

Musicologist Surveys Organs in China: An Interview with David Francis Urrows

[Extract from the Palo Alto/Peninsula Chapter of the AGO May 2019 Newsletter

‘Peninsula Pipings’: Interviewed by editor Katherine Ou.]



Rieger-Kloss Organ, Xinghai Concert Hall; Guangzhou

Earlier this month, one of our chapter members shared with me some of his professional activities in China. David Francis Urrows, former dean of the PAPen AGO (1997) lived in San Mateo from 1993-1997, where

he worked as the Executive Director for the Ragazzi Boys Chorus and was organist at Christ Church, San Mateo. Since then, he has again lived and worked in China, where he launched the Pipe Organ in China Project, a catalog of all known pipe organs in China and Hong Kong. For this issue of the newsletter I had the opportunity to interview him about the project and his 2017 book, *Keys to the Kingdom: a history of the pipe organ in China*. What follows is our Q&A:

Katherine Ou: What first made you interested in taking on this project?

Dr. Urrows: The whole Pipe Organ in China Project arose by accident. A colleague knocked on my door during my first month [in Hong Kong], and asked if I had ever heard of a pipe organ in Shanghai with bamboo pipes. I hadn't, and it all went from there. I learned enough Chinese to read the literature (sort of), and enough Cantonese to communicate well in Hong Kong. After the Handover [of Hong Kong from the British government to the People's Republic of China] in 1997, it became increasingly important in HK's universities to have a 'local' (i.e. China-based) research project. Research on non-China topics gets little or no support now. I was able to get funding, eventually, for the POCP, but after 1997 almost none for my critical edition of the music of Otto Dresel.

KO: In your own words, could you tell me the goals of The Pipe Organ in China Project?

DU: They are explained on the website (the website is all 'my own words' ☺), but initially it was just a census of instruments built in, or imported to China between 1600 and 1949. When the project started I didn't include Hong Kong or Macau (as being still under European governments, which seemed to make them anomalous to my topic), or the Mainland after 1949, because there were no new installations on the Mainland after 1939 until a single one arrived in

Beijing in 1989, and then nothing else for six further years. My initial work was published in *The American Organist*, in three parts in 1993. There was very little feedback about this, except from my friends. No one at that time took China seriously in connection with the pipe organ.

After I came back to HK in 1997, I realized two things. One, was that I would have to include HK and Macau in the Census after all, and the other was a growing awareness of all the contracts that were being let for new pipe organs on the Mainland. So the Project was expanded from a purely historical one to what it is today.

KO: How many organs do you have cataloged?

DU: As of today, there are 189 pipe organs in the Census, dating from 1600 to 2019. There are further instruments under construction of which I am aware, and some reports of historic organs that are not verifiable (at least at present). The Project is firmly dedicated to the pipe organ, and does not generally cover hybrid or electronic instruments, or the reed organ/harmonium.



Clavierorganum from ca. 1620; Macau

KO: Your book, *Keys to the Kingdom: A History of the Pipe Organ in China* was published in 2017, and is described as "a meta-study made up of micro-historical records in Chinese, European, and North American archives and libraries...". Could you explain how you performed the research for your book, and elaborate on it so that organists with less academic research experience could understand?

DU: It's difficult to describe in a short statement. The research involved a lot of world-wide archive and library work at first. Much of the information came from architectural histories and church mission histories, magazines, financial records, newspapers, letter collections, and the like. There was (and to some extent, still is) next to no useful music history literature to help here, and what little has been published by either non-musician China scholars, or by musicians not conversant with the pipe organ in a technical sense, is often spectacularly inaccurate.

The second thing was site visits. Even though none of the pre-1949 installations in Mainland China could be found when I started (I did find the 'remains' of three of them, eventually) site visits to major cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and the like, did produce some data, and this led to the third source of information, interviews. I have been very guarded about this last part, as any China scholar will understand.

When the project expanded in 1997 to include new instruments, these could for the most part be located, visited, played, seen, and the buyers and builders contacted for other (often conflicting) information regarding funding, design, builder selection, etc. Eventually, from about

2002, I was able to get sporadic funding for my own work; research institutes involved in China and China mission studies began to pay attention to what I was doing; and with their help I was able then to visit remote parts of Mainland China to track down the sites of other installations. The piece-meal nature of this kind of data collection over a period of many years is why I call this body of information and research approach ‘micro-historical’. I also hoped to show through my work in writing the book, as well as the finished book itself, how research on such a complicated and off-beat topic might be pursued, and thus I call the book a ‘meta-study.’

KO: Even though your book has been published, you still work on updating your organ census to include new installations, sharing discoveries on older instruments, and correcting errors in previous information. Can you tell me about one or two of the most exciting developments you have seen happening in the Chinese organ scene since your book's publication?

DU: I don't think there have been any significant developments in the past two years. Mainland China is stuck in its ‘Cultural Great Leap Forward’. This began under Jiang Zemin, and now, under Xi Jinping the imperative is to urbanize (or suburbanize) all of China. This is not working, but the system doesn't allow for a rethink or correction. One small part of the new ‘Leap Forward’ is the ‘Organ Race’, which is connected in turn to the building of *dajunyuan* (Grand Theaters) in almost every city down to fourth-tier places like Mudanjiang.

