

# Feast of Asian culture

## ON STAGE

Vernon Ram

JOHN THOMPSON, who helped put together the programme for the 13th Festival of Asian Arts starting on October 12, must have found the task almost second nature.

He has held the post of artistic co-ordinator of eight festivals in a row.

This in itself is a quiet tribute to Thompson's understanding of the indigenous musical and artistic flavours of the region.

The man, who is at home with the rhythms and harmonies of the *gamelan* players of Indonesia and *koto* artists of Japan, is himself an accomplished performer on the *qin*, a long Chinese *zither* with seven strings made of silk and no bridges.

In use for more than 2,000 years, the *qin* was the solo instrument of the ancient Chinese philosophers, a favourite instrument for accompanying singers and used in large numbers in orchestras.

Thompson has the fortunate position of being able to travel where his musical and artistic instincts lead him. And the results, for patrons of the Festival of Asian Arts, have been a many splendoured exposure to the rich and exotic cultural tapestry of the region.

The Festival of Asian Arts, in many ways, is an alternative to the accepted norm of international festivals. In its own modest way the festival has evolved from being a propaganda showcase for regional government-subsidised cultural troupes seeking artistic performances at a rural grassroots level to being a stage for them to gain a wider international audience to ensure their long term survival.

Asked if he had any

special recipe to make all this happen, the bearded American said: "My particular recipe is looking for groups that have an Asian basis.

"One rule of thumb is that the artist should be trained in an Asian tradition.

"We would look for people like the Thai musicians who are trained in the Thai tradition, but who are doing something contemporary."

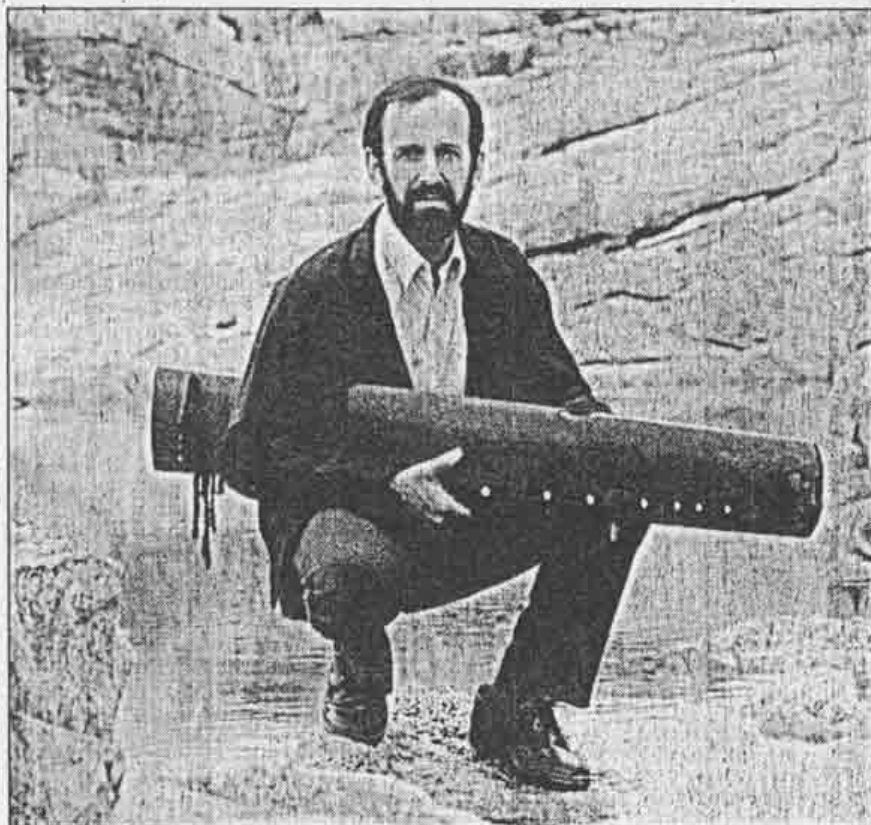
From China, said Thompson, comes the Guangxi Minorities Arts Group, an autonomous region known for its non-Han people from the region around the capital, Nanning.

Members come from Zhuang, Miao, Dong, Yao and other local ethnic groups and they put on stage music and dances usually found at local village celebrations.

