

Dandakaranya in Shanghai: A Transcultural Discussion of City-Zen

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Abstract

The Shanghai Conservatory of Music owns a large collection of 'Oriental Musical Instruments' that are exhibited and stored in its museum. Every week, a gamelan class is held in order to promote the collection of instruments. Recently, scenes from the Dandaka forest of the Ramayana were put in a dance performance accompanied by students playing the large Javanese gamelan of the museum. The paper shows how the discussion of global human values as well as the necessity of practicing ensemble playing in a highly competitive cultural environment makes the gamelan class becoming a time space for mental recreation and a playground for social engagement. This paper attempts to discuss the many layers of this specific cultural environment in one of the biggest cities of the world. Special emphasis is given to the creative processes in changing perspectives on dealing with transcultural issues, labels, and emblematic structures in music and dance.

Keywords: *Zen, Gamelan Set, Ramayana, Urban Environment, Body Knowledge*

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Introduction

The Javanese gamelan set exhibited in the “Museum of Oriental Instruments,” which is part of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, was a gift of Zhou Wenxuan, a rich and obviously kind Chinese who settled in Suzhou and came from Hong Kong. He arranged the import of the old set manufactured by Savando, the son of a court musician to King Solo II, with the help of the Indonesian Government. The gamelan set is placed in the museum of oriental instruments since 2005. It was only occasionally used by some instructors from Indonesia traveling to China who tried to teach one piece. They used gamelan standard notation with ciphers and time-space indications. Those instructions were part of some lectures in ethnomusicology, mainly organology, that are usually offered to undergraduate and graduate students in all departments. Participating students were learning this one single piece or some parts of it and then left alone with their fragmented knowledge and skills. They possibly thought of having “studied” gamelan music. Only few of them were further interested in dealing with the gamelan set or in developing creative ideas using the unique features a gamelan set can provide. Students of the department for composition were challenged by the visiting professor, Chong Kee Yong from Singapore, to compose music for chamber orchestra instruments that integrate elements of the gamelan set which their conservatory owns. They attended gamelan classes and studied with some effort tunings and the development of rhythmic cycles. In result, a number of interesting pieces were presented in a joint concert on December 22nd in 2016 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Poster of the first cooperation with the department of composition (Photo by the author).

This performance, however, was creating another type of stress for the gamelan students as it was organized in the framework of a fixed composition and unfortunately noted down in absolute pitches that had to be translated into the specific cipher notation for gamelan keys. Nevertheless, this ‘cross-over’ performance was successfully conducted and appreciated by the audience because the students were used to this type of performance organization. Also, the invited dancer Agung Gunawan who improvised dance movements to some of the pieces added much excitement to the performed pieces though his dance was not much related to the composers’ ideas.

In the following semesters, gamelan playing among the students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music changed. Without the pressure of compulsory performances on demand, the ensemble members established some new habits and used the weekly rehearsals to create a space of relaxation and comfort. Out of this situation the students developed another project in order to give their playing a meaning in their own lives. This paper is to describe this development and to discuss some underlying problems in the context of understanding actual Zen practices in the urban environment of one of the largest cities of the world.

Background

Gamelan playing outside the cultural core area Java, Bali, or parts of Malaysia, is wide spread, mainly in the United States and some European countries. Not surprisingly, Asian countries are not very much interested in gamelan playing. Possible reasons could be the following: One is the colonial connotation of appropriating Asian symbols and exhibiting attachment to culturally less valued performances compared to the highly developed skills represented in Western art music, a thought well investigated by Melvin & Cai (2004), especially in the first chapter about Shanghai in their publication. However, to local ethnomusicologists who often studied abroad, the gamelan is overly researched and westernized. There exist a post-colonial sensitivity which reflects in dealing with cultural neighbors in a different way compared to approved musical standard education introduced through Westernized ideas either during the colonial period or through scholarly education overseas. In result, gamelan playing is geographically situated rather than musically investigated. This constructed cultural ownership associated with the Indonesian-Malay archipelago makes it on the one hand attractive to basic ethnomusicologists, and on the other hand suspect. National animosities and tendencies to politically exploit cultural symbols impose problems on gamelan playing beyond the geographic area in Asia. Only very few examples exist that try to overcome these difficulties either in the ‘American way’ by trying to keep to the ‘pure tradition’ thus avoiding appropriation at any costs, or through exploiting the gamelan as a sound tool regardless of its historical background. Both ways create issues, which will be discussed here. In 1983, Becker reflected in a much cited article on the use of gamelan in the US and says that:

“There are now twenty or more Javanese (and additional Balinese) ensembles in America which regularly rehearse and perform and their number increases every year. Nearly all are supported by colleges and universities and only a handful have a

Javanese teacher. The degree to which gamelan music becomes part of our total cultural inheritance does not, I believe, depend exclusively on the number of ensembles in America or the number of Americans involved. It depends, I believe, on whether or not enough American composers take it seriously. Naturalization, some degree of adaptation and adjustment to the new context of a foreign or borrowed musical tradition, is the pattern followed world-wide. Borrowed traditions do not remain in the new context, but subtly shift, or rather, are sifted and re-arranged by musicians in the borrowing society.” (Becker, 1983:82).

This statement which was based on the acceptance of singular cultures or cultural circles seemed right in a still colonizing mind set of elevating sound or sound tools of “foreign” origin into the entity of one’s ‘own culture’ through the means of seriousness of one’s own culture, in this case through composing music. America, as it seems, is the borrowing society and the gamelan is the carrier of the foreign musical tradition. She, as well as nobody before her, ever questioned the state of tradition ownership and cultural geography constructed through imagined cultural circles. This early ethnomusicological approach has to be challenged in the context of the 21st century (Giannastasio, 2017; Welsch, 2017; Feld, 2017).

The fact of borrowing is not, I believe, just a cultural observation of changes. It is a change observed in the observer who claims for in- and exclusive cultural assets. If cultures are not closed systems, this shifting does not take place in the way it is projected, this borrowing also does not take place, and there is no arrangement that has to be re-arranged. The gamelan sets available all over the world are sound tools which are not different from any other functional item such as a piano, a violin, or a bell or a dance step. This cultural authenticity is constructed through isolative thinking and then academically reconstructed in early attempts to ‘preserve this constructed authenticity’ that is claimed through bizarre arguments similar to those for Egyptian belly dance as Jarrar broadly discussed in her comments “Why I can’t stand white belly dancers” (Jarrar, 2014). Knowing that a gamelan set was produced in Java or in Bali imposes another system of static knowledge boxes, from which any mind outside and inside the cultural frame cannot easily escape. However, only very few gamelan players of all these US American university campuses were able to watch gamelan performances in Java or in Bali. And if so, they may not have had the time to internalize the deeper meaning of elementary sound structures, their histories, and the changes in associated personalities who are the actual leaders of these ensembles including their often contradictory views on modernity in gamelan playing.

The claim of playing a Javanese gamelan might be, seen from this perspective, quite ridiculous. It is as if they would say that they play a Viennese recorder knowing that the city name dropped here adds to the reputation or authenticity and eventually to the marketability. The continuous misconstruction of musical cultures in the triangle of object, place, and transmitting agent leads to a large amount of bias reflected not only in the approach to gamelan playing, but also among the affected audience that feels often culturally qualified through touristic experiences or the chance of having attended a longer training in a gamelan play-

ing community. The best proof for this type of misunderstandings was a question by a forum participant at the last Urban Plaza Conference in Bangkok who listened to this presentation in its short version. He asked whether the Ramayana and the music and dance introduced to the conference audience through a short video clip were indeed conducted by a local advisor (meaning a Javanese person) or just wildly appropriated and ‘composed.’ The answers to this could only be no and no.