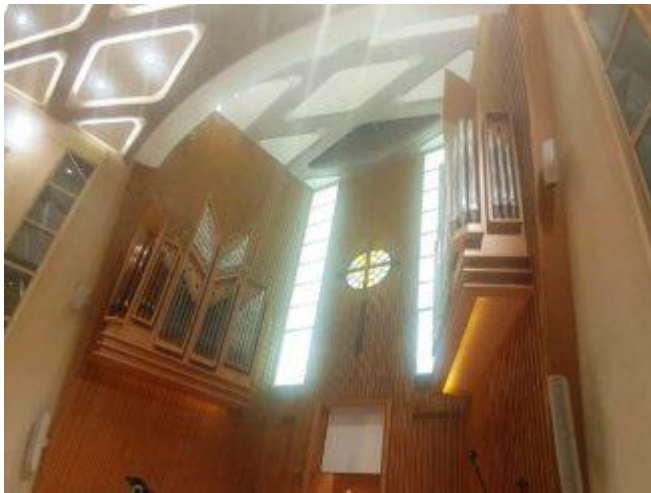


2014 Klais Organ, Linyi Grand Theater

As I observe in my book, this is in many ways only benefitting organ builders; the instruments themselves are often left to rot, and become “expensive pieces of furniture” (to quote one China organist.) All of this is tied in turn to what has been called the ‘culture of emulation.’

However, the Website has led to some new information coming in. The presence of a locally-built bamboo organ in the Hankou region in the 1840s was quite a startling find (not made by me, but one of my colleagues.) Since the website went up at the end of June 2018, there have been almost 7,000 hits, which I find almost incredible; but of course I am very pleased with the traffic even though I am not selling anything! I don't get a penny from the sales of the book, by the way.

KO: Historically, the pipe organ in Europe and North America has been an instrument for Christian worship, the crowning glory of many grand concert halls, and a marvel of engineering. How does it fit into the culture of China, a mainly secular, non-western nation? What motivates the Chinese people to install and keep pipe organs?



2012 Reichel Organ, China Congregational Church; Hong Kong

DU: Again, this topic is addressed at length in the book, in Chapters 6 and 7. It is not the Chinese people who are driving this, rather it is the one-party government and the 'Cultural Great Leap Forward.' There is, as you rightly point out, a kind of irony in seeing so many new pipe organs installed in China which, with their iconic connection to Christian (and other) faith, traditions, and worship practices, can only be obnoxious to Communist ideology. However, the desire to emulate Western cultural norms (the pipe organ as the backdrop for the concert hall stage) now trumps everything else. And then there is the competitive aspect ('If city

X has a 50-stop pipe organ, ours has to be bigger!') Although the situation is now changing slowly, all but a small fraction of the new organs are installed in concert halls, not churches, and so are civic instruments. What has lagged behind and is only now starting to catch up, is the development of study programs for the organ in the major conservatories. Shanghai is the most active in this respect, and now has (I believe) an AGO Chapter, but no website, probably due to the 'Great Firewall' [the Chinese Communist Party's Internet censorship policy].

KO: Is there anything else you would like to let us know about yourself or your work?

DU: Having devoted most of my professional life in the past 30 years to musicology, I am now trying to refocus on composition and the publication of more of my works, especially choral works. I am involved nevertheless with research projects at the University of Santo Tomás in Manila (on Philippine composer Julio Nakpil), and Silliman University in Dumaguete (on American concert pianist and missionary Albert Faurot.) By the end of the year, I hope that my

relocation to the Philippines will be complete. As many people may know, the only functioning pre-20th Century bamboo pipe organ is located here, at Las Piñas, along with other interesting historical organs from the late 18th and 19th Centuries. There is an organ festival at Las Piñas every February, increasingly twinned with another one of the country's historic instruments.

Many thanks to Dr. Urrows for sharing this information with us. To learn more about the Pipe Organ in China Project, visit www.organcn.org or check out his book, *Keys to the Kingdom*, available exclusively from the Ferdinand Verbiest Institute (ISBN 978-94-9276-802-5).



A historical musicologist and composer, Dr. Urrows studied at Brandeis University, the University of Edinburgh, and Boston University. His teachers included Randall Thompson, Kenneth Leighton, David del Tredici, Harold Shapero, Arthur Berger, Donald Martino, and Girolamo Arrigo. Between 1989 and 2018 he taught at Hong Kong Baptist University, where he established The Pipe Organ in China Project (www.organcn.org). He has also taught at the University of Massachusetts, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, and Eastern Mediterranean University. He is editor of the four-volume critical edition of the works of Otto Dresel (1826-90), and has also written on topics ranging from Hildegard of Bingen to nineteenth-century émigré studies to twentieth-century choral

*music to Andrew Lloyd Webber. His book *Keys to the Kingdom: a history of the pipe organ in China* was published in 2017 by the Ferdinand Verbiest Institute at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. His original music compositions have been published by Boosey & Hawkes and Paraclete Press. He is still actively composing. He is currently involved in research on East-West music topics at the University of the Philippines, the University of Santo Tomás, and Silliman University*