Gan-ru started experimenting with the “contemporary and avant-garde techniques” which were forbidden at that time.<sup>27</sup> These include the twelve-tone technique. “I believe I was the first composer who wrote twelve-tone music in China, which was in 1978.”<sup>28</sup> “Why do you write this kind of music?” he was asked.<sup>29</sup> “This kind of music is not understood by the audience.”<sup>30</sup> Ge Gan-ru himself was conflicted by composing in these styles known only in the West. He experienced “an uncompromising gap” between twelve-tone music and what he calls his “root music.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Barry Witharden, “Ge Gan-ru on His Musical Upbringing and Influences,” *Gramophone*, July 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Vivien Schweitzer, “Intrepid Journeys Lead to Ambitious Works,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>28</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Kyle Gann, “Music in Time of War,” *Village Voice*, August 7, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ge Gan-ru’s biography, liner notes to *Lost Style*.

... [I] realized I needed to find my own voice. The trouble was, I didn't know what that would be. I heard Cage and Crumb and that was closer to what I felt. Some Western people hear Cage as very Eastern, but to me he's very Western. For example, the preparations he does to the piano are still based on logic: when Western music uses microtones it's still dividable. In Chinese usage there's no insistence on a formula. You can move from more or less any pitch to any other pitch. It's like experimenting with each note.<sup>32</sup>

*Ge Gan-ru Found His "Lost Style" through "Yi Feng"*

The frustrated composer found a way out through writing *Yi Feng* in 1983. Written for a detuned cello, this radical work marked not only "the first avant-garde composition in China's music history,"<sup>33</sup> but also a turning point in Ge Gan-ru's composition career. Ge Gan-ru found his own distinctive voice in *Yi Feng*, which is translated as "Lost Style." He shared his composition process:

I compare basic elements common to Western and Chinese music: pitch, duration, timbre, dynamics. In Western music, pitches are very precise, very organised, and you seek the perfect sound according to the logic of physics, but in China there is no ideal. For *Yi Feng* I focused on the non-Western elements. I didn't write specific pitches and retuned the cello an octave down to lose the Western associations.<sup>34</sup>

Ge Gan-ru further described how he wrote for cello:

Because of the loosened strings, the part behind the bridge can be fully utilized. The strings are bowed and plucked in many unconventional ways and the body is struck in different parts to produce timbres simulating Chinese percussive instruments.<sup>35</sup>

"Unsurprisingly," as Vivien Schweitzer described in her New York Times article, " 'Lost Style'

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<sup>32</sup> Kathryn Woodard, liner notes for "Yi Feng," in *Lost Style by Ge Gan-ru*, New Albion NA134, CD, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>34</sup> Witharden, "Ge Gan-ru on His Musical Upbringing."

<sup>35</sup> Woodard, liner notes for "Yi Feng."

was harshly criticized.”<sup>36</sup> “It caused a lot of controversy, and for a while the government gave me a hard time, but I wasn’t trying to make statement or to destroy anything, I was just seeking to write from my heart,” Ge said in his interview with Witharden.<sup>37</sup>

### *Relocation to the United States*

After his visit to China in 1980-81, assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic David Gilbert brought Ge Gan-ru’s music back to the United States. The music “landed in the hands of Chou Wen-chung ... who was at the time the vice-dean of the School of Fine Arts at Columbia University.”<sup>38</sup> One night, Ge Gan-ru received an unexpected phone call. Ge recalled: “The person on the phone said he was Chou Wen-chung.... I immediately rode my bicycle to meet with him.... After around half a year, I received a letter from Columbia University, saying I was admitted as a doctoral student in composition.”<sup>39</sup>

On the night of July 16, 1983, Ge Gan-ru arrived at Kennedy International Airport, with only forty dollars in his pocket, which was the maximum amount one was allowed to bring out of China at the time.<sup>40</sup> “Speaking little English, he hung around the airport with no idea where to go. (A bystander took pity on him and offered him a bed for the night.)... After a week of

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<sup>36</sup> Schweitzer, “Intrepid Journeys.”

<sup>37</sup> Witharden, “Ge Gan-ru on His Musical Upbringing.”

<sup>38</sup> Ge Gan-ru’s biography, liner notes to *Lost Style*.

<sup>39</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru.”

<sup>40</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, August 8, 2012.

subsisting on bread and water, he eventually found work delivering Chinese food.”<sup>41</sup> “When my wife came, we all worked as house cleaners. I gradually made some money by composing music. Besides concert music, I also wrote for theater, dance, and films.”<sup>42</sup>

While life in the United States was difficult, it was even more difficult for Ge Gan-ru musically. Everything he learned at the university was strictly Western music, and students were expected to conform to the Western tradition, which contradicted his own desires.<sup>43</sup> The disorientation while at the university led Ge Gan-ru to disassociate himself from active composition for a period of time. He realized how he needed to mentally and emotionally return to a fresh state like when he was composing *Yi Feng*.<sup>44</sup>

Around the same time Ge Gan-ru’s wife, Vivian Wan-he Ge, started working as a metal trader.<sup>45</sup> In the early 1990s, Ge Gan-ru joined his wife and co-founded a business, establishing computerized network information for the metal industry. “I plugged into the venture right after I graduated from Columbia. I thought I would start composing again after becoming rich in six months,” Ge laughed as he shared this thought.<sup>46</sup>

The next decade Ge Gan-ru focused almost entirely on the business. Nevertheless, he never lost his urge to compose. “I had tried to forget composing but couldn’t. I realized it is in

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<sup>41</sup> Schweitzer, “Intrepid Journeys.”

<sup>42</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

my blood and has become a part of me.”<sup>47</sup> Ge Gan-ru finally resumed composing full-time around the year 2000 after the business was successfully established.<sup>48</sup> Many ambitious works came out in the 2000s, including the piano quintet *Four Studies of Peking Opera* (2003), *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* (2006), and his acclaimed fifth string quartet *Fall of Baghdad* (2007).<sup>49</sup> His CD album *Fall of Baghdad*, released by Naxos in 2009, was rated as one of the best recordings of the year by the *New York Times*.<sup>50</sup> In 2010, Ge Gan-ru was one of the two composers chosen among the “Fifteen Most Inspiring People in Classical Music Today” by New York *Listen* magazine.<sup>51</sup>

Today, Ge Gan-ru’s music has been heard all around the world. The New York Philharmonic, BBC Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Lyon National Orchestra, and Tokyo Philharmonic, among others, have commissioned and performed his works.<sup>52</sup> Renowned ensembles such as the Kronos and Ying Quartets have recorded his chamber works.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike his peers, Ge Gan-ru does not have a publisher and has never sought teaching positions in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Currently living comfortably in a mansion with his wife in Saddle River, New Jersey, his online business has enabled him to enjoy the freedom of writing

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Schweitzer, “Intrepid Journeys.”

<sup>50</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>51</sup> “Most Inspiring,” *Listen*, Summer 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Ge Gan-ru, biography.

<sup>53</sup> “Most Inspiring,” *Listen*.

<sup>54</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

only when he feels moved and inspired.<sup>55</sup> “I hope to be first touched by my own music. How will the audience be touched by it otherwise?”<sup>56</sup> In fact, Ge Gan-ru’s idealism has never changed. It is important to him that he only listens to what the music tells him, rather than what people say about his music.<sup>57</sup> With every piece, Ge wants to feel that he is completely inspired by the musical idea to the point that the writing of the piece is an inevitability. “That was one of the reasons that I wanted to be financially independent, so that I could write what I want.”<sup>58</sup>

In 2004, after being away from his home country for twenty-one years, Ge Gan-ru went back to Mainland China for the first time. He and his wife again returned to China in 2012 for the performance of his new orchestra works, *Ba Wang Bie Ji (Lovers Besieged)* and *Hu Die Xu Qu*, in Shanghai.<sup>59</sup> *Hu Die Xu Qu (Butterfly Overture)* is dedicated to his life-long mentor Chen Gang, who had written the famous violin concerto *Butterfly Lovers*.<sup>60</sup> A major Shanghai television station made a feature on Ge Gan-ru and his music while he was in China.<sup>61</sup> The documentary shows how Ge Gan-ru traveled to Chongming Island, the site of his incarceration in a labor camp as a teenager. There he recalled many of his unforgettable youthful memories.<sup>62</sup> Ge had once wondered why everything that happened in his life was against his own will. Looking

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru.”

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru.”

<sup>60</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Shanghai Television Art Channel *Ming Jia* Series, “Ge Gan-ru.”

back, all the hardships have indeed turned into special blessings.<sup>63</sup> “Music is just like my child. All the complaints and repining are instantly erased by love.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



### CHAPTER 3. “THE DIVA OF AVANT-GARDE PIANISM”:

#### MARGARET LENG TAN <sup>1</sup>

##### “BC” and “AC”

Before she became “the queen of the toy piano,” <sup>2</sup> she was best known for her interpretation of John Cage’s music. Before she met John Cage, she was known as the first woman to earn a doctorate from Julliard.<sup>3</sup> Like Ge Gan-ru, an invitation from a professor and a scholarship brought her from her home country to New York City. When the sixteen-year-old Margaret Leng Tan left Singapore to study piano at the Julliard School of Music, toy piano was the last thing on her mind.<sup>4</sup>

After graduating from Julliard, Margaret Leng Tan struggled with the idea of being a classical musician when she realized that she did not want to follow “the standard career path of the touring classical pianist with a repertoire limited by box-office constraints.” <sup>5</sup> Driven by her restless spirit, she explored other possible avenues that could lead her away from a conventional classical music career. She put together a program by American composers who were influenced

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<sup>1</sup> *New Yorker*, Goings on About Town (Music Listings), November 9, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Kozinn, Arts and Leisure, *New York Times*, March 7, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, biography, <http://margaretlengtan.com/pages/about.html> (accessed June 7, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Clark, “Sorceress of the New Piano,” *International Piano*, May/June 2008, 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

by Asian aesthetics and toured around the Far East before she presented the program in New York with Malaysian dancer Marion D’cruz.<sup>6</sup>

