

MELODIC MIGRATION OF THE SILK ROAD —Music Samplings of Northwest China

Bright Sheng

My heart beat faster when the plane began its descent toward Xining Airport on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. I was nervous. I had spent over seven years here during the Cultural Revolution working with the province's music and dance troupe. Qinghai, where historically only exiles and prisoners dwelt, has always been considered inhospitable. My life here was rough and difficult. It was not until Mao died and the Cultural Revolution was over that I returned to Shanghai to study music composition at the Conservatory. Four years later I moved to New York City to further my study. I never looked back.

When I left here, bringing to an end my self-imposed exile, I sensed envy and perhaps jealousy from some friends and colleagues. Now, twenty-two years later, what would my friends here think of me, especially since I had not kept in touch? Would they still welcome me as a friend or look upon me as a big-shot American composer returning to claim glory?

But my heart never left Qinghai. Although I was born and raised in Shanghai, Qinghai has always felt like a second homeland. I arrived here when I was fifteen. It was here that I made up my mind to be a musician. It was here that I first kissed a girl. And it was in the mountains of Qinghai that I first tasted the beauty of the folk songs which remain the inspiration for my works. During the past two decades, I often dreamed of coming back here to see my friends and again to smell the air in Xining, the capital, in my memory always dusty and filled with the odor of yak butter.

In recent years I became fascinated by the enormous commercial, cultural, and religious exchange the Silk Road had brought to all the countries between Asia and Europe. I wondered how music cultures moved along this route and how foreign music influenced, infiltrated, and embedded itself into Chinese music. I wondered if this interaction might have resulted in the distinct discrepancies between the music of northwest China and the rest of Chinese folk or classical music. And I wondered if it was still possible today to find traces of this ancient music migration along the modern-day Silk Road regions. In the summer of 2000, I finally made my trip: for two months I collected and studied the music cultures of the Silk Road within the current Chinese border from Xi'an to Kashgar. **(map)**

The worry about my reception turned out to be unnecessary. Many of my friends showed up at the airport to greet me and I was adorned with a *hada*— a white silk scarf which in olden times represented a list of gifts —the highest honor of Tibetan culture.¹ Xining has changed a great deal, too. The smell of yak butter is gone, and newly planted trees and high buildings give this remote provincial capital a fresh, friendly appearance. **(slide 1)**

Qinghai and *Hua'er*

Qinghai, named after a large salt lake within its border, was not initially part of the Silk Road. But when warlords, marauders, and robbers made the usual passage through the narrow Gansu Corridor impossible to travel, trading caravans took an alternate route to northern Gansu via the Qilian Mountains in eastern Qinghai. Not surprisingly, the culture in the region reflects this past history.

One of eastern Qinghai's most cherished musical treasures is *hua'er* ("flowers"), a form of love song sung only in the fields and mountains because of its zestful, often erotic content.ⁱⁱ And for my trip, the first taste of musical migration was at a Tu *hua'er* festival in Huzhu, an autonomous county of Tu people north of Xining.

The Tu were a branch of the Mongols ("White Mongols," as opposed to the "Yellow Mongols" of Genghis Khan). It is believed they had a dispute with their ruling authorities during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and migrated to Qinghai, then primarily ruled by the Tibetans. The Tu have a purely spoken language, a mixture of Mongolian and Tibetan, and practice Tibetan Buddhism. Musically, Tu *hua'er* has a kinship with both Mongolian and Tibetan folk music. Tu *hua'er* singing uses a large throaty vibrato like Mongolian singing, and its well-known dramatic movements, beautifully curved melodies that go straight up and down in large intervals, are reminiscent of Tibetan folk songs.

Hua'er is usually initiated by a young man, and if the object of his interest responds by singing her admiration back to him, the song can continue for quite a while — from a few hours to until well after dark, when the lovers really move into action. Extramarital affairs are commonplace during *hua'er* festivals but are usually forgiven as passing indiscretions. The *hua'er* festival is an event that local patrons have anxiously awaited throughout the year.