Some decades ago, Becker indicated (Becker, 1983:82) that only a few American gamelan sets were taught by Javanese instructors, which certainly says that the origin of the instructor is a cultural qualification. Secondly, her call for serious attention by living composers implies that only in a composing culture things can become serious. Both arguments do not fit into the context given through the case in this paper and contradict the very purpose of understanding the transient quality of all human culture. The origin, the way of upbringing, the virtuosity of applying body skills, are not sufficient elements of qualification in the matter of creating art works. In the end, the ‘being in the moment,’ following the purpose of expression with the means available is what counts. And yet, another new framing appears with the refusal of cultural ownerships as Mendonça (2010:369) explains in a case of her experience with gamelan playing among British prisoners. She claims that “...the gamelan ensemble and its tradition tap into underlying British narratives concerning personal transformation, music education, and the prison experience.” Is it possible that there is some music practice that is providing due to their primary features of sound and the way of sound production a specific purposeful application? Which means, are we getting back to musical essentialism and ‘cultural neutrality’? (Welsch, 2017) The next sections of this paper try to bring in the perspective of gamelan playing by young students in Shanghai and the transient understanding of sound as ‘organized silence’ reflected in their interpretation of scenes from the Dandaka forest.

The Understanding of Zen as a Way of Living in Chinese Urban Context

The popularity of everything that has “zen” in its name among stressed and burnt out urban population in developed regions is undeniable. So it is in Shanghai. Zen noodles, Zen hotels, Zen tea, Zen spa, Zen gardens everywhere. The simplification of Zen ideas and the appropriation of an imagined lifestyle is seemingly not a direct part of intra-Asian cultural exchange but rather a part of a fragmented and simplified Westernization of urban lifestyles. 50 years ago, Jiang Wu (1969) narrated generously about Zen ideas worth being studied in a gentrified context taking the specific Chan lineage of Zen masters in Japan and China as an example. His academic approach did not leave a trace in urban mainland China as it appeared in the dark time of the Cultural Revolution which is not yet sufficiently investigated in regard of symbolic authenticity provided through Zen ideas, as Jiang Wu could have put it. However, latest at the beginning of the 21st century, the growing metropolis Shanghai and large cities nearby such as Suzhou, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Ningbo were speeding up in creating a driving middle class population that increasingly sacrificed a great part of recreational time in order to earn enough for a progressive consumption of goods provided in urban areas. Rural life, in

result, became an idealized state of mind, which many could not afford practicing in parallel to their shifting working duties. Their connections to the countryside became a well-remembered picture which only was invigorated through traveling 'home' during New Year celebrations. These journeys still indicate attachment and longing for an individual justification of being alive and 'in the moment.' Jiang Wu (1969:40) describes Yinyuan's quest for understanding Zen texts and concluded that repeatedly reading a Zen text might be as important as meditation. In the urban context of the 21st century, the New Year journeys undertaken by millions of urban citizens back to rural areas of their relatives is, I believe, another type of mental pilgrimage that implies repetitiveness, perseverance, and also a joyful presence of mind expecting a reunion with 'a painfully lost self' (ibid). Since New Year is only celebrated once per year, the many other months in the metropolis have to be survived with simple tools of superseding recreation. It is, therefore, not surprising that the offering of Zen labeled experiences find many consumers in those large cities (Prohl & Graf, 2015), especially among the better off middle class and among temporary inhabitants such as project workers, intellectuals, artists, and students. However, the use of those appropriated Zen fragments and their integration into a modern urban life is modeled by advanced consumer technologies spread through European and American examples rather than through conscious dealing with parts of Chinese history. The de-facto Easternization of Shanghai's city life follows the ideas of alternative movements in developed urban areas of Europe, Australia, and North America distributed through social media and rarely through travel experiences.

Summarizing this aspect, Zen as a lifestyle or a philosophy cannot be fully understood through directly analyzing the behavior of some social groups in Chinese urban regions. Fact is that only very few fragments of specific Zen or Zen-Buddhist habits or habits that are labeled as such over the last decades by the growing service industry in large Chinese cities have been cultivated. The role of rituals in Zen as emphasized by Wright and Heine (2008:3-20) shifted to daily habits that are spontaneously connecting with earlier life experiences. These habits such as repetitive reading and meditation or the celebration of the liveliness of the moment experience continuous changes and adaptations throughout many temporary social classes found in cities with some regular fluctuation of its inhabitants. One of these temporary classes are university students in Shanghai, who study in a stressful and demanding way classical European music, music education associated to classical European music, or musicology and ethnomusicology which is ironically not free of colonial academic components. Out of the academic perspective, other adaptation habits are applied which are not less problematic.

