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## Hui Yu - Interview with Mark Slobin

Hui Yu

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Mark Slobin: So, let's get started at the beginning. How did you hear about Wesleyan? And how did you end up there?

Hui YU: Well, before I went to Wesleyan I was a teacher, a faculty member at the Shanghai Conservatory, and from there I had contact with two people who suggested Wesleyan to me. Alan Thrasher, who is your former student, and Steve Wild from Australia. Those people went to Shanghai during the early 1990s, just after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. They knew Wesleyan very well. Both of them suggested Wesleyan to me. Then I decided that maybe I should go to Wesleyan for my Ph.D. And during that time there was no Ph.D. program or any doctoral program in music in China, and after I'd gotten my master's from the Shanghai Conservatory, if I wanted to progress with my future studies, the only way I could do is to go to a Western country to get a Ph.D. Then Wesleyan became a choice. Then I applied to Wesleyan in 1994. I was accepted and I went to Wesleyan. I'm forever grateful for Wesleyan for this.

MS: Did you know anything about the program before you came? Like who was teaching or what the style was?

HY: Well, during that time, to be honest, I didn't know too much, because there was no internet access. I read some journals, like *Asian Music* and *Ethnomusicology*. Those journals were available in China. I read that some very good scholars were from Wesleyan, and I didn't have too much access to the specific introduction to Wesleyan's program, but I did know that Wesleyan was very well known for its world music program, and also—Oh, by the way! There's another guy I did not have direct contact with, but I knew he was from Wesleyan also, Tong Kin-Woon, from Hong Kong.

MS: I remember him very well. Do you know where he is now?

HY: He is still in Hong Kong, though. After very little time I knew that several good people were from Wesleyan. And also, Alan Thrasher and Stephen Wild strongly suggested me to go to Wesleyan, so I decided to go to Wesleyan.

MS: So when you got to Middletown, it was probably pretty surprising, because it's not like any place you saw before.

HY: Yeah, it was kind of a culture shock, because it's very, very different—and I still feel very grateful to Wesleyan, because something happened that I still remember even after so many years. When I first got to Middletown it was midnight, I still remember, and I didn't know where to go for help, at 2 or 3 am, then someone from Meriden I met in the limo took me to the public security office, then they took care of everything. They told me everything was taken care of. This would never happen in China. Sometimes when this happens you have to pay to stay at least. That was my first close contact with Wesleyan, and I was very impressed and very grateful, and knew this was a great university, great college, and they treated the students very well. They really cared about the students. So this Wesleyan experience was a really great experience for me. It opened my eyes.

MS: So you were in student housing with other students?

HY: Yes, actually I stayed in the university guest housing for my first night. The next morning, Su Zheng came to help me move into the student housing. What impressed me was that during that very difficult time I was kind of desperate. It's midnight. I felt that Wesleyan was very reliable, I could rely on this university for everything, and they really cared about the students.

MS: So you had to take—the courses must have been a little strange too. It's a different format and different expectations.

HY: Yes, that's the first time I was taught in a seminar setting. The seminar format is normal in Western countries, but during that time in China there were almost no seminars. It is a good way for students to discover, to discuss and to express themselves, and now in China, I teach my graduate students in seminar setting. In China people prefer the lecture style of teaching, but in graduate student level, seminars are very important, and that was my first time engaging in courses in this format. In the very beginning I was very shy, and didn't know what to talk about, and also my language was not so good. I know what people were talking about, but sometimes I didn't completely know what other students were talking about, but I wanted to provide some input on the discussion. I wish I had another opportunity to go to Wesleyan to participate in a seminar discussion. After a couple of weeks I was getting better and was able to participate in the discussion more, but still not very effectively. In any case, it gave me an idea in education on how to teach in a graduate student setting.

MS: Yeah, also, that's interesting that you still think about that format. So, you had to play in ensembles. What ensembles did you play in?

HY: Yes, actually, probably I was one of a very few first generation of Chinese musicologists who played the gamelan. During that time, people were talking about gamelan, but there was no gamelan in China at all, and no ethnomusicologist in China who ever played gamelan. I was one of the very few or one of the first musicologists who played gamelan. I made a contribution to Wesleyan's world music program also. I organized a Chinese music ensemble here, and taught a class called "Chinese Instrumental Music" which combined both performance practices and Chinese music theory. It was listed as a formal course in Music and East Asian Studies. Someone told me it was the first Chinese ensemble in Wesleyan. I've still saved the course brochure of that time. I was also very happy to be exposed to the real world music, rather than be limited to Chinese music only. So I understood what ethnomusicology meant. The Chinese music is only part of it, not everything, especially for me who had never been to a Western country before—No! I had been to Australia, but never been to a Western institution to really study ethnomusicology. It opened my eyes, and I got a very good experience to see how the world music was taught in Wesleyan. It helped me, actually, a lot. After I came back to China I organized a program of Wesleyan format. We had a gamelan and the first university gamelan program in China. We also had the first jazz program of any Chinese comprehensive university. The guy we hired from the US, Tom Smith, was awarded the Hall of Fame in Jazz Education in 2012 by DownBeat, and it helped me a lot. I had already opened my mind and my eyes.

MS: So you had to go to Connecticut to learn about Asian music, right? From Indonesia and India. [both laugh]

HY: Yes! Javanese. It's funny how that works, you go all the way around the world to learn about something from Asia.

MS: So, you studied mostly with Su, and who else did you study with?

HY: And you, actually. Oh, I took so many courses, during that time Gage was there, Sumarsam, you, Su, and—who else? Yes, I think those are the teachers who taught the, I forgot the name of that...

MS: The Proseminar?