Tan was also hoping to do something helpful to society. In Evans Chan’s 2004 documentary film *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan*, Tan revealed another interesting side of herself:

I was getting increasingly fond of animals. I had my own dog at that time, and I really wanted to do something with dogs that would be helpful to people.... I decided I was going to be a trainer of dogs to help the handicapped since hearing was such an important aspect of my life.... I did that for a while, unfortunately the program was not very professional ... but I did deliver a couple of dogs to their new deaf owners and I was very proud of that achievement, and then I met John Cage.<sup>7</sup>

Margaret Leng Tan met John Cage in 1981, when he attended her New York recital with dancer Marion D’cruz which included Cage’s *Bacchanale* and *Amores*. “I actually called up John Cage to come see us do our act, not realizing he was so famous at that time, or that he had such specific taste in dance ... I would never have dared calling up otherwise if I had known any better....”<sup>8</sup> This bold act led to their enduring mentorship, friendship, and close collaboration. “The following year 1982 ... he invited me to open the Wall-to-Wall John Cage marathon at Symphony Space honoring his seventieth birthday,” Tan continued.<sup>9</sup> Meeting John Cage marked the beginning of a new chapter in Tan’s life. “Having first gone to the dogs, this was a way of

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan*, dir. Evans Chan, Mode Records mode 194, DVD, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

coming back to music in a new transformation.”<sup>10</sup> This meeting was so important to Tan that she dates her life BC and AC, Before Cage and After Cage.<sup>11</sup>

### **Meeting Ge Gan-ru and Their Collaborations Prior to *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!***

At the same time that I was investing myself in the piano works of John Cage, I was also becoming increasingly interested in the work of Asian composers. This was really quite natural since I was so involved with the work of a composer who had been so profoundly influenced by Asian philosophies. I was very fascinated by the other side of the coin, by Asian music, by Chinese and Japanese composers who were writing pieces influenced by their own Asian sensibilities combined with their exposure to Western contemporary music.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Margaret Leng Tan’s first recording was not of works by John Cage, but of works by Japanese composer Somei Satoh, whom she met in the early 1980s when he first came to New York. The CD recording *Litania*, released in 1988 by New Albion, was rated as one of the best recordings of the year by the *New York Times*.<sup>13</sup> Before recording Satoh’s music, Tan had arranged to give a concert of his works at the Asia Society where composer Ge Gan-ru happened to be present.<sup>14</sup> “When I first met Ge Gan-ru in 1985 and heard his *Yi Feng*, I immediately asked him to write for me. Just as Ge’s cello composition made totally novel and radical demands on the instrument and its player, I wanted a work that would highlight the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD; Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

piano's identity in Chinese nomenclature as a steel *qin* (steel zither). The result was *Gu Yue* (Ancient Music)."

Evans Chan's documentary shows Tan and Ge around the piano exploring different possibilities of the interior sound:

I exposed him to the prepared piano scores of John Cage and string piano works of Cowell and Crumb.<sup>15</sup> He was really inspired to write something for me based on his own Chinese sensibilities combined with a sense of adventure of writing something new for the piano, but that was different from what Cage and Cowell and Crumb had done. He was really taking it to the next level.<sup>16</sup>

Through vivid exposure to the non-traditional piano techniques Tan used, Ge Gan-ru saw the potential of string piano and prepared piano becoming traditional Chinese instruments, and found what he called a "hook": "She showed me all the possibilities, particularly inside the piano. But both of us thought we had to have a hook. Without a purpose, we will be a slave to the technique. If we have a purpose, then we can be a master of the technique."<sup>17</sup> The four movements of *Gu Yue* (Ancient Music) were named after four Chinese instruments: gong, *qin*, *pipa* (lute), and drum.<sup>18</sup> Tan concluded: "He created a very interesting paradox unwittingly, by using the piano in a very *unconventional* way to create pieces inspired by *conventional* Chinese instruments."<sup>19</sup>

Tan included this experimental piano work in her second recording *Sonic Encounters: The New*

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<sup>15</sup> "String piano" is a term coined by American composer Henry Cowell to describe the following extended techniques he pioneered: "playing with his hand directly on the piano strings, strumming, plucking, thumping, and damping them." Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 110.

<sup>16</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, liner notes to *Sonic Encounters*, Margaret Leng Tan, Mode Records mode 15, CD, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

*Piano*, a CD of piano music inspired by Asian aesthetics. This CD, released by Mode Records just a few months after the *Litania* CD, marks the first commercial recording of Ge Gan-ru's music.<sup>20</sup>

This rewarding collaboration immediately led to another project in 1986, the same year *Gu Yue* was completed. This time, it was a piano concerto commissioned by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble.<sup>21</sup> Ge Gan-ru wrote this concerto with Tan's unique pianism in mind and titled it with a single syllable *Wu*, which can be translated as "Rising to the Heights."<sup>22</sup> Originally scored for chamber orchestra, this concerto was given its premiere at the Pittsburgh International Music Festival before Tan introduced it at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England. Ge Gan-ru then expanded the work for large orchestra. Tan performed this version with the New York Philharmonic and Hong Kong Philharmonic orchestras in 1991, and later recorded it with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.<sup>23</sup> Unlike *Gu Yue*, which requires preparation and the use of different objects, this major work includes only extended techniques applied directly onto the strings with one's hands.<sup>24</sup>

### **Music as Performance-Theater**

The album *Sonic Encounters* not only allowed Margaret Leng Tan to further her interest

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<sup>20</sup> Tan, liner notes to *Sonic Encounters*.

<sup>21</sup> Freed, liner notes to *Chinese Rhapsody*; Margaret Leng Tan, e-mail message to author, August 17, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

in exploring “the crosscurrents between Asian music and that of the West,”<sup>25</sup> but it also naturally led to what Tan described as “an avant-garde pianism—an art of mixed means where sound, choreography and drama assume equal significance.”<sup>26</sup> All the pieces in *Sonic Encounters* employ “the extended language of the piano,”<sup>27</sup> and this gave Tan the chance to “convey the impression of music and performance as intrinsic theatrical gesture.”<sup>28</sup> Tan wrote the following about George Crumb’s *Five Pieces for Piano*, included on the album:

In the early *Five Pieces for Piano* all the components of George Crumb’s mature compositional language are already evident: a broad palette of coloristic effects along with an extraordinarily sensitive command of nuance, his unmistakable musical gestures, an inherent sense of drama coupled with a magical suspenseful atmosphere and a battery of interior piano effects (harmonics, plucked and muted strings, *glissando* and *martellato* techniques applied directly to the strings themselves) demanding that the pianist be somewhat of a harpist and percussionist as well.<sup>29</sup>

All these different roles demand the pianist to also be a choreographer, since “all the movements have to be worked out to a great extent,” said Tan when sharing her experience on playing inside the piano.<sup>30</sup> “You have to be very well organized since there will be no time to fumble for notes or strings and to play everything in the correct rhythm.”<sup>31</sup>

Tan likes to refer to the three important composers who have extended the language of the piano as the three C’s, as opposed to the three B’s in classical music: Henry Cowell, John

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<sup>25</sup> Tan, biography, <http://margaretlengtan.com/pages/about.html>

<sup>26</sup> Tan, liner notes to *Sonic Encounters*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Cage, and George Crumb.<sup>32</sup> When asked if George Crumb's music was what brought her into theater, Tan mentioned that she was already moving gradually in the direction of theater since the 1980s, when she started playing Cage's piano music, which in turn led her to the music of Cowell, who was Cage's teacher. "With Cage it is very subtle, but it is inherently there.... definitely with Cowell with all the things involved with playing his pieces like *The Banshee*. Crumb brings it out much more to a conscious level," commented Tan during a phone interview.<sup>33</sup> "I don't regard myself as just a pianist playing the piano. For me playing the piano has three dimensions. It involves the sound, the drama of the music, and even the performance aspects of it. It all comes out of the score."<sup>34</sup> Since her first encounter with Cage, Tan has been specializing in piano music that extends the language of the instrument and that also evokes theatrical elements. Out of curiosity, I asked Tan: "Today if someone asks you what you are, how would you answer?" "It is so hard to define what I am that I just don't say anything," said Tan, before both of us started laughing.<sup>35</sup> After thinking for a while, Tan said, "I see myself performing 'music as performance-theater.'"<sup>36</sup>

### **Margaret Leng Tan Joins Schroeder as a Serious Toy Pianist**

Margaret Leng Tan's identity as a musician was further complicated when she found

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<sup>32</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>33</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

herself a new identity, calling herself “the toy pianist.” “John Cage was again the catalyst for me for the toy piano,” Tan disclosed in Evans Chan’s documentary.<sup>37</sup> “He wrote the *Suite for Toy Piano* in 1948. This was the first ever serious piece of music written for the toy piano.”<sup>38</sup> Conceived as an accompaniment for the dance suite *Diversion*,<sup>39</sup> John Cage probably was not very serious in making toy piano a serious instrument, since toy piano had never been brought up in his conversation with Tan.<sup>40</sup> “He did it as a pre-Fluxus, post-Dada little joke; at the time his philosophy was that you can make music from anything and this piece proved the point ... in the same way that, at around the same time, he was creating pieces for ‘junkyard’ percussion,” said Tan in her interview with Philip Clark.<sup>41</sup> This piece only came into Tan’s mind after Cage’s death in 1992 when Tan was invited to give a memorial tribute to John Cage at Lincoln Center’s Serious Fun Festival.<sup>42</sup> Through performing this work, which consists of only nine white notes,<sup>43</sup> Tan saw the potential of the toy piano to become a serious instrument. *Los Angeles Times* music critic Mark Swed, who regards Cage’s *Suite for Toy Piano* as “a small minor little experiment” made the following statement: “It is typical of the kinds of things John did, that he would take up a toy piano, and write a wonderful piece for it, then go on and do a million other things. Margaret somehow fixated on the piece, that she could sense in it how much more was there and could be

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<sup>37</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Maggie Williams, “Child’s Play,” *International Piano*, March/April 2007, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.



there.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Tan considers the work “one of the most charming and whimsical of his compositions”: “... [I]t is filled with Cagean irony and humor, as in the exaggerated dynamic extremes from *sffz* to *ppp*. As if a toy piano could have such capabilities! Nonetheless, the pianist tries his best and from the effort subtle differences emerge.”<sup>45</sup>

“And I got SO in love with the sound, and got all my composer friends excited that they decided to write for me, and then I became a toy pianist, quite by accident,” Tan shared in the documentary film.<sup>46</sup> In her interview with Philip Clark, Tan mentioned how composers love to write for toy piano since “the only limits are those of your imagination: there are no rules or restrictions, nor a ‘grand’ tradition that says, ‘You can’t do this.’ ”<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Tan started making arrangements of piano pieces that she thought would sound good on the toy piano. “Sometimes better,” added Tan over the phone.<sup>48</sup> Her groundbreaking CD, *The Art of the Toy Piano*, released in 1997 by Point Music/Universal, includes her own transcription of Philip Glass’s *Modern Love Waltz* for two toy pianos.

