

A fascination with the ethnic music of Asia

By MARY FARQUHARSON.

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Quite a community of writers, artists, poets, broadcasters and musicians is growing up in Cheung Chau. Rents are better suited to the shrinking purses of those who choose to opt out of the world of commerce. But also, the opportunity to live in a more authentically Chinese atmosphere is an attraction for this group of aesthetes.

One who feels very much at home in the Chinese environment is ethnomusicologist John Thompson. He can be found on the island retreat playing his *gu qin* or transcribing a 15th century book of *gu qin* music written by a Ming Dynasty prince.

Before taking up the *gu qin*, an ancient Chinese string instrument, Thompson played the *samisen*, one of a family of classical Japanese instruments. Although he can play the *gu qin* to professional standards, performances won't pay the rent, not even in Cheung Chau.

"I play for pleasure," he says, recalling that he once accepted an invitation to write music for the *gu qin* in a Cantonese film. He was promised five per cent of the profits as payment but the film flopped — no profits so no payment.

Thompson does live by his interest in Asian music though. He produces and presents a weekly programme for RTHK Radio 4, called *Musics of Asia* on Mondays at 8 pm.

This programme introduces Asian music to people who have been brought up to believe that serious music begins and ends with 17th, 18th and 19th Century Vienna. People should be entertained rather than informed about the music he says, so the programme includes entertaining pieces of music with short introductions to help listeners understand the style and technique.

Getting hold of good recordings of Asian music is a problem as most tapes and



John Thompson at home with his *gu qin*.

discs are short study pieces which are suitable for students but not for entertainment. Japan and India have healthy recording industries but countries like Burma and Laos have very little that could be used on radio.

In Burma producing tapes and records is a cottage industry. Quite often a popular performer will be recorded "behind the counter" of a Burmese record shop. The owner keeps the master tape and produces copies on low quality cassettes for sale to the public, John says. So when he goes to Burma, he always takes expensive blank cassettes with him and asks the shop keeper to copy from the master straight on to his cassette.

John Thompson has travelled round most of Asia collecting material and finding out as much as possible about the music and performing arts. His fascination dates back many years. Returning

qin they might be tempted to turn towards the music of their heritage.

After two years in Taiwan, John came to Hongkong to continue his studies with two Chinese *gu qin* teachers living here. Once he mastered the first step of imitating the teacher, John began to study works with notation and recordings. Then he studied the notation of works for which there were no recordings and now he writes his own notation from original tablature, which marks finger positions but gives no clues about note values or rhythm.

Although there is a lot of conjecture in this, John feels that he knows the language of *gu qin* music, just as he knows the language of most Asian music.

There are possibly four separate types of Asian music, John says: South Asian, which encompasses India; the Southeast Asian tuned gong ensembles — the gamelon of Indonesia, Pi Phat of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand and the Saing of Burma; then there's China and Vietnam; and finally Japan which John doesn't like to categorise with China although there is some dispute.

As former editor of the Asian Arts Festival, John has met and worked with most of the regions' leading musicians and performers. From his experience, John feels that Asian music faces problems when it is not receptive to new influences. Whereas Western music can take style and content from Asian classical traditions, the reverse has not really happened yet.

The Indian sarod, for example, hasn't adapted itself to its 20th century environment so there is a danger that it may survive only as a museum piece. Yet in Burma, Northern Thailand and Bali, John has seen ethnic music living and breathing with the people. This is what he expects Westerners will enjoy. There is a vitality about an Indonesian gamelon, there is an essence of "pop" in the hillbilly music of the Thai hill-tribe villages where Paul McCartney could be the name of a mountain in Timbuctoo.

from Vietnam, John enrolled in an M.A. course in Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. By the end of the course he knew a lot about Japanese music and no language; he spoke good Mandarin but didn't know much about Chinese music.

In the end he chose to study Chinese music and set off for Taiwan, possibly because he yearned after the life of the traditional Chinese scholar. According to ancient custom, the scholar should master calligraphy, including poetry, be able to paint, know how to play 'Go' and play the *gu qin*. Seven years later, an accomplished *gu qin* player, John is quite content with being one quarter scholar.

When he arrived in Taiwan, it was difficult to find a *gu qin* teacher. Finally, one of the two still living agreed to take him on, hoping that when Chinese musicians, wooed by Western music, saw a foreigner learning the *gu*