

# **“Radical Traditionalism”: Reconfigured Connections between the Experimental and the Traditional in East Asian Music.”**

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Paper presented at the Northeast Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology meeting, April 17, 2004.

## **Intro**

My presentation today is on two East Asian experimental composers, Yuji Takahashi from Japan and Liu Sola from China, and their collaborations with performers of traditional Japanese and Chinese music. I begin by acknowledging the rather oxymoronic pairing of terms, “radical traditionalism,” I use to describe these composers. Nick has just walked us through the complexities of the notion of tradition in reference to African music, and how it contrasts with the notion of modernity. This contrast is also found in discussions of music in East Asia, where traditional designates that which is indigenous, as opposed to Western music. This temporally distancing polarity is as unavoidable as it is problematic when examining the interaction between Asian musicians based in Western-oriented traditions and those based in indigenous traditions. As experimental composers in East Asia, Yuji Takahashi and Liu Sola inherit the legacy of a intensely Western-oriented modernization. But they also inherit a legacy of efforts to forge connections between contemporary art music and traditional musics. Their most significant contribution to this effort, I suggest, is the example they set in overcoming what is really only an apparent contradiction between commitments to the experimental and the traditional.

I describe this contribution as “radical traditionalism.” I use the term radical with its connotations of extremism in mind, but also because of its more fundamental, or radical definition: “of the root or roots” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English). The two collaborations I examine in this paper, between experimental and traditional Asian musicians, are not entirely without precedent. They do, however, represent significant departures from prior models of creating new music for traditional Asian instruments. They do not juxtapose traditional instruments with avant-garde orchestral writing, as does Toru Takemitsu’s *November Steps*. They are not about transferring a modernist musical language onto traditional instruments, with greater or lesser attention to idiomatic techniques, as with the music of Chen Yi or Bun-Ching Lam. Instead, in two related but distinct ways, Yuji Takahashi and Liu Sola get at the very roots of the

traditions they engage. I do not mean roots in the sense of historical origins, but rather where it is that traditions, if they are living traditions, are rooted: in the minds and bodies of the individuals who practice and pass on those traditions, and in the instruments those individuals play.

## Yuji Takahashi

Yuji Takahashi established his career as a composer and pianist in the international sphere of the avant-garde. Born in 1938, as a teenager he studied twelve-tone counterpoint and played the piano music of Cage and other avant-garde composers. He spent most of the 1960s abroad, first in Europe studying with Iannis Xenakis, and later in the United States, teaching, performing, and exploring the use of computers in music composition. After returning to Japan in 1972, his musical activity became increasingly informed by his radical leftist politics. He engaged with more direct forms of expression such as political protest songs, but also maintained his interest in experimental approaches.

From the mid-1980s and through the 1990s, Takahashi's work became less overtly political. His concerns with the social significance of composing led him instead to seek out musical situations where the participants had a greater degree of responsibility and involvement. He gravitated towards writing for small ensembles of people he knew, and became increasingly interested in working with traditional musicians and writing for traditional instruments. What is most remarkable and striking about Takahashi's approach to traditional instruments is the extent to which he explores the physical nature of the instruments and the techniques used to play them. The resulting work is unmistakably experimental, but in an understated way that contrasts dramatically with the brilliantly difficult avant-garde piano music that he made his mark with earlier in his career. He is not interested in trying to make traditional instruments "play very fast passages in contemporary idioms," a tendency he recognizes among younger Japanese composers. Rather, he is interested in creating a music based on "the movements of the body"—a radical redirection of the intimate understanding of the physicality of performance he gained as a virtuoso pianist.

