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by

Jingwen Xu

April 2019

FUSION OF CHINESE AND WESTERN MUSICAL STYLES  
IN CHEN YI'S *FROM THE PATH OF BEAUTY*

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An Essay

Presented to the Faculty of the

Moore School of Music

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

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## **Abstract**

Chen Yi (b.1953), one of the leading Chinese-born American composers today, has earned a reputation in the world as a female composer of contemporary music. Both Chinese and Western musical styles have influenced Chen's compositional style. As one of the new-wave movement composers, Chen has blended Chinese musical ideas into contemporary Western compositions, to develop a fusion of Chinese and Western musical styles.

This paper will discuss how Chen's personal life experiences have impacted her compositional philosophy by drawing from her personal interviews. An overview of Chen's compositions shows how her perspectives on her Chinese identity and her inspirations from Chinese culture influenced her personal compositional style. My analysis of *From the Path of Beauty* will investigate how she applies her compositional philosophy, and how she incorporates her own interpretation of Chinese culture in this work.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Chen Yi (b.1953), one of the leading Chinese-born American composers today, has earned a reputation in the world as a female composer of contemporary music. Chen has received many awards including the Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Elise Stoecker Award, and first prize in the Chinese National Composition Competition as well as being selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. Chen's works gained international attention after performances in America, China, and Europe. As one of the new-wave movement composers, Chen has blended Chinese musical ideas into contemporary Western compositions. Most of her works display different aspects of Chinese culture, including folk songs, poetry and philosophy. Chen has stated, "I have to think into my cultural roots very deeply in order to find my own voice."<sup>1</sup> She broadly adopts ideas and concepts from Chinese culture, ranging from ancient China to modern China, mythology to legend, and literature to art. In addition to the Chinese elements, she uses Western compositional techniques, including formal designs and instrumentation, to develop a fusion of Chinese and Western musical styles.

Previous research on Chen's string works is limited, but there are a few introductory articles that explore the techniques used in *From the Path of Beauty*. Leslie Kandell wrote an introduction to compositional features in this piece.<sup>2</sup> She provides a

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Yi, interview by Bruce Duffy, December 14, 2005, accessed February 8, 2018, <http://www.bruceduffy.com/chenyi.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Kandell, "Concerts Everywhere: New York City - Chanticleer & Shanghai Quartet," *American Record Guide* 71, no.4 (July 2008): 35-36.

brief description of each movement, which includes a discussion of cultural background and general musical character. Meng Fan-Qin and Teng Chi-Chuan each provided an analysis of and performance guide to Chen's Viola Concerto *Xian Shi*, which focuses on Chinese elements and the role of viola in this piece.<sup>3</sup> Guo Xin lists four Western idioms that Chen uses to express Chinese musical language: composing by logically constructed pitch systems, both tonal and atonal; presenting Chinese folk tunes within Western formal constructs; using Western instruments to evoke Chinese timbre and using orchestral textures as the primary means of defining formal sections.<sup>4</sup> He Xiang chose two of Chen's violin works, one composed in China and another in the US, to explore Chen's stylistic changes due to Western influence.<sup>5</sup> In addition to identifying the use of these four Western idioms in *From The Path of Beauty*, I will take a new direction by examining the timbres and textures Chen uses to represent the four Chinese art forms, that are suggested in each movement title, and how these elements are utilized within the Western genre of the string quartet.

This paper will discuss timbre and texture in Chen's *From the Path of Beauty* for string quartet. First, I will examine how Chen's personal life experiences have impacted her compositional philosophy by drawing from her personal interviews. Chen's interviews show how her perspectives on her Chinese identity and her inspirations from Chinese culture influenced the formation of her personal compositional style. My analysis of *From the Path of Beauty* will investigate how she applies her compositional

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<sup>3</sup> Meng Fan-Qing, "A Research and Performance Guide of the Viola Concerto *Xian Shi*." (DMA diss., The University of Wisconsin, 2016) and Teng Chi-Chuan, "*Xian Shi*, the Viola Concerto by Yi Chen: General Analysis and Issue of Performance Interpretation" (DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Guo Xin, "Chinese Musical Language Interpreted by Western Idioms: Fusion Process in the Instrumental Works by Chen Yi" (DMA diss., The Florida State University, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> He Xiang, "Selected Works for Violin and Piano by Chen Yi: Western Influences on the Development of Her Compositional Style" (DMA diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010).

philosophy, and how she incorporates her own interpretation of Chinese culture in this work.

## Chen Yi and Her Compositions

Chen, born in 1953 in Guangzhou, China, comes from a well-educated family. Music was an important part of Chen's family life. Both of Chen's parents are Western medical doctors as well as classical music lovers. As a result, Chen started piano lessons at the age of three, and started violin lessons at the age of four. During her childhood, Chen developed an interest in Western classical music like her parents, and she began listening to recordings of Western compositions. Violin and piano lessons, as well as constant exposure to Western classical music, gave her an intensive music education that provided the basis of her future career.

In 1966, the Chinese Cultural Revolution changed Chen's life completely. Political unrest in China forced her to stop performing for some time. In 1968, the Chinese government sent Chen to the countryside to perform manual labor on a farm, but she was able to smuggle her violin with her. Even after two years of hard labor on the farm, Chen continued to seek out time to practice after work.<sup>6</sup> Because of the policies during that time, only the performance of revolutionary songs was permitted. To these revolutionary songs she added extended techniques similar to those found in Paganini's Caprices to the melodies of revolutionary songs.<sup>7</sup> These extended techniques would later appear in her works, especially in *From the Path of Beauty*.

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Kelly, "Chen Yi," in *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States*, ed. Jennifer Kelly (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, "Chen Yi," 112.

