

Hua'er is a very popular folk song phenomenon found in Qinghai province in the northwest part of China. Given its severe weather and high altitude, Qinghai is historically one of the poorest regions in China. Nevertheless, the province is known as the "ocean of Hua'er," an indication of its cultural wealth. Life in Qinghai is simple and Hua'er is a popular diversion. Comparing Qinghai with other parts of China where folk songs are only known to a small portion of local residents, everyone living in Qinghai province participates actively in the tradition of Hua'er, regardless of religion, nationalities, age, and sex. There is hardly a peasant or herdsman who does not know Hua'er songs in Qinghai. They sing them while at work in the fields or herding livestock. Each year on the sixth day of the sixth month in the lunar calendar, Hua'er festivals take place in Qinghai and often last for days (figs. 1 and 2).

The literal translation of Hua'er is "flowers." A less common name is Shaonian (literally, "youth"). The names are most likely derived from the texts of Hua'er in which flowers are often metaphors for beautiful young women, and the young men are called youth. One of the characteristic traits of Hua'er is that the singer often does not immediately reveal the person who is the inspiration of his or her love. Rather, the admired one is described as a particular kind of flower, as in the following example where the white peony represents a young woman the singer admires:

chu qu da men fu shong kan,

xi que e pan wu li;

xien qi men lian li bian kan,

bi mu dan fi zhuo li.

Looking outside the door over the trees,

The swallow is building her nest diligently;

Looking inside the door behind the curtains,

The white peony is sleeping sweetly.

Although Hua'er texts may encompass many subjects, most of them are about love, and about the intimate relations of love. Hua'er are well known for their flirtatious content. Frankly, most of the lyrics from the love songs, improvised by the singers, are intended to be sexually seductive. Extra-marital affairs are common place during Hua'er festivals and usually are forgiven as passing indiscretions if found out. People turn out by the thousands at the Hua'er festivals, on the mountainsides and in valleys competing at singing techniques and text improvisation. Winning these contests is considered a tremendous honor and the winners, wearing red flowers and ribbons, are given rides on horseback through village streets and marketplaces.

The Hua'er singing ranges from solos, antiphonal duets to small ensembles and choirs. For male singers, falsetto singing is a required and prized technique presumably because singing in the high register carries the voice farther in open fields and mountain

valleys. Thus one of the vocal abilities for both male and female singers is the virtuoso command of the high register. For men and women who are seeking a festival love affair, having a loud and high voice, the skill and wit to improvise lyrics, and the knowledge of many different Hua'er tunes are great assets.

A typical Hua'er might begin as a solo sung by a man or a woman upon seeing an attractive person. The prospective lover could be far away, maybe on the side of another hill across a valley. If an antiphonal Hua'er is returned, it suggests that the flirtation is being entertained. The singing could go on for as long as two to three hours while the two singers move slowly toward each other, eventually their singing becoming more of a duet, often in octaves or unisons on the same melody with the two singers are standing next to each other, or even whispering into each other's ears. Then the couple may disappear, caught up in passion. A persuasive Hua'er might go as follows:

Shan Dan Hua E Ling

shan dan hua e kei hun liuo,

yi si bi yi si wong liuo;

You kan ga mi you jun liuo,

mi mao na xong tou hua liuo.

Morningstar Lily Ling

The red morningstar lily is blossoming,
It blooms radiantly;
The young woman is so ravishing,
She has gorgeous eyebrows.

Of course, in a different scenario, another singer could have “cut-in” and the duet partners could have changed.

Qinghai Province

Qinghai (literally, “Blue Ocean,” named after the large salt lake within its borders) is located in the northwest part of China. The nation’s fourth-largest province, it spans more than 724,000 square kilometers, one-thirteenth of the entire country. It borders Tibet in the southwest, Xingjiang (a Chinese Uighur autonomous region), in the northwest, and provinces of Sichuan in the southeast and Gansu in the northeast. Through Gansu, which borders Inner Mongolia and Ningxia Province (a Chinese Muslim autonomous region), Qinghai is populated by Mongolian and Chinese Muslim immigrants (the Hui) as well as Tibetans, the native Qinghai Chinese, and the Tu and Sala peoples.