Another input from China will be the Guqin Masters when eight to 10 masters of the *guqin*, a long unfretted *zither* with seven strings, will provide the delicately evocative sound favoured by China's scholarly elite.

From Taiwan will come the Hsiao Hai Yuan Glove Puppet Theatre, a troupe of three puppeteers and five musicians.

They will give four performances, two of them designed to entertain young people and focusing on the technical wizardry of the puppeteers.



■ John Thompson ... organiser of the 13th Festival of Asian Arts.

Langar and Manganiyar, two distinctive music centres in the deserts of the Indian state of Rajasthan, should have special appeal in view of their appearance.

They are reminiscent of Rajput warriors of old highlighted by their striking costumes.

The colourful timbre of the instruments they play and the mesmerising qualities of the music add to their impact.

Another Indian import will be Raghunath Manet.

He is a Bharata Natyam dancer from the former French Indian settlement of Pondicherry.

Raghunath, who trained at the Kalakshetra Academy in Madras, capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, also plays the *veena*, the south Indian equivalent of the *sitar*.

For his two dance recitals at the festival, Raghunath will be accompanied by his six-member music group from Madras.

Indonesia, always a favourite at the Festival of Asian Arts, will be represented by the East Java Music and Dance Group which will perform the music and dance of the

regions of Surabaya, close to Central Java, and Banyuwangi, which is just across the straits from Bali.

The group will also perform masked dances, court dances and modern arrangements of regional folk styles.

Also in the programme is a recital of new and traditional *gamelan* music.

From Israel comes Habrera Hativit, an ensemble that combines the musical styles of the Middle East and the West.

Led by Moroccan percussionists and singer

Shlomo Bar, the group features Jewish musicians from around the world: Ellen Dan, a reed and horn player from Michigan; Eli Digma from Israel who plays the electric and acoustic guitar; Samson Khamkar from Bombay, who plays the violin and *sitar*; Paris-born Emmanuel Mann, one of Israel's top bass guitarists; and Menashe Sasson, from Iran, who plays the Persian *santur*.

From Japan there is the Butoh company and the Kita Noh Theatre Company while the Lim Sisters Dance Company, representing Korea, brings a contemporary, modern idiom to the festival.

Malaysia provides a rich presentation in Al-Baladi, a blind singer and musician from Kelantan. He is best known for playing the flute. But he is also a master of a wide variety of instruments, including the lute, keyboards and drums.

In his Hongkong recital, he will be accompanied by two performers on local Malay drums.

From Pakistan-controlled Kashmir comes four musicians to perform music rarely heard outside their native region. Subhan Rather sings a gentle religious hymn, accompanying himself on the *rabab*, a plucked instrument close to the Indian *sarod*.

Thailand is represented at the festival by Kongsadan, with Thailand's leading saxophone player, Tewan Sapsanyakorn. There will also be a recital of traditional Thai music by

Sutarn Buathang and several other members of the group.

The Soviet Union's Asian tip is represented by the Uzbek Music Group. The Uzbeks, a Turkish people closely related to the Uighurs across the borders in the Xinjiang region of China, have developed an urban music style related to, but intriguingly different from, the music of Uighur that was in evidence at the 12th Festival of Asian Arts.

Last but not least of the overseas inputs is One Extra Company from Australia, brainchild of Malaysian-born Kai Tai Chan, who choreographed *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* for the Fringe and took it to the Adelaide Festival in 1988.

One Extra brings to Hongkong its lively 1989 production, *Othello*, with Aboriginal dancer Kim Walker from the Sydney Dance Company, in the lead role as an Australian state premier, and Verdi's score, condensed and adapted to blend with Australia's native instrument, the didgeridoo.

Local input at the festival will come from the Hongkong Ballet, the Hongkong Chinese Orchestra, the Hongkong Dance Company, the Hongkong Philharmonic Orchestra, the Hongkong Repertory Theatre and Han Shong, a group that will improvise music — blending elements of jazz with the extended techniques of Asian and contemporary Western music.

The finale will be provided by Lai Kin's *Sixty Years of Cantonese Operatic Song*.

To have got all this into a month is a great tribute to Thompson who over the years has consistently brought together the best artists in Asia for a feast of entertainment. Enjoy yourself.