This year the festival took place in aspen woods along the banks of a dried river in Danma, a small town surrounded by mountains in Huzhu County. During the three-day festival, all young men and women, dressed up in their finest clothes, sang and wooed each other with love songs. One afternoon, when the day was at its hottest, the festival was also at its zenith. Standing in the middle of the riverbed, I had the overwhelming experience of being in a "*hua'er* ocean," as Qinghai is nicknamed. When all of the small groups sang different *hua'er* tunes in the same key by chance, the sound of one melody falling as the other was rising, enhanced by echoes from the valley, formed a truly remarkable polyphonic composition. Later, the sounds of many groups singing in different keys from different parts of the valley swelled in Charles-Ivesian cacophony—but enlarged a thousandfold—and transformed music and nature into a masterpiece no composer could have written. **(slide 2)**

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The first known traveler on the Silk Road was General Zhang Qian of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). Ever since the Warring States period (475–221 BC), the Chinese had been in constant military conflict with the Xiongnu from its northern borders. The Xiongnu (Huns of Turkic descent, some believed to be the ancestors of modern-day Hungarians) were militantly aggressive and whose actions prompted the Qin emperor Shihuangdi (ruled 246–209 BC) to build the Great Wall. The Chinese sericulture was in

full bloom by the time Wudi, the sixth Han emperor, ascended the throne in 140 BC. Wudi was himself ambitious and had the desire to broaden the Chinese frontier. He sent Zhang westward with a caravan of 100 men to enlist alliances with Xiongnu enemies, specifically the Yueshi people, who had just been defeated by the Xiongnu in the north and driven to the southern edges of the Taklamakan Desert. Thus Zhang and his men bid farewell to their families, left the safe capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an), and started a dangerous and arduous trip.

Xi'an and Qin Opera

For some 1,100 years, Chang'an ("Forever Peace") was the capital under numerous Chinese emperors. The Tang Dynasty (618–907), arguably the most sophisticated period of Chinese civilization, was its last and most prosperous era. At the time, old Chang'an, with a population of two million, was the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world. Ever since Zhang Qian's discovery of the Silk Road, caravans of traders from western regions began arriving in Chang'an regularly. By the 8th century, this great metropolis attracted foreigners from all over Asia and the Middle East. Merchants, entrepreneurs, diplomats, pilgrims, sages, entertainers, and artists all thronged there. In addition to Buddhism, the most influential religion at the time, other religions thrived in Chang'an. Nestorian churches and Zoroastrian temples were built during the 7th and 8th centuries. Islam, Judaism, and Manicheism were also visibly present. At the Tang court, foreigners, including many musicians, held high official posts, and exotic foreign costumes were the vogue. It is said that at its peak, there were over 20,000 non-Chinese living in Chang'an. With a secure economy and a foreign policy of openness, a great civilization took shape. Literature and poetry, calligraphy and painting, music and dance flourished at all levels of society, foreseeing European Romanticism by more than a millennium.

But what would I find in today's Xi'an ("Western Peace"), now the capital of Shaanxi? Would I still be able to hear the music from Chang'an's glorious legacy?

I found some of the answers while attending a performance of Qin opera, whose history can be traced back to as early as the Qin Dynasty (2nd century BC). Originated in Xi'an and sung in its dialect, Qin opera, like all Chinese classical operas, combines music, dance, and drama. The best actors are excellent in all areas—singing, acting, narration, and martial art—the first of these being the most crucial element. The dramatically charged singing music is divided into two categories: happy and sorrowful tunes. The happy tunes, commonly believed to derive from folksongs of Shaanxi and Gansu, are based on pentatonic scales (i.e. five notes in each octave), like most mainstream Chinese music. What fascinates me the most are the unusual sorrowful tunes, which, I suspect older, appear to have a closer relationship with the music cultures from Central Asia, and share many of their traits. These tunes are based on the scale of eight pitches in an octave, a phenomenon peculiar for Chinese music. Highlighting the exoticism, sorrowful melodies emphasize the dissonant intervals of the scale—tritones and major and minor sevenths and ninths. In addition, Qin opera possesses other Central Asian characteristics, such as microtonal pitch bending, and the fiercely heartfelt singing style which sometimes resembles shouting more than singing. (7)

The evolution of the Qin opera orchestra also points to the Silk Road culture. Lute-like (i.e. plucked) instruments, whose invention is commonly attributed to the Babylonian civilization of second millennium BC, were the first musical instruments brought into China via the Silk Road. *Pipa* and *Sanxian* (*shamisen* in Japanese), two early descendants of the lute family, were the original lead instruments in Qin opera. Shortly after bowed instruments were introduced from Central Asia, *xiqin*, a bowed *sanxian*, emerged during the Sung Dynasty (960–1279) and became the chief accompanying instrument. Eventually, the *xiqin* was replaced by the *banhu*, a louder and more flexible bowed fiddle. It is thus perfectly natural that, in the instrumental interludes, one often hears fragments of musical traditions apparently from lands west of the old China. Aside from *banhu*, the present-day Qin opera orchestra consists of *erhu*, *pipa*, bamboo flute, and an assortment of percussion.

