

Uyghur Art Music and the Ambiguities of Chinese Silk Roadism in Xinjiang*

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The Silk Road is at once an object of scholarly inquiry, a romantic notion, and a potent metaphor. Its metaphorical impact was clear from the 2002 Summer Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC, which was devoted to Silk Road cultures. The two-week event was staged in a series of lavishly decorated tents and pavilions on the National Mall (the open space between the Smithsonian Museums) while Al Qaeda terrorism, the on-going Afghan war, and the crescendoing campaign for war against Iraq were not far from anyone's mind.

Against this implicit background of violent events and fearful prospects, the festival and its catalog's message was explicitly pacifistic and transnational, under the formal title "The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust" (Smithsonian Institution 2002). Look, it said, at all that connects rather than divides human cultures across Eurasia: our textiles, ceramics, stories, dances, foods, musical genres and instruments. Long-necked lutes and vertical fiddles know no national boundaries; all are variations on an ancient design, the stations of their Silk Road journey mapped by materials used in their construction. The curves in their bodies, numbers and tunings of their strings, a fret here or there, the movements of the performer's hand, the notes in his or her scale all tell a tale of centuries of interplay across the Eurasian continent.

The performers themselves, as well as the audiences, learned much from the unprecedented juxtaposition of related traditions; musicians attended each other's performances, and using whatever common languages they could (mostly Turkic and Russian) they shared songs, techniques and fellowship both during the festival and after-hours at a local Holiday Inn. And over it all shone the smile of Yo-Yo Ma, whose intellectual and musical contribution to the festival was great, and whose own Silk Road Ensemble produces disks found under "world music" as well as in the classical bins (Ma 2002).

Though the Silk Road remains a potent symbol of transnationalism and interconnections between societies, the physical territory through which it passes has been carved up by some of the most pointedly divisive

political projects of modern times. After Russian and Qing expansion divided Central Eurasia into discrete empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their twentieth-century successor states hardened the border between Chinese and Soviet Central Asia and further subdivided the heart of the Silk Road into peoples and lands organized on national lines as "republics" and "autonomous" administrative units. As Theodore Levin has shown in his Central Asian musicological ethnography *Ten-thousand Fools of God*, Soviet nationality projects had a deep and complex impact upon the musics of the Central Asian republics (Levin 1996). Below, I explore a similar process at work under the PRC in Xinjiang.

Popularity, Utility and Irony of the Silk Road Notion in China

Though the Silk Road idea has proved popular in many places, perhaps no country has embraced it as thoroughly as China. A Google search on the characters *sichou zhi lu* ("silk road") reveals one dimension of this: the notion is a promotional bonanza, especially for the tourism industry, which entices Chinese as well as foreign tourists with the promise of Silk Road exotica (Fig. 1) and



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Fig. 1. Silk Road exotica at the Seaman Hotel in Kashgar.

historical flavor. (At least one tour company even promotes the eastern Chinese cities of Shanghai and Suzhou as Silk Road "stations.") Clothing companies, software retailers, restaurants and other enterprises are also fond of the associations evoked by the term. The top panel on the website www.silkroad.com.cn is a bulletin board posting classified ads for apartment rentals and second-hand goods.

The Silk Road metaphor also serves another sort of marketing goal: promoting the ideological agendas of the Chinese state. Popular histories, textbooks, and tourist sites associated with the Silk Road emphasize the silk trade, Buddhism, and the high imperial periods of the Han and T'ang Dynasties, when Chinese influence in what is now Xinjiang was at its pre-modern peak).¹ Official China represents "the Silk Road" as a stage on which China plays the leading historical role. Just as early Euro-American scholarship on southwest Asia and India once focused on traces of lost classical civilizations and ignored or denigrated the more recent Islamic past, archaeology in the Tarim has de-emphasized the last, Islamic millennium in favor of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist antiquity and Han and T'ang-period artifacts. Documentaries such as the NHK Silk Road series and tourist itineraries generally follow suit. In Xinjiang's westernmost, and still predominantly Uyghur and Muslim city of Kashgar where old Central Asia neighborhood mahallas and bazaars are giving way to urban renewal, developers recently built a faux ancient city-site commemorating the Han Dynasty general Ban Qiao, complete with a mini-Great Wall, "spirit road" flanked with life-size figures of soldiers and ministers (reminiscent of those at the Ming and Qing tombs in Beijing) and a statue of the conquering general himself, who

