



Making Hong Kong's Asian Art Festival Work

by Jane Peranananda

Is there still a place in Hong Kong's sophisticated, international cultural scene for appreciation of Asian ethnic arts?

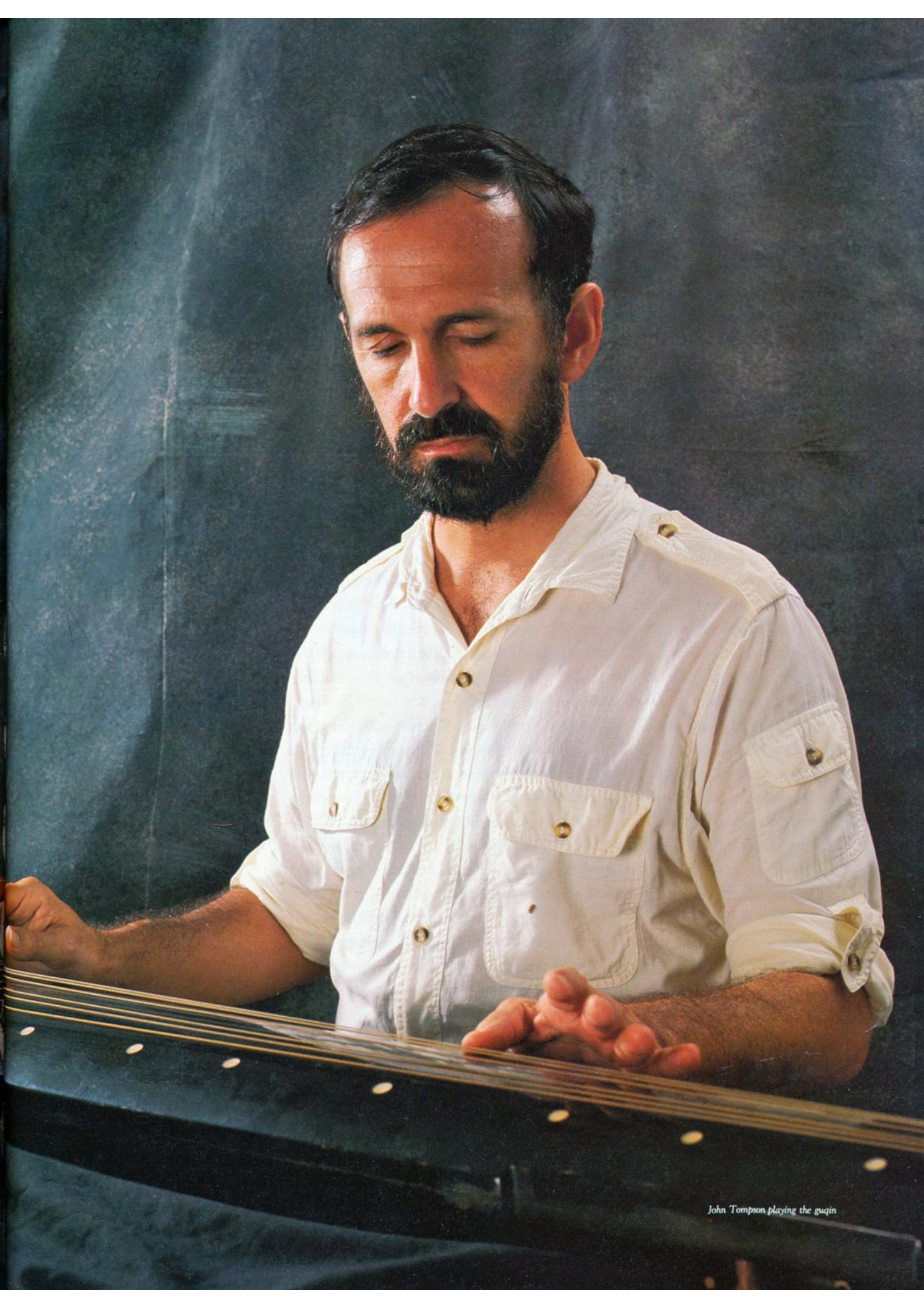
If you have never heard of *mukam* or the *biwa*, or you have to check an atlas to see where a Sulawesi dance troupe would come from, then you need to have a talk with John Thompson. A musicologist who has spent a month in Madras attending a music festival, traveled to remote Thai villages on the Laotian

border in search of instrumental groups, and visited cultural ministries from Tokyo to Turkey, he can discuss any of these topics with ease.

More importantly, Thompson is the person who next month will be responsible for making names like *mukam* or *biwa* known in Hong Kong. As Artistic Co-ordinator of the Festival of Asian Arts, he has spent the past two years working on the program which promises a veritable dim sum of Asian talent. The event, taking place from 14 October until 2 November, offers two culturally packed weeks of Asian ethnic entertainment, including performances from countries as different as Israel and Thailand.

