

ASIANetwork Conference 2003

Greenville, South Carolina

Throughout the year we will feature keynote addresses and selected papers from the ASIANetwork Conference 2003.

Plenary Session: John Flower, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Freeman Programs in China. Jen-Mei Ma, Augustana College, Convener; Sangeetha Rayapati, Augustana College; Ralph Bertrand, Colorado College

Using Handhelds: Learning a Language “Anytime, Anywhere.” Phyllis Larson, Craig Rice, St. Olaf College

Dr. John Flower, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, with participation from Daniel Knicely and Dave VanDeventer

Plenary Address: *Mountain to Mountain: An Exploration of Tibetan and Appalachian Folk Music*



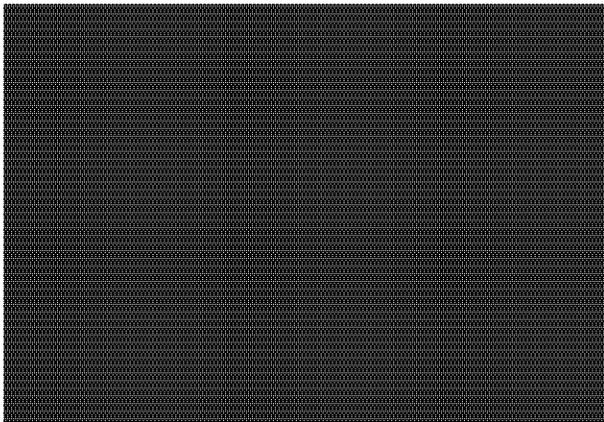
John Flower, Daniel Knicely and Dave VanDeventer performing Tibetan and Appalachian Folk Music

Editor's Note: John Flower recently reprised the presentation he gave at the ASIANetwork meeting on December 3 at the Miller Theater, Columbia University, along with project participants Daniel Knicely and Paul Brown (folklorist, musician, producer at NPR). The presentation was open to the public.

Mountain to Mountain: An Exploration of Tibetan and Appalachian Folk Music

John Flower, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

How does music speak across cultural divides? Or, more specifically, how can “folk” music serve as a universal idiom that transcends cultural particularity? What commonalities can we find between folk music traditions in places as different from each other as the Himalayan plateau of Tibet and the Appalachian highlands of the American South? What can people involved in folk music from these far-flung regions learn from each other? These are some of the questions explored in *Preserving Living Traditions*, a research project focusing on the digital documentation and public presentation of Tibetan folk music, and a cultural exchange that allowed scholars from Tibet and the U.S. to experience each other’s folk music in place.



Recording the Sokhang Quintet at the Norbulinka

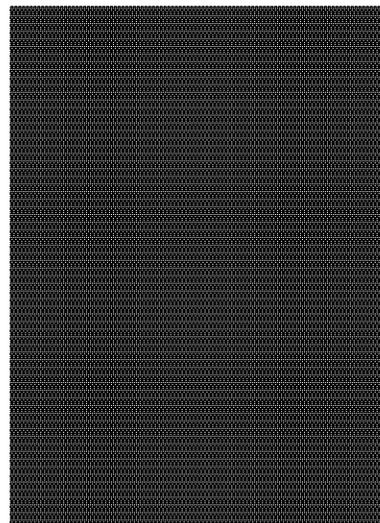
At the ASIANetwork meeting in Greenville last May, we tried to suggest cultural convergences by offering a presentation that combined audio and video recordings from the project’s on-line archive with live performance of Old Time and bluegrass music. The aim of the program was to suggest the existence of analogous folk musical idioms through side-by-side pairings of musical voices, interwoven with observations on performative contexts and on the communities in which each tradition is fostered, transformed, and passed on to new generations of musicians. I hope the presentation was of some scholarly interest to the audience—it was certainly a lot of fun for the presenters! In that spirit of informality, I will describe below the content of the program, talk about the *Preserving Living Traditions* project, and introduce the much larger *Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library* that hosts the project’s on-line archive of recordings.



Roofers in Lhasa singing work songs
A video is available at www.thdl.org

Fiddles and banjos...pewang and dramnyen

We began the program with the most striking commonality reflected in the music of the two traditions, evident to the layperson’s ear: the musical “voice” resonating from similar instrumentation. The program began with a “fiddle” represented in the Himalayan region by the sarangi of Nepal and North India, and the Tibetan pewang. Daniel Knicely demonstrated the sarangi, playing both a Nepali and Old Time Appalachian fiddle tune on the instrument, followed by recordings he made of solo sarangi and ensemble performance accompanied by madal drum and bansuri flute. Daniel, a participant in the Appalachian side of the PLT project and a multi-instrumentalist from a family of musicians in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, made the recordings during fieldwork among the Gandharva caste of musicians in Nepal. The Gandharva traditionally served as news broadcasters, and their songs still deal with current events—highlighting the fluid, adaptive nature of folk music.