consolidated his control of Kashgar in 87 by getting the local ruler and his men drunk and slaughtering them at a banquet. Pantuo City, as the park is called, has become a new station on the Silk Road, at least for some tourists.

More creditably, the Silk Road idea also resonates positively with developments in Xinjiang since the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping reforms in the 1980s. Under these reforms, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet union, the Xinjiang region has enjoyed renewed communications with Central Asia and increased autonomy from Beijing in dealing with foreign tourists, trade partners, investors, governments and NGOs. The general preface to a series of "Silk Road Researches" published by Xinjiang People's Press makes the relevant connection:

. . . Some authors [in the series] have attempted to combine their [silk road] studies with *the reform and the open door policy of China* in hope that the past can serve the present and show what we can learn from our ancestors. . . . There is no demand that the views of the authors should be in conformity with that of the editors. Instead, we appreciate the *contention of different schools and ideas* in the studies, for we believe that it is the only way to promote the Silk Road studies. . . . It is not a coincidence that the [UNESCO-affiliated] Centre for Silk Road Studies, Urumchi, has been founded in Xinjiang: the most important section of the Silk Road. All this proves that a *new age to rediscover and revitalize the great Silk Road* has come to us [emphasis added] (Zhou 1993: 12-14).

There is an irony inherent in these various Chinese enthusiasms for the Silk Road metaphor, however. What stirs the greatest global interest in the Silk Road is not so much military exploits or even commerce along its length, but the cultural exchanges and continuities across vast tracts of inner Eurasia that it represents. This is what was celebrated on the National Mall, and is how world history textbooks in the US treat the Silk Road (e.g. Bentley and Ziegler 2003; Bulliet et al. 1997). Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Islam and associated ideas and arts all entered China via Xinjiang, as did Sogdians and other Central Asians. Many "traditional Chinese" musical instruments are themselves originally Central Asian or Indian imports, including the *pipa* lute, possibly the *sanxian* three-string lute, the *yangqin* hammer dulcimer, various spike fiddles collectively known as *huqin*, the *dizi* transverse flute, the double-reed *suona*, and several small percussion instruments (Thra-
sher 2000: 36-56).



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Fig. 2. Dutars, Kashgar rawaps, and other instruments for sale in a stall in Kashgar.

Yet despite the silk road boosterism, Chinese authorities today are not terribly interested in cultural exchanges or non-commercial linkages over the revitalized Silk Road. In fact, one of the top priorities of Xinjiang's security apparatus today lies precisely in *preventing* religious and political influences, people, news, and certain trade items (drugs and arms, understandably enough, but also video tapes and cassettes) from crossing its western borders. Far from rejoicing in transnational Silk Road connections, the PRC national project with regard to Xinjiang and its non-Han peoples has aimed to clearly demarcate geographic and ethnic borders, even attempting to erase or mute historical and cultural linkages that challenge the PRC claim to historical priority in the Xinjiang region and blur the discrete ethno-national categories that have formed the building blocks for the bureaucratic management of non-Han Chinese peoples in Xinjiang.