In 2003 in Toronto, McGuire says about his composition used as analytical material in his Master thesis with the programmatic title *Zen a Musing: A Suite of Recombinant Digital Music*: "Samples, live playing, and synthetic sounds were combined using digital technology into a dance-informed, world-flavored, concert oriented, acousmatic music." It is this "world-flavoring" that makes it a problematic issue. World flavor implies that there is also a music unflavored by the world. In Shanghai, however, gamelan playing did not only serve as an exercise in overcoming

obstacles built up through Western art music training, it also was meaningful to a self-recreating body knowledge which was specifically important to the students as musicians.

The concept of Zen as described in numerous academic writings (Prohl & Graf, 2015; Wright & Heine, 2008), seen from this perspective, is not implemented due to a culturally ingrained tendency. It is simply fragmented and applied in a similar way as other cultural concepts economically introduced through urbanization, especially through lifestyle changes.

Searching for Adaptable Teaching Methods

The teaching material for Javanese or Balinese gamelan consists of ‘vernacular notation,’ which is often limited to an outline of the guiding melody and rhythmic patterns organized in cycles (Sumarsam, 2015). Many pieces are, therefore, practiced exactly as noted down. A number of gamelan teachers working in all parts of the world who learned in Indonesia insist on training methods in their purest shape. They teach gamelan playing in a similar way they were introduced into the world of Javanese gamelan when they started their practice in Indonesia. Unfortunately, this currently practiced training and the average playing practice in Indonesia is far different from each other. Pure melodic outlines or simply ritualizing techniques as described in the schoolbooks are rarely appreciated. However, abroad, this pure playing that keeps to the rules of stopping all bars and respecting melodic leads are considered “genuine” or “original.” This kind of basic playing does not provide much freedom and joy of playing. This might be also one of the reasons that Javanese or Balinese gamelan musicians cannot really enjoy or connect to this simplified or research based type of basic or pure playing. Visiting musicians are, as observed repeatedly,² constantly tempted to correct and to generalize gamelan issues (Tenzer, 2000).

The large gamelan set in the Museum of Oriental Musical Instruments owned by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music seems to be very challenging since the tuning of the instrument which is not ever lasting was difficult to adjust beyond the usual tolerance between different elements and octaves in aged gamelan sets. However, the technical aspect was widely overshadowed by the observation of students who seemed to be stressed out all days, having unhealthy attitudes to their career expectations, and did not believe in life style changes as a solution to some of their problems.

Gamelan playing was like a bitter medicine they were not willing to swallow on first sight. Compromises in teaching methods were needed. Not only with regard to the students who felt overwhelmed by yet another duty, also the tuning and notation system had to be modified in order to enable the students learning independently and based on a music imagination which was more familiar to them. One important compromise was the re-definition of slendro into a scale type 6-5-1-2-3-5-6 for the sarong instruments. Though the intervals measured do not include any minor thirds or major seconds, the students could quickly adapt to a pentatonic construction through pitch re-interpretation. The difference between slendro and pelog became virtually more prominent since the pelog scale for the

sarong sustained as just 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 without a match of any slendro key after adapting to the re-interpreted pitch-set. This is unusual to the traditionally instructed players of a Javanese gamelan such those being trained at Wesleyan University in the USA, but it helped in comforting the students and providing creative freedom, which is one goal in teaching gamelan.

Functionality versus Cultural Assumptions

The notation system of common Chinese cipher notation written with space congruency (one point is equivalent to one of the smallest time unit, figure 2) helped in another way to let the students focus on creativity within larger time units and cycles. Most students took this course for only one semester. A few students continued beyond the promise of getting marks. These students were later on the driving force in suggesting semester goals and performance plans. This group of students is focused on in this paper.