Drado with the pewang he made

That dynamic quality of folk music is also evident in the music of Drado, a pewang player we recorded in the capital of Lhasa in the summer of 2000. Drado’s music continues a long tradition of itinerant musicians playing the pewang, a three-stringed Tibetan cousin to the Chinese erhu, but he plays his own songs, often expressing longing for his homeplace of Lhatse in central Tibet—a theme common to wandering musicians from Appalachia as well. The rhythmic drone produced by the piwang on the video recording was compared to the “double-stop” fiddle technique common in Old Time and bluegrass fiddle, demonstrated in our program by Dave VanDeventer.



Dorje playing dramnyen at a nang ma nightclub

The itinerant musician in Tibet is also associated with the dramnyen or six-stringed Tibetan lute. We showed video performances by Dorje, an accomplished dramnyen player from a village near Lhasa. Dorje is a regular performer in Lhasa nang ma, and father of a family of musicians who work in state-sponsored performance troupes. He toured China as an “official” musician for several years in the early 1960s. Technically not “folk” music in that it uses written scores, nang ma is performed by ensembles of dramnyen, pewang, yangqin (dulcimer, from China), gling (bells), and bamboo flute, with singing from fixed texts. Nang ma is a synthesis of folk music from Western Tibet (‘stod gzhaz) and more structured classical forms. Historically performed for the Tibetan aristocracy and the Dalai Lama, nang ma persists today chiefly in nightclub performances, usually as the opening act for an evening of Karaoke and disco music (the performance context for the recordings of Dorje). The dramnyen is similar in sound and construction to the gourd banjo, and to the four-stringed banjo used in Old Time music. Daniel and Dave demonstrated frailing and claw-hammer banjo picking techniques on both banjo and dramnyen, and talked about the similarity between Dorje’s work songs and the themes and overall sound of banjo great Doc Boggs.

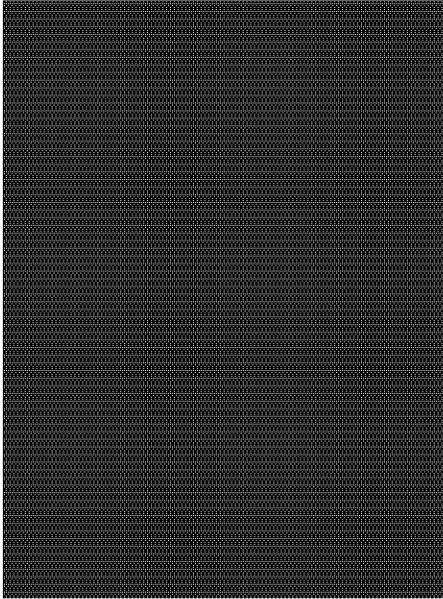
Our presentation continued with more dramnyen and banjo music, this time in ensemble form. In Tibet, these

ensemble performances of dramnyen music are frequently accompanied by dancing. Nyima Tsering is a dramnyen player and singer from Lhatse who performs with singer/dancers Pumo Dakyi, Pumo Dawa, and Pumo Migmar. While Nyima Tsering is an office worker in Lhasa, and plays music as an amateur, the group’s performances are well rehearsed. The singing and dance steps of the three women add a strong syncopation to the music. In the same genre, Dawa Ngodup, Dawa Tsering, Lhakpa Tsering, Pema Dondup, and Tenzin (referred to collectively as the “Sokhang Quintet”), form a band of musicians playing dramnyen, flute, and bells. The members of the group are farmers from Penam in the Shigatse region of central Tibet who busk in Lhasa during the slack agricultural season in the summer. Although the musical traditions of their native village of Sokhang are purely vocal, they taught themselves how to play their instruments, and have developed a pan-Tibetan repertoire, including songs from other regions of Tibet, to augment their traditional local songs set to instrumental accompaniment.



