



## AN ANALYSIS OF BUDDHIST ELEMENTS IN THE MUSIC OF PRINCESS WEN CHENG BY IMEE OOI

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines musical aspects of Princess Wen Cheng, a musical composed by Imee Ooi, a Malaysian composer. A majority of the past and present literature in Buddhist chant and music focus on chanting, devotional song and some on commercial popular music. This research looks into this piece of musical theatre that is based on the historical story of Wen Cheng Kongjo and analyses its musical content in relating to Buddhism. Selected analysis of the composition and its relations to Buddhism is highlighted, and the way in which elements from Buddhism, chanting and instrumentation are employed by Ooi in her music and the aspects of performance practice are discussed. This includes stylistic feature, melodic contour, harmonic progression and imitation of timbre in relation to Buddhist chanting and the instruments used in Buddhist ritual. Research methods include ethnography, interview, and analysis, revealing how this musical forms a new genre of Buddhist music to stand alongside others such as chant, devotional song and commercial popular music.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'music' is often questioned when referring to the organized sound heard during a Buddhist ritual. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist chant should not be labeled as 'music' according to the Buddhist devotees (Miller and Shahriari, 2009). Although Buddhist chanting, like music, is an organized sound with pitch and rhythm, Gao (1998) states that music was prohibited in the old times of Buddhism due to the strict implementation of asceticism. Wei (1992) commented that musical 'entertainment' should be rejected in Buddhism because it is not in line with Buddhist teaching, and could distract people from reaching enlightenment. However, Chen (2005) states that the term 'music' is accepted by some Buddhist communities. In addition, the pioneer composer

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named Hongyi (1880-1942) began to develop what is called *fo qu* (devotional song), which Chen categorizes alongside Buddhist chant and commercial popular music.

In Buddhist music literature, writings such as those of Wei (1992), Fowler (1994), Tian and Tan (1994), Yeap and Trembath (2000), Shelemay (2001), Green (2004), Chen (2005), Loo *et al.* (2011), Loo *et al.* (2012), Loo and Loo (2012), Loo (2013) and Loo *et al.* (2014) were reviewed for this article. Fowler (1994) describes the characteristic and style of music in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism while Tian and Tan (1994) draws the outlines of the three stages of the major trends in Buddhist music research in China over the last seventy years. Green (2004) explains that there are different musical cultures and their association with religion in different areas in Asia. Reviewing various studies on Buddhist music, Green provides useful baseline information on how Buddhism can be learned by the local people through music. Chen (2004) looks into the conceptual transformations in contemporary Chinese Buddhist chant and its reception within the changing of society. Loo *et al.* (2011) examine Buddhist song competition, while Loo and Loo (2012) and Loo (2013) looks into theatricalized and popularized Buddhist musical in the *Magic Mirror* production by Yayasan Guanyin in Malaysia. A study by Loo *et al.* (2012) review listeners perception towards the Malaysian composer Ooi's arrangement of Buddhist *mantra* and its calming effect; and in a research study, Loo *et al.* (2014) looks into the dissemination of Buddhist teaching via a musical theatre production.

From this, it can be seen that there is a general lack of research analysing the musical stylistic features in a Buddhist musical and its relation to Buddhism. In this article, *Princess Wen Cheng*, a musical theatre produced by Ho Lin Huay and Imee Ooi, has been selected for analysis. Ho directs the musical while Ooi is the composer. Both are founders of Musical on Stage Production (MOSP) (Loo and Loo, 2012). The musical is based on the story *Princess Wen Cheng* or *Wen Cheng Kongjo* (Warner, 2011). This article analyses selected songs from the musical to reveal musical stylistic features related to Buddhism. Data from fieldwork carried out during the production rehearsals from February to October 2012 and performances on 13 and 14 October 2012 at Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur are discussed, along with analysis in terms of performance practice. Selected musical elements such as stylistic features, melodic contour, harmonic progression and instrumentation are discussed.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The music employed in the musical *Princess Wen Cheng* relates closely to the mantra in Buddhism. The musical opens with *Om Mani Padme Hum* as the first song. According to Ooi (2012) *Om Mani Padme Hum* is one of the most important and well-known mantras in Tibet. The scene opens with Potala Palace, the palace built for Princess Wen Cheng, and these two elements represent Tibet, its religious belief and faith. There are different explanations by many scholars about the meaning of *Om Mani Padme Hum* (Loo and Loo, 2012) that relates to Buddha as the jewel (*mani*) sitting on the lotus (*padme*).

Another example is *Mahakaruna Dharani* (*Da Bei Zou* in Chinese or *The Great Compassionate Mantra*). This *mantra* is used as the eighth song titled as *The Thousand Arms*, in *Princess Wen Cheng*. *The Thousand Arms* indicates that *Avalokitesvara* uses her innumerable hands to help to liberate countless sentient beings from *dukkha* so they may gain happiness. During

this scene, Princess Wen Cheng kneels before the *Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva* (*Guanyin Bodhisattva*) after hearing her arranged marriage and expresses her reluctance and sadness about marrying King Songtsän Gampo. Later, the selfless action of Princess Wen Cheng reflects almost like a *Bodhisattva*. According to legend, Princess Wen Cheng was said to be the incarnation of Green Tara. *Green Tara* is the fourteenth song used in the musical.

Comparing *The Great Compassionate Mantra* in Ooi's arrangement (see Fig. 1a and 1b) and its form in chanting, such as a version I compared as chanted by a version taken from a recording of the seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa (see Fig. 2a and 2b), Ooi added harmony to the melodic figure and the phrasing and melodic contour of the music are very similar, without wide interval leaps.