How migration changed music practice is exemplified in the story of Yulin singing. In northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei), by the Great Wall and the Mongolian border, is an old military town called Yulin. Yulin was an important defense post, but the cold weather and harsh environment made it a place of exile for disfavored officials from the capital. One of them was General Tan of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Tan was originally from southern China, where it was stylish for wealthy families to have live-in female singers and musicians. After losing the favor of Emperor Kangxi (ruled 1662–1723), Tan was appointed governor of Yulin and moved there with his large family, including the musicians. As he entertained lavishly in his house, the graceful style of singing and chamber music playing from southern China became locally fashionable. With the passage of time, Yulin singing eventually spread into the narrow streets of this remote frontier town and became entertainment for average citizens.

But the Chinese tradition of the region considered female entertainers taboo. Even today, Yulin singing is predominantly done by males singing falsetto in imitation of female voices. There I spectated a curious episode: the vocal part, full of large leaps and sung in Shaanbei dialect by the unnatural male falsetto, was in discordance with the style of the instrumental accompaniment. Here, the typical elegance of southern instrumental playing, with its small intervallic rises and turns, was juxtaposed with the characteristic folk-song singing style of northern Shaanbei—a combination strange to me but apparently loved by the people in Yulin. During the full three-hour concert arranged for my visit, a large crowd from the street poured into the small classroom of a primary school and listened quietly throughout. (8)

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No sooner than they left Chang'an and stepped into the Gansu Corridor, General Zhang and his men were captured by the Xiongnu, who were sovereign in the region. Zhang undertook his special mission in disguise as an envoy sent by the Han emperor. The Xiongnu were suspicious and kept him under close watch, though they treated him well and even provided him with a wife. Zhang stayed there for ten years and had a son.

Gansu Corridor and Mogao Caves

With the Qilian Mountains to the south and the Gobi Desert to the north, driving through the barren and desolate narrow strip from Lanzhou to Dunhuang was an experience by itself. It was astonishing to see the old cultural glory and opulence had completely

vanished from the province, now one of the poorest regions in China. During the Silk Road age, this was the indispensable principal passageway for caravan traders travelling west to reach the outskirts of the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang. Because of the lucrative commerce, economic and cultural prosperity reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty for towns along the Gansu Corridor. Thanks to the mixed ethnicities, performing arts, especially music, also progressed rapidly and flourished in the region. *Xiliang* music, a form blending music and dance styles of Central Asia and northwestern China, was later brought into the capital, Chang'an, and became the craze both inside and outside the palace walls, and remained popular for five centuries. Important poets and literati wrote hundreds of poems about the exotic style of *Xiliang* music, which included singing, instrument playing, and dancing.

The songs and dances of *Xiliang* music,
Have disseminated all over the world
For those who cherish and find comfort in them.

—Du Mu (803–852)

In Wuwei, an old caravan town north of Lanzhou, the cultural bureau clerk laughed when I inquired about *Xiliang* music. But I did not want to give up. One afternoon near a public square in downtown Wuwei, I found a small group of blind people entertaining the pedestrians, a traditional custom for the blind to earn a few pennies. Listening to a performance of *Xanxiao*, a ballad music, I noticed that while the singer was singing in a 2/4 meter, the accompanying instruments, *erhu* and *sanxian*, were playing in 6/8, a typical dance rhythm of Xinjiang. This cross-meter created a sense of independence between the singing and the instrumental line—a rare occurrence in Chinese music. Could this be the remaining shred of old *Xiliang* music, which was known for its dance forms? (12)

However, it was in the silence of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, in front of the mind dazzling murals and frescoes, that *Xiliang* music became vivid and alive to me. Dunhuang (“Blazing Beacon”), named after a line of fortified beacon towers of the Great Wall, was the westernmost trading center for China since the beginning of the Silk Road. Not only was it an inevitable stop for the caravans travelling westward, it was also the first town inside old China for those who had come from the west to seek comfort and safety. To ensure the success of their business and safe return from the arduous journeys that lay ahead of their pilgrims, traders and merchants constructed inside the bare mountains Buddhist cave shrines which remain one of the wonders of the world. The Mogao Caves, with nearly 500 grottoes and some 45,000 murals within their walls, survived through nine dynasties, owing to the arid desert climate.

