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***Playing the Flute in Shanghai: The Musical Life of Dai Shuhong*** [*沪上箫声:戴树红先生的音乐人生*]. 2021. Directed by Helen Rees and Aparna Sharma, 84 minutes. In Chinese with English subtitles. Colour, DVD. Produced by Pan Records, PAN 9609.

Honoured at the Chinese Ethnographic Film Festival and the International Music Ethnographic Film Exhibition, this award-winning documentary is directed by Helen Rees and Aparna Sharma, two faculty members at the University of California, Los Angeles. Sharma, who is a professor in the department of World Arts and Cultures/Dances, puts her professional filmmaking skills at the service of a smart visual style that

captivates the viewer across the entire length of the film. Rees, Professor at UCLA's ethnomusicology department, offers her voice-over narration entirely in Chinese (thanks to her fluency in Mandarin). By doing so, she not only reaches out to a large audience but also pays a beautiful tribute to the central figure of Dai Shuhong (戴树红), her bamboo flute teacher since the late 1980s.

Dai's musical life is an exceptional testimony of the way in which individual destiny merges with the historical modernisation of China's higher institutes of music education. When Dai was born in 1937 in Taizhou (泰州), Jiangsu (江苏) province, the country under the Republican era had just been entangled in the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was when the People's Liberation Army was about to seize power in 1949 that Dai would start learning the flute with his primary school music teacher by "going onto the street to spread the word." Following the advent of the "New China," he was part in 1959 of the very first class to graduate in Chinese music. "Folk music departments" (*minzu yinyue xi* [民族音乐系]) had been established in higher conservatories only three years earlier. From then on to his final retirement in 2007, Dai spent his almost half-century-long career in one of these departments, in his case at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (SHCM) where he studied and, later as Professor, tirelessly taught *zhudi* (竹笛), the Chinese transverse bamboo flute.

Yet, mastering *zhudi* in solo and orchestra repertoires, as well as in the traditional form of "Silk and Bamboo instrumental ensemble of the Jiangnan area" (*jiangnan sizu* [江南丝竹]) was not enough. As his daughter Dai Wei (戴微, b. 1971), today Professor in the musicology department at SHCM, puts it at the end of the film, her father "made a gradual journey from *dizi* 笛子 (that is *zhudi*), to *xiao* 簫 (vertical notched bamboo flute) and then to *qin* 琴 (seven-string fretless zither plucked on table)." Indeed, he is now acclaimed as a renowned *xiao* master as well as a respected *qin* expert. Dai has not only been a privileged witness but also an active figure of the *qin* scene for the last few decades. As he recalls, he was invited to join the famous Jinyu Qinshe (今虞琴社, lit., "*qin* society of modern Yu [area]") as early as in the late 1950s. There he would, on his *xiao*, accompany some of the *qin* masters that acted as a bridge between the musical practices of the old world and their contemporary professionalisation as a performing art. Dai attended the musical activities called "elegant gatherings" (*yaji* 雅集) and forged a lasting bond with Zhang Ziqian 张子谦 (1899–1991), a giant among the older generation. Since the early 1980s, several video recordings of ZHANG and Dai performing *qin-xiao* duets have been handed over to posterity. One of them is included in this film. Undoubtedly, such rare material will always carry a special historical value. However, one may question the relevance of playing the footage in its entirety rather than just a selected sample, since it has already been widely disseminated as part of the standard-bearing collection of historical *qin* audio-video archives *Juexiang* (绝响, lit., "last echo") gathered by Guo Peng (国鹏) and published in 2017.

In this DVD release, a clear contrast obtains between Dai's high reputation and the sober style of his interview. Indeed, the star musician comes across as extraordinarily accessible. Some of the sequences capture a person of utter simplicity. One feels privileged

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in witnessing how Rees builds on her special Chinese master-disciple relationship to come close to this musician of great renown. Minor details of his daily life that lesser videographers would have left out are instead preserved and placed at just the right moment, making them resonate with a special significance. One thinks of the footage of their first encounter for this project, as Rees and Sharma arrive at Dai's home and see first-hand the warmth of his hospitality. Or the sequence in which he struggles to immerse himself into *qin* playing, the subtle nuances of which can easily be covered by interfering noise. When Dai realises the air conditioner on the opposite wall of his studio is still running, the camera shows him standing up and just switching it off, tiptoeing and using the extremity of the first flute at arms' length. At these junctures, one feels a sense of acquaintance with the film's main character, as if he were standing beside us.

The friendly atmosphere that pervades the relationship between the film's two directors and the master does not prevent the viewer from enjoying their deeper exchanges on Dai's musical practice. I will cover this aspect of the documentary via three main examples.

First, Rees is kind enough to share on screen the privilege of receiving a private lesson from Dai in his own studio. This sequence is subtly introduced by Sharma with a silent zoom on a calligraphy hung on the wall (next to the above-mentioned air conditioner), wherein one can read the translation of "Elegant strains of *qin* and *xiao.*" If neither the format of this individual lesson nor the *qin* piece selected are exceptional, what is worth watching revolves around the unique way each musician punctuates and breathes through the same musical phrase. As these features are not fixed in the tablatures, they can only be transmitted orally. We are treated to a few segments interpreted with a regular tempo but also, and perhaps more interestingly, some passages played with the kind of rubato specific to the *qin* repertoire. Dai stops singing and playing the *qin* to accompany Rees' *xiao* and picks up his own flute instead to lead her through a section underpinned by a kind of master-disciple mimetism.

