TAN DUN

Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women
IN TAN DUN’S WORDS

INTRODUCTION:
“NU SHU: THE SECRET SONGS OF WOMEN”

THE CREATIVE PROCESS:
“NU SHU: THE SECRET SONGS OF WOMEN”

REVIEWS

CREATIVE TEAM
IN TAN DUN’S WORDS

After completing these 13 microfilms, I have come to regard rivers and lakes in different light — they have become to me “seas of tears”. These drops of tears come together to form the nurturing Mother River significant to each human race, as each drop contains and carries our treasured culture from one generation to the next. Nu Shu culture can be seen as a drop or a ripple in the Mother River, beautiful and dreamlike... Nu Shu is a Symphony for 13 Micro Films, Harp Solo and Orchestra, 13 microfilms representing the past, orchestra representing the future, the dialogue in between is bridged by the solo harp and is the most beautiful women’s instrument in my heart...
Following the footsteps of his idol Bela Bartok, Tan Dun, the world renowned composer, conductor, and artist, returned to his home province to research and capture on film the unique Nu Shu culture and its ancient music — both of which have been fast disappearing to the point of near extinction. Tan Dun spent five years in the fields, filming, researching, composing music, and conceptualizing a new way of presenting the music. This work is most notable for employing Tan Dun’s counterpoint concept in three parts: 1. “the present” versus “the past” 2. the music versus the visuals 3. ancient Nu Shu culture versus culture of the future. This “triple counterpoint” flows through the work’s 13 chapters, woven together by a clear storyline. The 1st chapter is Prologue, entitled “Water Calligraphy: Mother, Daughter, Sisters”. The 2nd, 3rd, 4th chapters feature stories between mother and daughter. The 5th chapter depicts the scenery of the ancient Nu Shu town. The 6th, 7th, 8th chapters relate stories between sisters. The 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th chapters express daughter’s longings towards mother. The 13th chapter is Epilogue, reflecting a dreamlike reality in a “pond waterdrum”. Tan Dun’s “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women” represents the foremost effort to record and gather the ancient Nu Shu culture through high tech digital audiovisuals. The fast-disappearing Nu Shu culture is undoubtedly a precious gem in the world’s cultural treasure chest — the gem’s brilliant sparkles have no doubt ignited Tan Dun’s passion in recollecting the past and discovering the future.
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SYNOPSIS: 13 MICROFILMS

— I —
SECRET FAN

To express the love felt between mother and daughter, or among sisters, generations of women write in a common secret language Nu Shu on paper and fans. This forms the genesis of the ancient Nu Shu culture. The intimacy, compassion, and beauty of Nu Shu is a monumental tribute to women.
— 2 —
MOTHER’S SONG

“Wisdom on educating daughters”, the holy scripture that passed down from mother to daughter through countless generations, preserves the cultural traditions regarding family, ethics, and child-rearing, and what it means to be a woman.

Singing: He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan;

— 3 —
DRESSING FOR THE WEDDING

Girls are typically married at as early as age 15. Their wedding day is the most beautiful day of their life. Sisters, on the verge of parting with each other, help dress the bride. Underneath the dazzling head piece and the gorgeous wedding gown, is a reluctant heart bearing the weight of farewell. The fully attired bride captures the monumentality of life.

Singing: He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Zhou Huijuan;

— 4 —
CRY-SINGING FOR THE MARRIAGE

The wedding tradition features three days of consecutive crying. The resulted tear-soaked scarf serves as a link between mother and daughter, as well as between generations. After the wedding, any communication between mother and daughter is conducted secretly through rewriting the “Wisdom on educating daughters”.

Singing: He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Villagers of Nu Shu Village;
NU SHU VILLAGE

Every race and culture has a Mother River. In Nu Shu Village flows such a river since the Song Dynasty. Beside the river, the local women spend their lifetime nurturing their own language: Nu Shu. Nu Shu Village has never been relocated away from the river. The river has been serving as an emotional connection between mother, daughter, and sisters for generations.
— 6 —
LONGING FOR HER SISTER
Besides the relationship between mother and daughter, sisterly love is also featured prominently in this work. Singing songs that reminisce about sisterly love gives the woman a chance to be reminded of her innocent, happy childhood. This serves as an anchor for her navigation of her current state of loneliness.

Singing: He Yanxin;
Cinematography, directing, notation: Tan Dun

— 7 —
A ROAD WITHOUT END
The life of a woman contains endless alleyways. She meanders from one to another, searching for her childhood sisters. Household after household, gate after gate, river after river, dynasty after dynasty...the woman continues on her endless journey.

