

Music on Silk Roads : Ancient and Modern Times

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Music on Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern Times

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1. VARIOUS ASPECTS OF MUSIC IN ANCIENT TIMES

There has been a great deal of cultural exchange between the Chinese world in the east and the Mediterranean world in the west. It was far before the Christian era that the first description expressing longing for Shangri-la or the West appeared in China. That feeling was handed down in the form of Buddhist ideas about Western Paradise, beliefs in Heaven and in associated tales. The first exploration westward to Central Asia, mentioned in historical documents such as *Shi-ji* (史記), was Zhang Qian's (張騫) expedition dispatch by Wu-ti of Han dynasty in the second century B. C.

Along the trade route for silk, various aspects of civilization or culture, including large repertoires of music and dance, were brought from the western world to the east. Shosoin (正倉院) treasure house has passed on this flowering of ancient cultures in Japan, to preserve a total of 70 items of 18 kinds of musical instruments. The workmanship of each piece is elaborate. They include the gold and silver plain-patterned *koto* (long zither with 13 strings) and ideograms "Tang dynasty" inscribed on it (金銀平文・琴); five-stringed *biwa* (lute) made of rosewood with mother-of-pearl work (螺鈿紫檀・五弦琵琶); *genkan* (variation of *biwa*) with mother-of-pearl work (螺鈿の阮咸); four-stringed *biwa* made of maple wood (楓の四弦琵琶) and *sho* (笙) (vertical multiple bamboo flute like Pan's pipes) made of *Kuretake* (吳竹). Many of these musical instruments came to Shosoin during Tang dynasty (618-907 A. D.), and some of them were recorded in the donation list for Todaiji-temple (東大寺獻物帳・國宝宝帳), 756 A. D. (天平勝宝 8 年). It is thought that they originated in regions west of China. The sound rose of the Tang dynasty five-stringed *biwa* is decorated with the design of Hu-ren (胡人) or Western musicians riding elephants or camels. This picture of Hu-ren on a camel playing *biwa* seems to be an image of a western scene. Here music of ancient Japan has given us a clue to help piece together the genealogy of relations between East and West.

As for the *biwa*, its origin can be traced to ancient times in the Middle East. Scholars are currently looking at something between 2000-1000 B. C. in Assyria or Egypt for its origin. Later, this kind of musical instrument spread far and wide. The *biwa* was introduced into China in Han period, by way of Persia and Central

Asia and then into Japan around Nara period. It was also introduced into India and gradually developed into a native Indian musical instrument called *vina*. In Kucha (龜茲国), a state in Central Asia, *biwa* became the most central musical instrument and since then was popularized among Chinese in the period of North and South dynasties.

Musical instruments, such as *biwa*, which belong to the family of ancient Arabian/Turki plucked instruments called 'ud, were recorded in the history of various regions of the Eurasian continent along with Silk Road. It is known that a number of western-influenced entertainments like the music of the Tang period (唐樂) were widely performed in Nara times. Todaiji temple's *Records of Notable Items* (東大寺要錄) describes such a musical event during the huge pageant for completion of the Great Buddha at Todaiji temple (東大寺大仏開眼法会) in Nara in 752 A. D. (天平勝4年). So even Japan, at the most eastern part of Asia, was affected by western civilization.

Hu-ren meant people of the West, generic name for mainly Iranians including people in Sogdiana or Bukhara. During the height of prosperity in Changan, capital of Tang dynasty, widespread interest in Hu cuisine (胡食) and Hu clothing (胡服) prevailed while Hu music and dance flourished, according to records like Yufu-zhi (興服志) of *Jiu Tang-shua* (旧唐書) in the early days of Gao-zu, Tai-zong, Gao-zong (高祖, 太宗, 高宗). These records told how music of the West became popular in Chang an.

Descriptions of the popularity of Hu music are frequently found in historical documents such as *Yue-fu-za-lu* (樂府雜錄) by Duan An-jie (段安節). The popularity of Hu yue Xinsheng (胡樂新声) in *Tong-dian* (通典) or in many verses by Tang poets, such as the story about Hu-xuan wu (胡旋舞) in *Xin-Yuefu* (新樂府) by Bai Juyi, also bears witness to this.