By these building blocks I refer to the state identification of the Uyghur, Kazak, Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tatar, Tajik and other nationalities and instillation of these categories with political and cultural content, a process known to scholars of Soviet Central Asia as *korenizatsiia* ("root-ization" or "indigenization"). The *korenizatsiia* of Uyghurs and other Xinjiang peoples actually began before the PRC came to power. In the 1930s, warlord Sheng Shicai accepted Soviet military and economic assistance to quell rebellions and consolidate his hold on power, and in return fell into lockstep with many Stalinist policies. Stalin's overriding concern in Central Asia was to undermine "Turk" and "Islamic" as general identities by subdividing them into smaller, mutually exclusive and competitive niches. Because the boundaries between these

categories were in some cases more theoretical than real on the ground, cultural projects followed to collect, isolate, edit, canonize and promote the supposedly discrete language, dance, music and literature of each nationality (Roy 2000). Sheng's government in Xinjiang followed the same policies, also using political appointments and education to give political meaning to the fourteen nationalities into which it taxonomized Xinjiang peoples. The Eastern Turkestan Republic, which controlled northern Xinjiang from 1944-1949, did likewise, and the PRC in turn adopted the same categorization scheme, with only minor modifications. After the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its control over Xinjiang, PRC "cultural workers" from party and government agencies at local, regional and national levels devoted themselves to codifying the cultural attributes and achievements of each *minzu*, or "nationality."²

Uyghur Music—the Twelve Muqam

The official approach to Uyghur music (and to that of PRC *minzu* in general) had several purposes. One goal, especially in Maoist years, was make it "national in form, socialist in content." With regard to Uyghur classical music, the *muqam* (defined below), this involved modifying lyrics to remove religious content or replace difficult Chaghatay ghazals by 'Ali-Shir Nava'i and other poets with modern Uyghur poetry (Light 1998: 57). Chinese choreographers produced dances on such subjects as "the Child Care Worker" in place of older dances that had been performed to the accompaniment of *muqam* (Mackerras 1985: 65).

Music in itself, being more abstract than lyrics or dance, does not directly convey verbal content or story-lines and thus might seem of less immediate concern to government and party

authorities. Nevertheless, since 1949 the national PRC and regional Xinjiang governments have made collection, codification and republication of both classical and folk forms of Uyghur music a priority. The explicit rationale behind this project has been to preserve, order, develop, and modernize the Uyghur musical tradition. In practice this has involved several steps: collection, including recording, by local teams; selection of the "best" songs or, in the case of the *muqam*, ordering of the "authentic" tradition; transcription into western musical score or the Chinese numerical music notation; rearranging to "rationalize" rhythms, to include harmony or to set the music for the large ensembles (including western instruments) and dance troupes employed in stage concerts and song and dance shows; promulgation of the resulting product through publication of songbooks and scores and through radio, television and concert performances; and education in the state music and arts schools.

The French ethnomusicologist Sabine Trebinjac has shown that this process of "rewriting" Uyghur music brings it from Xinjiang localities through Beijing and back out to the localities again where the music is taught to the next generation of professional musicians in its revised, "modernized" and state-sanctioned form. While both the process and results of this project resemble those in the Soviet Union and there are clear borrowings from Soviet *korenizatsiia* practices, Trebinjac also argues that deep Chinese roots underlie the PRC efforts to put a state imprimatur on music of the minority nationalities. Chinese compilers of folk songs today point to the Chinese classic the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*) as precedent for their own compilation efforts. Moreover, in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220

CE), the Ministry of Music employed functionaries to gather songs from around the empire, and then orchestrated them for performance on Chinese instruments with new court-approved texts. Trebinjac's point is that Chinese governments have long invested music with political and ritual importance, and for this reason have endeavored to exert central control over diverse musical traditions and convert local and ethnic music into components of a unified Chinese national music. The modern expression of this urge, of course, is linked to the modernist idea that without the intervention of musicologists and arrangers trained in western music theory, Uyghur music would remain "primitive," and unable to develop (Trabinjac 1990: 227-238; Trabinjac 2000). (This last notion was once shared by European imperialists with respect to the native music of their colonial subjects: some British colonial officials in India devoted themselves to collecting songs and transcribing them in western staff notation in order to rescue the tradition from degeneracy and restore its purity [Farrell 1997: chapter 2].)