With six distinct cultures, the total population of Qinghai is 4.3 million, the lowest population density in China. The harsh climate of the province has made it basically inhospitable. Qinghai is mostly high desert, situated on the Tibetan-Qinghai plateau, called “the roof of the world,” with an average elevation of approximately 4,000 meters and 2.54 centimeters of rainfall per year. Mountain ranges of five thousand meters, perennially covered with snow, span thousands of kilometers. The severe weather limits

crops to hearty varieties like highland barley and potatoes. The vast grasslands of the territory support livestock such as Tibetan sheep, goats and yaks (fig.3).

In Chinese history, Qinghai's harsh environment has earned it a reputation as a kind of a "no man's land." Much like Australia was to Britain in the nineteenth century, for hundreds of years Qinghai was a colony for deported prisoners and refugees seeking asylum. Most of the Chinese living in Qinghai today are either the descendants of exiles from the era of the Ming dynasty (1368--1644), or of soldiers from the massive influx from southern China during the Han dynasty (ca. 121 B.C.). Emigrants from the neighboring regions surrounding Qinghai were either dissidents and refugees, or part of mass migrations caused by widespread famine.

Fortuitously situated for trade, Qinghai was the only passage from Tibet to the rest of China during the spread of Indian-Tibetan Buddhism thousands of years ago. Eastern Qinghai also was close to the historical trading routes between China's richer provinces and neighboring countries, including Russia, Mongolia, and middle eastern territories. Historically, each of the six ethnic groups inhabiting Qinghai attempted and, to some degree, succeeded in preserving its own ethnicity. Yet over the centuries interracial communities have been established and intermarriage, with its blending of culture and religion, is common. After centuries of evolution, Hua'er have become the most representative artistic expression of this cultural melting-pot.

There are many different theories about the development of Hua'er. Some say it is based on the folk music of the Hui people, the Chinese Muslim immigrants, the majority of whom are from Ningxia Province. Others think Hua'er are results of musical influences from Tibet and Mongolia. Hua'er, however, were first sung among the

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Qinghai Chinese. Wu Zheng (1721--1797), an intellectual from inner China, first mentioned Hua'er in a poem:

Hua'er rao bi xing,

fan nü ye feng liu.

Hua'er is rich in metaphor and

The native women are seductive and dissolute.

Here the poet suggests that native Qinghai women are exotic and savage, a historically typical misconception of non-Qinghai Chinese.

My Interest in Hua'er

I lived in Qinghai Province for seven years between 1971 and 1978, during the Cultural Revolution.

Contrary to the official explanation, the true impetus behind the Cultural Revolution was a power struggle at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party. In the late 1950s, Mao Zedong, chairman of the party, implemented economic and land reforms with disastrous results; millions of Chinese died of starvation. These failed reforms were called the Great Leap Forward. As a consequence, Mao's power was weakened. Recognizing this, he started the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to regain dominance. The revolution came to an end until Mao's death ten years later and ruined ordinary lives of at least three generations in the nation. One of the key missions of the Cultural Revolution was to permanently demolish the nation's educational system.

Knowing that intellectuals were more likely to question his rule than peasants, Mao eliminated all education above the junior high school level, then further devalued this level to the equivalent of a fourth-grade education.

In 1971 I was graduating from junior high school in Shanghai and the Cultural Revolution was five years old. The country was on the threshold of economic collapse, for during the preceding five years there had been virtually no production in the entire country. At the same time, millions of young people had graduated from junior high schools and were waiting to be employed. Mao's solution was to force the young to the countryside, to the mountains and forests to be "re-educated" by peasants doing physical labor. The only escape from this "re-education" was through the performing arts. A small number of people were allowed to join one of the performing arts institutions if they had skills and talent. This was because Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who rose to power at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, tightly controlled all of the arts. In order to gain credibility, she increased state funding to dance companies, orchestras, and theaters and required that they take students. Not surprisingly given the harsh climate of the times, most youngsters were learning to play the violin.

Thanks to my parents, my childhood piano lessons became a great advantage. I was accepted as a pianist-percussionist to a folk music and dance troupe in Qinghai. Thus, by pure political coincidence, I escaped physical labor and started my music career.

Chosen as a student, I was surprised to find that I was the best pianist in the entire province, not because of my playing, but simply because there were only a few people who could play the instrument at all. Realizing that at age fifteen I would not be able to receive an adequate training in performance, my interest in music expanded to include

composing. It was for my writing that I was drawn to the beauty, the savageness and the sensuality of Hua'er. This fascination remains unchanged to this day as many of my works are based on the Hua'er folk song materials (fig. 4).