“When one thinks of a toy piano, one inevitably thinks of Schroeder,” said Tan when the documentary film shows the scene of the character (the Peanuts comic-strip character) playing his little grand piano.<sup>49</sup> He was playing the *Piano Sonata in C major*, Op. 2, No. 3, written by his favorite composer, Beethoven.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> *International Piano*, Gallery view {A giant of 20th-century music}, February 2007, 12.

<sup>46</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, 53.

<sup>48</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

In presenting Schroeder as a serious toy pianist, Mr. Charles Schulz was way ahead of his time. In the animation film ... we see Schroeder playing Beethoven on toy piano. But unfortunately what you hear is the sound of Beethoven played on a regular adult piano. Back then I guess there was no one around who could provide a real toy piano soundtrack for Schroeder's toy piano. Since the Beethoven sonata Schroeder is playing happens to be a piece I learnt at Julliard, I thought I would make an arrangement of it for toy piano, and I did. Since then, I have performed my arrangement at concert, hand synching with Schroeder on screen.<sup>50</sup>

“The public, especially children, can finally hear how Schroeder's toy piano actually sounds,” expressed Tan.<sup>51</sup> After the release of *The Art of the Toy Piano*, in which Tan had included her transcription of Schroeder's favorite piece, the *Moonlight Sonata*, Tan received a letter from Mr. Charles Schulz:

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

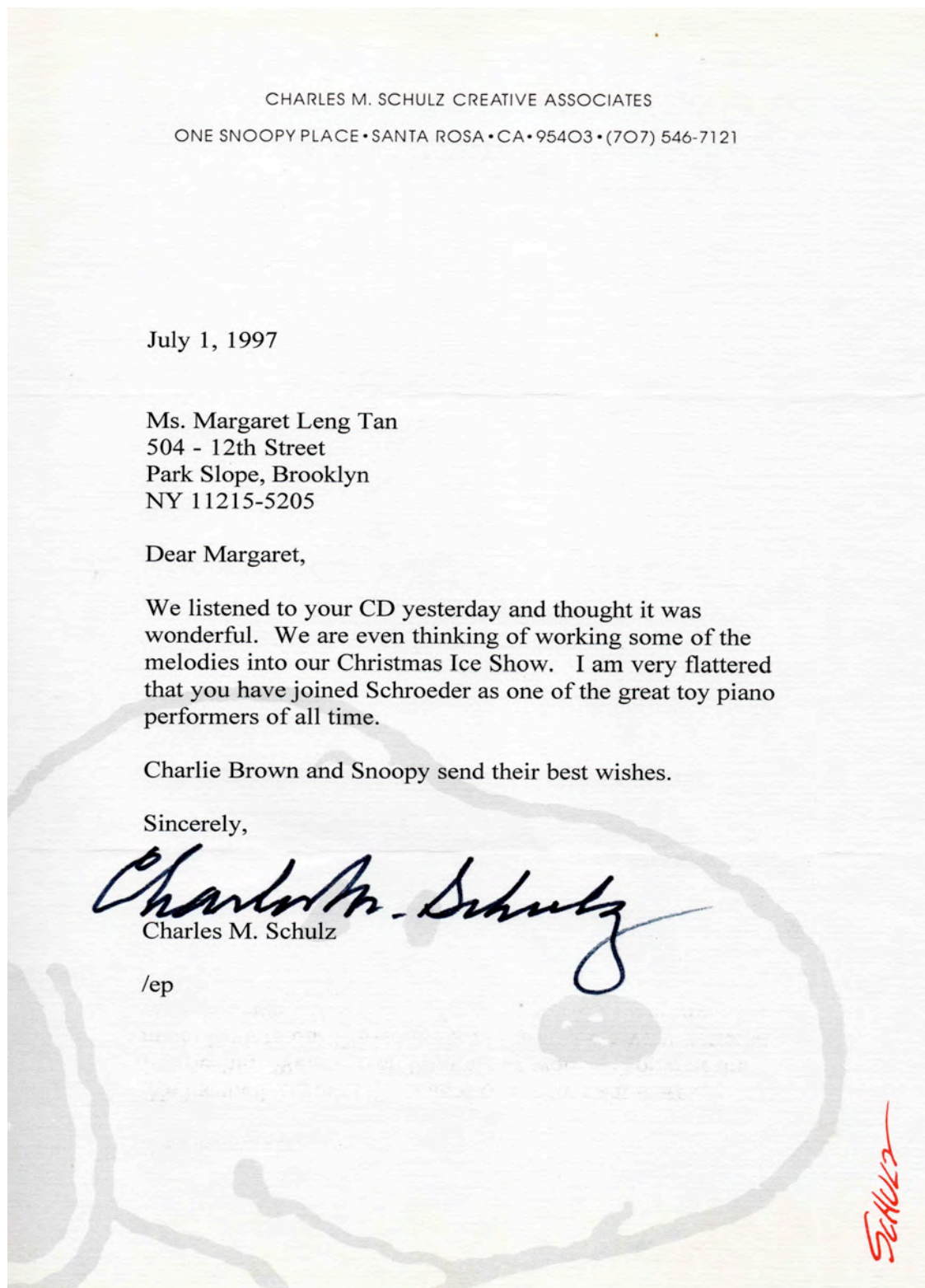


Figure 3. Mr. Charles Schulz's letter to Margaret Leng Tan

Like the character Schroeder, Margaret Leng Tan is serious about her toy piano playing:

Sometimes I practice it for four hours a day. I don't even get to the big piano. It's the challenge that intrigues me—of elevating the toy piano from the toy that it is to the status of an art instrument. I believe that challenge can be met. On the toy piano, I can actually control subtleties of touch, nuance, and articulation. I love the saying by Marcel Duchamp, the avant-garde artist who said “poor tools require better skills.” That has become my motto. I have to work very hard to make the toy piano sound like a real instrument.<sup>52</sup>

*A Glimpse of the History and Characteristics of the Toy Piano*

“Margaret is one of a kind. She is a fierce musician. When she decides to do a project, it is not that she just does the project, she does everything around it,” commented composer/writer Raphael Mostel.<sup>53</sup> Just as Tan has gotten to know the big piano inside out, she has also extensively studied the history, makings, and mechanism of the toy piano. Her article “TOY PIANOS No Longer Toys!” serves as an authoritative source of the history of toy piano prior to 1998. It was first published in *Piano & Keyboard* in 1997 and then a slightly modified version in *Experimental Musical Instruments* the following year.<sup>54</sup> Following is a summary of toy piano history from her CD notes for *The Art of the Toy Piano*:

In Philadelphia, 1872, the German immigrant Albert Schoenhut began manufacturing toy pianos according to his own newly-invented design. Wooden mallets struck sounding bars made of metal, replacing the fragile glass sounding-pieces used in toy pianos at that time. His new instrument could better withstand a child's rough handling and its gamelan-like timbre is the sound of the toy piano as we know it today. By 1935, the A. Schoenhut Company had produced over forty styles and sizes of the toy instrument with prices ranging from fifty cents to twenty-five dollars—“a piano for every purse and taste,” boasted its 1903 catalogue.

The toy piano was intended as an educational tool. The more expensive models stood nineteen to twenty-four inches tall, had raised black notes instead of imitation painted ones, full-width wooden keys and a range of two to three octaves....

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

... Jaymar was a rival toy piano manufacturer to Schoenhut in the 1940's, hence toy pianos bearing the Schoenhut or Jaymar name could be regarded as lilliputian equivalents to Steinway and Baldwin. During the 1950's, however, the two toy piano companies merged and because it was a joint venture, some pianos bore the name "Schoenhut," others "Jaymar."<sup>55</sup>

Margaret Leng Tan also discusses the mechanism of the toy piano in detail in her article.<sup>56</sup> Putting it in simpler terms, Tan gives a brief overview about how toy piano works in the documentary: "It is a percussion instrument basically, and what you have inside is a series of graduated metal rods. These metal rods are struck by plastic hammers that are activated by the keys, like the action of a piano, but much more primitive. You can't tune the toy piano. That's the first question everyone wants to know ... and I said, whatever the rods are, what you get is what you get."<sup>57</sup>

Just like regular piano, each toy piano has its own personality. "It's all defined by the construction," Tan explains.<sup>58</sup> "Even Schoenhut can't tell you how a particular instrument will turn out. The rods inside a toy piano produce very complex overtones—so complex that it's impossible to analyze them. The characteristic of the toy piano sound is that once you've hit a note, the fundamental pitch decays very quickly and leaves a lingering cloud of overtones. No two sets of rods are the same, and that's why no two instruments can sound the same. I have a

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, liner notes to *The Art of the Toy Piano*, Margaret Leng Tan, Point Music/Universal Point 456 345-2, CD, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, "TOY PIANOS No Longer Toys!" This manuscript was a preprint of an article that appeared in the September 1998 issue of *Experimental Musical Instruments*.