Chen learned two life lessons during her time on the countryside. First, the hard labor offered her a chance to understand farmers and the earth.<sup>8</sup> Second, Chen was able to explore folk songs for the first time. In an interview, she summed up her experience, “A positive aspect of this experience was the wider knowledge I gained of the life and music of my motherland and its people. I started thinking about civilization, the value of an individual’s life, and the importance of education.”<sup>9</sup> This idea of the great Chinese civilizations and their emphasis on education greatly influenced Chen’s compositional philosophy in later years.

In 1970, Chen returned home after winning an audition for the concertmaster position and resident arranger for the Peking Opera troupe in Guangzhou. She served there for eight and half years until the Cultural Revolution ended.<sup>10</sup> These two roles provided Chen the opportunity to explore many ways to combine Chinese and Western music. During this time as concertmaster and arranger for the troupe, she began her research of Chinese traditional music as well as of Western and Chinese music theory.<sup>11</sup>

When the Century Conservatory in Beijing reopened in 1977, Chen started attending classes as a composition student. Chen received systematic and comprehensive training in both Western compositional techniques and Chinese traditional music.<sup>12</sup> Writing in an article, Chen reflects on the inspiration she received from study at the Century Conservatory: “I felt that if I were to create my music in a language with which I am most familiar, using logical principles that are related to nature, then my compositions

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<sup>8</sup> Chen Yi, “Chen Yi: Composing to Honor Her Past,” interview by Michael Murphy, *Choral Journal: The Official Publication Of The American Choral Directors Association* 53, no. 2 (September 2012): 29.

<sup>9</sup> Chen, “Tradition and Creation,” *Current Musicology* 67/68 (1999): 59.

<sup>10</sup> Su De San Zheng, “Immigrant Music and Transnational Discourse: Chinese American Music Culture in New York City” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1993), 301.

<sup>11</sup> Chen, “Tradition and Creation,” 60.

<sup>12</sup> Chen, interview by Bruce Duffy.

would be very natural in motion and powerful in spirit. This is my ideal.”<sup>13</sup> Chen felt it necessary to learn the traditional styles of Western and Chinese music before she began establishing her own compositional style.

Chen maintained her Chinese heritage in her compositions despite her emigration from China to the United States. In 1986, Chen left China after finishing her master’s degree at the Conservatory to further her study of music composition in the United States.<sup>14</sup> She moved to New York City where she studied with Chou Wen-Chung, Mario Davidovsky and others at Columbia University.<sup>15</sup> Chen states in an article, “I believe that language can be translated into music and because I speak out naturally in my mother tongue, there are Chinese blood, Chinese philosophy, and Chinese customs in my music.”<sup>16</sup> Chen’s Chinese identity can be largely found in her compositions, which contains a wide range of Chinese elements. From her work, the influence of Chinese folk song and tunes, Chinese opera, Chinese ancient culture and traditional Chinese music are obvious.

The musical elements of Chen’s many compositions derive from Chinese folk music both directly and indirectly. Chen explored Chinese folk music many times during her life as a student, which provided her the chance to understand the characteristics of Chinese folk music and use those characteristics in her compositions. Many of these characteristics of Chinese folk music she learned during her stay in the countryside collecting and transcribing folk tunes. Later, during her study in the Century

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<sup>13</sup> Chen, “Tradition and Creation,” 60.

<sup>14</sup> Zheng, “Discourse,” 302.

<sup>15</sup> Joanna C Lee and Green Edward, s.v., “Chen, Yi,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Chen, “Tradition and Creation,” 59.

Conservatory, Chen traveled to different rural areas of China every year to collect folk songs to utilize in her study of Chinese folk music. One of Chen's most important works, *Duo Ye* (1985) for piano solo won national attention. Chen uses musical elements from the traditional dance music of the Dong minority, mixed with a rhythmic pattern from Guangdong Province where she spent her childhood.<sup>17</sup> Another composition, *Xian Shi* (1983) for viola and orchestra, also draws "melodic style and timbre of a traditional folk ensemble," which originates from a nearby city in the same province as Chen's home in Guangzhou.<sup>18</sup> Many of Chen's compositions contain folk music, such as *Ge Xu* (1994) for orchestra, *Chinese Folk Dance Suite* for violin and orchestra (2000), and *Bamboo Dance* for solo piano (2013).

Chen's experience serving in the Peking Opera troupe influenced her later compositions, and she uses elements of Chinese opera in many of her compositions, including her instrumental works like *From the Path of Beauty*. The two sets of art songs, *Meditation* (2006) for mezzo-soprano and piano, are an example of how she adopts the Chinese operatic singing style into her vocal work. In this composition, she uses Mandarin Chinese for text, and follows Chinese opera reciting style and melodic structures.<sup>19</sup> Chen mentions the reciting style in the program note as half singing and half speaking.<sup>20</sup> The voice line features lots of glissandos, trills and repeated syllables.<sup>21</sup> The piano also imitates the accompanying ensemble of Chinese opera by using an ostinato

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<sup>17</sup> Chen Yi, composer's note for *Duo Ye* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 1985), [2].

<sup>18</sup> Chen Yi, composer's note for *Xian Shi: for Viola and Orchestra* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 1983), [2].

<sup>19</sup> Chen Yi, composer's note for *Meditation: Two Songs for Voice and Piano* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 2006), [4].

<sup>20</sup> Chen, composer's note for *Meditation*, [4].

<sup>21</sup> Zhang Wen, "An Infusion of Eastern and Western Music Styles into Art Song: Introducing Two Sets of Art Song for Mezzo-Soprano by Chen Yi" (DMA diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2012), 25.



pattern. The Chinese operatic style exists in Chen's instrumental works, also. Chen imitates the melodic style of Peking opera in *Jing Marimba* (2010) for solo marimba, as well as *Jing Diao* (2011) for orchestra.

