
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Chihshuan Yang Interview

Omar Dyette
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Omar Dyette^[LSEP]
Artist: Chih-suan Yang
Location: Phone Interview - Chicago, IL.
Date: May 14, 2018.



Image courtesy of the artist

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2018 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design. The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Bio: Winner of the 3Arts Award in 2015 and the 2016 Camargo Foundation Fellow in France. Chih-suan was born and raised in Taiwan and moved to the United States at the age of 15. Being a Classically-trained violinist/pianist her whole life, Chih-suan acquired the skills to expand horizons beyond tradition, and it also granted her fluency in the universal language of music. As an eclectic and versatile violinist, erhu player, and pianist, actively engaged in the music scene around the globe, Chih-suan's body of work spans across a multitude of genres and reaches beyond borders. Chih-suan has performed with a wide variety of artists from Yo-Yo Ma and Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, to Kings of Leon, Lana Del Rey, and Regina Spektor, and has even played for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Chih-suan is also a long-standing member of the legendary, Chicago-based Corky Siegel's Chamber Blues, and a member of the flamenco ensemble, Las Guitarras de España. Chih-suan continues to work and record with a variety of world class artists, and in 2014 released her debut solo EP [Ways to Say Hello](#), a mix of original compositions. In 2016, She started an electronic/world duo *ESCP* and is currently recording her next studio album. <http://www.chihsuanyang.com/>
(Bio Courtesy of the Artist)

Interview Transcript

Omar Dyette: Just tell me a little bit about yourself and your practice if you don't mind.

Chih-suan Yang: I am a multi-instrumentalist and a composer, that's what I identify myself as right now...but that can also change later in life [laughter]. I'm a full-time freelancer. I write my own music and try to perform originals as much as I can. I was born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan, and moved to the States when I was 15. I went to DePaul University and majored in violin performance—that's how I met Professor Kina. Music has taken me all over the world and has allowed me to collaborate with many outstanding individuals. In my travels I have had a constant reminder that life cannot be taken for granted. Now I'm 35 and feel more at ease with myself than ever. I am eternally grateful to be doing what I love and to bring music into the world while teaching the next generation to do the same through private lessons, school, workshops, education. I am humbled by the fact that I am able to have this opportunity to interact with kids and just individuals from all walks of life. I hope to continue to do these things with music in my heart and sharing this unconditional love of music with them.

OD: Awesome. So I guess you kind of answered my second question, which was what drew you to Chicago, but what keeps you coming back to Chicago with all the international travel and performances?

CY: Sure, I originally came to Chicago because I had some family members here, I'm an immigrant and my family had an opportunity to move to the US and to become United States citizens when I was 15. I stuck around in Chicago for 15 years and was able to broaden my musical knowledge and education. Currently I perform and tour regularly with a few Chicago based groups. I don't live here anymore, but that's why I keep coming back.

OD: Speaking of your groups, I saw your project *ESCP*. Can you describe that a bit for me?

CY: So *ESCP* (pronounced Escape) is the newest project of mine. It's something that I have considered doing for the rest of my life and I'd be really happy doing that. It's a dual project with a longtime collaborator – his name is Bob [Garrett]. We share a lot of similarities because we both love electronic music and we both compose. I'm a violinist and pianist and he's a percussionist by trade. In our compositions, we try not to be confined by our instruments and fuse various mediums of technology, instrumentation, and improvisations, all the while exploring the impact of music as a soundtrack to our lives. I would describe our project as a cinematic experience: combinations sound and visual arts at times. We also often times incorporate modern dances. I feel like those two art forms complement each other extremely well: live music and movements.

OD: Nice, that also came up when I was looking through your website and your publicity and artist where there's two and everything. How does that visual aspect and they're translate into the work? Kind of how, how does the visual aspect of the way you kind of have laid out your website for your work – I'm looking at the one with the really large hat on the webpage.

CY: [Laughter] Yeah, it was really a chance encounter (with the hat), it wasn't planned. But I just love how striking it looks. People remember the picture and that served its' purpose I guess! You could say that I'm a visual person. That's where the visual effects come in and dancers for *ESCP*.

OD: You've worked with a lot of different people – Brian Wilson, performed the Dalai Lama. What was your experience working with each of these people and how has it kind of helped you evolve as a musician?

CY: Well I think being a musician is to act as a bridge for cultural diversity; to bridge that gap between race, gender, sexual orientation, religion...etc. Music can hold the power beyond all that. I would say I perform music of the world. Every type of music is world music – music is music – American music, Chinese music, Indian music, African, Arabic...etc. I have always dislike the phrase "world music" because in western cultural if it's not something people are familiar with then it becomes "worldly."