Singing: He Yanxin;
Cinematography, directing, notation: Tan Dun

— 8 —
FOREVER SISTERS
Reunion between sisters dissipates all sorrows, leaving behind laughter at childhood memories and tears at understanding adult life. The compassion shared between sisters, often accompanies them into their marriages, providing strength in moments of hardship.

Singing: Jiang Shinu;
Cinematography, directing, notation: Tan Dun
— 9 —
DAUGHTER’S RIVER
River, or a body of tears? Only the water knows the answer. River of Women is the river for daughters, mothers, and grandmothers of countless generations – as their tears form the melancholic melody on which float their boats of dreams.

Singing: Hu Xin;
Cinematography, Directing, Notation: Tan Dun;

— 10 —
GRANDMOTHER’S ECHO
Gao Yinxian was the most important women of the Nu Shu Village as she helped pass down the language from generation to generation. Gao passed away at the age of 88. In her former residence, Gao’s granddaughter sits on the stool that Gao once sat on, as echoes of Nu Shu songs once heard by Gao as she sat there sewing come from afar...

Singing: Hu Xin;
Cinematography, Directing, Notation: Tan Dun;

— 11 —
THE BOOK OF TEARS
Mo Cuifen cries in tears, on remembering her wedding 50 years ago, when she was once a daughter to her own mother. Half a century went by: her mother passed away; Mo’s tears remains.

Singing: Mo Cuifeng;
Cinematography, Directing, Notation: Tan Dun;

— 12 —
SOUL BRIDGE
A bridge where a daughter walks on to remember her mother.

“RIVER, OR A BODY OF TEARS? ONLY THE WATER KNOWS THE ANSWER.”
LIVING IN THE DREAM

Despite the hardship encountered by the women of Nu Shu Village, why are their songs and lives filled with romanticism? That is because each day, when mothers, daughters, and sisters gather together to sing, write and sew in Nu Shu, the happy time shared provides them with a wonderful, dreamlike reality.

Singing: Hu Xin, Hu Meiyue, He Yanxin, He Jinghua, Jiang Shimu, Mo Cuifeng, Pu Lijuan, Zhou Huijuan;
Cinematography, directing, notation: Tan Dun
1. PLAYBILL: Why compose a piece about Nu Shu?

TAN DUN: A few years ago I encountered a document on Nu Shu, which mentioned an anecdote that fascinated me: in the 1950s, just after P. R. China was established, a group of women came to Beijing asking to see Chairman Mao. They spoke a language so strange that nobody understood them. Linguists were called in to interpret for them, but even they were completely baffled by the language. Because of the strangeness of the speech, the police threw the group of women into a psychiatric ward. The news reached UNESCO, which sent linguists all over the world to research the matter, and realized that the language spoken by the women, originated from Jiaoryong county in Hunan Province, was the only existing language in the world that was solely created by and passed on among women. Later during political movements, especially the Cultural Revolution, most writings of Nu Shu were burnt and those who could sing in Nu Shu were tortured for “witch craft”, resulting in the language’s near extinction. After reading the story, I decided to preserve Nu Shu and compose a soundscape monument for these mothers, daughters, and sisters.
2. PLAYBILL: Historically speaking, how was Nu Shu formed?

TAN DUN: Nu Shu was hailed as a ‘miracle in calligraphy’. It is the world’s only calligraphy invented by and for women. It is in danger of extinction at the moment. Linguists have been arguing throughout the years about the origin of Nu Shu. Some believe the language is an ancient language connected with “jiaguwen(oracle bone script)”, an image-based language. Others believe that the language was created by women in feudal society who were deprived of education, so they gathered together and invented this language. The melody of Nu Shu is beautiful and romantic, and due to its intimate and secret nature the language is often passed down orally from mother to daughter. Thus, I have decided to approach the subject matter from an anthro-musicological point of view to research on the origin of the melodies of Nu Shu songs.
3. PLAYBILL: Where lies the origin of Nu Shu music?

TAN DUN: As early as in 1980s, as a student at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, I traveled to the area between Guangxi and Hunan provinces to research on the ethnic music of Yao and Han people in China. When I was filming and notating Nu Shu, I found out that certain Nu Shu melodies were very similar to the ancient Yao music, as both often feature syncopation and intervals of thirds. I speculate that the creators of Nu Shu language were women who not only understood ancient “jiaguwen” language, but also traditional music. Formed in the mountain areas between Guangxi and Hunan provinces, the roots of Nu Shu music extend far deep into Chinese history.
4. PLAYBILL: Why chose the form of “microfilms”?