Photo: Terry Leung





John Tompson playing the guqin

How did an American from Florida, whose accomplishments include being able to play the *guqin*, a classical Chinese stringed instrument, find himself in Hong Kong working for the Urban Council and involved with the Asian Arts Festival? It all goes back to when Thompson was drafted into the army and sent to Vietnam. "I was confronted with the fact that I thought I had a rather good education, and yet, knew nothing outside of Western civilization. I decided to go back to graduate school and, in effect, start my education over."

After doing a masters degree in Asian studies, Thompson, who had always been interested in music, decided to study ethnic musicology. Following that he joined a group of friends and moved to Taiwan to learn to play the Chinese seven-string zither, known as the *guqin*. When he had mastered all the songs his teacher knew it was time to move on.

"I wanted to play older pieces and I came to Hong Kong to study with Tong Kin Woon, who is now the head of the Chinese Music Department at the Academy of Performing Arts. At the time he was teaching at the Chinese University." When his teacher left for the US to further his own studies, Thompson began looking around for something else to do, and in 1980 found himself employed by the Asian Arts Festival.

Thompson got involved with the Festival through a meeting with a local film director who was making a movie called "House of the Lute." The director needed someone to play the *guqin* for the background music to the movie; but as the film has scenes of sex and violence in it, Chinese musicians, noted for being of the scholarly tradition, did not wish to be involved in such a work. "The *guqin* community is rather conservative, but since I was a foreigner it really didn't matter for me, so I did the music for the film," says Thompson. The director, who at the time worked for the Film Festival, put him in touch with people involved in the Festival.

The Urban Council was looking for an editor to compile a book describing the Festival's events. "I did not think that I would get the position because I really had no experience as a journalist. The job description was for an experienced editor," says Thompson. Nonetheless, he was hired for the position and put together his first catalogue by relying on contacts built up during his time at university. He found ethno-musicologists from various parts of the world to write on different topics.

Thompson's contract to compile the Festival's book lasted for only eight months of the year, which left him four months free to pursue other interests. In fact, what he decided to do was to travel around Asia. "To me there was really a basic structural problem with the Festival in that there was nobody there who really knew about the arts, and they were totally dependent on getting the consulates or the regional governments to nominate groups."

According to Thompson the difficulty in relying on governments is that they tend to select performers who represent the country as a whole. "For most countries this meant trying to do all of the arts of that country in one program and from an artistic standpoint you can't really do that. You oversimplify everything." In addition, according to him, once you've done a general program covering everything, the next year you end up having to repeat the same thing.

Although it became obvious that the Festival needed direction in the selection of programs, there was really no one around who was qualified to take on this responsibility. "I wanted to make myself qualified to do this, so during my four months I would travel

推動香港亞洲藝術節

在香港這個普魯世界文化的都市，有沒有容納亞洲底民族藝術的地方？

亞洲民族藝術對於很多人來說，都會感到陌生，何況是來自美國的湯臣經過越南戰爭之後，湯臣感到他對西方文化以外的一切都沒有認識，所以決定回校修讀亞洲研究。其後，因為參與一部香港電影的配樂，而被介紹到亞洲藝術節從事編輯工作。湯臣表示已往在安排節目及邀請表演者時，都得依賴各地的領事館及地方政府，因為在港找不到對這方面有認識的人士，所以他便自費到各地去拜訪表演者及有關的團體。回港後兼任藝術節統籌主任，主要負責挑選外地的表演者，由於統籌工作繁重，亞洲藝術節將改為每兩年舉辦一屆。

其實入場觀眾人數並非外國所傳的那麼差。據湯臣稱，近年已有增長，惟仍未達滿座。

如何挑選表演者，當然會影響到藝術節的成功及普及性。湯臣打算用不同的節目去吸引觀眾，其中包括各種舞蹈及音樂節目。

是否有許多人對亞洲民族藝術節感興趣呢？湯臣認為世界各國都非常重視保存民族藝術。以往的藝術家都曾以西方的手法作為一種現代的表達方式，現在他們卻轉向傳統的手法，他們從中了解到保存傳統藝術的重要性；而最佳的方法，是鼓勵更多表演者去參與，使此等藝術繼續發展下去。



around, see performers and meet organizers," says Thompson. For a number of years he did this at his own expense, without even being guaranteed that his contract would be renewed. In fact, one year when it was decided that Thompson's approach to compiling the Festival book was too highbrow, and a more journalistic approach was needed, another editor was hired. However, after that Thompson returned to his post and in the following year the position of Artistic Co-ordinator was added to his title.

"Now my responsibility is listed as advising on the selection of overseas groups and to a lesser extent on local groups," says Thompson. "And I started actually making official trips." While he had built up many contacts in Southeast Asia, Thompson had not hitherto been able to travel in Japan and Korea or to some other regions in Western Asia. However, in his capacity as Co-ordinator he was able to make official visits and develop contacts in those countries as well.

