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Tan Shuzhen and the 20th Century Music Scene in China

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Abstract:

The early 20th century witnessed a proliferation in the number of Chinese musicians and musical scholars. Missionaries introduced Christianity to China after its defeat in the Opium Wars out of Western Imperialism, and it was among these religious settings that Western music was disseminated. However, the practice of such music was strictly restricted to Westerners and extremely courtly settings: not until 1925 were Chinese audiences allowed to attend Shanghai Municipal Orchestra's concerts. Not until then did the Chinese public start to truly integrate themselves into the Western music sphere. Furthermore, China lacked a formal music education system—as music teaching in China had been based on a master-disciple learning style, there were few musicians who could read and teach music.

The later revolution in music performance and pedagogy, as well as the Chinese integration into Western music community, were attributed to many Chinese Western Music pioneers, with Tan Shuzhen (1907-2002) being one of them. As a violinist, violin professor, and violin maker, Tan Shuzhen left countless legacies. While pursuing violin education and career in Qingdao, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tokyo, Tan joined the all-foreign Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, marking the first presence of Chinese. Later, he served as a violin professor at multiple conservatories and started an instrument factory at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music after learning violin making with two amateurs in Qingdao.

There are a number of books and articles regarding Western music's early appearances in China, as well as the pioneers' contributions. However, very few works are dedicated to Tan Shuzhen himself. As I watched *From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China* (1979) and *The Gentleman from Shanghai* (2001), and talked to the professors who specialized in Chinese musicology, I found Professor Tan Shuzhen's story very inspiring and ground-breaking in Western music history in China. Drawing stories from Tan and the larger historical context, this article seeks to reimagine the big picture of the 20th-century music

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scene by recounting Tan's chronicle and summarizing his contributions to Western Music in China. My endeavor is bold and audacious, but by publishing the article, I hope I can commemorate Professor Tan Shuzhen and his transformative contributions.

Keywords: Modern Chinese Music History; Classical Music; Tan Shuzhen; Missionary Music Education

1. Introduction

Western classical music's first emergence in China could be traced back to the Christian missionary to the country. Upon the first protestant missionaries' arrival in 1805 and the establishment of their society in 1814, the Chinese population exposed to European music proliferated. Emperors, mandarins, and literati regarded Christianity as a foreign religion posting a threat to and undermining Confucianism and, accordingly, Chinese society. The missionaries thus turned to primarily grassroots—attempting to evangelize "poor" people instead of the Confusian elites. However, China went through tremendous social turmoil and turbulence in the 19th century. The First Anglo-Chinese War exploded in 1840. The burning of the Summer Palace opened China. Subsequently, five other ports were opened to the West as a result of the treaties of Nanking, the Bogue, and the American Treaty of Wanghia. Finally, the treaties of Tientsin in 1860 made interior China accessible to the West and Christian Evangelization unprecedentedly explicit. China's defeat in the second Opium War to British and France granted foreigners more rights and freedom; Christian evangelization took place on larger scales. With churches as the major venue of musical evangelization and organ music and choral singing an essential part of the protestant services, 63 different hymn books were translated into Chinese and circulating among churches by 1877. Eventually, Christianity was incorporated into the local education system. A document from the late 19th century to early 20th century, by Calhoun, J. C, wrote:

The Chinese have suffered a rude shock within the last few years, such as was never before known. That lofty superiority, calm, self-contained conceit, so characteristic of the race, and those prejudices, relating to foreigners and foreign things, handed down from fathers to sons, are being shaken up and are falling to the ground. For the first time in their history they begin to realize that they are weak—weaker than the nations long despised as barbarians; weaker even than the little Japanese whom they looked upon as children, and whom they had instructed in literature, art, morals, and philosophy[...]

The so long self-satisfied and immovable Chinese nation has reached the place where she must accept the Western learning, inventions, and teachers[...] Yes, slowly, reluctantly, she has reached the startling conviction that she must turn to the Christian nations for self-preservation.

The time is at hand, fitly named the day of Jehovah; for it is like that spoken of by one of Israel's prophets, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it" [...] Now that the stolid Chinese have at last awakened and are turning to us for light and help [...] will we who represent Christian truth, Christian education [...]

It can be seen that, out of an imperialist urge, along with China's constant defeats and upheavals, the West and its missionaries set foot in the oriental land, hoping to evangelize and integrate them with great contempt. With the abolishment of the Confucian exams in 1905, missionary schools' prevalence in China reached its new height. The number of students surged from 17,000 to 169,707 from 1899 to 1915, growing almost tenfold. By providing thorough music programs—from singing to piano or harmonium accompaniments—the missionary schools produced China's early generations of classical musicians.

Such a socio-political context produced a group of musicians. Tan Shuzhen was the epitome of a product of the second generation of missionary education, representing the son of a poor craftsman family. Tan Shuzhen recalled all the goods done by the missionaries to the people, "they educated, they cured sickness. My father was so poor, and yet he went to German school and learned German and violin!"

