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In Dialogue

Response to Chiao-Wei Liu, “Response to Leonard Tan and Mengchen Lu, ‘I Wish to be Wordless’: Philosophizing through the Chinese *Guzhen*” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 26, no. 2 (2018): 202.

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Chiao-Wei Liu’s response to our paper raised important issues regarding the translation and interpretation of Chinese philosophical texts, our construals of Truth and ethical awakening, differences between the various Chinese philosophical traditions, and the importance of recognizing students’ selves as music educators work with them through diverse musical traditions. In this paper, we respond to each of these issues in turn.

Liu rightly pointed out that the translation and interpretation of classical Chinese texts is complex. To support her argument, she cited a phrase from the *Zhuangzi* that was quoted in our paper (“The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap”) and noted that it has often been used “to attribute to one’s ungrateful attitude after receiving help from others.”¹ Taken on its own as a standalone, this reading appears plausible. Our interpretation, however, takes into account the quote in its original context:

荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃；
The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish you can forget the trap.

蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；
The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare.

言者所以在意，得意而忘言。

Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words.

吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉？

Where can I find someone who has forgotten words so I can talk with the person?"²

In each of the first three phrases, there are six characters followed by five. This pattern indicates that the first three phrases should be read as a whole rather than independently, which then lead to the final phrase—the playful climax which reveals that Zhuangzi's purpose here is to discuss language. The fish trap and rabbit snares are metaphors for words, while the fish and the rabbit are metaphors for meaning. Each of the first three phrases convey the same idea that if we get overly hung up on the means (that is, the fish trap, the rabbit snare, and words), we will never get to the Dao. Taken as a whole, the passage conveys the idea of words being mere means to the Dao, rather than the Dao itself, which supports the central theme of our paper: Philosophizing without words. Indeed, as Liu noted, the translation and interpretation of Chinese philosophical texts is a complex one, to which we add the importance of context.

In our paper, we drew on the Buddhist notion of *mingxin jianxing* (明心見性) to explain how a *guqin* player quietly and meditatively clears her heart-mind before playing the instrument so that she can search for Truth within and discover her innermost self. Extending and adapting our ideas for contemporary music education, we proposed that music education is not just an outward journey to learn about composers, but also an inward one to learn about the self. Liu's construal of our work as claiming that "Truth does not reside within the performer or the music, but is located in the space where the two are in sync" and also that "qualities aligned with the music are ethically good, whereas those that differ are not"³ extend our writing in ways we did not intend. Quite on the contrary, we agree with Liu that different students have different needs, hence our proposition for students to search inwards and discover themselves.

In like vein, we agree with Liu that “when music learning becomes a means of assimilating toward one prescribed/predetermined standard, regardless of students’ lived realities or how they make sense of the world, teaching then ceases to be moral.”⁴ As noted in our paper, we are not in favor of a standards-based approach to music education that is rigid; similarly, we do not advocate the prescription of moral standards. The moral stories associated with the *guqin* tradition are heuristic; they aim to inspire ethical *awakening*, not to impose moral standards, and are therefore neither mechanistic nor to be taken literally. Take for example, the fable of the man who lived beside the sea cited in our paper. This was clearly fiction as seagulls cannot possibly read humans’ intentions; the point was simply that one should not be scheming. Like the West, Asian philosophical traditions are replete with stories that are passed through generations to better humanity. If these stories have no place in the curriculum, we will also have to exclude—much to the detriment of society and humanity—the great poetries, plays, and stories across cultures that have inspired humankind since the dawn of civilization. We are encouraged by Liu’s agreement that teaching can be a moral endeavor and propose that learning stories that accompany the *guqin* tradition further enrich the curriculum to moral ends. Her proposition that space should be created for students to connect with the stories in their own terms is also one that we agree with.

Like Liu, we are amazed by how the *guqin* tradition has absorbed philosophical insights from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In response to her puzzlement regarding “how these ideas remain distinct even when they collide,”⁵ we turn to the allegory of “The Three Vinegar Tasters” depicted in several Chinese paintings. Upon tasting vinegar, Confucius’ face turned sour (reflecting his view of the world as being out of alignment with the Dao and the utopian past), the Buddha’s face was bitter (revealing a worldview of suffering due to attachment

and desires), while Laozi simply smiled (showing the Daoist notion of deriving happiness from living in harmony with the Dao).⁶ Each tasted the same vinegar but had a different response, depicting how all three philosophies, commonly known collectively as “The Three Teachings” (*sanjiao* 三教), offered unique insights and shaped Chinese thought over centuries.⁷ Our portrayal of the *guzhen* tradition as one that has been influenced by all three philosophical schools is therefore one that is in keeping with Chinese history. Their different views about music are indeed akin to the different responses to vinegar, each contributing unique insights.

In citing specific differences in philosophies of music, Liu posited that “Daoism believes that music is an extension of feelings and emotions and holds against the use of music in politics; by contrast, Confucianism advocates for the use of music in educating people over merely personal expression.”⁸ Our reading of the Daoist texts offers a rather different view: Music is valued as sounds *qua* sounds and silences *qua* silences, free from human emotions and feelings. In fact, the Neo-Daoist philosopher Ji Kang wrote an entire treatise arguing how music contains neither sorrow nor joy (*sheng wu aile lun* 聲無哀樂論).⁹ While we agree with Liu that Confucianism emphasizes an educational role for music, we are less certain if this is necessarily prized over personal expression or if such a dichotomy exists in the first place. After all, Confucian philosopher Xunzi’s *Treatise on Music* (*yuelun* 樂論) begins with the following that strikes us as a rather vivid portrayal of human expression: “Music is joy, an emotion which humans (*ren* 人) cannot help but feel at times. Since humans cannot help feeling joy, their joy must find an outlet in voice and an expression in movement.”¹⁰

Finally, Liu’s substitution of “words” with “music tradition” in Zhuangzi’s quote was a fruitful extension of our ideas. Just as Zhuangzi paradoxically needed words to argue for the notion of language as mere means, thereby highlighting the use and limitation of words at the

same time, Liu's substitution reminds music educators to go beyond musical traditions. The self shines even as one remains culturally sensitive and the focus is on the ineffable qualities of the musical experience. Extending Liu's substitution strategy to Zhuangzi's final phrase, we can say: "Where can I find someone who has forgotten music traditions so that I can make music with the person?" Nurturing such musicians should surely be an important task of music educators.

NOTES

¹ Chiao-Wei Liu, "Response to Leonard Tan and Mengchen Lu, 'I Wish to Be Wordless': Philosophizing through the Chinese *Guqin*," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 26, no. 2 (2018): 202.

² The *Zhuangzi*, 26/70/13, translated by Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 302. See also, Guo Qinfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋 [Collection of Annotations on the Zhuangzi] (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), 944.

³ Liu, "Response to Leonard Tan and Mengchen Lu," 200.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ While popular as a theme in several Chinese paintings, this allegory was popularized in the West by Benjamin Hoof in his *The Tao of Pooh* (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1989).

⁷ See for example, Kenneth Pletcher, *The History of China* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), and Shan Chun, *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy: Dao of Inner Saint and Outer King* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2012).

⁸ Liu, "Response to Leonard Tan and Mengchen Lu," 201.

⁹ David Chai, "Musical Naturalism in the Thought of Ji Kang," *Dao* 8, no. 2 (2009): 151-171.

¹⁰ The *Xunzi*: 20/98/14; translation adapted from Burton Watson, *Xunzi—Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 115.