

10-7-2015

Yun Fan - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Recommended Citation

Fan, Yun. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (October 6, 2015) http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/25

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Yun Fan: Okay so my name is Yun Fan and I came to Wesleyan in 2008. August 2008.

Mark Slobin: So how did you hear about Wesleyan and why did you come? You were in China.

YF: I didn't know about Wesleyan at all—

MS: Ok.

YF: —until about 2006? When I first met Su [Zheng] in China. At the time I didn't have plans to apply for a grad school in the US, not at all. But then my advisor in China encouraged me to do all the tests and fill out all the application forms to—he just wanted me to study abroad, ethnomusicology.

MS: And where were you then?

YF: I was at Shanghai University. So Su's mother—So in 2007 I met her again. So at the time I already decided to apply for the program at Wesleyan. So I talked with her and she told me how it's gonna be to study at Wesleyan and how the two systems are different—

MS: Really different.

YF: Really different, right. And what are the possible, you know, difficulties, I will have to face. So I was like, "Ok, I understand everything and I still want to do it." So I did it. At the time I didn't have—because I didn't have any plan myself to apply for a graduate program in the US, I only applied for one school.

MS: [laughs] Oh, ok!

YF: [laughs] That was really rare. But I guess Su, at the time, she was looking for a Chinese student or something, because I know there's kind of balance at Wesleyan. You have to have students from different areas. I guess that's the time she needed a student from China, so I just—got in.

MS: So what were you studying before?

YF: I was studying ethnomusicology in China. [laughs] I really liked it, and I thought, well, it's good. Like, I can have a different experience studying in the US. I was like, "Yeah, I'm gonna get a Ph.D. degree, of course." So, I came. [laughs]

MS: So when you came, you must have been very surprised by this little town and university—

YF: Hmmm, no, not *surprised*. I was stunned!—[both laugh] by how it looked. I didn't see anybody until the next day. I got in Hartford at midnight, I think, so then—I don't know if you remember him, he plays the big horn, what do you call that?

MS: Oh, Ben Klein?

YF: Yeah, the composer. He picked me up from the airport and I stayed at his house that night and the second day he drove me to Wesleyan. But it's like the end of August before the semester started so there was nobody on campus. It was really shocking [both laugh] but it's really beautiful. And I liked it right away because I don't like, you know, big cities [laughs] like New York. I don't like to see people, so many people everywhere. But it is shockingly different. I liked it right away. Yeah.

MS: So then you came to the department.

YF: I came to the department and nobody was there.

MS: Nobody was there!

YF: Yeah, and I got really scared, actually, the first night. Because I had two roommates and neither of them were there. The Japanese girl was still in Japan and the Iranian guy was away in Los Angeles, I think. So I locked myself in the house!

MS: Where was that?

YF: On Brainard. 38?

MS: Oh right, 38, I know that house.

YF: And there was no internet in the house because I don't know, everything wasn't set up yet.

MS: Strange.

YF: I didn't have internet, I didn't have access to a phone, so I couldn't make a call, I couldn't write an email to my parents to let the know I was ok! [both laugh] So I was freaked out and my mom was really freaked out. So she—and also we didn't have, you know in China you have to have this special service available—you have to call the company to have this special service to call overseas. So we didn't have it, and my mom couldn't make the call. She had the number, she had Su's number. She wanted to call her to make sure I was ok! But my aunt, at the time she could make the call. So she called Su [laughs] that night and she was like, can you just send somebody to check on me, to make sure I made it safe and ok. So Su called Public Safety so they sent officer to my house, but I didn't know—

MS: Oh, god.

YF: [laughs] So when I saw somebody in this police-like uniform—I was like, “What did I do?” [laughs]

MS: What a story.

YF: It was so funny. Yeah, that's the second—I can't remember if that's the first or second night I was there. So they took me—the literally took me—to their office to write an email. Because they can't make the call for me. [both laugh]

MS: What an introduction! That everybody came.

YF: Yeah, yeah.

MS: So how did you find the whole way the department was set up?

