



NTU International Scholars Monthly

*News and Features for NTU
foreign faculty and researchers*

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Cover Scholar - *Professor Shih-Hui Chen*

Q: *Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? What brings you to Taiwan?*

I teach at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in Houston, Texas. I arrived in Taiwan in July 2010 as a Fulbright Scholar. I am here to study Taiwanese Aboriginal and Nanguan music (南管/traditional Taiwanese music) at National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica. Partially as a result of my studies, I have completed a new work, *Our Names* (請恢復我們的姓名), which was premiered and performed three times in February by Network for New Music in Philadelphia, United States. This work features a poem written by a blind aboriginal poet, Na-Neng Mo (莫那能) from the Paiwan tribe (排灣族) in Taiwan. The poem grapples with issues of social injustice and inequality.

Currently I am working with Tai-Li Hu (胡台麗), the award winning anthropologist and filmmaker from Academia Sinica, on a film project titled *Bring the Souls Back Home* (讓靈魂回家). This film documents customs of the Aboriginal Amis tribe (阿美族) and their recovery of a lost tribal icon. I am also adapting these film soundtrack materials to write a solo violin piece to be premiered by Cho-Liang Lin (林昭亮) in the fall. I would not have been able to use these subjects and materials for these works before my visit in Taiwan this year.



(See Full Interview on Page 3)

Useful Information

Foreign Spouse Eligible for Pension Funds

Retirement pension funds are expected to open for foreign and mainland Chinese spouses of Taiwanese nationals starting from January 1st, 2012 as soon as the amendment to the Labor Pension Act is implemented. Employers should arrange six percent of their employees' salaries for

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Q: *What made you decide to come back to Taiwan to do this research?*



Although I was born in Taiwan, my training was completely from a Western perspective. Having lived in the US for more than 28 years, I felt disconnected with my heritage and ultimately with myself. This has been especially disconcerting in recent years, because I have devoted most of my creative energy towards integrating Western compositional techniques with ideas from my Asian heritage. This led to feeling a deep need to return to Taiwan to reconnect. I came to NTU primarily because of my association with Professor Ying-fen Wang (王櫻芬), whom I met 20 years ago. This year, Professor Wang helped me find the resources I needed, including Nanguan teachers Baolin Liao (廖寶林) at 中華絃管研究團 and Mingyi Wen (溫明儀) at Gang- a-tsui Theater (江之翠).

Q: *How has this experience changed your thinking about music and your teaching?*

After devoting much time and energy studying traditional music through learning the instruments, its theory, and history, I have found that my understanding of music making has already changed. Nanguan has a completely different notational form, harmonic and rhythmic sense, and aesthetic concept. It is passed through generations of oral tradition based on memorization and repetition. Nanguan music is almost an opposite of Western music. All of the books that I've read cannot compare to the actual experience of learning this music from a master teacher through oral communication.

Although it is my profession to teach creative thinking, in the past I haven't usually stressed the importance of finding a personal voice. Instead, I emphasized the technical aspects of musical composition. My year in Taiwan has changed my view on this subject. I now feel it is necessary in my teaching to address the aspect of personal voice at least as much as the aspect of technical craft. After all, composing is a form of communication. The 'voice' a composer intends to communicate is as important as the technical means used to communicate with. The only way one can become comfortable and fluent in a personal language is to develop it over a long period of time. It would be better to aim at the idea first and, over time, refine one's approach rather than avoid this issue of voice altogether.

Q: *How did you find the students at NTU?*

My connection with NTU students was mostly in the Graduate Institute of Musicology. I found them very bright and hard working. In one of the courses I audited, an undergraduate student took a graduate seminar with many readings and homework assignments but this didn't faze her. I was also impressed with their power point presentations, something I myself am not good at.

This generation also seems more sensitive to the gender issue. One female student often showed her disapproval of inappropriate comments and concepts she found in the reading materials. I would like to see students to be even more open and willing to share their views (especially with their professors), even if it leads to disagreements and arguments in class! I also met several NTU students by serving as a reviewer and interviewer for the Taiwan Fulbright Office. During this process, I met students who were pursuing Fulbright grants in the United States. Unlike my own generation, the best students in Taiwan today are not only strong academics, but also have broader interests and passions that they pursue outside of school very successfully.



Q: What are some of your memorable moments from this past year? What would you tell other international scholars coming here?

Most people overseas already know about the incredible food in Taiwan, this is not to be casually dismissed. However, Taiwan, especially Taipei, also has an incredible number of culture events to offer: traditional and new; Eastern and Western; local and international. If one glances through the website at the National Chiang Kai-Shek Culture Center, one will see an amazing listing of concerts, theater, and dance events. (link: <http://www.artsticket.com.tw/CKSCC2005/EHome/EHome00/index.aspx>)

Taiwan is also full of many interesting people. For example, last week I had a wonderful meeting with Chong-Pin Lin 林中斌 (Former Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Defense of Taiwan, ROC), and he introduced me to the Yeh Tang tea space 冶堂 and its owner, Chien Ho 何健. It is located near the busy circle of Yongkang Park 永康公園 where many incredible restaurants are located. This delightful oasis had a traditional Taiwanese décor with many interesting artifacts documenting the history of tea making. As we sat, we were served lightly flavored green tea (served free to anyone who enters). A guqin (古琴/Chinese zither) maker displayed his beautiful instruments on the walls and performed for us. The piece was so quiet that you had to sit close to the performer in order to hear the sounds coming from silk strings and see his soundless hand gestures. It was one of my most precious memories from my year in Taiwan.

If you would like to learn more about Shih-Hui Chen, please visit her website at:
www.shihhuichen.com