Takahashi flies in the face of the generally accepted notion in contemporary art music that composing starts with imagining sounds. He calls this "a perverse view" and instead, recognizing that "sound-producing movements are what you do to make music," suggests that a composition "should show the way to produce sounds." This is, in fact, the way that most notation systems for traditional Japanese music operate. Koto notation does not directly indicate pitch, but instead indicates which string should be plucked. The resulting pitch depends on the tuning used in a given piece. Takahashi uses the notational systems specific to each Japanese instrument for which he writes. He has even invented a notation

system for his 1995 piano piece “Finger Light.” The system, which he comments is “similar to the notation for Shomyo, a style of Buddhist chant” indicates only fingerings and contours, without specifying pitch.

Takahashi’s interest in traditional Japanese instruments led him to study shamisen, a three-string plucked lute, with performer Kazuko Takada. His aim was not to become a performer himself, but to gain a firsthand understanding of the particularities of the instrument. He observed a correspondence between patterns of resonant and non-resonant notes resulting from the sympathetic vibration of open strings, and the pattern of fingering. He explains:

When I started to study shamisen . . . I discovered that it has a resonant note that is felt with your left index finger. But when you move this finger on the string, you no longer feel the sound, you feel the movement of your finger along the string and you hear the result as resonance or assonance. The resonant tones are then played with the left index finger, and the assonant with the left middle or ring finger. This is how the instrument is organized. (Takahashi, 1997: 36-37)

This observation became the basis of the piece *Kagehime No Michiyuki*, for two performers playing shamisen and singing. Takahashi draws attention to the contrast between resonant and non-resonant tones by tuning the shamisen a semitone apart. Tones resonant on one are non-resonant on the other, so that “with the traditional intervals and playing methods, the result is highly unstable” (Takahashi 1995).

The piece consists mostly of simple idiomatic figures. These figures are played in alternation between the two shamisen, sometimes with variation, sometimes not. At times the fingering is maintained across the alternation, so that the figure is repeated a semitone higher. This can be heard at the end of the opening sequence, which builds and then resolves to a single tone played on each instrument, clearly revealing the buzz of the open strings which vibrate sympathetically. After a pause, the shamisen re-enter, this time using different fingerings to play the same pitches, resulting in a subtle shift between resonance and lack of resonance.

This excerpt is of a recorded performance by Takahashi’s teacher Kazuko Takada, joined by Ayumi Shimonoto.

[excerpt of *Kagehime No Michiyuki*]

## Liu Sola

The career path of Liu Sola in many ways parallels that of the much better known Chinese composer Tan Dun. Born respectively in 1955 and 1957, their formative adolescent years coincided with the Cultural Revolution. Sola entered the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing in 1977, a year before Tan Dun. Unlike Tan Dun and other “New Wave” or “New Tide” composers, Sola works primarily outside the realm of

classically based concert music. She finished her studies at the Central Conservatory only under pressure from her tutors (Spencer 1991). After graduating she turned her attention to pop and rock, which she found “more human.” In addition to her musical activity as a singer and composer, she has been active as a writer, actor, and playwright. As a musician, her eclecticism rivals that of Tan Dun, though it tends more towards a fusion of her diverse experiences. Besides her formal training in Western classical music and her forays into pop and rock, as a singer Sola draws upon a wide range of Chinese operatic and folk song styles. Her 1992 CD release “Blues in the East” brings together these interests, exploring the affinities she perceives between the blues and Chinese music. It consists of settings of two Classical Chinese stories for a 13-member ensemble of blues, jazz, and improvising musicians, performers of Asian instruments, herself and blues singer Amina Claudine Myers, and storyteller Umar Bin Hassan of The Last Poets fame.

A more focused project, though one no less informed by her diverse range of musical interests, is Sola’s collaboration with pipa player Wu Man. The first of the two CDs they produced is titled *China Collage*, and collage is indeed the term which best describes the compositional approach of this CD. The material for the pipa, on which my discussion will focus, is entirely idiomatic, derived largely from pieces in the traditional pipa repertoire. The most striking example is the first track, “Festivals,” constructed entirely out of seven short motifs from a single traditional piece, “Dengyue Jiaohui” or “Lanterns and Moon Competing in Brilliance.” These motifs are treated as riffs, repeated in blocks of anywhere from five to twenty iterations. They provide a driving, motoric backup to Sola’s vocalizations, which move between similarly short riffs, longer lyrical lines and held tones, and gestures characteristic of Chinese operatic vocal styles.

