

Asia Society  
Presents

## Soul Journey: Traditional Nanyin Music Reimagined



Friday, April 28  
8:00 P.M.

Asia Society  
725 Park Avenue  
New York



Soul Journey is presented by the Singapore Arts Council and Asia Society, as part of its Citi Series on Arts and Culture

### **About Soul Journey**

Asia Society presents the North American premiere of *Soul Journey*, a performance bringing new life to the traditional *nanyin* form. Meaning "music from the south," *nanyin* is an ancient style of Chinese music characterized by slow, gentle and melodic sounds.

In *Soul Journey*, Singapore's Siong Leng Musical Association merges traditional *nanyin* music and its Zen influences with other elements such as vocal, the bongo cajon, Indian tabla, masked dance, and more. The performance blends the traditional and the new, and draws on the influences of distant cultures from *nanyin's* origins along the Tang era maritime trade routes.

The 23-member company aims to engage the audience's five senses, inviting attendees to participate in a hand-washing ritual and offering a tasting of Chinese tea prior to the performance start. In today's hectic world, *Soul Journey* aims to provide a rejuvenating experience for the senses and nourishment for the soul and mind.

The performances are organized in conjunction with the Asia Society Museum exhibition *Secrets of the Sea: A Tang Shipwreck and Early Trade in Asia*, on view through June 4. Co-organized by the Singapore Civilisations Museum, Singapore, the exhibition explores the exchange of goods and ideas between China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, more than a thousand years ago.

### **About Nanyin**

*Nanyin* is a style of Chinese classical music originating in the southern Chinese province of Fujian. *Nanyin* is now popular in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, as well as among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The city of Quanzhou, located in Fujian, was a major port in the 7th century CE, the period between the Sui and Tang eras. Situated upon an important maritime trade route, it was a conduit for elements of distant cultures that helped form *nanyin* music.

*Nanyin* is typified by slow, gentle, delicate melodies which employ four basic scales, and is performed on five instruments: *pie* (wood clapper), *gibe* (four-stringed lute or *pipa*), *samhen* (three-stringed lute or *sanxian*), *xiao* (vertical flute or *dongxiao*), and *lihen* (two-stringed fiddle or *erxian*). Heterophony in *nanguan* proceeds simultaneously along two lines known as skeleton (*gu*) and meat (*ba*). Each individual instrument has a fixed role within the instrumental grouping. The *pie* is usually performed by the vocalist, and therefore not considered a main instrument, while the *dinxiguan* usually takes the central role. The *gibe* provides a simple but stable tempo and correct rhythm; the *samhen* lends a longer vibration of solid lower octave notes to the skeletal melody; and *xiao*, meanwhile, supplements the lutes by adding lightness and spirit.

*Nanyin* repertory falls into three overlapping styles, called *zhi*, *pu* and *qu*, differentiated by the contexts in which they occur, by their function, the value accorded them by musicians and by their formal natures. The *zhi* is considered the most "serious" repertoire: it is a purely instrumental suite normally more than thirty minutes in length, of two to five sections. Each is associated with a lyric that alludes to a story but, although this may denote origins in song or opera, today *zhi* is an important and respected instrumental repertory. *Pu* literally means "notation," and these are pieces that have no associated texts. It is an instrumental style that uses a wider range than *zhi*, emphasizes technical display. *Qu* is a vocal repertory which is lighter and less conservative in repertory and performance than *zhi*.

Traditionally, performances were not simply entertainment, but also carried strong associations with various broader social practices, such as ritual ceremonies to the music god *Minhu Longgun* each spring and autumn, or as a part of funeral processions. Musicians were also able to expand their own social networks, gain status, or even be invited to enjoy food and drink through their involvement with *nanyin* music.

The rich repertoire of songs and scores of *nanyin* preserve ancient folk music and poems, influencing opera, puppet theatre and other performing art traditions. In 2009, *nanyin* was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

### **About Siong Leng Musical Association**

Siong Leng Musical Association was founded in 1941 to promote and preserve traditional *nanyin* and *Liyuan* Opera in Singapore.

During the 1970s, during a marked decline in the interest of *nanyin*, Siong Leng Musical Association implemented plans to reinvent and rejuvenate the form. The group organized the International *Nanyin* Symposium in Quanzhou and Xiamen in China and tour the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1980s. In 1983, the association won the third prize in the folk solo category at the 37th Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod with *Reminiscence*, composed specifically for the conference. The instrument ensemble also took fourth prize in the folk ensemble category with the piece *Trotting Horse*. With these awards, the association has put *nanyin* on the world map of music.

The association is committed to keeping *nanyin* music alive in today's multi-cultural, technologically progressive Singapore. The association has reached out to students through the Traditional Arts Education Scheme, publishing two textbooks on *nanyin* and *liyuan hokkien* Chinese opera for use in class. Over the past few years, it has also sent selected talents for training in China to raise performing standards on stage and produce high quality and diverse programs, thus establishing Siong Leng's professional standing.

### **About Performing Arts at Asia Society**

Asia Society's Performing Arts Program is an intrinsic component of Asia Society's commitment to sharing vital aspects of Asian culture by placing creative expression at the center of a more comprehensive understanding of culture. Whether it is experimental artists exploring new territory or traditional artists bringing to life the voices of a great legacy, the Asia Society creates a platform for connecting and engaging artists and audiences to build bridges of understanding. We have presented extraordinary artists from renowned names such as Lang Lang, Tan Dun, Abida Parveen, Shen Wei, David Henry Hwang, Sardono and Malavika Sarukkai, to new emerging voices that we feel need to be shared more broadly. Beginning in 1957 with New York's first performance by Indian maestro Ravi Shankar, the Asia Society has presented performances across the United States and in Asia. These include original commissioned work from Asian and Asian-American artists, as well as non-Asian artists influenced by Asia. From Indonesian hip-hop and Shanghai electronica to traditional performing arts forms such as Indian *Kuttiyatam*, Burmese *Zat Pwe*, Chinese *Xiju* or Pakistani *Qawwali*, we foster artistic exchange and provide creative opportunities for artists. For more information, please visit [AsiaSociety.org](http://AsiaSociety.org).

### **Asia Society Staff:**

**Boon Hui Tan**, Vice President, Global Arts & Culture & Director, Asia Society Museum

**Rachel Cooper**, Director, Global Performing Arts and Cultural Initiatives

**Rachel Rosado**, Assistant Director, Cultural Programs

**Sarah McCaffery**, Executive Associate

### **Technical Staff:**

**Oscar de la fe Colon**, Stage Manager

**Ed Fasbender**, Lighting Technician

**David Mason**, Audio Technician

**Oscar Moronta**, Video Technician

*This program is made possible, in part, by Citi Foundation, as part of Asia Society's Citi Series on Arts and Culture. Major support for performances at Asia Society is provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Helen and Will Little, the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Inc.*