YF: Well, people came back, and somebody showed me around on campus. Just a few days after I arrived we had this new grad students meetup thing, and I remember Amanda [Scherbenske] was there. We hung out and I was introduced to people and the campus facilities, everything. Just gradually—[both laugh] things were fine.

MS: So when you started classes, how did it strike you, because it's very different from the Chinese system?

YF: Classes—

MS: You take seminars and do all these things—

YF: The first semester I remember I took one of Su's classes, the first semester. It was heavy. [laughs] And also the proseminar thing, that was even more difficult for me because that's the seminar for both ethno and composers. So there was a lot of stuff that I don't understand at all, like when we talk about those experimental music. [laughs] Those composers, I was like, "What are you talking about? What are these people?" I had no idea. And also because the instructor was Ronald, and he speaks really fast and [laughs] and it's difficult to understand, and plus, you know, the content of discussion is—I was really struggling. But he's supportive and I remember writing up my final paper for that class.

YF: He was helpful. [laughs] I struggled through the semester. Yeah. Su's class was, although, it is heavy, it was really heavy, but because I am more familiar with the textbooks and everything so it was relatively easier for me to follow up. But I wasn't able to speak in the class for quite a long time. I tried really hard to, but maybe I spoke a few sentences here and there [both laugh] but other than that, that was it. And also when other students talk about things like the research, or the fieldwork they do, it's difficult because it's something I don't know or because they have accents that I don't understand.

I remember, oh, who was there? Oh, Raphaelle [Brochet].

MS: Oh, right.

YF: Because she's French so [laughs] yeah.

MS: Who else was in your group?

YF: Raphaelle—composers, we have Andrew Greenwald, Ben [Klein], Marcelo [Rilla Sanchez]. Ethno students—me, Pete Steele, Raphaelle—who else? Yeah, I think that's it. Marcelo's a composer.

MS: And then there's the other students, you got to meet the other people, Amanda.

YF: Yeah, Amanda of course. I met Marcelo on my second day there at the laundry. [both laugh]

MS: So you knew you were going to work with Su, that would be your main area—

YF: Yeah, right.

MS: Did you work with anybody else on the faculty?

YF: No, no one else, just Su.

MS: So what ensembles were you in?

YF: The first semester I was in Korean drumming—and the second semester I was in Korean drumming and Chinese ensemble. Um, Joy [Lu] forced me [both laugh] to join the Chinese ensemble and I stayed until the last semester I was at Wes.

MS: And so you didn't do gamelan and African [drumming]?

YF: Oh, I did, I did Balinese gamelan with Pete. I was there for two semesters. And we had this Uganda kind of workshop, we meet up every week, it was Branco [Sekalegga] and—

MS: Branco and what's-his-name—oh, I've forgotten his name.

YF: Gideon [Ampiere]. Yeah, it was really fun, but I was too much—I don't know, because I don't really play percussion instruments and also because it's African rhythms, I was all, "I can't do this!" but I tried [laughs]!

MS: Right, that's the idea.

YF: I tried.

MS: Everybody tries to do—

YF: And also a few times Aaron [Paige] had this Middle Eastern group—

MS: Oh yeah, that's right. That was the period when there was the Middle Eastern [ensemble].

YF: I was there too and I was also—because he asked us not just to play the instruments, but we also had to sing along! [laughs] I was all, "I can't do this!" but yeah, it was fun. It was really fun.

MS: Yeah, there's so many generations it's hard for me to remember who was there when and who was there together.

YF: People come and go so fast. I was there three years, but still, it feels like afterwards, afterwards it feels like—that's just, it's gone.

MS: So did it give you a different angle thinking about China?

YF: Yes, definitely.

MS: How did your thinking change?

YF: Um, because while I was studying in China, everything was written in Chinese, of course. I did start reading English articles when I was a grad student in China, but the amount of reading is not comparable [both laugh] to what we do here. So after I came here, especially when the language barrier was no longer there, I see things—I see more things. How other people see my own tradition, you know.

MS: Ok.