The traditional Chinese culture that is deeply rooted in Chen's veins is in apparent in her compositions. Chen often uses poems from the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) and Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), which were the golden age of Chinese literature. Chen adopts texts directly from the poems as the text for her vocal works, and provides her own translations of the texts to help depict the scene and mood of the poem. These poems are written in classical Chinese. Because the Chinese language has been developing over the course of history, people may interpret the poems differently. Chen's own translations provide an approachable interpretation for a global audience. One of her choral works, *Spring Rain* (2011), is an example of this type of text-driven composition. The text, sung in Chinese, is originally from a well-known Tang poem. Instrumental works are inspired by the texts Chen selects. For instance, *Si Ji* (2011), which means four seasons, for orchestra is inspired by four poems from both the Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty. The four poems Chen chooses depict different scenes of the four seasons, and she provides her own translation of all four poems in a program note.

Chen gradually established her compositional style over the course of her study at the Central Conservatory of Music. During her education Chen began to establish her compositional style as a blend of the Western traditional system from her formal study at the conservatory, as well as Chinese folk music, which she studied on her own. Chen's early compositions are based in the traditional Western tonality, but are inspired by Chinese folk songs.

Chen began to learn Western contemporary composition in the early 1980s. As a result, Chen shifted away from the Western tonal system in the mid-1980s. She supplemented her compositional education by studying several Western modernists' musical works. She was most affected by Bartok's internalizations of folk idioms into Western classical traditions.<sup>22</sup> Chen's compositions become more varied by using a wide range of Chinese and Western instruments after her arrival in the United States. Since then, her work includes compositions for wind ensemble, mixed choral groups, traditional Chinese ensembles and ensembles that include both Chinese and Western instruments. Many of her instrumental works are programmatic, and often demonstrate her understanding of national culture in a broad way.

Chen's life experiences provided her with the chance to explore both Chinese and Western culture. These cultures inform her compositional style through the combination of Chinese elements and Western compositional techniques. Chen's string quartet *From the Path of Beauty* shows her musical application of Chinese identity through Western composition. This work was commissioned in 2008, after she earned major success in her career. It is notable that two of four movements are derived from two of her earlier compositions. She composed the original version of the second and third movements during her doctoral study in 1988 and 1986, respectively. As discussed above, Chen had begun a shift to contemporary music before that time, and was able to compose in a freer way both tonally and structurally.

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<sup>22</sup> Kelly, "Chen Yi," 104.

## Chen Yi's Compositional Style in *From the Path of Beauty*

*From the Path of Beauty* is a seven-movement song cycle for choir and string quartet. It was commissioned by the Shanghai String Quartet and Chanticleer to celebrate their twenty-fifth and thirtieth anniversaries, and was premiered on March 13, 2008 in San Francisco.<sup>23</sup> One month after the premiere, this piece was performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>24</sup> After this performance in New York City, Leslie Kandell wrote, "The work, a musical evocation of Chinese arts, touches on subjects from ancient totems and delicate figurines to poetry and calligraphy, like musical haiku."<sup>25</sup> As Kandell says, Chen uses *From the Path of Beauty* as a western musical art form to portray other Chinese art forms from a different time, including both musical and non-musical.<sup>26</sup>

Chen created a string quartet version at the same time as the song cycle. The string quartet was commissioned by the Shanghai String Quartet and premiered on April 23, 2008 in Washington D.C.<sup>27</sup> Chen took movements I, II, IV, and VI from the song cycle and re-ordered them. The first movement was originally for twelve-part a cappella chorus. It is the only movement fully re-orchestrated for string quartet. The string quartet parts of the other three movements are extracted directly from the song cycle. In the original song cycle, the second and fourth movements are scored for the string quartet alone. Chen transplants these as the second and fourth movements of the string quartet

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<sup>23</sup> Chen Yi, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty: Four-movement Version for String Quartet* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 2008), [4].

<sup>24</sup> Chen, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

<sup>25</sup> Kandell, "Concerts Everywhere," 35-36.

<sup>26</sup> Kandell, "Concerts Everywhere," 35-36.

<sup>27</sup> Chen, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

version. The sixth movement in the original song cycle is for choir and string quartet, and Chen omitted the choir part and extracted the string quartet part to form the third movement of the quartet version.

Four Chinese traditional high arts inspire Chen's composition of *From the Path of Beauty*. In her own notes to this composition, Chen wrote: "*From the Path of Beauty* brings us through the history of beauty in Chinese arts, from the ancient totems to figurines, from poetry to calligraphy, from dance to music, from thoughts to the spirit."<sup>28</sup> This programmatic description attempts to portray the image of Chinese traditional art forms from different time periods ranging from Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-c.1100 B.C.) to Song Dynasty (920-1279 A.D.).

Each movement of the quartet depicts the character of its respective time period (see Table 1). The subject of each movement draws on a wide range of Chinese high art, including Bronze art, poems, *qin* tunes, and Chinese cursive. In addition, each of the subjects is in a different historical context, from the Shang Dynasty to Song Dynasty, representing the different kinds of aesthetics in the long course of Chinese history.

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<sup>28</sup> Chen Yi, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty: A Song Cycle for Mixed Choir and String Quartet* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 2008), [3].