<sup>57</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>58</sup> Clark, 54.

toy piano from China that has a voice like Caruso!”<sup>59</sup> Tan concluded in her article “TOY PIANOS No Longer Toys!”: “While the fundamental pitches should ideally be in tune, it is the melding of these mysterious overtones that gives the toy piano its off-key poignancy and ineffable magic ... a magic which my novelist friend John David Morley calls, ‘Sound combed from the keys of a ‘starway’ ascending faintly into sleep.’ ”<sup>60</sup>

Tan has consistently used the word poignancy in describing the toy piano sound,<sup>61</sup> which suggests a sense of melancholy. “[It] has a quality of Fellini’s *La Strada* ... that really makes me very sad, very nostalgic ... ,” Tan shared her feelings in the documentary.<sup>62</sup>

*From Toy Piano to Other Toy Instruments to Toys*

“I like the toy piano. It makes me also a toy instrumentalist in other ways besides being just a toy pianist,” said Tan.<sup>63</sup> In 1996, accordionist and composer Guy Klucevsek wrote *Sweet Chinoiserie* for Margaret Leng Tan. Adapted from his pre-existing work *Chinoiserie*, *Sweet Chinoiserie* calls for two toy pianos, a toy accordion, a melodica, toy percussion (toy drums and rattles), and kitchen percussion (glasses, soya sauce dishes, and cans).<sup>64</sup> Tan recalls going to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Tan, “TOY PIANOS No Longer Toys!”

<sup>61</sup> Tan, liner notes to *The Art of the Toy Piano*; Tan, “TOY PIANOS No Longer Toys!”

<sup>62</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD; Tan, liner notes to *The Art of the Toy Piano*.

Chinatown in New York with the composer shopping for toy instruments.<sup>65</sup> For the cans, Tan mentioned she had to eat nine to ten cans of tuna fish to find three cans that would actually sound good. “In fact, I was auditioning tuna fish cans,” said Tan in the documentary.<sup>66</sup> This innovative work, according to Tan, could well be the first work written for toy instruments other than the toy piano.<sup>67</sup>

Adding toy instruments seemed to be the natural next step. The following step after this, said Tan, was to add toys.<sup>68</sup> As an example, Julia Wolfe’s *East Broadway*, which was also included in Tan’s first toy piano CD *The Art of the Toy Piano* is written for toy piano and toy boombox.<sup>69</sup>

The development of toy piano as an art instrument owes much to Margaret Leng Tan. “In fact, it was Tan who breathed new life into the instrument when, having been a fixture in every American kid’s bedroom, it was struggling to survive against the electronic keyboard revolution of the 1970s. In the toy piano Tan heard a nobility and pathos that has bypassed more casual listeners. She has taken the instrument seriously as a creative sound source and, using Cage’s 1948 *Suite for Toy Piano* as a starting point, has built a repertoire of transcriptions and new commissions,” wrote Philip Clark in his article *Sorceress of the New Piano*.<sup>70</sup> “John Cage never

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<sup>65</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>67</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Tan, liner notes to *The Art of the Toy Piano*.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, 51.

heard me play the toy piano and the path along which his suite for toy piano would lead me eventually. That is my only regret,” Tan revealed at the end of the documentary.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Makrokosmos* Marks the Beginning of Tan’s Use of Voice in Performance**

Toy piano, which subsequently led to Margaret Leng Tan’s exploration of other toy instruments and toys, was a welcome addition to her interest in what she called “performance-theater.” She started to use the voice in performance when working on George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* I and II in the late 1990s.<sup>72</sup> Besides combining sounds from the keyboard and from inside the piano, these fantasy pieces involve uttering talismanic words and creating non-verbal vocal effects such as moaning, half-singing, and humming.<sup>73</sup> Apart from playing the additional roles as harpist and percussionist as Tan describes, Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* adds the roles of vocalist and actor.<sup>74</sup> In 1999, Tan gave her debut of *Makrokosmos* I and II in Merkin Concert Hall as a tribute to Crumb’s seventieth birthday.<sup>75</sup> This concert marked the beginning of a close relationship she developed with Crumb and his family. Tan said she had found a second mentor, seven years after Cage died.<sup>76</sup> In 2004, Tan was invited to present the same program in Carnegie

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<sup>71</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>72</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Steven Bruns, *Notes for “George Crumb: Makrokosmos I & II,”* in DRAM, <http://www.dramonline.org/albums/george-crumb-makrokosmos-i-ii/notes> (accessed June 15, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



Hall as a tribute to Crumb's seventy-fifth birthday. A DVD recording of the work was released by Mode Records at the same time.<sup>77</sup> While there are many CD recordings of *Makrokosmos*, this is the only video recording professionally available of this important and visually engaging work. It also represents the first DVD recording of George Crumb's works.<sup>78</sup>

"You are like a female Merlin ... summoning the spirits from the inside of the piano ...," we heard Crumb saying to Tan in the beginning of Evans Chan's celebrated documentary film *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan*, also available on Mode Records.<sup>79</sup> The female Merlin, with her powerful creative spirit has turned herself from a lost classical pianist into "the leading exponent of Cage's music today" (*The New Republic*),<sup>80</sup> "the most convincing interpreter of John Cage's keyboard music" (*The New York Times*),<sup>81</sup> "the queen of the toy piano" (*The New York Times*),<sup>82</sup> "the toy piano's Rubenstein" (*The Independent, UK*),<sup>83</sup> ... and as a summation, "the diva of avant-garde pianism" (*The New Yorker*).<sup>84</sup> Currently

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

<sup>80</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Tan, Margaret Leng," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Leng\\_Tan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Leng_Tan) (accessed June 15, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, biography, [http://uncagedtoypiano.org/?page\\_id=143](http://uncagedtoypiano.org/?page_id=143) (accessed June 15, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

living with her three Steinways, twenty toy pianos, and five dogs in Brooklyn,<sup>85</sup> Tan is truly one of a kind. What is her guiding force? “You have your own niche, then you have to be confident, and you have to be thoroughly convinced of what you are doing. As long as it is not a gimmick, and you have put your heart and soul into it, then the world will listen.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, June 13, 2012.

<sup>86</sup> *Sorceress*, DVD.

## CHAPTER 4. A BRIEF HISTORY OF MELODRAMA

In general, melodrama is a term of little critical value; it has been so corrupted in common usage that to give it a more specific field of reference is a task which almost verges on the impossible. On the other hand, it ought to be attempted because of the important role that melodrama has played in American culture....<sup>1</sup>

The words of David Morse show how the term melodrama can mean many things. Today melodrama refers not only to a genre, but also to content such as narratives or plots that typically center around women. It can also relate to an emotion or “be used simply as a pejorative term.”<sup>2</sup> Ellen Elizabeth Seiter sums up the usage of the term in her dissertation: “Melodrama can be applied to literature, theatre, nonfiction, films, television and everyday life. It can be used to describe stories, behaviors, or judgments of verisimilitude. The word has accumulated so many meanings in everyday usage that it lacks specificity.”<sup>3</sup> Seiter agrees with Morse about the problems in defining melodrama “because of the generalized meaning it has taken on in everyday speech and its influence on all forms of popular culture in this century.”<sup>4</sup>

Even though the term melodrama is now most commonly heard in dramatic plays and films, the word actually originated from the Greek word for song, *melos*.<sup>5</sup> In the early nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> David Morse, “Aspects of Melodrama,” *Monogram* 4 (1972): 16-17, quoted in John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Elizabeth Seiter, “The Promise of Melodrama: Recent Women’s Films and Soap Operas” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1981), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

century, it meant “a stage play accompanied by music.”<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines the word as follows:

A composition or section of composition, usually dramatic, in which one or more actors recite with musical commentary. If for one actor, the term ‘monodrama’ may be used; if two, ‘duodrama’ (as in the duodramas of Georg Benda).

The form became popular in the second half of the 18th century. The first full-scale melodrama was *Pygmalion* by Rousseau, whose aim was ‘to join the declamatory art with the art of music’, alternating short spoken passages with instrumental music as a development of the *pantomime dialogue*.<sup>7</sup>

*Grove Music* provides a slightly different definition:

A kind of drama, or a part of a drama, in which the action is carried forward by the protagonist speaking in the pauses of, and later commonly during, a musical accompaniment.<sup>8</sup>

French and German melodramas differ in terms of when the music happens during the play: “On the whole, French melodramas tended to interpolate brief self-contained numbers between speeches, whereas the Germans preferred a sense of musical continuity, even when the music was interrupted by speech as well as accompanying it.”<sup>9</sup> Ge Gan-ru’s melodramas seem to fall mostly into the second category. They have a strong sense of musical continuity despite a few longer musical passages without voice that can be considered “self-contained.” His *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and the first version of his *Hard, Hard, Hard!* start and end with an extensive

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John Warrack, “Melodrama,” in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Alison Latham, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e4344> (accessed December 15, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Branscombe, “Melodrama,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18355> (accessed December 15, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Warrack, “Melodrama.”

musical introduction and coda. Both melodramas also contain a long musical interlude in the middle.<sup>10</sup> The Italian *melodramma*, on the other hand, is another word for opera or “musical drama,” which should not be confused with the melodrama here. Instead, the Italian word *melologo* is used to mean melodrama.<sup>11</sup>

Jiří Antonín Benda (J.A. Benda), also known as Georg Anton Benda, was known as “the perfecter of melodrama in Germany.”<sup>12</sup> He composed the most famous setting of Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*, and inspired Mozart to write melodrama because of his *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1774) and *Medea* (1775).<sup>13</sup> Mozart did not complete his initial attempt at a full-length melodrama (*Semiramis*), but was successful in using melodrama in the Singspiel *Zaide* (1779-80).<sup>14</sup> Other successful and famous examples are the dungeon scene in Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, the Wolf’s Glen scene in Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, and Gertrude’s spinning song in Marschner’s *Hans Heiling* (1833).<sup>15</sup> There are many nineteenth-century composers who wrote concert melodramas, including Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt.<sup>16</sup> Later examples include Richard Strauss’s *Enoch*

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<sup>10</sup> Ge Gan-ru, “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!,” poem by Lu You, self-published score, 2006; Ge Gan-ru, “Hard, Hard, Hard!,” poem by Tang Wan, self-published score, April 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Branscombe, “Melodrama.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Branscombe, “Melodrama”; Warrack, “Melodrama.”