Another sequence in the film gives a close-up view of the score for "Fan Cang Lang (泛沧浪)" (lit., "Floating on Deep Blue Waves"), a piece for *qin* and voice. The handwritten version shown here was transcribed by Dai based on one of Zhang' s interpretations. To the best of my knowledge, this has been an unpublished original to this day. As Dai explains, one can see a combined score with an upper line for the voice (pitch and lyrics) paired with a lower line for the *qin* (pitch and tablatures), both pitch lines being written down in cipher notation with regular time signatures. These specific choices of interpretation and transcription hold historical value, notably for the current debate on historical informed performance, for they are representative of Dai's generation. Still, a little clumsiness is to be regretted about "*wuxian pu* (五弦谱)" being mistranslated in this context as "Western staff notation." When it came to choosing which notation was to be kept, it was not a matter of whether it was Western or Chinese, since both staff and cypher notation were introduced by Western missionaries to Chinese elites as early as in the seventeenth century for the former and in the nineteenth for the latter. Actually, as Dai suggests, it was rather a pragmatic choice of maximising its acceptance by the masses.

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Finally, in one sequence Dai demonstrates his calligraphic skills while his earlier interpretation of "Chun Xiao Yin (春曉吟)" (lit., "Spring Dawn Song") plays as background music. Such an editing choice serves the purpose of better conveying the organic connection between *qin* and poetry. As a matter of fact, most *qin* pieces, even those without a voice accompaniment, keep an intrinsic bond with an underlying literary allusion that confers a descriptive or even programmatic meaning to them. Here, it is interesting to note that Dai does not quote the usual historical commentaries associated with this piece but comes up with his own poetic association. Nevertheless, this sequence would have gained clarity had the reference to the poem been explicitly provided, failing which one could think that Dai improvised those verses during his performance. To be sure, improvising poetic associations remains popular in these social circles and someone as erudite as Dai would have achieved it without effort. But in this case he actually just quotes a poem attributed to the famous Tang dynasty scholar Han Yu (韓愈, 768–824), "Chuchun Xiaoyu (初春小雨)" (lit., "Light Rain of Early Spring"). As classical Chinese poetry surely remains hard to master, references to some of commentaries available on this poem would have proven appropriate. We would better understand how Dai, playing this specific piece amidst the forest of tower blocks that one can see through his window, reinstates today the *locus classicus* of an ode as an unadorned contemplation of nature that "surpasses the mist and the willows [of worldly desires] that fill the imperial capital".

Last but not least, an important feature in this documentary touches upon its temporal and spatial diversity. The narrative around Rees' visit to her flute teacher keeps the viewer anchored in today's Shanghai while embarking on a historical journey. At the same time, Sharma's film makes one feel as if Dai were a storytelling grandfather bringing out some old family album with black-and-white pictures in it. Let me highlight three instances of temporal framing.

A first one takes the viewer to the recent past when Dai, likely already retired, takes a few of his private students to a temple in the Shanghai region. Several pictures show them giving a *qin-xiao* performance there during a Buddhist rite led by a local monk. This example gives a glimpse of today's urban educated middle-class and their renewed interest in "folk music." A second moment brings the viewer to a picture taken in 1980, at a time when Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" policy was only at its timid beginning. One can see Zhang giving a private *qin* lesson to Dai in a spartan room as an example of the slow and gradual resumption of musical activities that had then just taken place after more than a lost decade for music development. A third moment takes us to around 1962. One sees a picture taken in the garden of the Shanghai Literature and Arts Federation building, where an already ageing Zhang is happily surrounded by a still young Dai and two other *qin* students, all four smiling on a beautiful sunny day. This idyllic image can be perceived as an allegory of the 1956–1963 period, considered in retrospect as a short golden age characterised by the publication of the first great modern systematic studies on Chinese music, gathering both theoretical work and fieldwork. In the background, however, stands a head sculpture of Marx, whose pensive look and prominent beard can be seen as a

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warning sign of the period of ideological drift looming ahead. The fact that the Cultural Revolution is barely mentioned feels like the elephant in the room. This topic certainly remains highly sensitive yet one would have hoped that the directors had collected Dai's personal testimony on these troubled times.

Despite this omission, the viewer will find comfort in the feeling of fullness given by one of the final scenes of the film. As in a counterpoint to the rest of the film, a whole sequence without music and dialogue unfolds by simply showing the gentle silence of Dai walking hand in hand with his spouse near the foot of their building, located in a compound typical of Shanghai's urbanism post Deng's reforms.

In conclusion, this DVD is so rich that it conveys the impression of a precious jade that could be further polished. It would benefit from a brief scholarly apparatus that could take the form of a small accompanying booklet with succinct biographies of all the persons encountered in the film, brief descriptions of the orchestras and societies mentioned, as well as the political events referenced. This would help the viewer better grasp the local historical context behind Dai's vicissitudes. Furthermore, short presentations of the few Chinese instruments involved would be welcome. As a non-East Asian audience would generally be less familiar with this music, a brief organological perspective might provide a good introduction to the repertoires performed by Dai and his partners (including, of course, Rees herself). And since music lies at the core of this documentary, it would need a glossary of all the pieces played. As shown in one of the close-ups of the scores, it is customary to specify a tablature's origin (and not only its publication date, as otherwise only the connoisseur can guess it), along with the nature and authorship of the performed version as well as its transcription. As things stand, there is the risk of discouraging the curious to go deeper into the subject, as most of its subtleties regrettably seem accessible only to the happy few already familiar with the matter. Nevertheless, I firmly believe in the quality of this audio-visual homage to a major figure in Shanghai's musical life. Given the appropriate introduction, the film will please a wide audience, whether one is a sinologist or not, a music historian or simply a music enthusiast.

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