The state music project emerges clearly in the recent history of the Uyghur *muqam*, a series of suites or song cycles that are considered by many Uyghurs to be the acme of Uyghur cultural achievement. In the mid-twentieth century, the *muqam* in Xinjiang consisted of a flexible tradition with many individual and regional styles (such as those of Kashgar, Ili, Dolan, and Qumul), passed on aurally from masters to disciples. During their apprenticeship, disciples would play percussion on the *dap* frame-drum while the master sang and played the *dutar* (a two-string long-necked lute), *rewab* (a mandolin-like lute with doubled strings and a round, skin-covered body) or *tambur* (another long-necked

lute, with a doubled melody string) (see Wan 1986). In this way, the pupil could internalize the complex rhythms, poetic lyrics, melodies, and rules of ornamentation before performing *muqam* on a melodic instrument themselves. For the most part, it appears, Uyghur musicians traditionally did not perform whole cycles, but rather isolated pieces or sections of *muqam*.

Both Ahmetjan Qasimi (leader of the Eastern Turkistan Republic in northern Xinjiang in the 1940s) and Seypidin Eziz (Saifuding; former member of the ETR government who served later under the PRC both as regional vice chairman and chairman of the Xinjiang Nationalities Committee) sought to promote the *muqam*, and particularly the twelve *muqams* (*on ikki muqam*) tradition of Kashgar, as the prestige music of the Uyghur people (Light 1998: 55). In the 1950s an orchestra director from Nanjing, together with scholars in the Muqam Research Group, were charged with collecting and organizing the suites, which in fact were extant as an unsystematic living tradition with more than twelve suite names overall, and with no one performer's or regional tradition's repertoire including exactly twelve complete suites. The collection and editing project thus focused on "reconstructing" an imagined former system of twelve and only twelve complete *muqam* suites, each consisting of about thirty songs and instrumentals. In the event, it was the *muqam* tradition as known and performed by one master, Turdi Akhun, that became the basis of the canon of the twelve *muqams* that was recorded, reordered, transcribed and published in 1960 (Wan 1959). This and subsequent editions (also based solely on the repertoire of Turdi Akhun) have become the foundation of most pedagogy and professional performance of the *muqams* in

Xinjiang, while other variant traditions from Tarim Basin cities are dismissively treated as "local" or "individual." There remains little if any room for improvisation in *muqam* performance, as many of the movements are now played by orchestras rather than small groups of a singer and one to four instrumentalists. Thus preserved, systematized and frozen, the Uyghur *muqams* are now lauded as a "treasure trove," "encyclopedia," and "perfected" tradition raised from a "germ" over "two thousand years" by the Uyghurs as an "expression of their social and productive struggles" (Sai-fu-ding 1994: 45-46, 49, 51). The corpus of "folk classical" music (*khelq klassik musikisi*) has thus been apotheosized as the unique, ancient and autochthonous tradition of Uyghur music now reconstructed nearly in its entirety and enshrined as one of the national musical forms of new China.

Despite the success of this program of ethnic cultural codification and representation, the Uyghur *muqam* still presents certain problems for PRC nationalist ideology, problems that arise from its Silk Road history. *Muqam* (variously spelled *maqâm*, *mugham*, and so forth) as both suite form and music theory belongs to a Arabo-Irano-Turkic tradition that spans Central Asia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Arab countries (Chabrier 1960). Of the twelve names applied to the twelve standardized suites in Xinjiang today (Rak, Chebbiyat, Mushavrek, Chargah, Penjigah, Özhal, Ejem, Ushshaq, Bayat, Nava, Sigah, and Iraq), all but two are used elsewhere, and derive from Arabic and Persian, not Turkic language roots. Of the two used uniquely in Uyghur *muqam*, "Rak" may in fact be a derivation of an Arabic word, or even of the Indic *raga*, and Chebbiyat is a Turkicized