**Table 1:** *From the Path of Beauty*, tempo, time period, subject and form.

<b>Movement Title</b>	<b>Tempo</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Form</b>
I. The Bronze Taotie	$\text{♩}=60$	Shang Dynasty (c.1600 - c. 1100 B.C.)	Bronze art	A-A1-A2
II. The Rhymed Poems	$\text{♩}=60$ freely	Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 A.D.)	Poem	Through-composed
III. The Secluded Melody	Lento – Vivace – Lento	Six Dynasties (497 – 590 A.D.)	<i>Guqin</i> melody	Ternary form
IV. The Dancing Ink	Allegro, $\text{♩}=120$	Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 A.D.)	Cursive	Through-composed

The first movement draws upon an image of a bronze vessel. She explains, “trace[d] back to the ritual spirit, remote yet powerful”; the second movement is “an instrumental realization of musical reading [of] two poems”; the third movement is “the polyphonic development of a simple pitch material drawn from the *Guqin* music”; and the last movement represents “the exaggerated shapes and gestures in Chinese cursive.”<sup>29</sup> The specific type of cursive comes from the Tang dynasty. This is a type of script that is characterized by the continuous movement of the writer, connecting individual strokes.

Chen uses Western forms throughout the piece. The overall structure of this composition employs the basic idea of the western string quartet setting with deformations. The outer two movements are relatively dense and heavy in texture, while the second and the third movement are lighter and softer in both texture and dynamic

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<sup>29</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

level. The outer two movements do not follow sonata or rondo form as expected in a Western string quartet formal design, but the third movement can be considered a deformation of the ternary form. The ternary third movement follows the expected slow-fast-slow structure.

### **Movement I, “The Bronze Taotie”**

The first movement of the quartet, “The Bronze Taotie,” is inspired by an image of a bronze vessel from the Shang Dynasty. Chen explains:

The taotie was an auspicious symbol, which was used in primitive sacrificial ceremonies. It had the power to protect against evil. The ferocious beauty of the bronze art expressed an irresistible force and a historical inevitability.<sup>30</sup>

The Shang Dynasty is the earliest dynasty in Chinese history, also known as the Bronze Age of China. During the Shang Dynasty, it was generally believed that only a ruler could own bronze products.<sup>31</sup> Art forms from that time have been discovered for court use only, showing the reverence for imperial power. As one of the earliest Chinese fine arts, bronze art reached its peak during the Shang Dynasty.<sup>32</sup> In Chinese mythology, *taotie*, as one of the four evil creatures, represents fear and power, which acts as the deterrence against enemy. The image of *taotie* was commonly used as motif on ritual bronze vessel, for religious and sacrificial ceremonies.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Chen Yi, composer’s note for *The Ancient Chinese Beauty: For Recorders and String Orchestra* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 2011), [1].

<sup>31</sup> Michael Sullivan and Jerome Sibergeld, s.v. “Chinese Bronzes,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Chinese-bronzes>.

<sup>32</sup> Sullivan and Sibergeld, “Chinese Bronzes.”

<sup>33</sup> Sullivan and Sibergeld, “Chinese Bronzes.”

Chen employs several devices to portray the solemn image of the heavy bronze taotie and to build the intensity of the first movement: a homorhythmic texture in the string quartet, alternation between unison and dissonance, broadening of the quartet register, and rhythmic diminution over the course of the movement. In addition, this movement is dense and uses a slow tempo. In Chen's words, this movement is characterized as "the dark and dense blocks of moving chords with contrast of harmonic tones." This movement has three sections, A-A1-A2.

Chen uses compositional devices of homorhythmic structure and unison melody to represent her concept of the "irresistible force" of a bronze taotie, and to build intensity throughout the movement. The first two measures illustrate the homorhythmic texture and unison in pitch (see Example 1 in Appendix 1). In m.1, all four voices play E4, in the same sixteenth note pattern. Chen marks a strong accent on every note to emphasize the power of the homorhythm and unison pitch. The repetitive pattern creates energy toward the arrival at C-sharp 4 on the third beat of m. 2. The sudden halt of the sixteenth note pattern and the addition of a crescendo in m. 2 create an intense moment at the end of the first phrase in this movement.

Chen represents the irresistible force through the use of dissonant minor seconds that are often found between two upper and two lower voices. For example, the minor second in measure 7, created by the repeated E in the lower two voices, and the upper voices on F natural represents the ferocious beauty (see Example 2). The dissonant intervals among the four voices create tension in the quartet texture, contrasting the unison of the first six measures. Chen's concept of evoking the "ferocious beauty" of the

bronze taotie is supported by the alternation between unison melody and dissonant intervals.

Chen uses register as a compositional device to define contrasting sections and a change in melodic style. In the second section, starting at mm. 12, Chen expands the melodic range of the quartet. Unlike the first section in which the quartet plays in the same octave, here each voice plays in a different octave. This unison melody, comprising four octaves creates a new intensity, not through density but by utilizing a broadened range of the instruments (see Examples 3). At m. 17, the climactic point of this movement, Chen explores a three-note pattern C-sharp, B, and G sharp. The melodic material becomes restricted to these three notes in the upper register of each instrument. (see Examples 4). The interrupting motives from the first section (eg. mm. 6 and 11) combine to form the melodic material of the second section. The octave leap in two violins on the last beat of m.15 leads to this high register. The fortissimo dynamic, the accents, and the highest note C-sharp 6 form an intense melodic section before the return of the homorhythm of the third section.

Chen uses rhythmic diminution as a tool to build intensity and reflect the density of the bronze taotie. The last section of this movement starts from m. 25. In mm. 26 - 28, Chen uses rhythmic diminution from sextuplets to thirty-second notes, further reinforcing the intensity (see Example 5). The tightly packed rhythmic pattern, as well as the collection of minor seconds A-flat, G, F-sharp, and G-flat, recalls the density of the first section.