Hua'er and Jia Songs

Although there are isolated occasions when you might come across a Tibetan or Mongolian who could sing a few selections of Hua'er, generally the Tibetans and Mongolians do not regard Hua'er as their music. Hua'er belongs to the Qinghai Chinese, the Tu, the Sala, and the Hui peoples. All of the four peoples sing Hua'er in Chinese; when they sing their own folk songs, they sing them in their own languages.

In the province, the Qinghai Chinese and the Hui are the largest in numbers. And their religions are respectively Chinese Buddhism and Islam (figs. 6 and 7).

The Tu and Sala peoples have smaller populations and their own religions. The Tu are believed to be descended from the Mongolians and disparagingly are called "black Mongolians." Like the Mongolians and Tibetans, the religion of the Tu is Tibetan Buddhism. The Tu language is closer to Mongolian and their social customs and clothing are similar to those of Tibet. Like the Chinese Muslims, the Sala are descendants of Arab emigrants and followers of Islam. The languages of the Tu and the Sala are different from the rest of peoples in Qinghai. Moreover, they do not have written languages other than religious scriptures. Thus folk songs as popular art and communication play a crucial role in their daily lives (figs. 8 and 9).

Distinct from the Hua'er are other folk songs of each of these four peoples. These folk songs are called Jia songs. Literally, Jia means "home," it also has the connotations

of “family,” “cultured,” “formal,” and “cultivated.” These folk songs, considered more socially appropriate, are sung at weddings, funerals, New Year’s festivities, and even during physical labor to synchronize movements. They can be heard after banquets and dinners, or during these meals. Jia songs may also accompany the drum, dragon and lion dances, stilt-walking, acrobatics, and displays of martial arts.

Hua’er are the opposite of the respectable Jia songs. The often sensual content of the Hua’er is considered “savage” and has earned the nick name *ye* (wild) songs. The flirtatious subjects of the Hua’er texts are considered “unfit” and even “pornographic” within the Chinese moral tradition. For most Chinese, the direct expression of love and sex is shameful and disgraceful. In traditional Chinese poetry or folk songs from other areas of China, appreciation for physical beauty is usually expressed in the third person. The subject of a poem might be obscured in a natural metaphor, such as mountains, clouds, flowers. Mentioning the actual person would be considered in bad taste. But in the Hua’er, not only is the first or second person often used, the metaphor for the beloved can also be something quite graphic, ranging from “my heart” or “my flower,” to “my lovely flesh” or “my boy’s little piece of meat.” This frank sexuality is unparalleled anywhere else in China.

Even among the Qinghai, Hua’er are considered inappropriate for elders and children. The songs can only be sung in the mountains, valleys, woods, or during the Hua’er festivals. The home is considered sacred and conduct there must follow moral tradition. This custom is enforced to the extent that Hua’er cannot even be hummed or played on an instrument at home. There is actually a Hua’er describing these circumstances:

bi yong fu fu ni bao shong,

ni shong (ha) zi zi e gua li;

zou jin zhuang zi ni bao chong,

ni chong si lao han men ma li.

Do not climb the white poplar,

The branches will break;

Do not sing near the village,

The old men will yell at you.

From the emperors to Mao's Communist Party, until well after the "Cultural Revolution," Hua'er has been periodically banned in China. However, Hua'er were never truly suppressed. Regardless of censorship, they have become more popular than the Jia songs in Qinghai.

The "Ling"

Hua'er melodies are expressively lyrical and beautifully constructed with dramatic twists. Most of them are either in triple time (3/8, 6/8) or duple (2/4, 4/4) meter, or a mixture of both. The texts of Hua'er are rich and varied in form. They are divided

into categories of tunes called “Ling.” These hundreds of Ling determine the basic form and melodic structure for each Hua’er. Within a Ling there are many Hua’er, each having similar text rhythms and melodic movement.