YF: More and more, and I can read deeper materials that I couldn't before. For example, not just something academic. For example, Joy and I were roommates for a year and because she's from Taiwan, and actually that was the first time I actually spent time living, communicating, with someone from Taiwan for, you know, quite a long time—a year is a long time together!—and it's the first time for me to understand and to hear, actually hear, what they think about their national identity and culture. It was really different, it's very different because of what I was taught in China as a student was that of course Taiwan is part of China and we share the same culture and people are the same, we share the same ancestry trees [laughs], whatever. Not just Joy but Po-wei [Weng], too. They have very strong Taiwanese identities, and I understand why. I might not 100% agree with them but I understand.

MS: Oh, interesting.

YF: And also, you know, writings on China, on Chinese music, by non-Chinese scholars. They kind of open other windows in the room you couldn't find before you are here. People always say you cannot understand yourself until you have other people observe you from a distance. I don't know what to say, anything specific, but that's the general idea. The general sense you will get when you read those people's writings. I don't know, and now, well, I guess sometimes it's *bad* that Chinese scholars don't actually read the writings by Western scholars about Chinese music. So there's no communication there. That's what I see more and more after I started working for RILM [Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale]. Because I see more from both sides.

MS: Now you have the big picture, you see all this literature—interesting. So the Wesleyan perspective is still...

YF: It is still very—I'm always very proud; I was at this taiko workshop, it's kind of a recruitment workshop by this very small taiko performing group but they're very serious about what they do. So I was there, and after about five hours drumming [laughs]—

MS: Oh, god!

YF: We were hanging out and one of the guys asked me how I got my experience with taiko. I was, “I loved it when I was at Wesleyan even though I couldn't get in the group because it's so popular and it's for undergrads, basically.” And he was, “Oh, oh, who was your instructor there?” “I know the guy Mark but I don't know his last name—” and he said, “Oh, I know the guy, and I know the guy after him!” It made me really proud. And also because that's the first school I went to here, I don't know, it's just, the connection is deeper. I spent two years in

Illinois, at UC [Urbana-Champaign], but it's always like, just somewhere I spent time. Not that deep. Because the nature of the two programs are very different. There you don't have personal connections with professors. There you don't have advisors or anything.

MS: Really!

YF: You just attend classes and you do final projects on your own. Sometimes you work with people in groups, like in teams, but you don't have a personal advisor.

MS: Really! At the Illinois program? Who did you study with? Oh, so you didn't—

YF: No advisor, you just pick whatever class you want to go to, and you go—you have to design, you have to have a picture of what you want to do and you have to pick the right classes.

MS: So how do you write anything?

YF: Well, some of the courses you don't have papers to hand in at the end, we just have to work on projects depending on what kind of classes—

MS: But if you were writing a dissertation, you'd have to have an advisor—

YF: There's no dissertation at the end of the program.

MS: Really?!

YF: No. That's—but, well, it's different on a program basis—if you go to Indiana University, their program requires final thesis, but not UC—

MS: So, you took exams? What do you do?

YF: No, you just finish all the courses. If you have credits, you just graduate.

MS: Really! What's the degree?

YF: MILS.

MS: Oh, ok, it's an MILS. So ok. So why did you go there?

YF: [laughs] That's sad! Uh, so, the second year at Wesleyan, towards the end of that year I applied for Ph.D. programs and I was accepted by Indiana University, and I really wanted to go there because I wanted to study with Sue Tuohy. She's a Chinese music expert. Do you know her?

MS: Yeah, yeah, I know Sue.

YF: And also I know there's one faculty there who studies Japanese music and that's what I want to do. So I was accepted and I was almost looking for housing in the town, and then they wrote to me saying, "Oh, but we might not have money for you for the first year, and we were not certain that you can have money the next year—" but they did say that there are scholarships and

fellowships you can apply to—so I talked with some students there, I asked them, “Did you get scholarship or fellowship or any kind of financial support from the school or wherever?” And they said, “Well, you may get it, but it’s competitive, and it’s difficult,” so I had to think whether or not I wanted to do this, because it’s risky. And by that time I already began to understand more and more that the market for ethnomusicology is not—as good as I expected. When I was in China I knew it’s a difficult field because there aren’t that many job opportunities but I didn’t think it’s the same here. I knew before I came here that ethnomusicology is more popular here than it is in China and there’s more programs here associated with the subject ethnomusicology or world music or whatever. But still the job market sucks! [both laugh] I have to think about it because it’s not just about a job, it’s also about surviving in this country. You know, if you can’t get support from the school, personally I can’t support myself—

MS: Right, because you’re a foreign student.