Chen uses two methods to evoke the “powerful yet remote” image of bronze taotie of the Shang Dynasty. For the first method, Chen uses an intense homorhythmic



pattern to evoke the powerful aspect of the taotie, and for the second method she uses harmonics to provide the “remote” atmosphere at the end of the second and third sections. The harmonics at the end of the second and third sections put time and space between the Shang Dynasty and the present, connecting the movement to the past. This reflects the distance between the antique bronze taotie and people today.

The static homorhythmic texture in three dense sections evokes the image of a solemn and ancient bronze art. To evoke the image of a taotie, Chen focuses on four devices to build a sense of intensity in this movement: homorhythm, alternation between unison and dissonant interval, rhythmic diminution and broadening of the quartet register. In contrast to the dense textures, she uses harmonics to build a sense of the remote.

## **Movement II, “The Rhymed Poems”**

The second movement, titled “The Rhymed Poems,” is derived from the fourth movement of the song cycle, in which the string quartet plays without voices. This movement is a revision of Chen’s previous composition of two songs, *As in a Dream*, sung in Mandarin. There are three versions of the two songs. The instrumental accompaniment varies among these three versions, but the soprano part remains the same. The first version is written for soprano, violin and cello and it was premiered in New York in 1988.<sup>34</sup> Premiered in 1994, the second version features soprano and two Chinese instruments, the *pipa* and *zheng*.<sup>35</sup> The third version is adapted for soprano and *zheng*,

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<sup>34</sup> Chen Yi, composer’s note for *As in a Dream: Two Songs for Soprano and Zheng* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 2010), [5].

<sup>35</sup> Hoi Lam Ip, “Chen Yi’s Song Set *As in a Dream*: The Merging of Chinese and Western Musical Idioms” (DMA diss., Arizona State University, Tempe, 2015), 6.

premiered in 2010.<sup>36</sup> According to Chen, this movement is based on the original trio version.<sup>37</sup> In this quartet version, Chen uses the Western string quartet as a tool for word painting, and evokes the images that the two poems present.

The lyrics of *As in a Dream* are from two Chinese poems by Li Qingzhao, a female poet from the Song dynasty. The text depicts a fantasy. Chen provides her own explanation and translation of these two poems (see Appendix 2). She states:

The reciting speech and lingering charm of the Chinese traditional opera are absorbed as nourishment so as to transmit the sentiment feeling of remembering the happy past times and treasuring flowers and spring scenery, leaving a lasting impression after the ending of the pieces.<sup>38</sup>

The influence of Chinese operatic style can be clearly heard throughout the movement. Chen uses several string techniques to imitate the timbre of Chinese plucked instruments, such as the *zheng*, which is commonly used to accompany the lyrical voice in Chinese operatic singing.<sup>39</sup> In addition, just as Chinese opera traditionally has no established form, this movement is through-composed. However, it is held together by a motive, which Chen develops over the course of the movement.

In my interview with Chen, she addressed the collaboration among voices. She said, “All layers are woven in the four string instruments, which could sound like reciting, and express emotion and atmosphere vividly.”<sup>40</sup> Even though Chen gives the soprano line to the viola, she does not let the viola line stand out, but blends it with the other three voices. Chen writes the other three voices in imitation of the viola line, and

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<sup>36</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *As in a Dream*, [5].

<sup>37</sup> Chen Yi, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *As in a Dream*, [5].

<sup>39</sup> Ip, “Song Set *As in a Dream*,” 21.

<sup>40</sup> Chen, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2018.

gives each instrument fragments of the melodic material. By passing around the melodic material the quartet remains balanced, unlike the song settings in which the audience would focus only on the melodic line. The chromatic passages and free rhythm present a dream-like atmosphere. The lack of tonal center or rhythmic patterns creates a dream-like atmosphere rather than providing a specific focal point for the audience.

Chen utilizes extended techniques of Western instruments to imitate the timbre of Chinese instruments and word painting to evoke Chinese imagery, albeit in a Western setting. As a former violinist, Chen's fluent usage of string techniques helps to portray the images held in the two poems. In this movement, Chen adopts single or grouped *glissandi* and trills as the main techniques to represent the influence of "Chinese operatic" styles.<sup>41</sup> In order to imitate Chinese plucked instruments, Chen uses *glissandi* or trills in the Western stringed instruments. Starting from m. 30 beat 3, Chen marks *glissandi with trill* for two and half measures. This is the only time that four voices play together in this movement, marking the climactic point at m. 33 (see Example 6). Starting from m. 31, the intense *glissandi* with trills start to build an agitated effect. The higher two voices and the two lower voices are in contrary motion, while the chaotic sound creates the sense of intensity. The contrary motion between the higher two voices and the two lower voices also imitates a technique of the *zheng*, another traditional Chinese stringed instrument, in which the two hands play in different directions aggressively when reaching the climactic point in a piece. At the passage of text, "By mistake we went into the recesses of the cluster of lotus," the music at m. 30 uses the intense *glissandi*

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<sup>41</sup> Chen, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

with trill in a suddenly faster tempo to portray the exciting feeling of accidentally getting lost in a beautiful place.

Chen also transfers the techniques of Chinese plucked instruments to Western strings in order to explore variations in timbre. At the beginning of the second movement, the cello has *pizzicati* with *glissandi* into a pitch from above and below, to create interest around a single pitch (see Example 7). The first three measures illustrate the pizzicato with slide. Here the cello imitates a common practice of the Chinese zither, which changes pitch by pressing down the string in various ways. This indirect approach to these pitches helps to express a “sentimental feeling” euphemistically.<sup>42</sup>

Percussion also plays an important role in Chinese opera by making distinctive sounds that to help depict different scenarios. In “The Rhymed Poems,” Chen uses extended techniques to create word painting. Chen instructs the performers to make percussive sound effects on their instruments.<sup>43</sup> In m. 38, Chen marks “use left palm to beat the wood of the instrument” in all voices except the viola (see Example 8). This instruction serves a specific musical purpose. Because the text in the song is “paddled by bending to the oars,” Chen intends to evoke the image of splashing oars from a rowboat.<sup>44</sup> The imitative rhythm gives the feeling of continuous water spray. In addition, the diminuendo marking in each sextuplet suggests the water droplets getting smaller, creating a sound picture of the text.