TAN DUN: After I been researching Nu Shu for a while, I realized that this ancient language was usually sewn or written on women’s most intimate and beautiful objects, such as handkerchiefs, fans, silk, belts, journals, etc. The beauty and romance contained within the language made me regard it as a language of tears. Since this particular language exists in many forms, such as in music, calligraphy, sewing, and even in the environment and architecture, I have decided to employ both audio and visual elements to present Nu Shu in a multifaceted way, thus “microfilms”.
TAN DUN: I have been actively composing music while doing research in the field, thus the visuals were filmed according to the melodic tempo felt in my heart. We also made plans regarding the best way to shoot the visuals before listening to Nu Shu singing. These 13 microfilms, regardless of duration, were all filmed in one shot – 13 films, 13 shots. The visuals captured maintain their authenticity, with a sort of anthropological feel, in a visual tempo that does not interfere with that of the music.
6. PLAYBILL: What is the main creative concept behind this work?

TAN DUN: Namely, to see the music and hear the visuals in a three dimensional space. The ‘past’ is represented by the visuals; the ‘future’, the orchestra. Meanwhile, the harp – the most feminine instrument in my opinion – acts as a bridge to connect the past with the future. Harp has always been used ornamentally to enhance music’s tone color. Yet this time I am using the instrument in a much more dramatic way – as a Nu Sheng (‘voice of women’), steeped in history, narrating, crying, etc. Also, the visuals are screened across three projection screens simultaneously, making them into a 3D visual space, which runs parallel to my “3D Music”.
7. PLAYBILL: “Nu Shu: the Secret Songs of Women”: realism or abstract?

TAN DUN: Mostly abstract. For instance, in the last chapter, when all Nu Shu tradition-carriers sing Nu Shu songs while washing clothes near the pond in Nu Shu Village, I filmed the pond as a huge water-drum of tears on which “Water Rock-n-Roll” is being performed – which is quite abstract. Of course, when selecting the style of presentation, realism records the past, abstract paraphrases the present and the future, naturalistic reflects how one truly feels in one’s heart. These three points of views are featured throughout “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women.”
8. PLAYBILL: A project of archaeology or creativity?

TAN DUN: I am not an archaeologist. I am an artist. Just like what my music idol Bela Bartok set out to do, I, too, want to find the soundscape of future. All audiovisual materials I’ve collected on Nu Shu can be given to the museums to showcase the earliest feminist movement and its historical take on marriage, family, and moral values, but I also believe that through reviewing these things from the past, a meaningful soundscape of the future can be generated. In other words, I was searching for an invisible bridge – one that leads straight to what’s within us: our heart.
9. PLAYBILL: Why choose 3 world famous orchestras to premiere this work?

TAN DUN: My ambition was to capture the romantic and dreamlike teardrops of Nu Shu. So I entertained an idealistic thought: wouldn’t it be great if the three most beautiful orchestras in the world – the North America’s Philadelphia Orchestra, Europe’s Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Asia’s NHK Symphony Orchestra – could transport the most beautiful Nu Shu language to all corners of the world? So I started to contact these orchestras to see if they might be interested. I didn’t expect that all of them were so captivated by this romantic thought of mine that they all decided to participate in my world premiere. Later, after repeated visits to Nu Shu Village, I realized this work would not feel complete without the audiovisual aspect, so I’ve decided to make the project into a “microfilm” project. Yet the filming was not included in the original budget and plan, so I had to absorb the cost by myself. I led my creative team to start from ground zero – we purchased 4 HD film cameras and a comprehensive HD editing station, as well as hired professional cinematographers and editors. Every time we went into Nu Shu Village, we went in as a huge team including cinematographers, audio engineers, arts management personnel, etc.
The Philadelphia Orchestra visited China in 1973 with former US President Richard Nixon. 40 years later, Chinese composer and conductor Tan Dun was appointed Creative Chair for the Orchestra’s China tour.

It was such a gigantic project, that towards the end I almost felt like we wouldn’t be able to finish what we originally set out to do. Nevertheless, we finished it in the end. When I mentioned to my wife that we might have to sell our house to fund this project, she said that would be alright – as long as this would help to get this project finished! I am very grateful to my wife – without her support, I would not have been able to finish the project.
10. PLAYBILL: Is preserving Nu Shu part of your position as a UNESCO’s Goodwill Ambassador?