These murals cover over fifteen hundred years of history spanning from ca. 400 to 1900. They provide a marvelous document of the lifestyles of these periods. Many of the paintings portray scenes of the Pure Land—the Buddhist afterworld—reflecting the imagination of an ideal world by those in the material world. As Buddhists believe that good music comes from heaven, almost every Pure Land picture has *apsaras* (flying angels) playing various musical instruments. One can trace the evolution of performance practices of Silk Road instruments by chronologically following these musical figures. In

the earlier grottoes, for example, the *pipa* was shaped very much like an Iranian *ud*, with a long, turned neck and pear-shaped body. Through the years, it gradually grew into something more like the modern *pipa*. The same can be said of the way the *pipa* was played: At the beginning it was plucked with a large plectrum, which was eventually replaced simply by fingernails.

Performance practice at the time can be seen clearly in the murals depicting music and dance forms, especially in the Tang grottoes, which number well over 200. A typical painting of this Pure Land paradise shows the Buddha Sakyamuni himself seated in the center of a magnificent palace surrounded by hundreds of other gods and bodhisattvas. Directly below are the musicians and dancers. The musicians, separated into two groups of eight to fifteen members each by the dancers in the middle, play a large collection of instruments of different national origins—*pipa*, *zheng* (zither), *konghou* (harp), flute, sea shells, *sheng* (mouth organ), cow horn, panpipes, reed pipe, *suona*, and a variety of percussion instruments (chimes, bells, drums and the now-extinct large clappers). Thirty-five different kinds of drums appear in the murals. The number of dancers is small; usually two females appear in the rather small central area.ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the dance figures are so vivaciously painted, with their flowing dresses and flying ribbons, I could almost see their fast virtuoso twirling movements and hear the exciting *prestissimo* dance music. Strumming the *pipa* behind one's back while dancing is another feat no modern-day dancer can duplicate.^{iv} The exhilaration represented by these heavenly scenes is well illustrated by one of the Buddhist texts: **(13)**

Thousands of gods under luminous skies,
The rustling of zither and crystal chimes,
The pung-pung beatings of the drums,
The ravishing melodies and resonating clouds,
The reverberation of the invigorating flutes,
Are all in the splendor of our heaven.

(Collection of Dunhuang Bianwen, Volume 5)

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After ten years of captivity, General Zhang and his remainder managed to escape from the Xiongnu and continued their imperial mission westward, along the northern Silk Road to the present-day Kashgar area. When he finally arrived, Zhang found to his disappointment that the Yueshi had contentedly settled down there and were no longer interested in fighting the Xiongnu—the Chinese were far away and the Yueshi would not want to war with their immediate neighbor. Zhang stayed there for more than a year before returning to Chang'an, this time through the southern Silk Road below the Taklamakan Desert. Once more, he was captured by Xiongnu's allies, the Tibetans. Miraculously, he escaped again and, thirteen years later, returned and received a royal welcome from Emperor Wudi.

Of the one hundred men who left Chang'an with Zhang, only one returned with him. Though he had failed in his mission for Emperor Wudi, Zhang brought back invaluable detailed information about the thirty-six kingdoms in the Western Territories, as well as

the earliest knowledge of the Roman Empire and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea.

Please drink another cup of wine,
As you will have no friends west of Yang Pass.

—Wang Wei (701–761): *Music of Weicheng*

In ancient China, there was a genuine sense of mystery and fear about the Western Territories, that vast land joined Central Asia and the Middle East beyond Yang Pass, fifty miles outside Dunhuang and the last military post of the Great Wall. Historically, the Chinese hereditarily considered the region barbaric, and the non-Chinese ethnic inhabitants expressed animosity toward Chinese sovereignty. Even today, the province of Xinjiang (“New Dominion”), that joins Central Asia and the Middle East, remains a place of exoticism and esotericism for most Chinese. **(16) (17)**