Tan Shuzhen grew up in such a historical context. Tan's grandfather was a lowly carpenter who died before 1897 when Germany took control of Jiaozhou Bay and Qingdao and turned the fishing villages into commercial ports. His sons, inheriting their father's carpentry business, went to Qingdao seeking survival and found opportunities: As the Germans implemented road and building construction, the

carpenters quickly found jobs on construction sites.
Due to Tan's father's young age, when he first arrived in Qingdao with his brothers, he did not have the skills of craftsmanship. After marrying Tan's mother at nineteen, he entered the Central Missionary School and graduated seven years later in 1901. Shortly after graduating, he studied the violin.

2. Chapter 1: Early Life

2.1 Childhood

Tan Shu-Zhen was born on June 10th, 1907. When he was two years old, the family moved to Shanghai, as his father got a job teaching German at a public school. Tan grew up amid the sounds of his father's violin playing.
As financially sufficient families would send their children to preparatory schools for the Confucian civil service exams, the missionary-educated violinist Tan recounted that poor people were Christians and went to missionary schools. Tan's elementary school hired an American Ph.D., Dr. Hargrove, as the English teacher. He gave Tan the English name Tim, after Tiny Tim from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.* Tan's early exposure to English made him quite a fluent speaker and later earned him many career opportunities.

2.2 Teenage

After finishing middle school, the fifteen-year-old Tan switched to a high school in Beijing. During the other summer, passing by the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits (六国饭店), Tan was deeply enthralled by the live music coming from it. Tan considered the violin to have the most beautiful sound and started to learn the violin under a senior student, Li XuGang (李勛刚), at Yenching University (燕京大学). As a boarding middle school student, Tan could only practice the violin when everyone was out for their designated physical activity time.
After three months, Li taught Tan all he could, and Tan decided to find his next teacher from the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits. The violinist at the hotel, Oroop, accepted the student readily, but his lessons were expensive. As a result, Tan could not study long with Oroop.
During the summer of 1923, when Tan was sixteen years old, he became inflamed with pleurisy and thus returned to Qingdao to rest. There, he studied with Russian violinist Horosheshi and Austrian violinist Paul Strauss. Returning to high school after a year, Tan was frustrated as he could not find a second violinist in the non-musical setting. Tan then tried to pursue his violin career at Peking University. However, the mediocrity of the instructors made him decide to return to Qingdao. As he was searching for a direction to go, he was drawn to Shanghai for its excellent orchestra and the emerging cosmopolitan and international music community. Tan's father approved readily, as his business was also somewhat associated with Shanghai. And so, in the autumn of 1925, Tan arrived in Shanghai with his father. Tan found a Russian violin instructor and started to attend concerts by the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra.

3 Career

3.1 Shanghai Municipal Band

Western Culture music culture in China grew rapidly during the post-Opium War era, primarily through secular means such as bands. In 1879, a town band named Shanghai Public Band was colonially established for the British in the Shanghai International Settlement, performing at official events. As it represented British sovereignty in the semi-colonial Shanghai, it thus excluded Chinese residents of the settlement. "There was little scope for any incidental transmission of European classical music to a Chinese audience, save for the Chinese servants of European families looking after European children in the Public Garden, or ceremonial attendance by local Chinese officials." However, an all-Chinese band was subsequently formed by the amateur violinist and Inspector-General of the Imperial Chinese Customs (1863-1908) Robert Hart. These western-styled bands were accepted by the changing political-military culture and were even invited to perform to Empress Dowager Cixi.
In 1922, the Shanghai Public Band changed its name to the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (SMO), marking its new phase under Mario Paci (1878-1946). Paci led the orchestra and served as its director from 1919 to 1942, gaining it the title "Far East No.1". The orchestra's emergence coincided with the Western knowledge's introduction to Chinese soil in the early twentieth century. By 1922, Shanghai had become the Asian center of Western musical activities, engaged not only by Westerners but also Chinese enthusiasts. However, Chinese audiences were not allowed to attend SMO concerts until 1925. It thus marked a groundbreaking milestone when in 1927, Tan Shuzhen knocked on Maestro Paci's door and asked for a position in the Shanghai Municipal Band, and got approved.
Paci asked Mr. Tan a few questions about his musical background, and said simply:
"Come tomorrow."
Like that, Tan became the first-ever Chinese member of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra. The newspaper *Shen Bao* (申報) featured the ground-breaking news, attract-

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ing more Chinese to the concerts. Tan recalled, "Nobody had ever seen a Chinese in the orchestra, so many people came to see me."