Working with Brian Wilson was very interesting and inspiring. I'm extremely grateful to play with such a legendary artist. There's no words to describe what that feels like but feeling honored and humbled. However, performing for the Dalai Lama was and is the highlight of my musical career so far, and probably will be for the rest of my life. There will not be many experiences that can top that.

OD: So that kind of bleeds into the next question. How do you address an Asian or Asian American identity through your music, if you do that?

CY: I think that's the question that I struggle a little bit with. Because like I said, music is music. I have collaborated with international artists from Senegal, Syria, Spain, Portugal, Japan, China, Mexico, India, Peru, Brazil and so many others. How I "address" my cultural identity through music is by playing a Chinese instrument called erhu. It is a two-stringed violin, and I play it often in many of my collaborations with others. That's my way of inserting my Asian identity I guess. I try my best to incorporate erhu and other musical elements whenever I see fit. I introduce erhu to many artists I work with including Corky [Siegel], who is a virtuosic piano and harmonica player and composer/arranger. He did an arrangement for a traditional Chinese piece [called *Galloping Horses*] that we perform regularly with our group *Chamberblues*.¹

OD: What are you currently working on now?

CY: I am trying to record my second solo album as well as *ESCP*'s debut EP. My first album was released 2014 "Ways to Say Hello". It is available on iTunes and Spotify, Apple music and all other major platforms. The second album will feature a diverse ensemble of musicians that I've met through my career. So hopefully through these collaborations we can effectively spread the message – acting as a wider bridge to cultural diversity.

OD: Who are some of the musicians you are collaborating with on this album?

CY: Probably some regulars like Bob, my collaborator on *ESCP*, but I don't know yet. I'm in the process so we will figure out as things unfold.

OD: I get that. As a multi-instrumentalist, what draws you to a new instrument?

CY: I was in Taiwan as a kid I started out as a pianist, then violin came at age five or six. In junior high school – you're required to learn a traditional Chinese instrument. So that's when I picked up erhu because it was similar to violin. In some ways it was kind of forced upon me

[laughs]. But then it stuck because I actually really enjoy it. Being a Classically-trained musician, I feel like there's something that's lacking in my Classical training sometimes, the freedom to improvise. We grew up playing Mozart, Beethoven, Bach and all the Classical stuff, and I've always wanted to try something different. So after getting a degree in classical violin performance. I expanded my musical palette to so many different genres and as well as tried and still trying to learn all the other instruments I didn't have the chance and time to explore when I was in school. I pride myself on being an artist that explores multiple styles and being eclectic in my musical passions and personal interest. I don't want to become a robot, or a factory made, cookie cutter player who can play everything perfectly. There will always be people who can do that better than me. I feel like I have something different to offer to the world than to become a technician.

OD: Yeah, it does. I really resonate with that, because the reason I stopped playing was because I didn't get that opportunity to work outside the Classical confines.

CY: Ah, yeah, but there are people who are perfect for that. It's just not for me. But classical training definitely provided a very important foundation. Even just the discipline part, to practice three instruments every day in a confined box for hours 20+ years of my life. It grants me the fluency, skills and techniques, but not necessarily creative freedom.

OD: And you definitely seem to have found that. Is that what led you to more electronic music as well?

CY: Yes, when I was a junior at DePaul I started hosting open mic nights at this place called Tonic Room [in Chicago]. I hosted open mic nights for 2 years while being a music major at school. I wanted to expand my horizons so I bought an electric violin and was able to explore and learn to improvise on the job.

OD: I really understand that. I have one more question – do you have any specific events that highlight Asian American experiences?

CY: Occasionally I will participate in something that will have a focus on Asian Americans. For example, we performed last year with *ESCP* at the Asian American Jazz Festival in Chicago.² I don't go out of my way to seek out events that just focus on Asian cultural. I am open and would love to participate always. Like I said, as a musician I find it important to be that bridge for cultural diversity.

OD: It's more about making connections then.

CY: Absolutely. The power and wonder of music. If I can help others to inspire, heal and unite through my work for even just a second, then I will have truly served my purpose to the best of my potential.

END

¹ Yang, Chih-suan. "Sai Ma (Galloping Horses)." YouTube, July 3, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXLsCSN7PA8>

² The Chicago Asian American Jazz Festival. <http://caajf.org/>