<sup>15</sup> Warrack, “Melodrama.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*Arden* (1898), which is described as “a recitation with piano,”<sup>17</sup> Arthur Honegger’s *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher* (1935), and Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947).<sup>18</sup>

Although this paper is mainly concerned with the late eighteenth-century meaning of melodrama, which is connected to music, interesting connections can be found between Ge Gan-ru’s melodramas and the other meanings of melodrama. Originally a musical form or technique used by composers, music “ceased to be an integral part of melodrama” later on and the word melodrama is no longer used only in a musical sense.<sup>19</sup> It has come to mean “a form of drama characterized by sensationalism, emotional intensity, hyperbole, strong action, violence, rhetorical excesses, moral polarities, brutal villainy and its ultimate elimination, and the triumph of good.”<sup>20</sup> This type of play, usually without music accompaniment, became very popular in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The story presented in Ge Gan-ru’s melodramas has many of the characteristics of a typical melodrama, particularly sensationalism and emotional intensity. The tyrannical mother of Lu You can be regarded as an example of “brutal villainy” present in most melodramas.

As previously mentioned, melodrama may also allude to content. As Seiter describes, “narratives about family life, love stories and plots revolving around a female protagonist tend to be automatically considered melodramatic.”<sup>22</sup> By this standard, Ge Gan-ru’s melodramas are

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Dissanayake, 1; Branscombe, “Melodrama.”

<sup>20</sup> Dissanayake, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Branscombe, “Melodrama.”

<sup>22</sup> Seiter, 2.

considered very melodramatic because the poetry on which the pieces are based has as its subject the poets' love story. Moreover, the narrative plot centers around a female protagonist: Lu You's poem is full of descriptions of Tang Wan, showing his deep regret for having to divorce her while portraying how "wan and wasted" she is,<sup>23</sup> while Tang Wan's poem, a reply to Lu You's poem, allows the woman's voice to be heard. Leon Metayer mentions in his essay that the theme of a melodrama usually falls under one of the following categories: "a man desires [a woman]; a man has dishonored her; one wants to make off with her fortune; someone has taken her children; her father wants her to marry against her wishes—[and] it is her emotions that give meaning to these episodes."<sup>24</sup> The story of Lu You and Tang Wan presented through Ge Gan-ru's melodramas touches on most of the above themes.

Seiter defines "melodramatic" as "a sentimental speech about suffering, morality, and the family."<sup>25</sup> Through setting the sentimental poems, Ge Gan-ru shows the sufferings and anguish of the lovers. She also argues that "'melodramatic' can be used simply as a pejorative term ... unbelievable plot is melodramatic."<sup>26</sup> The story of Lu You and Tang Wan is just as unbelievable as stories presented in other melodramas, except that it actually happened in China over eight hundred years ago.

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<sup>23</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!"

<sup>24</sup> Leon Metayer, "What the Heroine Taught, 1830-1870," in *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 236.

<sup>25</sup> Seiter, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

## CHAPTER 5. WRONG, WRONG, WRONG!

### Ge Gan-ru's Initial Reservations about Toy Piano

After their second collaboration on the piano concerto *Wu*, Ge Gan-ru agreed to write Margaret Leng Tan a short piece in the summer of 2003. Tan requested that this piece be for toy piano.<sup>1</sup> Ge Gan-ru knew Tan was becoming more interested in toy piano, but he confessed that he did not pay serious attention to it. “Although Tan had often played it for me through the years I had never imagined writing for it,” disclosed Ge.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Ge Gan-ru had not thought about the piece until Tan reminded him about it in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Having no idea what to write for toy piano, Tan suggested strongly to Ge that he should borrow one of her toy pianos to become familiar with it. “Initially, I was reluctant to take her toy piano home because I didn't think it had anything special except for the higher pitches.”<sup>4</sup> Tan insisted and Ge Gan-ru took home not only a toy piano, but also other toy instruments, including a toy harp, a toy xylophone, a toy drum and a plastic hammer.<sup>5</sup>

The toy piano sat in his house untouched for a long time, not to mention the other toy instruments. During this time he still met with Tan quite often. “She gave me more of them every

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<sup>1</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 3, 2012.



time we saw each other,” Ge laughed as he recalled.<sup>6</sup> Included among these toys Tan gave Ge were some cricket boxes and a paper accordion Tan had bought from Chinatown. “I didn’t know what to do with all these toys!”<sup>7</sup> After at least half a year, Ge’s view on the toy piano finally started to change. “When I gradually touched it more often, I started realizing it has a very distinctive timbre which is totally different from the regular piano.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Lu You’s *Phoenix Hairpin* as the Hook**

In March 2006, as Ge Gan-ru was searching for inspiration, he came across Lu You’s *Phoenix Hairpin*. At that moment, everything came together, as he recalled Tan’s interest in using her own voice in performance.<sup>9</sup> When Tan gave the performance of George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* I and II in Carnegie Hall in 2004, Ge Gan-ru was present at the concert.<sup>10</sup> Ge saw what Tan could do with her voice. “I think he was struck by my unbridled dramatic utterances and the fact that I could vocalize so comfortably in a man’s register, no less,” expressed Tan in her note on *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*.<sup>11</sup> Ge Gan-ru knew right then that he had found the perfect conception to tie everything together. He planned to write a piece utilizing not just the toy piano

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<sup>6</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tan, liner notes for “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!.”

and other toy instruments, but also Tan's distinctive voice.<sup>12</sup> Ge Gan-ru was envisioning Margaret Leng Tan singing, accompanying herself with a toy ensemble—the birth of a Chinese melodrama.

### **The Creative and Writing Process**

#### *From Toy Piano to Toy Chamber Orchestra*

From Tan's "arsenal of toy instruments" Ge Gan-ru finally settled on a toy table harp, a toy glockenspiel (or toy xylophone, as the score indicates), a percussion battery consisting of two claves (or wooden blocks), three cup gongs (or temple gongs), a beaded gourd rattle (indicated as pearls in the score), a pitched plastic hammer (dubbed a plastic flute when used in reverse), and a "smiley-face bead-rattle drum" (indicated as plastic bell in the score), "a paper accordion endowed with a two-note compass," an old-fashioned water warbler (indicated simply as birds in the score), electronic frog and cricket boxes (indicated collectively as cricket sounds in the score), in addition to the toy piano.<sup>13</sup> The plastic hammer (also the plastic flute), the drum, and the paper accordion, according to Tan, each cost only one dollar in Chinatown.<sup>14</sup> Tan calls them "the humblest of instruments."<sup>15</sup> "It was back in the nineties when I bought all these one-dollar toys. You never know when you are going to do something with them. Toys come and go. Now

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<sup>12</sup> Ge Gan-ru, phone interview by author, April 10, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!"; Ge Gan-ru, "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!," score.

<sup>14</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

there is nothing of interest as far as these cheap toys go. I don't know what has happened to them! I wish I had bought more of them as I can't seem to find new ones that have any sound making potential," Tan observed.<sup>16</sup> Without these cheap toys Tan had bought many years ago, the toy piano piece Tan requested would not have turned into such ambitious piece that calls for seventeen instruments, a size comparable to a chamber orchestra.

*Close Collaboration between the Composer and the Performer*

"One of the most fulfilling aspects of this latest collaboration with Ge Gan-ru is his willingness to allow me an active role in the creative process," Tan revealed.<sup>17</sup> Ge Gan-ru had not only considered Tan's suggestions on toys but he had also worked closely with Tan in the writing process. "He would drive all the way from New Jersey to my place, bringing with him some skeletal patterns, passages and ideas based on the poem. I then messed around with it."<sup>18</sup> "Each time we would spend several hours together, and we had at least three or four sessions on this piece," added Tan. She then shared an unforgettable experience they had during the process. "It was a hot summer day. I had a serious allergy and the only way I could function was to lie flat on my back. Gan-ru still came over. I ended up dictating to him on my bed what I had in mind while he sat at the desk trying to transcribe."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!."

<sup>18</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

*Tan's Use of Her Low and High Voices to Portray Male and Female Characters*

Tan's input is especially evident in the vocal part: "Given the limitations and idiosyncrasies of my untrained voice, Gan-ru allowed me free rein as only I knew what I could or could not do."<sup>20</sup> While Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin* clearly reflects "the anguish of the poet himself," Tan argues how it also "speaks of her [Tang Wan's] sorrow," thus giving "voice to the woman's perspective."<sup>21</sup>

The way it has turned out, the vocal element of *Wrong* is, to a greater or lesser degree, extemporized as I alternate freely between my head voice and chest voice, assuming both female and male roles respectively. Stylistically I have tried to capture something of the nasal timbre and melismatic flights of fancy so characteristic of the woman's singing as well as the peculiar guttural texture of the declamatory male voice.<sup>22</sup>

### Final Result

The result of Ge and Tan's unique collaboration between March and July 2006 is the Chinese opera-inspired melodrama *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, with the subtitle "a melodrama for voice, self-accompanied by a toy orchestra [or toy ensemble]."<sup>23</sup> Not only was the instrumentation greatly expanded, but the length of the piece was at least three times longer than the originally requested "three-to-four-minute short piece."<sup>24</sup> Prior to *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*,

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<sup>20</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!"

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Tan, liner notes for "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!"; Ge Gan-ru, "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!" score.

<sup>24</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2012.