The first two semesters were spent on studying simple and less complicated pieces with regular cycles and some extra, with composite meter such as 7/8 or 5/4. Those composite meters were already quite demanding to most of them since the students rarely apply such meters in practice though they learned about them in theory.

Then, the entire gamelan experience had to come into view. Singing along seemed to be difficult as this will not be understood. Singing style and language were completely alien to the students and there was no way to teach both in the short time given. Especially singing needs a long term cultural involvement unless globalized singing patterns are applied such as imitating east Asian belcanto or amplified pop art singing (R&B, house, rap; Jähnichen 2011, 2012). Another problem is that the assumption of 'Javanese' as the language of transmission or singing style and meaning is questionable. Even in the past when on Java, Chinese residents owned large gamelan sets and arranged performances with singers. Actually, there is no need to Javaneize melodic ideas or to transform Chinese musical meanings. Gamelan sets are in their functionality regionally unlimited and not principally "owned" by any people as a cultural property similarly to a modern piano or any synthetic sound. The romanticizing view on gamelan playing as something "Southeast Asian" has to be challenged. The gamelan set in Shanghai could surely be seen as a Shanghainese gamelan that evolves from the high possibility of exchanging musical instruments and the ability of using them in a much larger cultural region.

However, the functionality of the set includes some patterns of ensemble playing that can be found throughout many cultures opposing Western art music ideals (Jähnichen, 2009). There is a demand for collectivity and musical thinking in a wider context that goes beyond a comparison with a Symphony orchestra. Musicians in a gamelan set have to listen to each other and the entire sound from physically different positions and mostly play different melodic or rhythmic parts within this holistic experience. Mechanical movements and audible experience seem often divided. The other musicians control you and you control them. The

worst scenario is a group of soloists who want to beat each other in loudness, clarity, and – beware – speed. This experience is so different from what students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music are used to that they feel in the first few hours vulnerable, personally attacked, and without orientation. Only through forming a joint sound body within a piece of music, they could gain back some confidence and relax. This point is often reached after playing a long repetitive piece of music when the mechanical movements loosen up the tension of coordination while enjoying the overall sound structure (figure 2). Without labeling it as a Zen fragment, reporting about this observation is again reminding to the feature of repetitiveness and meditation mentioned by Jiang Wu (1969).

RAMAYANA BRIDGE (TRANSITION MUSIC TO BE REPEATED UNTIL NEXT ACTION STARTS)

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565.6.5.6.5.6.5. | 656.5.6.5.6.5.6. | 565.6.5.6.5.6.5. | 656.5.6.5.6.5.6. |
565.656.----- | 656.565.----- | 565.656.----- | 656.565.----- |
-----6...6... | -----5...5... | -----6...6... | -----5...5... |
--5...5...5...5. | ..6.5...----- | --5...5...5...5. | ..6.5...----- |
6..... | 6..... | 6..... | ..... |
oxo.x.o.x.o.x.o. | xox.o.x.o.x.o.x. | oxo.x.o.x.o.x.o. | xox.o.x.o.x.o.x. |

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Figure 2. Excerpt from the music notation for Dandakaranya (Scheme by the author).

The modified gamelan notation includes time congruency, meaning, each print element (cipher, dot, slash) takes the duration of the smallest time unit. The drum uses x and o to mark open and closed beats (or to differentiate left and right hand of which one is playing open and the other closed beats). The bar lines appear before the main beat as in modern Chinese cipher notation. This short line from the Dandakaranya-arrangement is the gamelan music section played during transitions (bridge). The melodic movement of the first line (played by the high pitched sarongs) was also applied on dance steps with alternating directions for those who were operating as flowers and trees. The 5 marks the left foot, and the 6 the right foot.

