

John Thompson - Ant Or Grasshopper?

An interview with FAA's Artistic Coordinator

Night & Day, Hong Kong, 1988



He comes from Florida but for most of the last 15 years, he's been living in Hong Kong. John Thompson, 43, is now in his third year as Artistic Coordinator of the Urban Council's Festival of Asian Arts. He spends a lot of his spare time practising the *ku qin*, delving into 13th century Chinese music notations, and studying Asian culture, but he took time out to speak with **Night & Day**.

How did his interest in Asian culture begin and how did he end up in Hong Kong? John Thompson went straight from college graduation to the Vietnam war. That was the first time he stepped on Asian soil. R & R leaves gave him the opportunity to travel. Even though he had majored in music, he had never really had a chance to hear Asian music so his first contact with it during his journeys came as a revelation.

"I had thought of myself as being quite a well educated person because I went to a good boarding school and a good college. And yet this wonderful education was purely Western. When we did world history, maybe we had one day for China. World history meant the history of the western world, I didn't know anything at all about Asia. I wanted to learn more about it."



Making a point on an invisible *ku qin*

In 1974, he came back to the Far East along with some friends and ended up studying Mandarin in Taiwan. It was during those years that he developed a deep interest in the *ku qin*. In 1976, he came to Hong Kong to study the instrument under Tong Kin Woon. After taking on the Festival of Asian Arts' job, he's been able to spend some of the time between festivals in travelling throughout Asia and listening to the local music.

The Vietnam war was an unhappy experience for many, but it brought an appreciation of Asian culture for John Thompson.

His duties lay mainly in office work, and he lived in towns rather than on a military base. Fortunately, ambushes and dead bodies were not part of his experience.

"I had a couple of chances to see dead men when I was in Vietnam. On a couple of occasions we heard that some Communists had been killed and their bodies were left in the town square for people to look at. Some of us went out to look, but I didn't.

"The first time I ever saw a dead person was from a bus in Taiwan. I saw a body had just washed ashore and there were some people standing around it."

War aside, he found Vietnam a beautiful place and it brought him a chance to travel.

"I had a leave of about six weeks for a total of about two months away from Vietnam. I had a six-week vacation in Japan and Korea, one week in Singapore, and one week in Bangkok."

During that period he also did some reading about the area and civilisation surrounding him.

"In reading, I was most interested in Chinese culture. I got some of the

famous Chinese novels that had been translated - 'Journey to the West' (Xi You Ji) and 'Water Margin' (Sui Hu Zhuan), found them interesting, and wanted to know more about China. They were interesting for what they showed about Chinese culture. I was bothered by the amount of violence in 'Water Margin', particularly towards women. I couldn't understand the morality expressed. It seemed to me that all the women in the book were either bad people or came to bad ends. If they weren't bad, they ended by getting killed.

"I remember one story where the heroes want to make a guy join their gang, so they kill his wife and children and make it look like he did it, so that he has to run away and join the gang, or something like that. And it seems from reading the book that this was considered quite normal; in fact, quite wonderful. I couldn't understand that. I couldn't really relate to the characters because of some of these attitudes.

"I liked 'Midnight Scholar' (Rou Pu Tuan). It was kind of a silly story, but it had some interesting people, particularly the woman. It seems to me that the way the author wrote about her was quite realistic, much more so than anything else I've read about women in old Chinese novels.

"I always find the aesthetics as expressed in writings by the scholars and in the paintings very beautiful. From a personal standpoint, I find it very different. I'm not really able to identify with the social side, but I find it very interesting and want to find out a little more about it."

One aspect of Chinese culture John Thompson definitely finds engrossing is the ku qin. He not only plays it, but he is also studying a 13th century score for this instrument. The 'Sun Ji Bi Pu' has three folios and about two hours of music in each folio, he explains. The folios were selected and edited Zhu Quan of the Ming dynasty.

"I've made a tape of the first folio and I would like to make six tapes of the whole thing. I'm focusing on trying to get the notes correct and after I've, so to speak, learned the pieces, I want to go back and record them again in a more artistic and technically correct way. I really would need time off to do it. That's some-



"I'm doing what I enjoy."

thing that I can see as being really quite worthwhile."

Music seems to be the most important thing in John Thompson's life. True?

"The most important thing about life is having food to eat and a place to live, and fortunately I haven't had to worry too much about that. They are the most important things in life, but they're not what I focus on because they just come naturally."

Readng, playing the ku qin, being an arts administrator - what exactly is his ultimate goal?

"Do you know the story of the ant and the grasshopper? I think it's an Aesop's fable. In the story, the grasshopper is just playing around all the time. But the ant is carefully collecting food and putting it in his anthill. And then winter comes. The ant's all ready for the winter. But the grasshopper freezes because he just played around.

"I'm doing what I enjoy."

Does he feel a need to justify his grasshopper outlook on life?

"I'm always analysing myself and when I'm doing that, I first attack myself and then defend myself.

"I'm not putting aside enough for the future. Why am I here living a relatively easy life playing around with

music and things like that when there're people dying of starvation? That kind of thing. I think about these things, but I don't know what I can do about it.

"I defend myself by thinking that there're some people who appreciate what I'm doing. If I wasn't doing it, it wouldn't be done as well. Besides, it's worth doing, both in terms of the Festival and in terms of the music."

Does he think it's strange for somebody who's not Chinese to come to Hong Kong and advise on performances to be presented to Hong Kong people?

"Well, I suppose the answer to that would be partly: Okay, is it strange that Western arts should be presented by somebody who's local? For the HK Arts Festival, it is better to have a director who's European so he knows about European arts because that festival's mostly European arts, or is it better to have a local Hong Kong person? ...You go for whoever knows the most and is the most interested in a particular field regardless of what his race or nationality is.

"On the other hand, it does seem a little strange or a bit unusual. But I think that 20 or 30 years ago in the West, it was considered a bit strange if a great violinist or a great pianist was Chinese or Japanese, just because it was not very common. But now a lot of the great performers of Western music are in fact Oriental. Does that seem strange? Not any more. But it used to. So, no, I don't think it strange.

"I would say that living here as an outsider makes me kind of special, and it's kind of nice being special. It's not a bad special; it's generally a good special. I can see the advantages of being a special person just by virtue of being a Westerner where a Westerner is part of a minority.

"On the other hand, there're things I don't like about it because I don't feel I completely belong. But then, even if I go home and even though I'm accepted, I feel a bit of an outsider because I've had all these other experience that're difficult to share.

"I worry that maybe I don't really belong here because I'm not Chinese, but I also worry that I don't belong anywhere completely."