I confirmed that “Festivals” consists of only seven phrases (with some variation), and that these phrases are all drawn from “Lanterns and Moon,” by analyzing the pieces using ProTools. This is what you see projected. The handout shows a schematic transcription of the pipa part—schematic in that it makes no attempt to represent the details of idiomatic technique, but is intended simply to give a sense of the overall architecture of the piece. The seven motifs are labeled with letters A through H. Above each motif is noted the number of repetitions, and in very general terms what the vocal is doing.

Here are some examples of the various motifs, as found in the source piece “Lanterns and Moon” (as performed by Wu Man on her first solo CD) and as treated in Sola’s composition/arrangement “Festivals”. This is motif A in “Lanterns and Moon”:

[motif A in “Lanterns and Moon”]

This is how it sounds in “Festivals”:

[motif A in “Festivals”]

This is F in “Lanterns and Moon”:

[motif F in “Lanterns and Moon”]

This is F in “Festivals,” starting from the last few repetitions of B to give a sense of the context:

[motif F in “Festivals”]

This is F1, from “Lanterns and Moon,” which adds a knock on the body of the pipa to the figure:

[motif F1 in “Lanterns and Moon”]

and F1 in “Festivals”:

[motif F1 in “Festivals”]

This last example shows how motifs are altered slightly, in this case squared off to eight rather than ten pulses. Other alterations include changes in pitch content or emphasis, through which “Festivals” gains a clear sense of definite pitch centers of A, D or B. Here, for example, is G in “Lanterns and Moon”

[motif G in “Lanterns and Moon”]

and G in “Festivals”:

[motif G in “Festivals”]

The most important type of alteration, however, is the conversion of motifs into riffs, through their extraction from longer phrases and their repetition to form blocks. This basic compositional technique—of using fragments from a previously existing piece of music to create a quite different piece of music—bears an obvious resemblance to the practice of sampling, ubiquitous in popular music forms such as hip hop, rap, and various genres of electronic dance music. There is an element of quotation here, but there is also a radical shift in context which substantially alters what the extracted motif “means” in its new context.

As much as Sola’s manipulation of traditional material resembles sampling, there is an equally obvious and fundamental distinction. Sola is not working with a recording, but with a living and breathing performer. More than that, the performer, Wu Man, is very much engaged in the compositional process—in contrast to situations where performers are objectified and simply used to provide stereotypical clips of traditional music. It is worth noting the different ways that Sola and Wu Man are credited on *China Collage*. On the tray card, they are simply listed as performers: “Voice: Liu Sola; Pipa: Wu Man.” On

the insert: “Music composed and arranged by Liu Sola, BMG Songs, BMI” (she does claim copyright) and “Pipa music consultant and improvisation by Wu Man.”

As in the case of Yuji Takahashi’s work with his shamisen teacher Kazuko Takada, *China Collage* is not simply the work of an individual composer making use of traditional music as something abstract and disembodied. It is not adapting traditional musical elements for fully scored pieces, or using traditional instruments simply as a source of unusual timbres, or less overtly using concepts from traditional music in imagining a new music. Instead, the music grows out of a broader musical relationship between the composer and the performer—and the intimate relationship one or both has with the instruments used.

## Conclusion

None of what I have said is meant to suggest that Takahashi and Sola compose traditional music. They don’t. They are as exploratory, and idiosyncratic as any example of experimental music. But at the same time, Takahashi and Sola depart from the typical relationship between contemporary art music and traditional music. This relationship is cogently summarized by Georgina Born in the introduction to *Western Music and Its Others*. Born reminds us that

those modernist and postmodernist composers who have drawn upon or made reference to other musics . . . are not producing that music but drawing upon it in order to enrich their own compositional frame. They are transforming that music through its incorporation into their own aesthetic: appropriating and re-presenting it. Crucially, in doing so, they intend not only to evoke that other music, but to create a distance from it and transcend it.