Ge Gan-ru had written his impressive piano quintet *Four Studies of Peking Opera* in 2003, which is described in *All Music Guide* as “a dreamlike re-invention of Chinese Opera.”<sup>25</sup> Pianist Kathryn Woodard, who recorded the work, wrote the following: “In *Four Studies*, the textures, timbres, melodies and playing styles effectively evoke the sonic environment and dramatic force of a stage production without the presence of voices and language.”<sup>26</sup> With the use of voice and Chinese language in *Wrong*, Ge’s reinvention of Peking opera has come to a full circle in this piece, his first melodrama. When asked if *Wrong* is related to *Four Studies*, Ge expressed that they are both similar in style, even though he did not think of *Four Studies* when he was composing *Wrong*.<sup>27</sup> “I tried to dramatize the characteristics of the Chinese words in the voice part. I thought that would not only make the music unique, but would also organically fit in with how each word sounds. Peking opera is of course such a prime example.”<sup>28</sup> Tan realized how she had also “come full circle” through *Wrong*:

[A]s a child growing up in Singapore, we would regularly attend Chinese opera productions that lasted all afternoon at my father’s clan association. For an aspiring pianist already steeped in Mozart and Beethoven it was a jarring contrast. From my present vantage point, however, I can boldly claim that *Sprechstimme* was part and parcel of the Chinese operatic tradition centuries before Arnold Schoenberg introduced the technique to Western ears through his *Pierrot Lunaire* of 1912!<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dave Lewis, review of *Lost Style* (CD), by Ge Gan-ru, *All Music Guide*, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/ge-gan-ru-lost-style-mw0001570603> (accessed July 15, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Woodard, liner notes for “Four Studies of Peking Opera,” in *Lost Style by Ge Gan-ru*, New Albion NA134, CD, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 3, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Tan, liner notes for “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!.”

To Ge Gan-ru's surprise, New Albion agreed to record *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and to include it in his new album *Yi Feng* when he suggested this new work to the recording company, even though the company's original plan was to include a previously recorded piece.<sup>30</sup> The recording of *Wrong* took place at Classic Sound, New York, on August 10, 2006.<sup>31</sup> Included in the same CD were Ge Gan-ru's newly recorded *Four Studies of Peking Opera* and his pre-existing recording of *Yi Feng* (Lost Style).<sup>32</sup>

*Tan's Translation of the Poem*

Not finding a satisfactory translation of the poem, Tan decided to come up with her own translation for the CD notes. One afternoon, she went through the poem with Ge Gan-ru's wife, Vivian Ge, at a Barnes and Noble café in Brooklyn. Together, quite effortlessly and intuitively, they came up with the following beautiful translation for Lu You's *Phoenix Hairpin*:<sup>33</sup>

*Her hand rosy, tender,  
Pours the yellow t'eng wine.  
Spring hues adorn the city,  
Willows embrace garden walls.  
The East Wind malevolent,  
Conjugal bliss evanescent.  
A heart sorrow-laden,  
Cruel years steeped in loneliness asunder.  
Oh, wrong, wrong, wrong!*

*Spring as in days of yore,  
So wan and wasted is she,*

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<sup>30</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, July 9, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ge Gan-ru, *Lost Style*, performed by Frank Su Huang, Margaret Leng Tan, Kathryn Woodard, and The Shanghai Quartet, New Albion NA134, CD, 2007, liner notes.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

*Rivulets of tears drench her pink kerchief.  
 Peach blossoms falling,  
 Stillness pervades pond and pavilion.  
 Vows immutable as mountains,  
 Yet how futile a lovelorn epistle.  
 Ah, woe, woe, woe!*<sup>34</sup>

### *CD Release, Premiere, and Subsequent Performances*

Released in June 2007, the CD album *Lost Style* has garnered praise from major newspapers and music magazines. The *New York Times* wrote the following about *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*: “It’s a strikingly unconventional creation even by Mr. Ge’s standard, but Ms. Tan’s fierce commitment produces a powerfully moving experience.”<sup>35</sup> *Gramophone* calls this work “a brilliant re-imagining and a unique meeting of minds between composer and performer.”<sup>36</sup>

Margaret Leng Tan gave the premiere of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* on November 29, 2007 at the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.<sup>37</sup> Tan used the word “interesting” to describe how it was received.

We were told in advance that there was this group of thirty to forty Chinese coming to the concert from a conference that happened in D.C. at around the same time. They were in their twenties or thirties and they all sat in the front section of the hall. When I started playing the toy piano, they didn’t know what to make of it and started giggling! The performance was being recorded for NPR but I tried to ignore them and they gradually quieted down. Then I got to the second part and started playing the paper accordion. By then I had just gone through this big drama of screaming “wrong, wrong, wrong” ... then

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<sup>34</sup> Tan, liner notes for “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!”

<sup>35</sup> Steve Smith, review of *Lost Style* (CD), by Ge Gan-ru, *New York Times*, September 16, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Clark, review of *Lost Style* (CD), by Ge Gan-ru, *Gramophone*, October 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, e-mail message to author, April 1, 2012.

there was this beautiful and heartbreaking solo on the paper accordion, but for some reason that cracked them up incredibly! The Western audience, on the other hand, sat through quietly, paying much attention....<sup>38</sup>

Because of the involved set-up, Tan said she does not perform this piece very often. “The toys take up much room and this piece is not the only piece I would play in a concert. I have finally devised a portable enough version that I could bring it to other countries.”<sup>39</sup> Since then Tan had performed *Wrong* in European countries such as Portugal, France, and Poland in addition to various cities in the United States.<sup>40</sup>

### **My Experience with *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!***

On August 27, 2009, I received an e-mail from my piano teacher, Dr. Robert Satterlee, with a link to a *New York Times* article “Intrepid Journeys Lead to Ambitious Works.”<sup>41</sup> I could not believe that I had not heard of this composer who is regarded as “China’s first avant-garde composer” and “one of the most original composers of his generation.”<sup>42</sup> I was introduced to his piece, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, for toy piano and spoken voice.

At that time, I was just getting to know the toy piano and started to get interested in toy piano pieces. What excited me right away, however, were the words “spoken voice” since I have always been interested in works for vocalizing pianist, and had yet to discover any Chinese

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<sup>38</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Schweitzer, “Intrepid Journeys.”

<sup>42</sup> Zhang Weihua, “Ge, Gangru”; Ge Gan-ru, biography.



composer who would incorporate spoken text into his or her piano works. Listening to *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* was quite a shocking experience. It struck me that the toy piano in the piece reminded me of the Chinese instrument *qin*. Also I heard many sounds unlike the toy piano. The instrumentation was not mentioned in the online recording. Other than the composer's name and the title of the work, all I could find was the performer's name, Margaret Leng Tan.<sup>43</sup> Where did all the sounds come from? I became very confused and curious about the sound source. What surprised me even more was how Margaret Leng Tan spoke and sang in Mandarin, and that she was yelling at times like she was going insane. While I was very impressed by both the piece and the performance, I could not see myself playing this piece, which seemed to require such a dramatic voice and intense character. A few months later, Dr. Satterlee brought up this piece again when we were trying to finalize my recital program scheduled for February 2010. I thought that the idea of including the piece on the recital was insane and unrealistic. The first question that came to my mind was: where would I find all of the instruments?

### *My "Toy Story"*

I wrote the composer Ge Gan-ru on October 21, 2009 asking for more information about *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, particularly about the instrumentation and how I could obtain the music. Ge Gan-ru replied, saying that all his music was self-published, and that the work was for voice, self-accompanied by a toy orchestra which does include a toy piano. I became nervous when I saw that it was for a "toy orchestra." How could I justify playing a toy orchestra in a piano recital? Before confirming my purchase of the score, I asked if the toys were easy to find. I found

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<sup>43</sup> Ge Gan-ru, *Lost Style*, New Albion NA134, in Naxos Music Library, <http://0-BGSU.NaxosMusicLibrary.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/catalogue/item.asp?cid=NA134> (accessed August 29, 2009).

it difficult to commit to performing a piece if I did not have access to the instruments specified in the score. In response to my concern about the toys, Ge Gan-ru sent me the CD notes written by Margaret Leng Tan.

The score did not come with a performance note or with an instruction page, so the CD notes were the only written source of information I had for the piece. Not having any idea where to find all the toys other than the toy piano, I wrote Margaret Leng Tan an email in the beginning of December asking for her advice. I was ready to make a trip to New York City if necessary.

Tan replied:

... The trouble with toys is that they change all the time and when I decided that I should perhaps try to get some spares they were no longer available in Chinatown. So there is no point in your coming to New York. I suggest that you be a little creative and find suitable substitutions that would sound reasonably close to what you hear on the recording as it would be impossible to duplicate the exact same instruments that were originally used.<sup>44</sup>

Thus began my interesting journey searching for toys. I first tried to determine the range I would need for the pitched instruments from the score, before I went to Toys “R” Us, a place that always excited me when I was a child. To my surprise I could not find anything suitable in the store. Most of the toys in Toys “R” Us seemed to be too sophisticated for what I needed. For example, I found a colorful and fancy little xylophone, but it barely covered the range I would need for the piece. After the first toy-shopping trip, which was rather discouraging, I started searching online and was amazed by the options available. Fortunately, I was able to find a twenty-seven-key toy glockenspiel, a fifteen-string toy harp, and a toy accordion from websites like Amazon.com and eBay. By this time, we had also realized that the toy piano I borrowed did not have sufficient range, so Dr. Satterlee obtained a Schoenhut thirty-seven-key Concert Baby Grand Toy Piano.

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<sup>44</sup> Margaret Leng Tan, e-mail message to author, December 7, 2009.

While waiting for all the “main instruments” to arrive, I started searching for the smaller toys. Since there is no Chinatown anywhere close to where I live, I visited stores like Ben Franklin and Walmart. Ben Franklin has many animal related toys and I found a bird shaker that could be used for the bird sounds. Not being able to find cricket boxes or cricket toys, I bought a toy duck that could make a duck sound and some electronic animal toys, thinking that perhaps these animal and insect sounds could replace the cricket sound. Inspired by Tan’s one-dollar toys, I also explored the One Dollar Store in town, where I found many potential sound makers, including a toy tambourine that I later used to replace Tan’s beaded gourd rattle (indicated as pearls in score), and a hand clapper as a substitute for Tan’s plastic hammer. Indeed, I was always looking out for toy shops anywhere I went and was constantly shopping for toys of any kind. Meanwhile, I asked acquaintances if they owned any small objects that could make sound, or if their children had any toy instruments I could borrow. In the end I was able to borrow a wood block, a Chinese cup gong, a recorder (substituting for Tan’s “plastic flute”), and a Tunisian hand drum (substituting for Tan’s rattle drum), before I realized most of them are not even regarded as toy instruments or toys. When I discovered how difficult it was to control a hand drum, however, I decided to replace the drum part with the hand clapper I bought.