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<sup>42</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *As in a Dream*, [5].

<sup>43</sup> Ip, “Song Set *As in a Dream*,” 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ip, “Song Set *As in a Dream*,” 28.

This movement takes advantage of the imitation of Chinese operatic style by imitating the timbre of Chinese instruments. All four voices serve equally as tools for word painting, attempting to evoke images from the two poems.

### **Movement III, “The Secluded Melody”**

The third movement, titled “The Secluded Melody,” is borrowed from a 1986 composition entitled *Sprout*. *Sprout* was originally composed for standard Western string orchestra, which includes violin I, violin II, viola, cello and bass. It was used as the sixth movement in the song cycle for choir and string quartet, and she extracts the string quartet parts from that iteration, without the double bass, to create this movement.

This movement is inspired by a composition for the *qin*, “Secluded Orchid in the Mode of Jie Shi,” which is the oldest notated score in China, dating from the Six Dynasties Period.<sup>45</sup> *Qin*, a seven-string Chinese zither, has been played since ancient times, and is made of wood with silk strings. Literati and learned people have traditionally favored the *qin* for its great humility and refinement, which embody the spirit of literati and sage in ancient China.<sup>46</sup> Chen states that the overall atmosphere and the melodic style of the *qin* music inspired her while composing.<sup>47</sup> As the title of the *qin* music suggests, “secluded orchid” portrays scenery of a vale orchid with pureness and elegance. The orchid in Chinese culture represents integrity, nobility and friendship. In

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<sup>45</sup> Chen Yi, composer’s note for *Sprout: For String Orchestra* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 1986), [2].

<sup>46</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, “The Case of Chinese *Qin* (zither) Music,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, (2001): 39-40.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Yi, e-mail message to author, January 15, 2019.

ancient China, it was associated with virility, which was particularly a symbol of a literate and learned gentleman.

The manuscript of “Secluded Orchid” is written in *jianzipu* (character notation), which gives a detailed description of the performing techniques, such as the fingering of two hands, the order of plucking the strings, etc.. In this case, *qin* players of today have differing understandings of the manuscript, thus there are different performances of this piece. Chen uses the pitch material from Wu Wenguang’s version of “Secluded Orchid”.<sup>48</sup> Wu is a qinist as well as a musicologist specializing in ancient Chinese music.

This movement follows the ethics and portrays the spirit of the Chinese elite class in the Six Dynasties period by using “thoughtful melody,”<sup>49</sup> elaborate texture, and harmonics. Even in the *vivace* section, the texture and melodic pattern are simple and light. There is little contrast between voices, and they are mostly in canon or have the same rhythm.

Chen adopts several musical materials from Wu’s version of “Secluded Orchid.” First, the expressive five-note pattern in the theme of Lento section is derived from Wu’s score (see Examples 9.1 and 9.2). The notes in the second measure of the first violin [E-flat, F, G, A G] mark the first arrival, which are the same as the notes in mm. 18 - 19 of Wu’s score. Second, the rhythmic pattern in *vivace* section is also derived from Wu’s score (see Examples 10.1 and 10.2). Third, the cello solo in m. 34 can be traced from the manuscript as well. Chen takes the pitch material [F-sharp, E, D, C] from the manuscript, and expands it by adding passing tones between these four pillar notes, as well as rhythmic complexity (see Examples 11.1 and 11.2).

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<sup>48</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *Sprout*, [2].

<sup>49</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *Sprout*, [2].

Following the Western traditional form of the third movement of a string quartet, Chen adopts ternary form in this movement. There are three clear sections, marked as Lento (mm. 1 -36), Vivace (mm. 37-63) and Lento (mm. 64-82), connected by two transitional passages. The first and last sections of this movement are in a slow tempo, quite dynamic and use the same melodic material in chromatic modulation from F mixolydian to F-sharp mixolydian, respectively. The lively middle section is in double tempo, in contrast to the outer two sections. This is further emphasized by the change of meter from compound 8/8 to simple 4/4. These three sections are linked by two transitional passages between the first and the second section, and the second and the third. The first transition (mm. 29-36) begins with a change in time signature from 7/8 to 8/8, and the key change to G mixolydian. The second transitional section (mm. 64-66) utilizes the similar melodic material, but it reduced to 1/3 of the length of the first transition. Both transitions adopt the lyrical style of the first and the last sections.

In order to imitate the quiet sound of the *qin*, all four voices are muted throughout the whole movement to create a tranquil atmosphere. However, she incorporates a Western use of dynamics to shape the melodic contour. This movement begins at a dynamic of *piano*, which is maintained until the *poco a poco cresc* in m. 15. There is a long crescendo through eight measures, reaching the first *forte* in m. 22, where the first violin hits the highest pitch. The dynamics of the first transition help to carry the momentum out of the climactic point at mm. 22 into the upcoming Vivace section. Unlike the relatively plain first section, the middle section has many dynamic outbursts. The change in m. 63 from *forte* to *fortissimo* and the unison texture abruptly ends the second section. The transition material leads the movement back to the atmosphere of the

first section. The dynamics help to shape the melodic material of the movement; however, the muted timbre maintains the sound of the *qin*.