YF: If I think about it, like, how much time and money and energy you kind of invest in this program and how much can you get out of it at the end. I have seen people struggling, everyone, to just get a job.

MS: So you, but the Illinois program, they supported you?

YF: No, they didn’t. For that program, my parents paid for the tuition for the first two semesters, and then I got this kind of national scholarship. It supported me, not that much, but covered part of my tuition. And also because it’s a library school so students are encouraged to get on-campus jobs. I worked from almost the first day on campus like twenty hours per week.

MS: Oh, ok, so you had a way to get through.

YF: Yeah.

MS: So how much library work did you do at Wesleyan?

YF: When I was there? A lot! At first I worked for the, back then it was still called the Asian library. It was a small one, and then it merged with other libraries to become the international and area studies library. So I worked there for the two years. But I worked for this Chinese library. And then I worked at the music library there.

MS: Oh, at Illinois. But what about at Wesleyan?

YF: Oh, at Wesleyan I worked at the music library all the time. Three years.

MS: So you got some skills, from Alec [McLane].

YF: Yeah, I learned a lot.

MS: It turns out to be an important part of our program. People get to get this training.

YF: Yeah, actually it’s interesting because Indiana has this combined program like ethnomusicology and librarianship. You can get both degrees when you graduate.

MS: Oh, I didn't know that. I guess they have the archive there.

YF: Yeah. Because I guess people realize that you really have to have something else to get a job.

MS: Right, right. So then you were able to get this job.

YF: Yeah, I was hesitating when they offered this job, actually. Because this is not a music library.

MS: Right.

YF: And when I was looking for jobs, I knew I wanted to be a music librarian.

MS: Oh you mean in Illinois, when you were in Illinois, the Asian library.

YF: Yeah.

MS: But you were able to use the credentials to get this job here at RILM.

YF: I think they hired me not because of my librarian training. It is because of my background in music and also because my language skill. Librarianship is only like an add on to this thing. But it turned out it is very helpful and useful. But I was hesitating because at the time I had quite a lot of interviews and some were looking promising, so—but they offered the job quite early and so I was like, “Should I take it or not?” So I talked to people and they all said, “Well, you should take it.” [both laugh] And I was thinking yeah, because it's in New York, it means more opportunities, more chance to meet people, more chance to get maybe another job, better job [laughs], and also because I had a boyfriend who was also looking for a job. At the time he didn't have anything yet so I thought New York means more chance for him as well.

MS: So you were working with Jim Cowdery, who's another Wesleyan person.

YF: Yeah, I don't report to him, but he's kind of my boss.

MS: So, in the long run, then, how do you feel about what you got from Wesleyan?

YF: Oh, a lot. Actually I think Wesleyan taught me what the most important is in perspective, like how to see things, how to understand different people from their perspective. I think that's the most important thing. And also, like, my passion for taiko! [laughs] Actually I'm going to the second part of the workshop tomorrow, and after that they're going to decide if they want me to be a trainee.

MS: Oh!

YF: Yeah, and if I get in, it's going to be a three-month long training, and after that, all members are going to vote, and if they say, “We want this person,” after that there's going to be another three-month training, and after that they're going to vote again to say “we want this person to be our official member.”

MS: So it's a very elite group. This is a serious organization!

YF: [laughs] They are! They're so serious. And the group has been there for so long, like since late seventies, I think.

MS: So did Korean drumming help you for this?

YF: [both laugh] No, not at all. But it did help me to get, like, the sense of how to drum.

MS: Yeah, well that's what I mean! It got you started.

YF: Although the styles are so different.

MS: But the idea, the discipline of drumming. But yeah, so you never know.

YF: You never know.

MS: So I don't know, do you have any other thoughts about Wesleyan and your experience?