**Figure-1.** *The Great Compassionate Mantra* in *Princess Wen Cheng* the musical by Imee Ooi (Score in cipher notation courtesy of MOSP, transcribed by Tee Xiao Hao).

(a)

(b)

**Figure-2.** *The Great Compassionate Mantra* bars 1-4 sung by the seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa (Transcribed by Tee Xiao Hao).

(a)

(b)



The melodic range of *The Great Compassionate Mantra* is restricted, not wide (see Figure 3). The tempo and rhythm of the music are similar but there is a small difference at the end of music (see Figure 1b arranged by Ooi bars 25-27 and Figure 2b chanted by the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa bars 25-26). In Figure 1b, Ooi lengthens the melodic-rhythm of “Ya” and “Ha” syllable in bar 26-27. The lengthened “Ya” and “Ha” syllables makes it easier for the dancers to finish their movements more calmly and stably. They are able to dance with slow movement to the slow tempo. Choreographers Yong Soo Fon and Chan Soo Leng recall the teaching of Chan Buddhism and remind the dancers to achieve a calmer movement (Chan, 2012).

**Figure-3.** Melodic Contour of *The Great Compassionate Mantra* bars 1-4.



Ooi uses the singing style of microtonal melismatic singing in *The Great Compassionate Mantra*, *Om Mani Padme Hum* and *Green Tara*. ‘Melismatic’ means having two or more pitches per syllable. It is common to hear Buddhist *sangha* chant in microtonal melismatic style, moving around the primary pitch in microtone and returning to the primary pitch. Microtones in *Princess Wen Cheng* such as *The Great Compassionate Mantra* are applied to exactly the same syllables as in the chant by the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa.

In terms of instrumentation, Ooi uses a female vocalist and an organ pedal imitating the weaving sound of a Tibetan singing bowl (see Figure 4). Percussion instruments that imitate the Tibetan singing bowl, inverted bell and wooden fish are used in the background at certain intervals. The triangle and drum are used to imitate the sound of inverted bell and wooden fish. In relating to this music, choreographer Chan (2012) explained that no matter how disturbed the dancers are back stage, when they perform as the “Avalokitesvara”, they must be tranquil in “heart” and have smoothness in body movements. Chan (*ibid.*) added that she has collaborated with Ooi for many years in musicals such as *Perfect Circle*, *Kita*, *Hua La La*, and *Prince Siddhartha* and to her Ooi’s music has a narrative story in within that helps them in body movements and dance routines for the musical.

Figure-4. *The Great Compassionate Mantra* bars 33-36 arranged by Imee Ooi (Transcribed by Tee Xiao Hao)

6

33  $A\flat/C$   $D\flat$   $A\flat$

YA NA MA AR YA JNA NA SA GA RA VAI RO CA NA VYU NA RA JA YA

DRUM

TRIANGLE

TUBULAR BELLS  
(IMITATING THE BELL SOUND OF TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS)

VOICE  
AR  
(IMITATING THE WEAVING SOUND OF TIBETAN SINGING BOWL)

PEDAL (ORGAN)  
(IMITATING THE WEAVING SOUND OF TIBETAN SINGING BOWLS)

Another feature of Ooi's music in *Princess Wen Cheng* is that the composer prefers consonance and she chooses to avoid augmented and diminished chords, never including them. To her, the latter caused tensed feelings in the listeners. Also, a common feature in Ooi's music is that the singer sustains a long note at the end of a phrase, for example in songs such as: a) *Jewel of Tibet* bars 69-72, b) *A Thousand Mile Odyssey* bars 49-52, and c) *The Gallant Eagle-Requiem* bars 25-28 (see Fig. 5).

Figure-5. Long note at the end of a phrase

(a)

69  $E\flat$

字

21

(b)

Ab

保 佑  
Bao You

(c)

9 Gm/Bb

土 地  
Tu Di

Additionally, frequent repetition of a melodic idea in *Om Mani Padme Hum*, *Green Tara* and *The Great Compassionate Mantra* is another feature of Ooi's music (see Fig. 6). Figure 6 shows the repetition of the pitch "E" in *Chang An*, "C" in *Why Me* and the repetition of "G" in *I Am King Songsten Gampo*. This reflects the monotonous character of Buddhist chant.

Figure-6. Repetition of a single pitch.

(a)

17

盛 世  
Sheng Shi

最 昌 盛 的 国 度  
Zui Chang Sheng De Guo Du

(b)

25

福  
Fu

就 一 因 为 生 在 皇 室  
Jiu Yin Wei Sheng Zai Huang Shi

吗  
Ma

(c)

28

任 — 摆 脱 旧 贵 族 势 力 — 的  
Ren — Bai Tuo Jiu Gui Zu Shi Li — De

### 3. CONCLUSION

This study contributes analysis and discussion to reveal how Ooi has incorporated Buddhist elements in a Western musical theatre genre. According to Ho (2012) the director of *Princess Wen Cheng*, she aims to portray Buddhism in musicals as a way to convey positive messages to the audience. In this musical, all participants, including the production team members, performers, and audience are immersed in a theatricalized musical with chant-like songs, music and movement. Buddhist teaching is revealed in the concert hall via Ooi's ingenious composition that synthesizes the chant-like melodic figures, instrumentation and careful selection of harmonic progression that accompanies the lyrics. Thus, the musical disseminates the teaching of Buddhism, forming a new genre of Buddhist music.

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