Chen adopts a Chinese scale, the *yanyue* scale, for this movement. There are three flats in the key signature of the first section, B, E and A, and F serves as the tonic. However, the A-flat is always raised to A-natural. Therefore, the scale Chen using is F mixolydian, which the Chinese refer to as the *yanyue* scale. The *yanyue* scale is one of three kinds of seven-note scales in Chinese music. Based on the pentatonic scale, *yanyue* on C has two additional notes, F and B-flat. In other words, the *yanyue* scale is a diatonic scale with a lowered seventh degree, or what is referred to as a mixolydian scale in Western music.

Chen uses a learned compositional technique, the canon, to portray the learned Chinese scholars from the Six Dynasties period. The double canon, one at the octave and the other at the unison, “weaves the four voices together” in the first section, which lasts for fourteen measures.<sup>50</sup> The first violin and cello are a pair, and the second violin and viola another pair. The canon occurs at an interval of seven measures, and the paired instruments use the same notes in different registers. This canon is also present in the final section, with some variation. Chen organizes the four parts into two pairs and creates two different types of canons with each pair. The second violin and viola form a strict canon. The second violin begins, and the viola enters two beats later at the same register. The second pair is not a strict canon. The cello enters three beats after the first violin, and the cello leaves out a melodic segment found in the upper part. The

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<sup>50</sup> Chen, e-mail message to author, January 15, 2019.



restatements of the theme within short time intervals create a structural stretto in this section.

This movement takes the musical elements from the *qin* score and arrange them into a canonic setting. With thinner textures formed by contrapuntal lines of the canon, Chen creates a lighter sound, which allows the delicate melody of the double canon to more clearly portray the elite class of the Six Dynasties. The Chinese scale helps to reveal the Chinese identity of this movement, especially the uses of pentatonic scale in the cadential point.

#### **Movement IV, The Dancing Ink**

The fourth movement, titled “The Dancing Ink,” is inspired by *caoshu*, Chinese calligraphy from the Tang Dynasty. As Chen states, “the strings have woodwind-like passages, representing the exaggerated shapes and gestures in Chinese cursive from the Tang Dynasty.”<sup>51</sup> Chen also emphasized her appreciation of Chinese cursive in her program note to another composition; she states, “this energetic, dramatic and forceful calligraphy made such a deep impression on me that I wanted to translate it into music, as a metaphor for the flourish contemporary music is making in our new society.”<sup>52</sup> As the movement title suggests, the idea of dancing shapes in Chinese calligraphy provides the main image for this movement.

Chinese calligraphy is closely related to Chinese painting, and both play a prominent role in Chinese visual arts. *Caoshu*, meaning “grass script” or “draft script,” is

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<sup>51</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

<sup>52</sup> Chen Yi, composer’s note for *Momentum: for Orchestra* (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, 1998), [2].

a cursive variant of the standard Chinese scripts. This script was developed during the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), and it grew to its peak during the Tang dynasty.<sup>53</sup> *Caoshu* has the fullest freedom of expressive stroke among all types of Chinese calligraphy. The creation of *caoshu* allows the calligrapher to produce an object of abstract art rather than one for general use.<sup>54</sup> There is no rule about the number of strokes in characters, the even spacing between characters, or maintaining the same approximate size of the characters. Strokes can be varied by reducing to single scrawls or abstract abbreviations of curves and dots, and with varying thickness and modulation to show a great variety of shapes.<sup>55</sup> *Caoshu* as an art form is presented through literature, such as poems, not as individual characters. Each character is written using a single, continuous stroke to express the content of the literature.

The image of *caoshu* provides the main image for Chen for this energetic and dramatic movement. *Caoshu* is characterized by starting from a single point and connecting what would have been individual strokes, unlike the standard form of a modern Chinese character, which uses a specific number of individual strokes. Like the continuous brush strokes in *caoshu*, all four voices of the string quartet are tightly layered together in a fast tempo. The four voices trade the melody in such a way that the movement gathers momentum, mirroring the overlapping strokes in *caoshu*. At four instances, all four instruments have an eighth rest that creates the sense of brief lifting movement used between strokes and characters.

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<sup>53</sup> Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, s.v. “Caoshu,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 20 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/caoshu>.

<sup>54</sup> Chiange Yee, s.v. “Chinese Calligraphy,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 20 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Chinese-calligraphy>.

<sup>55</sup> Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, s.v. “Caoshu.”

This movement does not have an established form, but two motives and the recurring interval of the ninth to portray the dramatic image of *caoshu* unify the different sections of this movement. For the first motive, Chen adopts a four-note pattern, presented in the first three measures, and develops this set throughout the whole movement. The first section (mm.1-16) is constructed by two sets of the four-note pattern, which Chen shows in the first three measures (see Example 12). One is [A4, D3, G4, F4], and the other one is [E5, A4, D5, C5]. The contour of these two sets is characterized by movement down a fifth, up a fourth, and then down a second. Chen develops this pattern by moving it to different pitch levels and using different rhythms throughout the movement.

The second motive, the ascending second, first happens in m. 55, giving this movement more dramatic effect (see Example 13). The chromatic passage in fast sixteenth notes gives the feeling of “exaggerated shapes and gestures”<sup>56</sup> as she mentions in the program note. Chen imitates the continuous *caoshu* brushstroke by connecting the four instruments with the ascending-seconds motive. The viola and cello start the eighth note pattern of ascending seconds in m. 55. One measure later, two violins play the second motive in two times faster than two lower voices. While both violins play the same notes in different registers, the two lower voices have the ascending second motive in contrary motion and *pizzicato*. Just as the usage of the first motive, the ascending second motive is developed until the end.