New Ideas About an Old Story: The Ramayana and the Scenes in the Dandaka Forest

In the third semester, the students enjoyed their newly learned body knowledge. Yet they were curious about new possibilities. However, singing was not practicable since most of the songs associated with Javanese gamelan playing are in a language nobody of them understands or is able to sufficiently internalize. This also means that language as a cultural identification marker is much stronger, though it may provide transient elements, especially through singing texts. This problem might be investigated in another study. In result, it was thought of introducing dance, which seems to be easier to follow and to modify. The most used dance scenes accompanied with a gamelan set (Jähnichen, 2010) are taken from the Valmiki-Ramayana. The students liked to choose the 'Appearance of the Golden Deer' and the 'Abduction of Sita by Ravana.' Both stories are related to each other. Analyzing the storyline and observing the feedback of the students, we agreed on a contemporary interpretation of these scenes and a re-telling of characters in the light of the current Shanghai city life.

While in the Valmiki-Ramayana, the Dandaka forest is the strange and unknown wilderness Rama, Sita, and Lakshman have to adapt to, in the current life of the students it is the large metropolis of Shanghai that appears as the ‘uncivilized wilderness.’ While in the Valmiki story line, Ravana is representing the bad spirit who is challenging the pureness of love and loyalty, in the modernized story of these students, Ravana is the only wise and foresighted person. Ravana knows from the beginning how to reach his goals. He knows the vulnerable characters of the traditionally well-educated royals and acts without fear. For example, he knows that Sita as a rich girl in a state of appreciating consumerism wants to have that golden deer. He also knows that she will not hunt the creature herself, but she sends Rama to do his duty. Once the rich but inexperienced dandy Rama, who first tries to bribe the deer with cash, get lost in the city jungle, Sita will send out Rama’s best friend to find him. His best friend, Lakshman, the former poor class mate of Rama, is grounded enough to smell the danger. He also knows Sita’s weaknesses. So, he let her promise to not leave the hut he encircles with a magic dance before he is going to rescue his rich friend. However, Ravana also knows that Sita is not very bright. She is superstitious and superficially religious. He sends an eremite asking for offerings to lure her out of her house. So, she gets out of the magic hut and is finally kidnapped by Ravana. When Rama returns with Lakshman, Ravana refuses to fight after briefly testing the weak couple of fighters. He already reached his goal and is the winner in the story. This modification is also expressed in the layout of the dances and the outfit of dancers. Only Ravana, the golden deer and the eremite wear traditional clothes. Rama, Sita, and Lakshman are dressed in exactly what they represent (figure 3).



Figure 3. Photo of the main characters and one dancer playing a flower and a tree in different scenes (Photo by the author).

The golden deer and the monk were performed by the same dancer. Left to the golden deer is Rama, in front of him is Lakshman, his old class mate from the suburbs, on his side is Sita, the fashion girl; behind Sita is one flower dancer at the side of Ravana. The masks were produced by a Lao mask maker in Vientiane in October 2017.

The outline for the principal drummer who guides the entire ensemble shows the formal structure of the performance:

1.	Javanese dance intro <i>slendro</i>	Entrance of dancers one by one getting into a snail-circle and in introducing the main roles, then lining up and dancing the DANDAKA letters: Sita, Rama & Lakshman, Ravana in the background, all dancing individually as if being presented in public for an audience (hands and hips!)	drum starts with 2 bars; 4/4 moderate tempo → bell marks switch to drum with 2 bars ahead	Short solo on slenthem + one agung beat, then drum starts. Pattern: ○.x.x.x.○.x.○.x.
2.	Ramayana bridge <i>slendro</i>	The deer appears, Sita is requesting to get the deer, the others are the forest (dancing along the line behind the scene with rhythmic footsteps and hand movements) Ravana in the background watching and looking through the forest	slower → gong marks switch to (drum starts with 2 bars)	Pattern (switched emphasis): ○x○.x.○.x.○.x.○. x○x.○.x.○.x.○.x.
3.	Rama is hunting the golden deer <i>pelog</i>	Rama is hunting and getting lost – slow speeding up – slowing down again, the others appear as <u>disturbing trees</u> (hands up, long steps and turns)	Serious, faster → ching marks switch to	Pattern (2+2+0½+1): 3x: ○...○.....x. 1x: ○...○.....x.x.x.
4.	Ramayana bridge <i>slendro</i>	Sita requests Lakshman searching Rama, the others are the forest (hands, sitting & standing) Ravana in the background	slower → gong marks switch to	Pattern (switched emphasis): ○x○.x.○.x.○.x.○. x○x.○.x.○.x.○.x.
5.	Lakshman's instruction (with text) <i>pelog</i>	The monk tells the story, reciting the Javanese text. Lakshman asks Sita to stay at home, circles around her. The forest helps protecting Sita, but Ravana is bothering the trees who dance diverse trees (everybody different, walking in small steps and circles)	lyrical start with recitation and only drums + gongs → bell marks switch to drum with 2 bars ahead	Original pattern: -----○...x...○. x...○...x...○... x.○...x...○...x. T.T.----- Simplified: x.○.○.x.x.○.○.x. T.T.-----
6.	Ramayana bridge <i>slendro</i>	Sita is bored at home, a monk comes along and lures her out of the house, Ravana appears and abducts Sita (forest dancing along the line behind the scene with rhythmic footsteps and hand movements)	Slower → ching marks switch to drum+ gong+ kenong 4 bars alone	Pattern (switched emphasis): ○x○.x.○.x.○.x.○. x○x.○.x.○.x.○.x.

Figure 4. Musical narrative of DANDAKARANYA as a chart for the principal drummer of the gamlean Shanghai.

7.	Rama's return <i>pelog</i>	Lakshman finds Rama, they fight with Ravana but cannot win. Finally, Ravana denies fighting as he feels that Rama learned his lesson. Both Rama and Lakshman are sad to miss Sita and ask each tree for help. (Trees dance in line the letters of DANDAKA), One after another disappears. Rama stays alone, consoled by Lakshman.	Fast, 5/4 Fading out one by one	Pattern (3+3+2+2) o x o . . . x . o . 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2
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Figure 4 cont.. Musical narrative of DANDAKARANYA as a chart for the principal drummer of the gamelan Shanghai.

This chart helped to control the performance through the main drummer who worked also on the dynamics of the entire gamelan ensemble during the performance.

Dandakaranya scenes as written in the Valmiki-Ramayana with Hindi outlines served finally as a step guide for the eight dancers embodying flowers and trees. These flowers and trees moved along an imaginary line between gamelan and dance areal in this way:

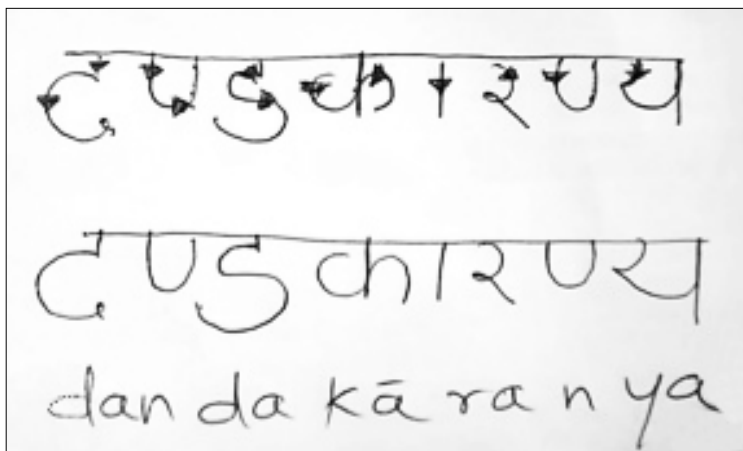


Figure 5. Drawing of letters in support of dance movements (writing courtesy of C. P. Meddegoda).

The dance experience of the instructor derived particularly from Thai and Lao style Ramakien or Phalak-Phalam performances respectively. All these known performances are valid in their geographical and cultural sense of understanding dance traditions.³ However, most of the students could not accomplish complicated hand and foot movements that would have been necessary in order to let the dancers appear in a unique local style. Body movements, steps, gestures, and facial expressions were reduced and accommodating specific habits of the students such as being reluctant of showing controlled shoulder or arm movements and the tendency to soften their presence. Only Ravana, Rama, and Lakshman were trained in dance fighting styles and representing static figures according to the best knowledge of the instructor.