This brings up the question of how the Asian region is defined in terms of the Festival. Thompson says, according to the dictionary, Asia begins east of Suez and the Bosphorus, which means that countries like Turkey are included in the list. Pacific rim countries such as Australia and New Zealand are also counted. "Australia is keen to be considered as part of the Asian region, so we included it in the Festival on some occasions, although what we look for is a performance that has something to do with Asia," he notes. "We have about ten groups from overseas every year, usually no more than one from each country." Due to the complexity of finding groups and putting together a catalogue, the Urban Council decided to run the Festival bi-annually instead of annually; the 1988 Festival marks the first time the event will be run on a two-year basis.

The question of audience attendance is a touchy point with Thompson who notes that statistics are misleading. "At the time I started attendance was falling. The first few years there had always been full houses, then I believe, because they were starting to repeat themselves the attendance began to fall. Now it has gone back up again, but it is not full houses." He attributes this partly to increased ticket prices which can run to as much as HK\$80 for overseas groups, but also attendance problems are related to the wrong choice of venue. "If you put a group in the concert hall and it's not full it looks bad, even though if you had put them in the theatre, where they belonged, it would have been a full house." For the last few years there has been a more concerted attempt to place the groups in the right venue he added.

Thompson was especially irritated a few years ago when a newspaper article announced that the Festival was a flop because attendance was down 50% and people began to talk about cancelling the program altogether. According to him these figures were misleading because they were weighed down by percentages based on attendance of pop music concerts given by local groups. One year, due to a popular choice of music, attendance was excellent, while the next year's concert was less well received and attendance dropped. As these concerts catered to a large audience the drop in ticket holders threw off figures for the whole year, when, in fact, that same year attendance at overseas performances had increased over 30%. "Really the test of the Asian Arts Festival is the attendance for overseas groups," Thompson stresses.

The choice of performers for the Festival also contributes to its success and popularity, so the problem is how to choose the right mixture of artists. "My aim is to try to reach two different audiences," says Thompson. "One is the general audience which has come for a pleasant evening of entertainment." This he says usually means presenting a colorful,

regional dance company which will appeal to almost everyone. "On the other hand the aim is to try to appeal to more serious audiences, in particular to people who are involved in arts themselves."

To accomplish this the Festival has come up with some innovative ideas. For example, for general audiences a large song and dance company from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi was chosen to perform this year. As an offshoot to this large performance one singer from the group and a few of the musicians have been asked to give a separate smaller recital for those particularly interested in folk music.

In the upcoming Festival one musician chosen to appeal to more sophisticated audiences is Fumon Yoshinori who will play the *biwa*. Thompson explains, "In Japan the instrument looks more like an old Chinese *pipa*. They have kept the same form but the music they play is very different. It is a very sophisticated art form." He believes that local *pipa* players will want to hear how this Japanese version of the instrument sounds.

Another performance which should attract the attention of scholars is music played by a group of Uighurs from Xinjiang province in China. The history of this music, known as *mukam*, goes back to the Tang dynasty and is related to music known in other Islamic countries. "This group was suggested to us by the Hong Kong Institute for the Promotion of Chinese Culture," says Thompson who notes that Chinese scholars believe the music of the Uighurs predates Islamic culture and was actually responsible for influencing Middle Eastern music.

While some find discussion of the *biwa* or *mukam* fascinating, many could care less, which raises the question of whether there really is enough interest in Asian ethnic arts to keep Hong Kong's Festival running year after year. Thompson points out that recently the preservation of ethnic arts has become a popular cause for international organizations and ethnologists which in turn has begun to raise local interest in indigenous art forms.

"For a long time if artists wanted to do something modern they looked to the West," says Thompson. The problem according to him is that with a growing number of artists taking up Western art forms, it becomes harder for artists to do something unique. "Ten years ago, in order to do something new, people would have simply done something Western. Now they can't do that so easily, so they have to look to their own traditions which are in a way new, because they are disappearing." According to Thompson this change has been highly beneficial, "As artists look to their own traditions to do something new they become more aware of the need to preserve what is old."

In the upcoming Festival a Thai musical ensemble entitled the Fong Nam typifies this approach to creating something new out of more traditional forms of music. Playing Thai traditional instruments the group will perform a mixture of Thai classical music and jazz which, most unconventionally, will be blended with modern electronic sounds.

John Thompson's arguments for maintaining Hong Kong's Festival of Asian Arts are strong. After all, a painting can be placed in a museum warehouse and saved for years, whereas the music and dances of ethnic groups survive only so long as there are people to maintain the tradition. Hong Kong should be proud to encourage artists to preserve their indigenous culture by supporting their work through the Festival. As long as someone cares about playing the *biwa*, performing *mukam*, or is interested in songs and dances from Sulawesi, these unique art forms will continue to flourish.