YF: Actually, I like it, I like living in the area a lot. I always want to go back, when I was looking for apartments here in New York. Everything is so expensive, everything is like this, you don't see a tree. I was like, "I want to live in Connecticut and commute."

MS: But you can't do that.

YF: You can't, you can't.

MS: Well.

YF: And Wesleyan is still—I still network through my Wesleyan friends.

MS: Who are you still in touch with?

YF: A lot of people. Stephanie, the Korean girl—

MS: Oh, Stephanie Choi.

YF: I went to see here in California last, no, the year before.

MS: Where is she now?

YF: Santa Barbara.

MS: Oh, that's right. Another person, I have to talk to her.

YF: Stephanie—my Japanese roommate, she lives in Japan but she comes to the US quite often because her husband travels a lot. And that Iranian guy, he's now a professor at one of the state universities of Connecticut. Amanda, occasionally.

MS: That's nice.

YF: Raphaelle.

MS: Oh, really?

YF: I saw her in February this year.

MS: Where is she?

YF: At the time she was visiting Aaron in Denver. And I was there, so the three of us, we hang out.

MS: Oh, how nice!

YF: It was really nice.

MS: That's nice. Raphaelle, that's another foreign person—there's so many, it's going to be hard to do this—

YF: She's quite active performing.

MS: She works?

YF: Now, I don't know—I think she said that she moved back to Europe and I think she lived in Belgium, and then I can't remember—.

MS: Do you ever email?

YF: No, it's just on Facebook—

MS: Oh I can find her on Facebook.

YF: And she was in China last year at this kind of international music festival, in Shanghai, she came, in South Indian music. She was in Beijing performing, quite happy.

MS: She was very spirited.

YF: And Aaron is doing well too. And Po-wei too! There are great people, really, all great people. And not long ago, I was listening to some music and thought, "Oh, maybe I should go back to study—" and then [laughs]. "Oh, maybe not."

MS: So do you think about going back to China, or no?

YF: I don't know, if a really good job is there waiting for me, then why not!

MS: Well, look at Hui [Yu], he spent twelve years after his Ph.D. before he got the job, then he got a great job. So you never know.

YF: Yeah, I don't know maybe. Actually my boss, Barbara, she told me during the IAML [International Association of Music Libraries] conference, this year was in New York in June at Juilliard, and she told me that Juilliard will have this, like, campus, in China.

MS: Oh, ok, interesting.

YF: Actually, they officially released the news just a few days ago.

MS: Everyone wants to have different satellites everywhere.

YF: And she was like, "I'm worried that you're going to apply for a job there!" Oh, no—oh yeah—maybe—if there is a job, because, yeah, it is true that there is no music librarianship in China. I am trying to, I am helping people there to form the thing

MS: But yeah, that's interesting.

YF: Hopefully. Yeah.

MS: Well, you'll see what happens next.

YF: Yeah.

MS: Well that's great, that's really—

YF: Actually, I am working on this project. I hope it will work out. And maybe you can advise, or not, I don't know. The idea is, so I read writings on music by non-Chinese scholars, especially those earlier writings from the 1990's or early 21st century, well, they all use different spellings and styles for Chinese musical terms, and genres, institution names, all kinds of things, and there's no kind of—a standard that everyone agrees to, agrees with. So I want to have this kind of glossary of Chinese music terms that will have transliteration, translation, and a brief interpretation.

MS: You should get a grant for that.

YF: Yeah, that will help scholars here and scholars in China. Because they are writing in English more than before.

MS: Well, you should get a grant to do it!

YF: It's going to be a huge project.

MS: Yeah, you'll have to have helpers.

YF: I will have to contact everyone in this field. Actually I will have this newsletter hopefully in November, the ACMR, the American—what's the name? The Chinese Music Research something—they meet every year during the SEM meeting. So hopefully I'll get some feedback. I've been talking with the China conservatory and Shanghai conservatory. I'm going to a meeting later this month in Beijing. It's a translation conference, kind of small but I think I will see people there and ask for their ideas—I don't know if I can get money from the Chinese

government or a conservatory but I think it's something, someone has to work on—because it's a thing. Maybe I should try to get a grant.

MS: Great, well, it's really great to talk.