Takahashi and Sola, to be sure, bring their own aesthetic to their collaborations with traditional musicians. But rather than seeking a distance from traditional Japanese or Chinese music, they immerse themselves in it, and strive to create something new through it. Tradition is not appropriated and represented in this work, but immediately present, in a much more intact and integrated way than in most new music for traditional Asian instruments.

In making this claim, I am following Paul Connerton’s observations about bodily practices as part of how societies remember. Connerton suggest that

Our bodies . . . keep the past . . . in an entirely effective form in the continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions. (Connerton 1989:72)

I also take note of John Bailey’s insistence that musical cognition and creativity involves not only auditory thought processes but also bodily relationships to instruments (Bailey

1995). In their own distinct ways, Yuji Takahashi and Liu Sola engage the bodily relationships to instruments of the traditional musicians with whom they collaborate. In the case of *China Collage*, this results from building a piece out of bits of a traditional piece which Wu Man has thoroughly internalized and embodied. Sola hints at the process when she thanks Wu Man for working “day and night with me for many days, playing traditional pipa music, explaining pipa technique, and trying out my pipa arrangements as soon as I made them.” Drawing again on Connerton, “Festivals” would seem to make use of an incorporated practice—that is, one dependent on the presence of a body which performs a particular activity—rather than an inscribed practice, which uses external means of storing information such as writing or musical notation. The compositional process of “Festivals” does involve breaking down a traditional piece. But rather than treating “Lanterns and Moon” as an abstract series of pitches, rhythms, or otherwise notatable elements, Sola worked with Wu Man to identify motifs to be taken whole, thus maintaining their embodied integrity.

In Takahashi’s case, the exploration of the bodily relationship to instruments is conscious and deliberate. Instead of taking patterns whole, he attempts to identify the principles underlying traditional patterns through investigating the physical characteristics of instruments, and the techniques used to play them. Takahashi has a remarkably inquisitive attitude towards tradition, which parallels in many ways the ideas put forward by John Bailey. In elaborating on his preference for using traditional Japanese instruments because of the traditions attached to them. He notes that “the way you learn these instruments is one-on-one, teacher-to-student, you copy the music from body to body.” He continues:

Tradition is accumulated patterns, and a convenient way to learn is by starting from patterns, but this can also become a limitation. So the question becomes, how to use these playing patterns to free yourself from these same patterns? But as a composer, without an understanding of these accumulated patterns, you have difficulty in approaching performers. You have to start from where they are, and together you go somewhere else, or they don’t understand. This is difficult. They are the masters of their own instruments and you have to approach them with respect. You can’t just say, “Oh, I’m a composer. Whatever I tell you to do, you do.” They have several hundred years of accumulated wisdom with their instrument, and unless you play the instrument, you often know little or nothing about it. So you start by learning what their resources are and as you learn more and more about their instrument, in effect, you also become a student of traditional music. But you must go beyond that built-up wealth of tradition. And these traditions are dying anyway. (Takahashi, 1997: 37)

Takahashi’s comments about freeing oneself from traditional patterns and going beyond tradition clearly reflect the premium he places as an experimental composer on innovation and originality. But at the same time, he demonstrates a real sensitivity to where it is that traditional performers are coming from, and an appreciation for how traditions are maintained. Perhaps he is right in saying that “these traditions are dying

anyway,” at least in terms of the kind of life that is recognized as traditional. The kind of radical approaches to tradition taken by Takahashi and Sola are, to be sure, too idiosyncratic and particular to the individual artists involved to become traditions themselves. But perhaps the example they set of a more interactive relationship between experimental and traditional musicians, is precisely what is needed to complement preservationist approaches to traditional Asian musics: a radical traditionalism based not on excessive respect, but on an active recognition of possibilities.

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