Xinjiang and *Mukam* Music

Although prepared, I nonetheless felt clearly the cultural divergence between mainland China and Xinjiang. Here, everything from language, food, to social etiquette is different. Located in China’s northwestern corner, today’s Xinjiang occupies one-sixth of the country’s territory (three times the size of France) and is home to a dozen non-Chinese ethnic peoples. During the Silk Road era, Xinjiang contained most of the so-called thirty-six kingdoms in Central and Western Asia, which included present-day Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tashkent, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajekistan, and Uzbekistan. It did not become a Chinese province until 1884, during the Qing Dynasty, though Chinese suzerainties had it briefly under their domain during the Han and Tang Dynasties. As a result of nomadic tradition and warfare, the ethnic makeup of this region shifted many times until the Uygur people moved in and became the largest population in the province. **(18)**

Of Turkic origin and initially resident in the Altai Mountains between the sixth and ninth centuries, the Uygurs were once militarily powerful. In the second half of the Tang Dynasty, when China was facing Tibet’s aggression, the Uygur army was paid huge sums by the enfeebled Tang court to fight its enemies. Around the ninth century, after its defeat by the Kirghiz, some of the Uygurs were forced to migrate southwest across the Tian (“Heavenly”) Mountains and to settle into the oases surrounding the Taklamakan Desert, while others moved east and founded kingdoms in northern Gansu. The Uygur language is close to Turkish, though one can also find traces of its connection to Mongolian. Numbering over six million in Xinjiang, the Uygurs are proud of their craftsmanship and astute business sense. But they are most celebrated for their daily rich musical life of singing, dancing, and instrument playing. Music seems a part of their nature; almost every Uygur can sing, dance, or play an instrument, and sometimes all three.

I was invited to lunch at a Uygur friend’s apartment in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, a city that today combines old and new. After the meal, to my surprise and delight, my friend’s two sisters started dancing in the rather small room to Uygur folk music playing

from a boom box. I was captivated by these two beautiful Uygurs dancing just two feet in front of me. As the music continued *prestissimo*, the intensity of the dance magnified. One of the dancers was swirling so quickly that she almost blinded my view; I could only feel the breeze her spinning body generated. It was extraordinary to see them dance so gracefully in such a small space without touching one another. Suddenly, I realized what I might be witnessing: the twirling dance of *Xiliang* music! (19)

Dance also plays an important part in *mukam*, an art-music tradition popular in Islamic nations. Depending on the locale, *mukam* can be spelled *makam*, *magam*, *maqam*, or *mugham*, and is called *dastgah* in Iran, *raga* in India, and *nuba* or *dor* in North Africa. Although *mukam* music is unique in each country, all *mukams* share much common ground. While each country claims to possess its most special qualities, Uygur *mukam* is generally agreed upon as having stemmed from one of the oldest musical traditions in the world. Evidence based on similarities of structure, tuning systems, and instruments bespeaks Uygur *mukam*'s origins in the region over a thousand years ago. It did not become world famous until the 16th century, thanks to Amenisha, an imperial concubine of the Yarkant kingdom (1513 to 1677) near Kashgar, then the most powerful kingdom south of Tian Mountains and one of the cultural centers of Central Asia.

The legend tells the story of Amenisha, a thirteen-year-old virtuoso player of the *satar* (a long neck bowed instrument) whose playing was accidentally heard by the Yarkant king during a hunting trip to Margit, Amenisha's hometown. The king, also a master of *mukam*, was so enchanted by her superb music making and her beauty that he proposed to her and brought her back to his palace. Recognizing her musical talent, he invited all the best *mukam* musicians in the world to perform in Yarkant. Musicians traveled all the way from north Africa and Central Asia to play *mukam* on the banks of the Yarkant River—one of the biggest *mukam* festivals that ever took place. Meanwhile, Amenisha spent months systematically collecting and notating *mukam* music from her guests; thus the glorious sixteen Kashgar *mukams* were born. The Uygurs crowned Amenisha Queen of *Mukam* and today proudly believe that the Kashgar *mukams* encompass the best *mukams* in the world.

Many features in Uygur *mukam* music bear close relation to old Chinese classical music. The structure of Uygur *mukam* resembles that of *Tang Daqu*, a large-scale musical form popular during the Tang Dynasty. In many ways, this model—essentially, a large suite divided into three sections (slow-moderate-fast)—also shaped the form of long arias in Qin opera. Like *Xiliang* music, Uygur *mukam* incorporates singing, instrument playing, and dancing all in one. The first *adagio* singing section, sometimes meterless, is followed by a lengthy *andante* instrumental section, and the suite concludes with fast dance music. Often, a long suite consists of many alternating sections of *adagio* and *andante*, but the fast dance music is always at the end. Each *mukam* can last from a few minutes to a few hours, depending on the occasion and the space in which the music is performed. The expressive mode ranges from sentimental to savage. Customarily, the ensemble size also varies from a few people to a small orchestra of a dozen. This flexibility makes *mukam* popular and fitting for any social occasion.