For toys or toy instruments that could not be found, I had to devise temporary solutions for the first performance scheduled for February 2010. Having only one Chinese cup gong, I played on two glockenspiel bars to emulate the sounds of two higher pitched cup gongs. My biggest toy-related problem with the piece was to find a good substitute for the cricket boxes Tan owns. Deciding that the cricket sound was too vital to the piece to be left out or replaced, I ended up using a cricket sound sample in my first performance.

### *Other Challenges and Adjustments*

Finding all the instruments was only the first step. Tan's drawing of her toys' set-up in the CD notes was helpful in establishing my own set-up. As I was learning the piece, I realized how the challenges were not so much the notes or rhythm, but rather, what one could not see in the score. These include having to move flexibly between different instruments like a percussionist. Because there was not an available video recording of the piece at that time, I had to use my imagination to come up with a plan for realizing the score and developing my own choreography for the piece. Moreover, learning how to play the pitched instruments and trying to make them project could be tricky, given their small size and limitations as concert instruments. What I found to be most challenging, however, was the vocal part. Initially I tried to imitate what Tan does with her voice in the recording. Having a completely different voice type than Tan's, my efforts to imitate her did not feel natural. I especially had problems projecting my low voice and creating special vocal effects in my low register. That led me to seek advice and help from a great friend, Jing Lin, who is a remarkable Chinese soprano. Lin strongly recommended that I sing in a comfortable range, even if that meant changing the pitches, and in a style that would fit my voice. "You have to believe in what you are singing and to do that you have to first be comfortable," said Lin.<sup>45</sup> Knowing that *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* was written specifically for Tan, my thought was that she sets the standard for the piece by the way she performs it. But what Lin said immediately reminded me of Tan's advice about being creative with the toys in finding substitutes that would work, which then gave me courage to think the same way with my voice. In addition to working on breath control and vocal technique, Lin and I also looked closely at the

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<sup>45</sup> Jing Lin, in discussion with the author, February 2010.

meanings of the words and phrases of the poem which were very helpful for me in interpreting and presenting the text.

#### *Additional Changes in My First Performance*

As I got to know the poem better, I felt that it would help me to project the meaning of the poem in performance if I recited the poem first before playing the piece. I began the first performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* by reciting the poem in the dark. The lights gradually came up when the melancholic toy piano introduction started.

A few nights before my performance I decided that I would put the animal toys I bought from Ben Franklin into use. An insect-like sound made by a toy duck joined the bird sound and cricket sound at the end of the piece. At the conclusion of the performance I picked up an electronic toy and started winding it, then I placed it on the stage floor and stared at it for a while. It was joined by some other electronic toys (manipulated by a few friends sitting in the front row of the hall) while I started slowly walking offstage. The insects were gradually taking over the scene in the quiet night after we heard the familiar theme coming back....

#### *Reception of My First Performance*

I first performed *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* in my doctoral recital on February 28, 2010. It was a concert of contemporary piano works, including a toy piano solo piece on the first half of the program. *Wrong* was the first piece after intermission. To my surprise, it received a very positive response from the audience and became the highlight of the recital. A number of people, both Chinese and American, expressed their amazement with the piece and shared their insights

with me after the recital. My *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* debut also sparked interesting conversations about music with various individuals, particularly my non-musician friends.

## CHAPTER 6. HARD, HARD, HARD!

### The Commission and the Idea of a Sequel

The rewarding experience of performing *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* led to the idea of commissioning a piece from Ge Gan-ru in May 2010. Ge wrote me back the same day I contacted him and graciously agreed to write me a piece, asking if it would be a piece for piano or toy piano and if I had any thoughts about the content.<sup>1</sup> I told him about my areas of interest and he proposed the idea of writing a sequel to *Wrong*, based on the companion poem written by Lu You's beloved ex-wife, Tang Wan.<sup>2</sup>

On June 4, 2010, I received an email from pianist Genevieve Lee, a professor at Pomona College, who had just watched my performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* on YouTube. She heard about me from Ge Gan-ru when she contacted the composer to ask about the piece. Interested in performing this piece, she wanted to discuss the process of finding the more “unusual ‘instruments.’”<sup>3</sup> I later asked Lee if she would be interested in co-commissioning the new piece Ge Gan-ru was writing for me. Lee expressed interest and agreed to a co-commission.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, May 3, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, May 20, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Genevieve Lee, e-mail message to author, June 4, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Genevieve Lee, e-mail message to author, June 30, 2010.

### Expansion in My Toy Collection

After my first performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, my university colleague, Chinese scholar and teaching assistant Mei Shang, mentioned how toy and miniature instruments were popular among children in China and offered to bring some back for me after returning from a trip to her home country. She brought back a wooden frog, which makes an authentic frog sound when rubbed with the striker, a pair of castanets, a temple cup gong, a pair of tiny clash cymbals, a mini gong, and a small-sized *pengling*, which is a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals connected by a string.

When Genevieve Lee contacted me in June, she kindly offered to send me some cricket and bird boxes, toy paper accordions, and Chinese hand drums she found in Chinatown in San Francisco.<sup>5</sup> I was glad that I no longer had to use cricket sound samples in my performance! Moreover, the paper accordion, which comes simply with a two-note compass, was the instrument Ge Gan-ru originally intended to be used in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*. It is also more desirable because of its lightness and portability compared to the toy accordion I bought online.

Hoping to replace all the non-toy instruments I had borrowed, I continued to shop for toys after the performance. I found a toy penny whistle in a toy store in Princeton, New Jersey, which serves as an ideal substitute for the recorder I borrowed for *Wrong* (and later became a featured instrument in the new commissioned work *Hard, Hard, Hard!*). I also bought online two types of toy woodblocks to replace the real woodblock I had borrowed.

Even though Ge Gan-ru had intended to use the same instrumentation as *Wrong* for the

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<sup>5</sup> Genevieve Lee, e-mail message to author, June 7, 2010.



new piece to enable future performers to play them as a set,<sup>6</sup> I thought it would be exciting to consider the new instruments I had collected. I offered to send Ge pictures and sound samples of the new instruments, and he replied that it would be helpful to also include pictures and sound files of the instruments I used in *Wrong*.<sup>7</sup> Knowing that I would be in New York sometime during winter break, Ge asked if it would be possible for me to bring all the toy instruments.<sup>8</sup> I finally arranged to have my colleague, who was driving to New York, bring all my toy instruments (except for the toy piano) to Ge Gan-ru in December 2011. These included the new instruments mentioned above, the ones I had used for *Wrong*, as well as those I had collected earlier but did not put into use, such as a bell, wind chimes, and toy shakers. I then met with Ge Gan-ru in the beginning of January 2012 in New York City, the first time we conversed in person after having e-mail correspondence for over a year.

### **First Version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!***

On April 11, 2011, Ge Gan-ru sent me the score for the new piece.<sup>9</sup> Having considered different titles, we finally came to an agreement to follow the same procedure as *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and named the new piece *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, using the English word for the last three words of the first stanza of Tang Wan's poem.<sup>10</sup> I found *Hard, Hard, Hard!* to be technically and musically more challenging than *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*. Co-commissioner Genevieve Lee

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<sup>6</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, June 6, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, December 15, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 11, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2011.

agreed: “This new piece is definitely harder, but maybe it’s also because I don’t have a model to emulate.”<sup>11</sup> The world premieres were given by Genevieve Lee on October 1, 2011 in her solo recital at Pomona College in Claremont, California,<sup>12</sup> and by myself at the Bowling Green New Music Festival 2011 “Method In Madness” in Bowling Green, Ohio on October 15.

*Hard, Hard, Hard!* was programmed in a concert of the festival entitled “Playthings,” along with other pieces written for unusual instrumentation. A few people thought *Hard* was the most interesting piece in the program, because the toys were used in an unexpectedly serious manner, as opposed to most other pieces on the program which were meant to be more playful. On the other hand, those who had seen my performance of both melodramas were not as amazed by the novelty of *Hard*, most likely because they had seen *Wrong*. Perhaps they found the two melodramas to be similar and therefore were not impressed by the new piece. A few of them expressed liking *Wrong* better, even though they could not really explain why.

Later in the month, I presented the two melodramas at the Livewire Festival and Symposium in Maryland in the form of a lecture-recital. This was the first time both melodramas were presented together as a set. Individuals I have spoken to seemed to equally enjoy both pieces, while two people favored *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*.

### **The Composer’s Decision to Rewrite *Hard, Hard, Hard!***

On November 6, 2011, I was very surprised to receive an unexpected e-mail message from Ge Gan-ru regarding his decision to rewrite *Hard, Hard, Hard!*. He described how he had

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<sup>11</sup> Genevieve Lee, e-mail message to Ge Gan-ru, September 15, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Genevieve Lee, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2012.

some thoughts about the piece after hearing Genevieve Lee's performance live in California. He had intentionally kept his thoughts and decision from me knowing that I was soon performing *Hard, Hard, Hard!* at the festival. Ge wrote:

I felt that this piece sounded like another version of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* rather than a totally different piece. Even before composing it, I knew this could be a problem. Somehow, I didn't deal with this problem as seriously as I should. So, I would like to rearrange this piece and make it a more interesting one. I hope the rewriting will not waste the efforts that you have put in this piece. Many of the old materials can still be used....<sup>13</sup>

I was impressed by the composer's sensitivity and openness. He seemed to be the best listener and critic of his own music and knew what he was looking for before hearing others' opinions.