Conclusion

The “Scenes from the Dandaka Forest” [Dandakaranya] were programmatic in two ways: firstly through naming the source of pressure such as feeling forced to consume whatever is fashion, and, secondly, at the same time relaxation from this pressure by allowing a traditional spirit to comprehend the situation and act accordingly.

The Ramayana has thousands of valid interpretations which makes it one of the most effective stories in the repertoire of mankind as confirmed during the 2nd Ramlila conference held in New Delhi, 2015.⁴

The outcome was an interesting and thought provoking performance that has grown step by step from the rehearsal situation. The dancing of the letters reminded strongly to Zen meditation exercises which Thibault (2015:14) simply describes as “... this meditation style consists of observing the breath and the mind, and through interaction with a teacher.” The time spent with the gamelan ensemble became a true time out for most of the participating students who voluntarily attended without being specifically marked for their performance skills.

The conceptual work on this piece of contemporary critical art which was initially thought as being a well-limited goal for the gamelan training in which projects have to change each semester was finally a creative product of young students. The meditative experience and the felt freedom in musical and personal matters provided a nurturing atmosphere Yang Yuelin, the Ravana of the dance group, said: “I know why we play the story so well in this way - we play ourselves! Our own generation” (Yang Yuelin, 2017). This is indeed worth a thought. The students started overcoming the plain mantra playing by providing the possibility of relating to a history that reaches into the musicians’ and dancers’ own world within this big city.

Zen experiences, even though fragmented and little understood, in the city are far from the complex construction they were developed and shaped in the time, place, and with the agents of past cultures. Yet they continue to play an emblematic role in overcoming environmental destruction and a noisy social uprootedness of any type, especially of stressed students and staff at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The gamelan set in Shanghai serves as an extended tool in achieving both relaxation and recreating strength through appropriation of its musical properties regardless of its individual history. A critical view on it, however, also shows that the gamelan experience is often seen as a less demanding, less developed, and less exhausting musical practice and that cultural patterns of approaching so called world music can be simply forced upon it. In practice, this is not the case. Gamelan playing is very complex and diverse, even in repetitive and mantra-style playing techniques. It invites complex musical narrations that are reflective and discursive towards contemporary issues in a fast growing urban context, which seems to be indeed a general feature of gamelan playing: the intensity of experienced sound versus its constituent silence, fast progressing versus slowly modifying, cooperative playfulness versus individual competitiveness and

a number of further elements that have yet to be studied. The cultural respect towards the gamelan starts where the musicians recognize this potential and do abstain from imitative approaches to playing gamelan from not well understood score books. The same may apply on dance and storytelling which are both affected by the spirit of gamelan playing.

Endnotes

- 1 Prof. Dr. (Ecomusicology, Performance Practices of Southeast Asia, Audiovisual Archiving) at Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Chair of the ICTM Study Group on Musical Instruments and editor of *Studia Instrumentorum Musicae Popularis*, Secretary of the IASA T&E Committee, also teaching at Guangxi University of the Arts, Vienna University, Humboldt University Berlin, and as consultant at the National Library of Laos. More at: <https://gisajahnichen.academia.edu/>.
- 2 My experiences as an emergency teacher of gamelan playing in Malaysia taught me to “think less and do more.” In the 6 years teaching the gamelan Serdang –as we called it congruent to the campus name, – I had to compose and transform 38 different pieces in order to relive the spirit of gamelan playing that is so often dearly missing in strictly “original” ex-territorial gamelan classes.
- 3 A detail report on dance training in the Phalak-Phalam performances is given in “Nattasin” (see references).
- 4 The “Second International Conference on Ramlila: A Festival Celebrating the Masterpieces of Intangible Heritage of Humanity” organized by IGNCA under Ministry of Culture was a seven day long festival being organized from November 23 – 29, 2015 at IGNCA, Janpath, New Delhi. More information here: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=131841>.

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