Before the government invested five million dollars to build a bridge across the river in 1994, the only way to get to Markit, a small oasis Uygur community on the bank of the Yarkant, was by ferry rafts made of sheepskin. Not much of the modern civilization has assaulted this peaceful hometown of Amenisha, part of the ancient civilization known as *Dolang*; excellent peasant *mukam* musicians can still be found in every village. There I had one of the highlights of my trip.

At a Uygur family dinner, a richly varied spread of food and drink, five peasants performed *Dolang mukam* with rough and rugged homemade instruments: *tanbur* (long necked lute), *satar*, *aijet* (Uygur *kamenche*), *Dolang rewap* (a lute with extra resonating strings, much like the Indian *sitar*), *kolong* (plucked dulcimer) and *daff* (hand drum). The singing style immediately reminded me of Qin opera; the loud and fiercely coarse microtonal singing sounded more like shouting. It was five hours before the main course, a whole roasted lamb, was brought to the table. Then there was dancing, hosts and guests alike joining together. By the time we finally left the house at two in the morning—all very drunk—we had been there for over nine hours! The most astonishing thing was that for this entire time, the five *mukam* musicians, all in their sixties and seventies, continuously sang and played without much break. Most extraordinarily, their energy and vocal quality never deteriorated, in spite of their ceaseless smoking and drinking. The raw, savage, and extremely stimulating *Dolang mukam* is truly unforgettable. **(20)**

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About 120 miles north of Xi'an, among the lush greens and pine trees, sits the mausoleum of the legendary Huangdi. Huangdi (“Yellow Emperor”) established the earliest Chinese monarchy in 2987 BC; it is thus the year of 4989 according to Chinese calendar. During his reign of more than a century, Huangdi supposedly invented agriculture, the written Chinese language, politics, religion, philosophy, arts, medicine, music, and just about everything else in modern civilization. His empress, Leizu, was the presumed discoverer of sericulture. Hailed as the founder of Huaxia (Chinese nation) and the forbearer of all Han Chinese, Huangdi is memorialized by a mausoleum, a holy shrine for all Chinese; yellow is the color of the earth, of the Yellow River, and of Chinese skin.^v Each year thousands of Chinese from all over the world come here to worship and pay respect. **(26)**

On my way back from Shaanbei, I too stopped for a visit. The experience turned out to be quite enlightening, but not for reasons I could have guessed. I first noticed that Huangdi's last name, Gongsun, is not a typical name for Han Chinese. Rather, it belonged to one of the minority ethnic peoples who inhabited the area at the time. I further observed that most of the ethnic peoples who lived under his reign were not consanguineous Han Chinese. I was rather baffled to realize that none of these facts were talked about much in Chinese communities and publications, though the information has been there all along. I suspect that most Chinese, like me, would not know that Huangdi was actually not a Han by blood. How could it be that for thousands of years the Chinese have been worshipping a non-Chinese as their original ancestor?

Maybe the Yellow Emperor should instead be considered the founder of Huaxia culture, which originated in northwest China, an area inhabited by many different ethnic groups

since the dawn of Chinese civilization. Indeed, is there any nation in the world that is pureblooded? Or any pure culture, for that matter?

It was remarkable to see so many different musical cultures performing together in the Mogao Caves. During the Tang Dynasty, Chinese music was categorized into ten genres to include music from Korea, India, Burma, and kingdoms of Central Asia like Bukhara, Samarkand and Persia. Surprisingly, among the ten only two were genuine Chinese: *yanyue*, a lavish musical form for court banquets, and *qingshang*, traditional Chinese folk music. Today it is a common belief among Chinese scholars that this was part of the brilliant foreign policies carried out by Chinese emperors, that they were confident and secure that Chinese culture would absorb any foreign influences and dissolve them into its own.