3.2 Pedagogical Career

During the 1920s, China did not yet have a system of formal music education—all instrument learning, Chinese and Western ones, was largely done in a master-disciple style. Attributing the loss of old music to the lack of standard notation and education system, the German-educated musician XiaoYouMei (萧友梅) thus determined to establish one. Initially deeming Shanghai as a commercial southern city with foreign-dominated concessions, Xiao finally decided to establish the National Institute of Music in Shanghai(上海国立音乐院 , which is the former Shanghai Conservatory of Music)—it was the only place in China with a musical environment, and Shanghai's many foreign musicians could be hired for much less than professors hired from abroad.

Once the plan was approved by Cai YuanPei (蔡元培), the minister of higher education for the Nationalist government in Nanjing, Xiao started to recruit staff from the city's best musicians, thus contacted Tan, hoping that he would help to gain entree to the city's musical circles. Tan suggested contacting Maestro Paci, who would know all the versatile musicians in Shanghai. The faculties comprised both Chinese and foreign professors, including virtuosic Russian pianists, violinists, and European Jewish refugees.

Shanghai

3.3 War Against Japan

Tan had lived outside Shanghai for much of the decade since he first joined the SMO—He went to Tokyo in search of a virtuosic violin teacher. He opened the Metropolitan Music House on Nanjing Road upon his return to Shanghai in 1929, which nevertheless turned bankrupt soon enough. Tan then returned to his parent's home in Qingdao, studied violin making with a British and an American amateur violin maker, and married the woman who became his wife for 71 years.

Tan had been living away from Shanghai for much of the decade since he first performed with SMO: he was led to Japan in search for a good teacher and studied after White Russian Josef Koenig from St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Orchestra. As he returned to Shanghai in 1929, he opened the Metropolitan Music House, which was soon closed down due to bankruptcy. Then, he went back to his hometown, Qingdao, and learned violin making with two violin making amateurs.

Many professional musicians in Shanghai who regarded music as more essential than their lives chose not to put down their instruments and batons among the Japanese gunfire. With the outbreak of the war in 1937, Tan rushed back to Shanghai to reunite with his wife and baby with little more than some clothes. After finally getting a new suit the following year, he contacted his old friend Foa, and was told that the orchestra was short on four players. Tan borrowed a violin and returned to his position in the SMO–this time, a paid one. As Paci convinced the Italian government to fund and pay the salaries The 1938 season marked the "official integration of Chinese players into the ranks of the orchestra".

Tan encountered an ethical dilemma when the SMO agreed to perform a concert for a Japanese general in 1940. Tan's patriotism made him write a letter to Paci that said, "I resign from my job today," putting him in an even harder time to make a living.

3.4 Post-War of Japan

Tan famously said "I cannot live without music for any moment. Life without music loses its motivation and joy. Just like air and water, I cannot imagine how life could continue without music."

After the war and many hardships, Tan Shuzhen continued to teach in the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and was later appointed as vice president. Tan was involved in multiple cultural conventions with the United States from 1979 forward. In 1982, he received his honorary doctoral degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in Shanghai.

Tan's early exposure to western music undoubtedly left him a lifelong impact. He marked the first Chinese player in the all-foreign Shanghai Municipal Band, and was one of the first faculty members in the world class Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Tan's story is tremendously inspiring, and serves as an epitome of how the earliest Chinese western musicians pioneered through the domain and paved the way for future generations.

4.Conclusion and Discussion

Western classical music's introduction to China could be traced back to as early as 1805, with the protestant missionaries' arrival and their aim to evangelize the Chinese population. Along with defeat in the Opium Wars, missionaries formally and massively introduced China to Western integration. However, the Western music communities and activities were strictly limited to foreigners in the concessions, excluding Chinese. Chinese music pedagogy also lacked formal systems. Growing up in such a historical context, Tan Shuzhen was the epitome of a second-generation missionary school student. He started to learn to play the violin under his father's influence.

His dedication had fruitful results—Tan became the first Chinese member of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra in 1927, marking the first Chinese involvement in music performance of the all-foreign orchestra, two years after Chinese's allowance to attend the all-foreign concerts in 1925. He also played a crucial role in the establishment of formal music education in China when he became one of the first music professors of a systemic conservatory in China, as Xiao Youmei founded the National Institute of Music—which was renamed the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1949—in 1929. It would be fair to say that Tan established Western music's pedagogical system in China, which has had a lasting impact until today. Tan well represented the first Western music pioneers in China, alongside other pioneers such as Li Delun, who worked diligently to promote inter-cultural exchange and integration between music of the West and the East.

Further research can focus on Tan's students and their subsequent careers, which could serve as good examples of the lasting influence and continuation of Tan's teaching and vision, as well as offering insights into the evolution of Western music in China. Tan's story is inspiring and testimonial to the power of music and music education; through his legacies, we see not only the growth of Western music in an Eastern land but also the enduring significance of intercultural exchange in shaping the future of music on a global scale.

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