variation on another common Arab *maqâm* suite name, Bayat. Even the notion of specifically twelve *muqam* (the number twelve having zodiacal significance) appears earliest in the thirteenth century Arabic writings of Safi al-Din (Light 1998: 30-31). In Arab and Persian environments, *maqâm* refers to the musical modes of each suite, in which the pieces of a given suite are composed. Arab *maqâm* maintain the modes consistently; in Central Asia and Xinjiang in particular, the modes of pieces within the suites vary: they may begin and end in a particular mode, but middle pieces adhere only inconsistently (Light 1998: 28, 28 n. 19). (A mode is a particular order in which notes of a scale may be played. The *muqams* also use a wider variety of scales than the major, minor and harmonic minor scales most familiar in Western art music.)

Muqam, then, would thus seem to be the quintessential Silk Road musical form: variations on a theme stretching from the Tarim Basin to the Black Sea. The *muqam* scales, modes, rhythms, lyrics, instruments and terminology tie the Uyghurs to a system shared across the Islamic heartlands of Eurasia — but do not point to any obvious connections with Chinese musical tradition. Moreover, the fact that the Arab versions maintain consistent modality, while the Uyghur and other Central Asian ones do so only partially or nominally, would seem to indicate an Arab center for the tradition. (*Maqâm* literally means “place or rank” in Arabic, and is one of the standard terms used for mode in Arabo-Iranian music theory.)

Both Uyghur and Han politicians in China have worked to obviate these inconvenient implications. For example, in prefaces and keynote speeches delivered over decades on the subject of Uyghur *muqam*,

Seypidin argued that *muqam* is originally a Uyghur word, corrupted by Persian and Arabic influences; he urged the cultivation of a “Uighur Mukamology” that Uyghurizes relevant vocabulary.

This Chahetai language [Chaghatay is a literary written Turkic, with many Persian loan-words, that flourished from the fifteenth through nineteenth century in Central Asia] found its way into the terminology and poetry of the mukam, by way of the verses of the Maola [mullahs] [and] poets, during the Middle Ages. The result was that the Uighurs, creators of the mukam, could hardly understand the lyrics themselves. It is time that this mixed language of the mukam be cleansed of its impurities (Sai-fu-ding 1991: 72).

Chinese musicologists have joined the effort to de-emphasize the obvious transnational nature of *muqam* and its association with Islam, while playing up evidence of local origin and development, as well as links to and mutual influences with Chinese music. One approach has been to argue that the *muqam* began with the pre-Islamic Uyghurs. In his historical study of the *on ikki muqam* (1981), Abdushukur Muhemmet Imin suggests that the word “muqam” itself is originally Turkic and dates from the fourth century, well before it is attested in Arabic and before the Islamicization of Central Asia. It was during the Karakhanid period in the eleventh century, Imin argues, that the *muqam* spread westward (Imin 1981; Trebinjac 2000: 228; Light 1998: 58-59). Zhou Jingbao sounds both Turkic and Chinese nationalistic notes, making a case for the influence of “Chinese” instruments and music — i.e. those of the Turks and of Qiuci (Kucha) — on Abbasid period

Baghdad from the mid-eighth century. He points to five-string lutes in frescos at Kizil (near Kucha in Xinjiang) as evidence that the *oud*, the central instrument in Arab *maqâm*, was a Kuchean export.³ Moreover, he argues that al-Farabi (870-950), an author of musical treatises and, among other things, a famous commentary on Aristotle, was a Turk; likewise, Zhou suggests, Ibn Sina (Avicenna 980-1037),⁴ should be seen as “eastern” in his thinking and as a beneficiary of Turkic and Chinese influence in his musical theory because he was educated in Bukhara. Zhou’s logic is worth quoting:

In conclusion, the foundation of Ibn Sina’s thinking derives from al-Farabi, and Farabi was a Turk. Thus, there is no doubt that Ibn Sina’s theory enjoys Turkic influence. . . . Bukhara [where Ibn Sina lived as a youth] fell under the control of the Anxi Commandery (*duhufu*) and historical records illuminate the influence of Chinese culture on Bukhara. Because before he was 18 years old Ibn Sina lived in the Bukhara area, he unavoidably received the influence of Chinese civilization (Zhou 1987: 227).

