

Travel and Advanced Study in Europe (1950s)

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Lucien Wang and her travels

A) The "Trigger" For Her Decision To Embark On Further Training

The key event which triggered Lucien Wang's decision happened in February 1952 when Alfred Cortot was travelling past Singapore by ship and met with Lucien Wang on board [i]. Cortot advised her to embark on further musical training, but she refused in order to take care of her ailing mother. However, it was only upon her mother's encouragement to press on that she relented and decided to embark on further training in Europe spanning over 3 key periods (in 1953, 1956 and 1959). The competencies acquired during this period were also vital to her legacy both as a musician and a pedagogue.

B) The 1950s Advanced Training Period and Travels

Lucien Wang's key activities are as follows.

1) 1953:

June: Lucien Wang undertook classes on music interpretation in Paris [ii],[iii]

Sept: She attended a course of interpretation at Conservatoire de Musique de Lausanne from 4 to 20 sep 1953, conducted by Alfred Cortot. The course was dedicated to masterpieces from romantic epoch: Weber, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schuman & Lizst.[iv]

October: She attended classes for vocal training in the Scuoladi Educazione Vocale di Manfredi Polveresi in Rome

Post-course Travel: She visited her friends and stayed in London, New York and San Francisco, before returning to Singapore in April 1954.

2) 1956:

In Lausanne, Lucien Wang took advanced piano lessons on modern piano technique under Alfred Cortot.[iii] She was also invited by Cortot to be an examiner in the Paris Conservatory.[v]

Similarly, she travelled after her lessons, where she went to Switzerland, Paris, Norway, Germany, Austria, Athens and Turkey, before heading to Bangkok to visit friends and returning to Singapore in October.[vi] Compared to 1953, Lucien Wang's travels in 1956 were better documented because she continually sent postcards and letters back to her mother during this period. This will be discussed more extensively in the following section.



Letters by Lucien Wang to her mother in 1956



Lucien Wang in Austria, 1956.

3) 1959:

August: Lucien Wang studied at the Academe Musicale Chigiana under Alfred Cortot and Guido Agosti. She recounts that her lessons were rigorous -- she undertook 10 classes in 3 weeks (of which content included Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas), and practice usually started post dinner until 11pm or later. Breaks were only 2 or 3 minutes long.[iii]

She also attended a concert by the students of Emilio Pujol at Palazzo Chigi Saracini in Siena on 8 September 1959, organised by the Academy. [vii]

Unlike her previous trips, she returned to Singapore immediately after the course due to her mother's ailing health.



Lucien Wang (standing) with Alfred Cortot (2nd from left) in Siena, 1959

C) Friends and Travels

After attending lessons in Europe, Lucien Wang took the opportunities in 1953 and 1956 to travel around the US, Europe and Asia for weeks at a time and to meet up with old friends. She usually stayed at a friend's place and would send out letters from her current location to some of her closer friends such as Margaret Auger and Elizabeth Howe [ix],[x] and update each other on their lives.

During her travels, Lucien Wang also made new friends from outside the music circle who would then go on to become life-long pen pals, such as Nina P. Bricker [viii], who was a then research engineer for Goodyear Aircraft Corporation when they first met in Athens in 1956.

The Chinese letters and postcards which Lucien Wang sent to her mother in 1956 provided much insight into her travels. Lucien Wang was also very open to meeting new people and making friends with them. On her train ride to the Swiss mountain station of Jungfrauoch in mid-September 1956, she met fellow passengers of German, Indian, Australian and other nationalities. Despite language barriers with the German passenger, she was willing to hold a conversation with him and to get to know other people whom she encountered on the move [xi].

Despite her love for travelling, Lucien Wang remained attached to her mother back in Singapore. She often made it a point to send postcards and letters back to 6B Loke Yew Street, narrating her experiences to her mother every few days. These letters were written whenever she found available time [xii]. Lucien Wang would make time for writing even when she was hard-pressed in her schedules. There was an occasion when her lessons ended late and she could not purchase tickets for a train ride the next day; yet she committed time to narrate even these last-minute changes [xi]. Lucien Wang even penned a quick letter to her mother while waiting for her professor to come for the next class [xii].

D) Lucien Wang's Disposition as Shown by her Travels

Aside from her attachment and care for her mother, Lucien Wang's travels shed important light on her character and personality. She was rigorous in terms of her planning -- her return flight details and travel itinerary were already planned, which she wrote to inform her mother on 6th September (her scheduled return was on the 21st October 1956!). [xiii]

Furthermore, Lucien Wang was very culturally attuned. She attended theatre and concert performances regularly, and was personally very impressed with the Chinese decor when she visited the home of a Guangzhou-born student she met in Lausanne. [xiv] This cultural sensitivity also included a historical awareness of the societies she visited. In her letter back home from Oslo, Lucien Wang told her mother that the people in the city were still plagued by yesteryear horrors of WWII and it loomed over their collective memory [xv]. She also liked to compare the highlights, as well as the gripes, of the different cities she visited, and to express these thoughts in her letters back home.

Her historical awareness was also infused with humour, as can be seen by her description of how the Dutch lost a "juicy, sumptuous piece of meat" when Indonesia gained its independence! [xvi]

Lucien Wang was amiable and appreciative of those whom she came across. In her travels in Germany, she described how an old man aided her with her luggage, and even helped her to avoid taxi fares by giving some travel advice. She treated the man to a meal the next day she saw him [xvii]. Her other letters also include her observation of different persons, and the interesting circumstances in which she came to meet them. In all, a rigorous and organised persona, political astuteness, keen awareness of cultural elements and a love of meeting people were evident in the letters she sent.

[i] Newspaper: ???????? (Mdm Lucien Wang's Interview), ???? (Nanyang Siang Pau), 25 July 1954: Chinese C002

[ii] ?Testimonial: Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris, signed Alfred Cortot F2.003. Issued June 1953. French F2.003

[iii] Newspaper: C030 - ???????? (The teacher I knew, Mr Alfred Cortot), Publication Unknown. 17 July 1962. C030

[iv] Certificate: Conservatoire de Musique de Lausanne. Issued 20 Sept 1953: French F2.001

[v] Newspaper: Lucien Wang: Portrait of Singapore's Leading Piano Teacher, Publication Unknown. Jan/Feb 1992. E1.026

[vi] Passport: Lucien Wang's passport #16855, issued 13 March 1952

[vii] Certificate: Academia Musicale Chigina, Issued 8 September 1959: Italian I2.001

[viii] Letter: Nina Bricker to Lucien Wang, 29 August 1956: English E3.052

[ix] Letter: Margaret H.R. Auger to Lucien Wang, 29 Jan 1954. English E3.084

[x] Letter: Elizabeth Howe to Lucien Wang, 21 Oct 1946. English E3.040

[xi] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, 17 Sept 1956; Chinese C184

[xii] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, 8 Sept 1956: Chinese C187

[xiii] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, 6 Sept 1956: Chinese C186

[xiv] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, 19 Sept 1956: Chinese C183

[xv] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, 25 Sept 1956: Chinese C192

[xvi] Letter: Lucien Wang to her mother, Oct 3 1956: Chinese C193