HY: Theory, the theory seminar, yes.

MS: So, did you have any connection with the composition students?

HY: Yeah I did, not too many though. I don't know who—I don't know where they are right now, these names. Matthew, what's the name? I forgot. Because he's very interested in Chinese music and we talked a lot. And also Rob Lancefield. He's still in Wesleyan, right?

MS: Yeah. He works in the art collection. It wasn't Matthew Welch, right? No, because that was later. Matthew Welch is the guy who plays the bagpipes and things. Oh, Matt Rogalsky.

HY: He was a master's student, from Canada.

MS: Oh! Okay, a composer.

MS: Alright, well. I have to remember now. It's so many students, so many different generations that I forget who was where, when.

HY: I met Michael Veal last year. I invited him to come to China for a conference. Actually I was at the same time, same year with—1994—and Michael and I were the two first-year students admitted to Wesleyan.

MS: Who else was there then? Who were the other students you were friends with?

HY: Michael Veal, Mike Heffley, and Harriotte. Who else? Junko was there, but she was master's student. And also Miranda!

MS: Miranda Arana.

HY: Miranda. Really nice music, and also from Indonesia—Suwardi.

MS: So you had a very interesting group of people, right, from very different background. Yeah, that's the Wesleyan approach. Did you take courses outside the department? Did you meet faculty in other parts of the university?

HY: Yes, I took anthropology courses, and also I was in Canada for one semester, in the University of British Columbia, for one semester.

MS: Okay, with Alan...

HY: Yes, it was Alan for one semester. They offered me a fellowship at the same time when I was admitted to Wesleyan, so I postponed that to the next year, and Wesleyan was very generous and granted me a semester to go to Vancouver.

MS: And now Gage is there also, right.

HY: Gage is in Vancouver now. Actually I met him two years or one year ago in Vancouver.

MS: Oh, okay. So, what was the difference? Did you feel like a difference between British Columbia and Wesleyan?

HY: Actually after I came back from British Columbia I felt Wesleyan was a very good place to study. The University of British Columbia is a public university. I saw there were problems with public universities, and big universities although most of time they were good. But Wesleyan's advantage is obvious. Actually, my daughter is going to apply for college this year, so maybe I will ask her to apply to colleges like Wesleyan. I think that small colleges really pay attention to the students. The University of British Columbia is a big university with a huge student population, so they don't pay particular attention to each student because there are too many, but at Wesleyan you really want to study—Wesleyan is a very good place. Some of my friends even suggest that Wesleyan is even better than Yale, because it's smaller, and they have much better focus on each student.

MS: Yes, particularly in music, because it's so small. So the atmosphere among the grad students was very instructive?

HY: Yes.

MS: You worked with each other's projects? Did you work on other people's music?

HY: Yeah, we worked on some projects. I think one is like, oral history of the music department...

MS: Oh right! those interviews, right.

HY: Turns out it was a controversial project, because people interviewed—we interviewed so many people and they all had different opinions, but from this I know better some of the details of the history of this program.

MS: Who did you interview?

HY: I interviewed with my former landlord, Anna Barron. Do you know what's the situation now?

MS: She died a little over a year ago. I went to the memorial for her. It was very nice. Kenny Barron came, Bill's brother, the great jazz pianist, and he played. It was a very nice event. She died, I guess, maybe 2 years ago now.

HY: Oh, really? Died in Middletown? In the same place?

MS: Yeah, her daughter came—because her daughter was a friend of my daughter’s—and her daughter Jennifer came, and I hadn’t seen her in a long time. It was a very nice event, Yeah.

HY: Oh, that’s great. I feel sorry that I haven’t seen her for a long time and suddenly she has passed away.

MS: I know, that’s what happens to us. [connection lost] Oh no! We lost the connection. [pause] Why did you lose the connection? I was doing just fine. [pause] Okay, we are back in business here. The Skype is a little bit fragile. Sometimes it breaks down. So, anyways, we were talking about—Oh yeah! You did the end of your projects. We were talking about those interviews. Yeah, I’ve not listened to those. Alec says they’re “still-not-to-be-listened-to.” So, well, we covered most of the territory. You were already talking about how you continued to use the Wesleyan ideas in your work today, that’s very interesting. So how do the students respond to this kind of approach? Do they like being in seminars? Or do they find it difficult?

HY: Well, it takes time, because the system—Chinese education in general—because, maybe it is related to the Confucius ideology. The teacher is very important, so the student should always listen to the teacher. Students from very little age, from elementary school, they are accustomed to listen to the teacher, so, to the lecture style. But when I come, now I ask all those graduate students, “I’m not going to lecture you, you have to do your work before you come to my class.” So I force them to speak up, sometimes they are very shy to challenge the teacher. To challenge the teacher is not very valid in the Chinese education, which is then a problem. They always want to listen to what the teacher said, the teacher is always correct, so that’s our problem, and I’m trying to correct this in my capacity.

MS: So, yeah, well that’s the main outline of the story. So you brought Sumarsam over and you are still in connection, bringing people from Wesleyan.

HY: Some ways, yeah. I met Sumarsam in China, so Sumarsam helped me to get a gamelan from Indonesia, and we hired 2 gamelan teachers.

MS: Wow! Are you actually teaching it? People are playing it? Yeah, so I think we covered most of what we wanted to cover. I got a really good idea about your connection to Wesleyan and what it did for you, so it’s good.

HY: Well, you said you were going to teach the last semester next semester? Spring will be your last semester teaching in Wesleyan?

MS: Yeah, that will be 45 years, so it seems like enough. [pause] Okay, so, Skype call ends here, with Hui Yu.