In fact, the primary vehicle of the T’ang dynasty’s influence in Bukhara was its largely Turkic army. T’ang presence in Transoxiana was shortlived, and ended 230 years before Ibn Sina’s birth. Ibn Sina’s autobiography gives no suggestion of Chinese influence (Gohlman 1974).

Other arguments by PRC authors have likewise highlighted local roots and Chinese connections of the Uyghur *muqam*. Some scholars have noted structural and rhythmical similarities of the T’ang period suites known as *daqu* with

certain sub-sections of the *muqam*, and posited a common origin in the music of Kucha. Yin Falu goes further still, claiming that the suite form itself was originally introduced into the Tarim Basin by Chinese during the Han dynasty, to be thenceforth adopted by the people of Kucha, Kashgar, Turfan and so on as the basis of their own popular music.⁵

* * *

Mukamology (to use Seypidin's word) in China, then, has celebrated the Uyghur *muqam* as a unique cultural achievement of the Uyghur people, realized through a process of mutual interchange with the fraternal Han people. Links to the musical traditions of Central Asia, Iran and Arab lands which share the name *muqam* were by this argument merely one-way; they arose from the westward spread of Turkic and Uyghur musical culture and contributed significantly to the development of Arab music, providing, besides the *muqam*, certain scales and even the five-string lute or oud. On the other hand, according to this view the Arab and Persian literary and terminological influences that flowed back east with Islam represent an unfortunate corruption of the original purity of the Uyghur *muqam*.

This version of *muqam* history thus attempts to isolate the "folk classical" musical tradition of the Uyghurs from Central Asia and Islam, even while glorifying it. Where the links across the Pamirs are too obvious to ignore, they are dealt with by assigning creative priority to the Uyghurs. Of course, one can easily find examples of similar ideological approaches throughout official Uyghur historiography from the PRC, and the history of linguistic and script reforms of Xinjiang's Turkic languages is likewise one of consistent erection of orthographic barriers to

communication among closely cognate languages and related peoples.

It is worth noting, however, that the PRC project to define, codify and develop the Uyghur Twelve Muqams is largely supported by Uyghurs, who appreciate the prestige it has afforded their national music. While some Uyghurs have resented Han musicians' borrowing and rewriting of Uyghur folk songs (Harris 2001), the *muqam* in its new redaction serves Uyghurs both within and outside of China as a proud symbol of Uyghur identity. And this of course has been the common result of *korenizatsiia* across Central Asia: the cultural productions of Chinese and Soviet state cultural apparatus, however ersatz they may appear to western observers, have staying power as points of honor among the peoples whose identities they helped crystallize. Nationalist pride, as much as trans-national interchange, is part of the modern reality of the Silk Road.

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Notes

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1. On the politics of Xinjiang historiography, see Bovingdon 2004.

2. Recently, official Chinese sources have started translating *minzu* as "ethnic group."

3. Zhou 1987: 217-18, 224-227. A five-string lute is depicted in the cave frescos at Kizil (near Kucha) and listed in Tang sources as one of the Kuchean (Qiuci) instruments. However, such lutes with vaulted backs are common across Eurasia, and there are similar instruments depicted in Mediterranean sites dating from the second century BCE.

4. Avicenna's *Canon* became the foundational work of Renaissance medicine in Europe.

5. Yin Falu, "Woguo lishi shang de minzu qianxi yu wudao wenhua jiaoliu" [Ethnic migrations and exchange of dance culture in the history of my country], *Wudao luncong* 3: 48-57, cited in Trebinjac 2000: 222-223.



Fig. 3. Playing a spike fiddle in Kashgar.