Each Ling has a descriptive name. Most commonly, Ling are named after key words in incidental phrases that are repeated throughout a Hua’er such as “White Peony Ling,” “Sister Willow Ling,” “Pony Ling.” Like the nonsense syllables in other Chinese folk songs, the meaning of these phrases are not necessarily related to the main text.¹

Another common way of naming Ling is after the regions or ethnic groups where particular Hua’er are popular, such as “Sala Ling,” “Tu Ling,” “Eastern Village Ling.” Other Ling refer to labor, such as “Porter’s Ling,” “Grass-Cutting Ling,” “Harvesting Highland Barley Ling.” Also, there are Ling describing the melodic movement of Hua’er, for instance, *Zhi* (Straight) Ling which suggests upward or downward movement of the melody.

The Lyrics

The basic form of Hua’er lyrics consists of four phrases in which the first phrase has the same number of syllables as the third, and the second phrase the same as the fourth.² The length of phrases one and three are usually different from two and four. This makes the form distinct from traditional Chinese poems like those of the Tang Dynasty (618--907). In Tang poetry each sentence has odd numbers of words (five or seven) and each poem has even numbers of phrases (four, eight, or their doubles). In Hua’er the melody of the first two phrases is repeated and the repetition is frequently embellished. The lyrics in phrases one and two consistently center around a core

metaphor, ranging from familiar rivers, mountains and flowers, to historic legends and heroes. Only when the melody returns with the second pair of phrases does the text reveal the principal inspiration for the song, as this example shows:

Sha Yan E Rao Ling

tu ne /³ tou shong zi / dun dun e cao, (2+3+4)

lian dao / lao zhuo / mo gu; (2+2+2)

nao ba / ga mi mi / cou ha zi zao, (2+3+4)

qiu nian / da zhuo / mo fo. (2+2+2)

For so long the thick grass has grown on the cliff,

I could not cut it as the sickle is blunt;

For so long I have been in love with my girl,

I could not tell her as I am shy.

A common modification of this basic form is to add “half-phrases” anywhere in between the longer ones, the length of which can be either three or four syllables. The meaning of these words may or may not be related to the main text. They function to connect and segue between sentences and, more importantly, provide extensions for the melody, much like the incidental phrases in the following example:

xiong ci / ying tao / jin hua yuan, (2+2+3)

rei fu tian,

wan yong zi / hua e / yo li; (3+2+2)

rü jin / li bie / bao mai yuan, (2+2+3)

gu ji tian,

tuan yuan zi / ri zi / yo li. (3+2+2)

Come to the orchard if you would like to taste the cherries,

In mid-summer,

There are thousands of flowers blooming;

Do not be sad for the farewell,

In a few days,

There will be a time for reunion.

Having different numbers of syllables between the odd (1 and 3) and even (2 and 4) numbered phrases is a distinguishing feature of Hua'er. In the above song, although the full-length phrases have the same number of syllables, the word groupings and rhythmic emphases vary, thus giving a sense of imbalance between the odd and even numbered main phrases.

Nonsense syllables and incidental phrases are an important component in Hua'er lyrics. Singers often claim that without them one would not be able to sing a good Hua'er. These syllables and phrases primarily have two functions: first, they appear when the melody requires extra words or lengths, for Hua'er rarely repeat their texts; second, they perform as rhymes since they usually appear in the same rhythmic positions in both the first and second pair of phrases, as in the music of "Sha Yan E Rao Ling" below.

Here the nonsense syllables and incidental phrases (shown inside the parentheses) have been added as they would be sung by a Hua'er performer. Comparing this example with the lyrics of the "Sha Yan Rao E Ling", it is obvious that these extra words are required by the melodic extension. They also enhance rhyming by repeating the words *sha yan e rao* (literally, "the circling of desert swallows") twice and the syllable *rao* (circling) a few more times at the same positions in both verses. More interestingly, here the Hua'er melody is divided into three segments (5+4+6 measures) instead of the normal two, largely due to the melodic extension furnished by these extra syllables and phrases. Apparently, the title of this Hua'er---"Sha Yan E Rao Ling"---is borrowed from the incidental phrase that appears many times.

The Melody

To my ear, the melodic contour of a folk song has a close relationship to the inflection of the dialect from the region in which it was sung. To sing the word---to vocalize--- is the result of an emotional leap from narrating and reciting. It also appears to me that the outline of variations in pitch of a folk song bears a resemblance to the topography of its region. This seems to be true in the cases of Chinese spoken dialects. For instance, in northwestern China where many great mountains lie, the pitch variation is wider than that in the south where the land gently undulates. Melodic movement of

folk songs in these regions also reflects this relationship. The following two folk songs are from these two contrasting regions; the melodic movement of the “Jasmine Flower” from southern China (Jiangsu province) is mostly stepwise within the pentatonic (or five note) scale, whereas the “Blue Flower” from the north (Shanxi province) is full of skips.⁴

Jasmine Flower ---Jiangsu province

It is such a beautiful jasmine flower,
The scent of it lingers over a garden-full of blossoms,
I would like to wear it,
But I fear the gardener.)