Tai Chang Si (太常寺), which played the role of Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in promoting the establishment of a Tang period musical system, founded institutes for music and dance called Jiao-fang or Li-yuan. Hu-yue also occupied an important position in those days. Inheriting the system from the Han and the Sui dynasties, folk music was classified into 10 types named Shi Yue Ji (十部伎): With Han Chinese folk music such as Yanyue Ji (讌樂伎); Qingyue Ji (清樂伎); Xiliang Ji (西涼伎) from the area of present Kansu; Gaoli Ji (高麗伎) from Korean Peninsula; Tianzhu Ji (天竺伎) from India; Qiuci Ji (龜茲の伎) from Kucha of the present Xinjiang Uygur (Sinkiang Uighur) autonomous region; Shule Ji (古名疎勒の伎) from Kashgar; Anyue Ji (安国伎) from Sogdiana; Kangguo Ji (康国伎) from Samarkand; and Gao chang Ji (高昌伎) from Turfan. It is noteworthy that six of these 10 types of music came from the west along Silk Road.

Abundance of music in Kucha is well recorded. For example, one of the longest documents by Xuan zang (Sanzang), *Datang Xiyuji* (大唐西域記) described the prosperity of music in Kucha. From both documents and numerous groups of wall paintings left in cave temples of the thousand-Buddhist-images (千仏洞) in Dun-huang, or in Kucha, we can gather many things about the music along Silk

Road in those days, as well as note exchanges or cultural propagation.

No material evidence of ancient *biwa* still exists in the various regions where it once was popular, including China, except the five-stringed one in Shosoin mentioned above. It has been surmised that the original Kucha *biwa* was similar to the one in Shosoin.

2. MUSIC OF SILK ROAD TODAY

The magnificent music from the West spread gloriously to the East during ancient times. However, it is known only from documentary and material evidence. No conjecture can be made about this ancient music from the evidence of music or musical instruments now found along Silk Road. The music of today is quite different from ancient forms revealed by records.

It has not been determined why those ancient traditions were interrupted and faded away. We can surmise several possible reasons for the collapse. These include changes in culture or society because of the influence of nomadic states, or complete destruction of ancient Buddhist kingdoms by the invasion of Islam, or movement of watercourses or oases because of changes in climate.

In Bamian, an ancient capital where Buddhism once flourished, there are many cave temples situated around two great standing images of Buddha. Most of the statues there, including the two largest ones, have had their heads knocked off. Seeing those examples of the complete destruction of sacred images by Islam, we can guess at the treatment received by other cultural phenomena, including music in Kucha.

The music of Kucha was typical of regions along Silk Road. Today's Sinkiang Uighur was its center. The present music of this area has been greatly affected by Arabian or Iranian styles, both of which reflect Islamic musical culture. Music in Sinkiang Uighur has much in common with that in Afghanistan or Iran, using the same kinds of musical instruments and following Arabian musical theory, or melodious style, called *maqam*. Besides these Uighurs in Sinkiang, some peoples in Russian Central Asia, such as the Tadzhik and the Kirgiz, have similar musical cultures. In fact, there are not a few areas in which *maqam* has been more than just a theory. Indeed, they have organized their folk music through six kinds of *maqam*.

The music in Sinkiang Uighur mainly consists of ensembles of plucked instruments of the lute family: two-stringed *do-tar*, three- to five-stringed *tanbul*, two-stringed *rubab*, and *sa-tar*, which has one main string and nine to 13 resonating strings. These are played together with the following instruments: *doira*, tambourine type drum that is struck on one side; *zerbagari* or *donpak*, timbal or pot-shaped drum also struck on one side; a pair of drums called *nagara*; oboe-type instrument with double reed called *bar-ban* or *zuruna*; double-type instrument called *sabai*.

Since the end of World War II, when China was liberated from military

occupation, Chinese music has exerted great influence in this area. So it is worth noting that *erhu yuegin yanggin* (二胡, 月琴, 楊琴), which is the same type of instrument generally known as the *kanun*, has been imported again.

Variety of rhythm of the music of the Uighurs has been often mentioned as one of its distinctive characteristics. Besides using various rhythms, including odd-numbered times of five or seven beats, much of their music is performed for dancing. The dance is energetic, mainly featuring circling with movements that require lifting of hands or supple elasticity of leg and back muscles. We can see a similarity between this kind of dancing and what the ancient Hu called Huxuanuu (胡旋舞).

From ancient times through the present, music of Silk Road has changed in a number of ways. Repeatedly cross-fertilized between regions, it has allowed the sensitivities of each people to contribute their own special characteristics. Acting as a bridge between East and West, the music of Silk Road is still very much alive.