I received the email by Ge Gan-ru just a few days after I had received an invitation from Phyllis Chen to perform *Hard, Hard, Hard!* at the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival in New York City on the December 1 concert.<sup>14</sup> Since the performance was just a few weeks away, Ge Gan-ru thought we could wait until after the New York premiere to discuss the rewriting or rearranging of the piece.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Our Bold Decision to Rework the Piece for the New York Premiere*

When Ge Gan-ru sent Genevieve Lee and me the score in April 2011, he was certain that what he sent us was not the final version of the piece. He requested input from us and urged us to be critical, as our ultimate goal was to make the composition better.<sup>16</sup> However, I did not have any constructive thoughts or ideas until after I had finished learning the piece, and even more so

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<sup>13</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, November 6, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Phyllis Chen, e-mail message to author, November 1, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, November 6, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, April 11, 2011.

after having performed it twice and having gotten some feedback from the audience. Since the New York premiere of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* was scheduled directly after Thanksgiving, I asked Ge Gan-ru if it would be helpful for me to arrive a few days early in the hope of working some things out together before the performance. Even though it seemed unwise to start the rewriting process just a few days before the performance, I thought that was probably the best time to do it given how I could be there with all the instruments. Ge Gan-ru liked the idea of using the Thanksgiving holiday to rework the piece and invited me to spend the holiday with his family. He was hopeful that I would be able to perform the new version on December 1.<sup>17</sup>

### **New Version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!***

#### *The Opening*

Instead of starting off the piece with a toy piano introduction like *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, I was imagining a mysterious opening with a fading cricket sound suggesting a quiet night (as if the piece were continuing from the ending of *Wrong*), and a woman singing softly the first few words in a free melisma before she suddenly screamed on the third word *e* (evil or wicked), cutting straight to measure twenty-nine of the original score with the piano cluster and “terrifying birds,” then continuing with the toy piano melody in measure thirty-four. I recorded myself singing and playing and sent it off to Ge Gan-ru. While the composer welcomed and appreciated my input, he thought we could use what I suggested later in the piece. He already had in mind how he wanted the piece to start.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, November 7, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Ge Gan-ru, e-mail message to author, November 14, 2011.

This conversation continued the first night I arrived in New York on November 25, 2011. We were brainstorming in Ge Gan-ru's studio in his beautiful New Jersey home and Ge shared this thought: "When I saw Genevieve laugh in the middle of the piece, it was very shocking to me, and I asked myself why I didn't start with that intense laughing." Apparently we both conceived of starting the piece very differently from *Wrong*, opening it with voice rather than toy piano, but what Ge Gan-ru and I were envisioning were two extreme opposites, with one being insanely dramatic and the other being introspective. As a performer, I knew I would be much more comfortable with the latter. I had reservations about starting immediately with what I consider the most challenging part of the piece—an outburst of laughing/crying as a result of Tang Wan's long-suppressed emotion (suggested by the poem text "pretending to be happy").

Nonetheless, the composer was certain about the opening. I trusted his strong instincts and clear vision about his piece, and agreed right then to take on the challenge to begin the piece that way.

#### *Close Collaboration with the Composer*

The writing process started the next morning. I was stationed on one side surrounded by all the toys while Ge Gan-ru sat on the other side with his keyboard and working desk. The composer would describe to me what he had in mind, often playing on his keyboard to demonstrate, and I would try it out on the "real" instruments and with my voice. If he did not like what he heard, he would have me try different ways of playing or he would have me try a different instrument. I was also able to provide instant feedback from a performer's point of view and to make suggestions. Then Ge had me either sketch out or make notes of what I did, which allowed the composer to keep moving on with his thought process. For more complicated

instrumental passages, Ge would sketch out and show them to me so that I could play them for him. We were able to go through the entire poem and had the complete piece sketched out by 6:30 p.m. the same day. We had a productive first day and were very pleased with our progress.



Figure 4. Working with composer Ge Gan-ru in his home in New Jersey. Photograph by Vivian Wan-he Ge.

Ge Gan-ru spent the next two days notating the piece. I helped by reminding him of what we had decided on by playing from my rough sketch. Putting everything into exact notation enabled us to detect problems or performance issues that we had missed before. The new version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* came into being on November 28, 2011. The instruments used for this new version are: toy piano, toy harp, toy glockenspiel, toy gong, penny whistle, hand clapper, Chinese hand drum, two temple cup gongs, a *pengling* (a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals connected

by a string), wooden frog and a striker (also used where woodblock is indicated in the score), a pair of shakers, wind chimes, bell, bird shaker and cricket boxes. Even though some materials from the first version were used, the new version was an entirely different piece, not only from its first version, but also from its precursor *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*. It was more condensed and concise, and we were both pleased with the outcome.

We only had time for two intense rehearsals prior to the performance, making minor changes and thinking about ways to make the piece work more effectively. It was challenging enough to have to learn the new piece, not to mention having to get fully comfortable with it, all in one-and-a-half days before we left for New York. Needless to say, my close collaboration with Ge Gan-ru was altogether meaningful, engaging, and memorable. As a composer he knows exactly what he wants, but at the same time is very open and respectful to performers' opinions and feedback.

*Premiere at the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival*

The premiere of the new version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* took place on December 1, 2011 in Gershwin Hotel, New York City as part of the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival hosted by pianist/toy pianist/composer Phyllis Chen. Right before the performance, Ge Gan-ru said to me, "I think we need the gong to end this piece." In our last rehearsal, we had both agreed that the piece would end powerfully either with or without a strong strike of the toy gong. I continued to be impressed with the composer's engagement with the process.

During the performance everything came together magically. I was exhilarated to the point that I forgot that I was actually performing. After an intense long cry on the last word *man* (hide) echoed by a glissando on the harp, I stroked the harp aimlessly before joining in with my

voice. With every stroke, I repeated the word *man*, sometimes louder and sometimes softer, without a sense of where to go, as if the situation was hopeless. The speaking and playing then became faster and more intense, but I suddenly stopped and looked up at the audience, before pantomiming shouting the word *man*. By hiding the voice for the word “hide,” the word translates itself and vividly suggests Tang Wan’s long suppressed distress from having to conceal her true emotions.

I froze after my last word. The piece could have ended, but I had not forgotten what the composer said to me. Just when everyone thought the piece was about to end, I gradually picked up the wooden striker and gave the most powerful strike I could imagine on the gong. The sonorous gong sound was so powerful that it stayed ringing for a while in the room. It struck me as the perfect ending. I had forgotten that the gong was just a toy.

As I stood up I could see Margaret Leng Tan standing in the audience, whose face I recognized through her pictures on recordings and websites. I finally was able to meet the legendary pianist, who was the motivator behind everything that led to that night’s performance. If she had not asked for a toy piano piece from Ge Gan-ru many years ago, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* would not exist and *Hard, Hard, Hard!* would not have come into being. Meeting Tan felt like going back to the origin of a circle.





Figure 5. After my performance at UnCaged Toy Piano Festival, Gershwin Hotel, New York City: *left*, myself; *right*, Margaret Leng Tan.

Both Ge Gan-ru and I were very glad that we made the bold decision to rewrite *Hard, Hard, Hard!* for the New York performance. It took not just initial courage, but also considerable creative energy, continuous mindful effort, and strong determination to make it happen. In the end we felt that our hard work had fully paid off as the outcome was beyond what we could have hoped for. The sequel *Hard, Hard, Hard!* can now stand alone as a unique piece, just like Tang Wan's poem which is stylistically and distinctively different from Lu You's. Like her poem, *Hard, Hard, Hard!* is personal, transparent, and depressingly dark.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

As much as I had been exposed to the full range of contemporary piano repertoire, discovering *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* in 2009 truly opened my eyes to a new kind of music. I was initially drawn to the piece because of my interest in music written for vocalizing pianist. However, I was intimidated by the idea of performing it as soon as I found out that it was not just written for voice and toy piano, but for toy orchestra, in which the performer sings intensely while playing all the miniature toy instruments. Even after I had gathered most of the toys and started learning the piece, I still had doubts whether I could “trust” the toys. With this piece I would have to see myself as not just a singer and reciter, but also a multi-instrumentalist. Above all, I had to be an actor. How could I justify using toys in portraying myself as the protagonist?

As I studied Lu You’s poem further, I was taken by his story of Tang Wan. In his late poems Lu You described his memories with Tang Wan as shattered and vanished dreams.<sup>1</sup> The unusualness of including toys in the composition contributes to the dream-like atmosphere. The toys became a means for me to enter the poet’s state of mind, and helped me to express the emotions I had associated with the story. Playing on childhood toys is a sentimental, intimate, and personal experience. Having picked out each of the instruments myself added to the intimacy. I could see Lu You, who had lived much longer than Tang Wan, reminiscing in his old age about his childhood days with Tang Wan, which only brought heartache and regret. The use of toys also contributes to a sense of fantasy in recreating this ancient subject matter for today’s audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, 29; Peterson, 282.

I gradually learned how each of these toys has its unique personality, and how they can create sounds that many so-called real instruments cannot. A friend who saw the performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* expressed her thoughts: “The sounds created images that were so real that they were almost vivid. They brought us right back to the olden days of China with wooden chairs, wooden table, wooden window and a lonely man singing about his lost love...”<sup>2</sup> Chinese calligrapher Huang Shenchen was so drawn by the sounds he heard in *Wrong* that it led to the idea of collaborating with him in a live calligraphy demonstration, with me improvising on Chinese toy instruments to convey the liveliness and spontaneity of calligraphy. Indeed, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* has not only inspired the writing of *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, but more importantly, it has revealed the potential of toys as musical instruments.

Margaret Leng Tan reminded me of how *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* would not have come into existence if it were not for toys. “The only reason why it came into existence, is because it is within a toy frame. I will not see myself doing it otherwise. As a concept it will not even come about.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, toys have inspired the writing of the melodramas. Avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan saw something new in toys that others did not see, eventually requesting a toy piece from Ge Gan-ru. Avant-garde composer Ge Gan-ru discovered a new voice in toys that had not been heard, culminating in the two melodramas based on the story of Lu You and Tang Wan. These emotional melodramas were unlike any pre-existing contemporary music repertoire. They reveal, retell, and reimagine the story of Lu You and Tang Wan, enabling the performers and listeners to experience this eight-hundred-year-old Chinese romance with an absolutely refreshing touch.

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<sup>2</sup> Yinghui Chee, e-mail message to author, November 26, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Tan, phone interview by author, April 1, 2012.

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## APPENDIX: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: February 17, 2012

TO: Yen-Lin Goh, Doctor of Musical Arts

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [298367-2] Reimagining the Story of Lu You and Tang Wan: Ge Gan-ru's Wrong, Wrong, Wrong! and Hard, Hard, Hard!

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: February 17, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: January 24, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 2 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 24, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.