Blue Flower ---Shanxi province

Golden thread, blue thread,
They are so pretty,
Just like the beautiful girl,
Her name is Blue Flower.

Qinghai, with its high plateau and mountainous terrain, inspires folk songs with melodic intervals even more dramatic than perhaps anywhere else in the country. As in the following Chuan Ke (river mouth) Ling, besides the obvious leaps of fourths, the melody also has the trademark Hua'er feature of the straight ascending line.⁵

Looking at the mountain pass under the sun, ...

This Hua'er is sung by the Hui people and has a melodic contour typical of the Hui. The range of pitches become even wider in Hua'er sung by the Tu people shown below:

Bluestone railing on whitestone bridge,

The bridge ends right on the cliff; ...

In this Lian Shou (hands joining) Ling, the melody twice leaps down a tenth, characteristic of Tu Hua'er (note the leaps between measures 5 and 6, and 10 and 11).

Each ethnic group has its own distinct features for its Hua'er, features akin to its Jia folk songs. For Qinghai Chinese, sometimes this connection can be traced to folk songs from southern China, since a large number of the Chinese living in Qinghai are descendants of immigrants who came from the south hundreds of years ago. In another Morningstar Lily Ling below, melodic influence from southern China can be found in the stepwise pentatonic movement: (See "Jasmine Flower" for a similar movement within the pentatonic scale.)

My boy is building a canal on the sunny hill,
Your girl is sowing seeds under the cloudy mountains; ...

Despite their poverty and Qinghai's inhospitable environment, the outcasts from disparate ethnic traditions have created expressively sensual and beautiful music. And, because of the isolated location of Qinghai, the tough weather and arduous traveling conditions, Hua'er have been little affected by musical influences from inner China. A folk art form has grown and been protected. For the same reasons, the true beauty of Hua'er is little known outside northwestern China, although the name of Hua'er is prevalent all over the country. Few Chinese folk music scholars have conducted thorough studies of Hua'er, which has resulted in keeping Hua'er a Chinese folk music secret.

As the great twentieth-century Hungarian composer Béla Bartók was to reveal the beauty of eastern European folk music through his compositions and collections early in the century, Hua'er awaits a similar treatment. Only then will Hua'er blossom outside its native region and enrich our understanding more fully of one of China's most expressive musical cultures.

¹ Nonsense syllables are an important element in all Chinese folk songs, especially in folk song of northwestern China. They are usually one or two words, sometimes short phrases. These phrases also can be nonsensical.

² In Chinese, each syllable is a word.

³ The slashes here indicate the divisions between word groups.

⁴ To demonstrate this point, in this article the folk song text pronunciations are all based on local dialects instead of standard Chinese Mandarin.

⁵ A “fourth” indicates an interval between the first and fourth successive notes in a scale. On the white keys of a piano, the beginning note (the fundamental) is counted as the first with the fourth note from the fundamental as the last. The notes in the middle are omitted.

Further Reading

Selections of Hua'er. Qinghai, China: Qinghai Public Arts Museum Press, 1979.

This collection of Hua'er are categorized by ethnic group. The music is notated in Jian Pu, a number system similar to the “movable do” *Solfège* system. The collection is in Chinese.

Zhang Gu Mi. *Music Essays from the Western Ocean*. Qinghai, China: Qinghai People's Press, 1991.

A collection of Qinghai folk songs, with limited musical analysis.

Zhou Juan Gu & Zhang Geng Yo, eds. *Selections of Traditional Folk Songs in Qinghai*. Qinghai, China: Qinghai People's Press, 1988.

A collection of Qinghai folk songs in Chinese, including Hua'er and Jia songs, that contains information about Qinghai folk songs.

Author Biography

Bright Sheng, composer, pianist and conductor, lived in Qinghai Province, China, for 7 years. He moved to the United States in 1982 and is currently the Composer-in-Residence of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Artist-in-Residence with the University of Washington in Washington State.

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