TAN DUN: I would like to thank the municipal government of Jiangyong County and UNESCO for their great support. As a UNESCO Ambassador, I consider preserving intangible cultural heritage my highest goal. I have worked hard to make this possible. For instance, through research I found out that Nu Shu was one of the earliest feminist movements in the world and thus deserves to be studied. I believe that behind every man there is a woman – or, you can also say it the other way round – behind every woman there is a man. Women are so important in the formation of civilization, that every race and culture has its own Mother River. Nu Shu is certainly part of this Mother River, in the form of a drop, or a ripple. In order to preserve Nu Shu, I am hoping not only to just gather all the materials collected in my research – calligraphy, songs, ancient music scores, sewing, etc – and send them to a museum. I am rather hoping that we can build a specific museum dedicated to Nu Shu culture, establish a NuShu school, set up woman’s culture studies centers or Nu Shu academic department in universities in China or around the world. I hope everyone can join in our effort to revive the lost cultures of Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters – these are the invisible steps towards helping us to discover the future. We are hoping to establish the Nu Shu museum, the Nu Shuschool, the Nu Shu website, the Nu Shu bilingual dictionary, etc...
FIELD TRIPS AND RESEARCH

Over the past five years, Tan Dun and his team made countless visits to Nu Shu Village, searching for Nu Shu tradition-carriers, collecting Nu Shu music scores, etc. The team ended up with 200 hours of audiovisual material about Nu Shu, and notated many ancient Nu Shu songs.
This is the most comprehensive audiovisual archive of Nu Shu culture to date - representing the deepest and most high-tech effort in the history of Nu Shu cultural preservation.

- Tan Dun completing his research
- Discovering manuscripts of Nu Shu
- Tan Dun on Nu Shu Village Bridge built during the Han Dynasty, conceptualizing his work
Tan Dun asks where you would find the Nu Shu women?
We will be keeping these audiovisual materials in a museum for Nu Shu cultural preservation. These materials are tributes to all women.
Tan Dun’s Score
PREMIERE AND TOUR

“Five years ago, composing Nu Shu was just a dream, of mine. A dream that could only be realized with dear friends and three of the best orchestras in the world: North America’s Philadelphia Orchestra, Europe’s Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Asia’s NHK Symphony Orchestra. Today, my dream has come true, as I get to work with these three great orchestras bringing the lost traditions of Nu Shu to life. I am hoping there will be thousands of other orchestras joining in the effort to transport Nu Shu culture to different corners of the world.”

– Tan Dun
# PREMIERE AND TOUR

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<td>NHK Symphony Orchestra</td>
<td>May 22 – 23, 2013</td>
<td>Tan Dun</td>
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<td>The Philadelphia Orchestra</td>
<td>Oct 31 – Nov 1, 2013</td>
<td>Yannick Nezet-Seguin</td>
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<td>EUROPE</td>
<td>Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra</td>
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• Full of warmth and love, the music of Nu Su melds together the secrets of women, lessons from mothers to daughters, sadness, nature and power of life.

SHIMBUN AKAHATA (JAPAN)

• Tan’s Nu Shu...was the most elaborate, with field videos showing three generations of women in the Hunan province of China, passing on life wisdom in the form of song. Great idea, since Tan is a master scene painter with music...

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER (USA)

• The 13-micro films led us into deep thoughts of eternity but also revealed a detail and grandeur of pastoral life.

ON STAGE (JAPAN)

• Tender melodies with a deep impact embedded in the colorful visuals and the multi-layers of sounds.

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL MUSIC (CHINA)
FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE NU SHU TOUR, PLEASE CONTACT:

Parnassus Productions, Inc. at music@tandunoffice.com
COMPOSER, DIRECTOR
Tan Dun

CINEMATOGRAPHY
Tan Dun (13 Microfilms), Zhang Yi (Documentary and Photos)

EDITING
Liang Yao, Zhang Yi

POST PRODUCTION
Liang Yao

PROJECT MANAGEMENT
Kaitlin Collins, Huang Xiaojie

MUSICOCYLOGY AND ARTS MANAGEMENT
Li Jun, Chen Xianxian, Zheng Xiaozhou, Cheng Yiling

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Zheng Wei, Jia Xiaoyin

SPECIAL THANKS:

Nu Shu tradition-carriers: He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Zhou Huijuan, Hu Meiyue, He Yanxin, Jiang Shinh, Hu Xin, Mo Cuinui
(in order of appearance)

Municipal government of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China

TYXL Culture Exchange. Co.