Apart from the two main motives, the use of interval of the ninth appears many times. I believe that the interval leap of the ninth represent the flowing, angular strokes of

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<sup>56</sup> Chen, composer’s note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

*caoshu*. In m. 4, the first violin plays D6 on the second beat. The leap from C4 to D6 is heightened with a *crescendo* to *mezzoforte*. Later, in m. 16, the first violin has a relatively lyrical melody, constructed by the first motive with a downward ninth after the fourth note. The irregular accent with a big leap suggests the dramatic feeling of this piece; it also resembles the bold shape of *caoshu*. Chen uses the four-note motive, mentioned above, interval of a second and the interval of a ninth to unify the movement.

Chen ends the string quartet with this restless, fast-running movement. To tie the whole string quartet together, Chen gave the first and the last movements the same ending bass note, following the string quartet tonal design. This unifies the endings between the outer two movements.

## Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, I argue that Chen's *From the Path of Beauty* creates a sonic journey that comprises the merits of Chinese and Western elements. While she employs Western instruments, her colorful use of the string quartet based on traditional Chinese high art reflects Chinese influences and aesthetics. Specifically, *From the Path of Beauty* evokes an aesthetic appreciation for the possibilities of both Chinese and Western cultures. The first and second movements evoke Shang bronze art and Song poetry through different compositional devices. The third and last movements portray the images of elite class from the Six Dynasties and calligraphy from the Tang Dynasty through different timbres and techniques. The dramatic homorhythm in the first movement provides a dense texture and static feeling, which helps to portray the solemn image of bronze *taotie*. In contrast, the second movement has a thin texture, characterized by the alternation between voices, depicts the sentimental mood of the poem. The third movement, the only movement that uses traditional form, is in a delicate canonic texture to portray the image of an educated scholar. In contrast, the energetic last movement develops one primary pattern throughout, evoking the continuous and dramatic shape of *caoshu*.

I hope that this research will inspire performers and audiences with an improved understanding of Chen's compositional style, which is imaginative in her use of traditional Chinese sounds and idiomatic regarding the use of Western techniques in her works. Starting with an idea of presenting Chinese art form, Chen uses both Western and

Chinese musical styles to portray the certain characteristics of the desired image. To the performer, understanding the importance of the dramatic effect in evoking imagery and poetic atmosphere in Chen's works will provide direction and enhance the enjoyment of performing these pieces.

## Appendix 1: Musical Examples

**Example 1.** Chen Yi, *From the Path of Beauty*, I, mm. 1-2.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

$\text{♩} = 60$

sul G

*f*

*ff*

V

**Example 2.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, I, mm. 7-8.

Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello staves. The Violin I and II parts are in treble clef, and the Viola and Cello parts are in bass clef. The music is in 4/4 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

**Example 3.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, I, mm. 12-15.

**Example 4.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, I, m. 17.

Example 4 shows measures 17-18 of the first movement of Chen's *From the Path of Beauty*. The score is for four strings: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. All instruments play a rapid, ascending sixteenth-note scale starting on G4, marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The measures end with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

**Example 5.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, I, mm. 26-28.

Example 5 shows measures 26-28 of the first movement. The score is for four strings: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. Measures 26-27 feature a continuous, rapid sixteenth-note scale in all parts, marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 28 concludes the passage with a final chord and a double bar line.

**Example 6.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, II, mm. 31-32.

Example 6 shows measures 31-32 of the second movement. The score is for four strings: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. Measures 31-32 feature a continuous, rapid sixteenth-note scale in all parts, marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The measures end with a final chord and a double bar line.



**Example 7.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, II, m. 1-3, cello line.



**Example 8.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, II, m. 38.

**Example 9.1.** Wu Wenguang, *Secluded Orchid in the Mode of Jie Shi*.



**Example 9.2.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, III, mm. 2-3, first violin.



**Example 10.1.** Wu, *Secluded Orchid in the Mode of Jie Shi*.



**Example 10.2.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, III, mm. 37-38, first violin line



**Example 11.1.** Wu, *Secluded Orchid in the Mode of Jie Shi*.



**Example 11.2,** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, III, m. 34, celloline.



**Example 12.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, IV, mm. 1-3, two violin lines.



**Example 13.** Chen, *From the Path of Beauty*, IV, mm. 55-56.

55

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

*mf* *cresc.*

*pizz.*

*mf* *cresc.*

Detailed description: This musical score snippet covers measures 55 and 56. It features four staves: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The Violin I staff begins with a fermata over a half note in measure 55, followed by a melodic line in measure 56. The Violin II staff has a melodic line in measure 55 and continues in measure 56. The Viola and Violoncello staves play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in measure 55, marked with *mf* and *cresc.* dynamics. The Violoncello staff also includes a *pizz.* (pizzicato) marking in measure 55. The key signature has one flat, and the time signature is 4/4.

## Appendix 2: Text of *As in a Dream*

### *As in a Dream*<sup>57</sup>

#### I.

I remember many times  
We were in the sunset  
At the pavilion by the rivulet,  
Got drunk and lost our way back.  
Returned by boat after thoroughly enjoying ourselves,  
By mistakes we went into the recesses of the cluster of lotus.  
Paddled by bending to the oars,  
Roused the gulls and egrets to flight  
From the sand bars.

#### II.

Last night fine rain, gusts of wind,  
Deep sleep could not dissolve the leftover wine.  
I asked the person who was rolling up my curtains,  
The answer was: "The begonias are still the same."  
"Don't you know? Don't you know it is time  
For the green to flourish and the red to wither?"

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<sup>57</sup> Chen, composer's note for *From the Path of Beauty for String Quartet*, [4].

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