I think there might be other elements at play. The influence and attraction between powerful Chinese empires and their surrounding countries were very much like the present-day relations between the United States and the rest of the world. Everywhere during my trip, I was overwhelmed to discover that American pop culture reached almost every corner of this remote area. In many of the small villages, I saw American soap operas on television, and in each town I could find street vendors selling pirated tapes of American pop songs. Still, I do not believe that someone is pushing the globalization of American pop culture there. Everywhere I went, for better or worse, I could feel a natural attraction to American culture. In turn, American culture itself has been enriched deeply because of its diversity and inviting environment. As a result, what defines American music today is exactly this melting-pot effect—from European classical music to jazz, folk, pop, new age, Asian, and African music. This multiculturalization makes it possible for composers like Lou Harrison and myself to have an audience.

Likewise, during the dynasties when China was economically and militarily powerful, many countries sent their young people to study in China, and foreigners regularly lived in Chinese capitals and other major cities. While China assimilated foreign cultures, it disseminated its own throughout Asia.

On the flight back from China, I felt blessed. I am blessed that I lived in Qinghai, and that I left for America to develop my musicianship in both Western and Asian traditions. Wherever I live, Qinghai and northwest China will always be my homeland, a place to which I am now closer than ever. But mostly, as a musician steeped in both cultures, I feel blessed that the Silk Road produced such a fantastic mixture of cultures—one of mankind's most beautiful gifts to itself.

ⁱ Qinghai used to be part of Tibet and was called Eastern Tibet. In Chinese, the word for Tibet is *Xizang*, meaning Western Tibet.

ⁱⁱ See my article “The Love Songs of Qinghai” in *Asian Arts & Culture*, Fall 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since the third century AD, female duet dance had been popular along the Western Territories.

^{iv} A number of music scores with ancient notation—believed to be the *pipa* accompaniment to singing—were also found in the Mogao Caves. But there has not been a convincing way to translate these manuscripts, in spite of efforts made by various musicologists worldwide. Still, there seems to be a consensus as to pitches, while scholars are widely divergent in interpretations of rhythm and meter.

^v Ethnic Chinese are conventionally called “Han” as the posterity since the Han Dynasty.

Captions for *Melodies on the Silk Road* by Bright Sheng

1. Bright Sheng was adorned with a *hada* at the Xining Airport
2. a, b, c Tu *hua'er* festival
3. a, b *Princess Wencheng*, a classical Tibetan opera in Regong Arts Festival, Tongren County, 200 miles southeast of Xining
4. a, b, c Tibetan sacrificial ritual ceremonies, Tongren County
5. a, b Qinghai puppet show, Datong County, 40 miles north of Xining
6. Qinghai *pingxian* and *mihu* singing, Xining People’s Park
7. Qin opera performance, Xi’an
8. Yuling singing, Yuling, Shaanbei
9. Shaanxi *Wuanwuan* singing, Xi’an
10. Shaabei *suona*, Yan’an
11. Shaabei ballad, Yan’an
12. *Xanxiao* singing, People’s Square, Wuwei, Gansu Province
13. a, b mural of Buddhist Pure Land dancers and musicians, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang
14. Lanzhou *Guzi*, Suburb of Lanzhou, Gansu Province
15. Yugur folk song singing, Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, in the Qiliang Mountains, 500 miles northwest of Lanzhou; Scholars are disputing whether Yugurs are the ancestors of modern-day Hungarians, but their singing certainly reminded me of Hungarian folk songs.
16. a ruins of old Great Wall, northern Gansu
b ruins of a beacon tower of the Great Wall, Yang Pass
17. a, b Bright Sheng on the Silk Road (“Western Territories”)
18. a, b, c Tian Mountains of Xinjiang
19. a Uygur street musicians, Urumqi, Xinjiang
b a Uygur village in Urumqi’s old town,
20. a, b village peasants performing *Dolong mukam*, Markit
c a Uygur dinner, Xinjiang
21. a, b Uygur *mukam* dance, Urumqi
22. a. b Kazakh *dombra* singing, Yining City, Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, 600 miles west of Urumqi
23. *qomuz* playing by Mamati Turmish, a 72-year-old virtuoso, Akqi, Kizilesu Kirghiz Autonomous County, Xinjiang
24. Tajek folk dance, Kashgar, southern Xinjiang
25. a, b Kashgar street scenes
26. Huangdi Mausoleum, Shaaxi Province

Note:

- 1) Please choose one from *a*, *b* or *c* from the multiple slides I selected, *a* being my first preference.
- 2) We definitely need a good size map at the beginning of the article to indicate the old Silk Road passages and the places I traveled.

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