The Sokhang Quintet

The Sokhang Quintet reminded us of the early pioneers of bluegrass music, such as Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass boys or the Stanley Brothers, in that their music, while strongly rooted in place, branches out thematically and stylistically to create a new synthetic form—a phenomenon made possible by the advent of recorded music. The band members talked about making their own recordings and “going on tour” in much the same way as Daniel, Dave and I do in our own bluegrass band. They also are folklorists in their own right, and showed a keen interest in the recordings our project made in different regions of Tibet, even as they learned more of their own tradition from Molhakyi (mo lha skyid), an 81-year-old blind singer from Sokhang village in Penam, musical mentor to the Sokhang Quintet and important bearer of local song traditions. The influence of Molhakyi on the Quintet resembles the role Bill Monroe’s mother played in the development of his music, as detailed in Rachel Liebing’s documentary film *High Lonesome: the Story of Bluegrass Music*.



Nyima Donma plays the mandolin

Speaking of Bill Monroe...one of the most interesting adaptations of Tibetan folk music is the widespread use of the mandolin in the Amdo region of Northeastern Tibet. While our project did not visit Amdo, we did record Nyima Donma (nyi ma sgron ma), a woman from Amdo who performs regularly in a nang ma nightclub in Lhasa. The story—or more accurately, stories—of how the mandolin came to be the instrument of choice among yak herders on the Tibetan grasslands will (hopefully) be the topic of my next research in Tibet.

Singers and dancers

In every region of Tibet we visited on the project, women played a key role in both preserving and innovating within local musical traditions. In the Basum region, Diki (bde skyid), Yangchen Tsomo (dbyangs can mtsho mo), Lhache, and Xiaomi, compose a troupe of women singer/dancers from the village of Duarte. The group represents three generations of local singers, led by the oldest member and leader, Diki. While most of their songs are traditional, they also sing their own lyrics set to older tunes, including one song they created to honor a beloved religious leader in the area.

In our program, we showed several examples of vocal music from various regions in Tibet, as this is the most common form of Tibetan folk music, almost always with dancing that ranged from the stationary shuffle of gzhas chen (ceremonial songs) to vigorous circle dancing performed at Tibetan New Year (Losar) celebrations. Like the old barn dances in Appalachia, these song and dance celebrations are still an important focus of community life in rural Tibet. While some people are acknowledged as better “performers,” the activity is inclusive, and villagers turn out not just as audience, but also as participants.

The Ngari region, in the far West of Tibet, is particularly interesting because of the ancient, pre-Buddhist musical traditions that are still extant there, and because of the distinctive singing style characterized by long, slow chant-like passages sliding through minor intervals. The group singing and dancing from Ngari represented in the project database was recorded during fieldwork in Purang and Ruthok. The obvious parallel in the Appalachian tradition are the folk ballads that captured the attention of folklorists like Cecil Sharpe, who was enthralled by the “survival” of old English and Scottish ballads in the southern Appalachian highlands. More recent scholarship (e.g. David Whisnant’s *All That is Native and Fine*, and Jane Becker’s *Selling Tradition*) reveals the extent to which the traditions discovered by Sharpe and other folklorists in the early twentieth century were in fact inventions serving the search for “Anglo-Saxon” roots of American identity—conveniently ignoring the African contributions to the American “folk.”

The Preserving Living Traditions Project

The term “folk” itself, bearing culturally and historically contingent associations, is best used as a heuristic device rather than a precise referent, just as our framing of Tibetan folk music reflects more our eclectic encounter with it than any attempt at systemization. There is a tremendous variety of folk music in Tibet, and each place has very local and distinctive traditions. The recordings in the project database therefore should be viewed as providing a taste and not an exhaustive representation of these regional traditions. The research in Tibet was carried out inductively; that is, we did not try to record representative samples of different genres of folk music, but rather worked from the music found in specific communities, working in places where we had some local connections, and interviewing the performers about their particular experiences and perspectives on the music’s meaning and natural context.

The issue of context was important because the time limitations of our fieldwork meant that much of what we recorded was taken out of its natural performative context (e.g. songs performed during New Year celebrations were out of place in the summer). The genres with which we categorized the songs, more descriptive rather than analytical, are in keeping with the musicians’ own flexible understanding. Moreover, the syncretic nature of the music itself tended to defy rigid classification. The very term “folk music” is, of course, problematic in that it is an imposed category from a modern perspective, a nostalgic invention of “the folk” dating from the late 19th century in the West, and from at least the 1920s in China. We use the term “folk music,” *faute de mieux*, in its connotation as community-based music transmitted face-to-face, as opposed to music learned from fixed written scores or from popular recordings (a relatively recent phenomenon in Tibet).

In terms of its organization and aims, the Preserving Living Traditions project is a collaboration between the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (home institution of John Flower, project director), the Tibetan Academy of

Social Sciences, the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library at the University of Virginia, and the Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique, France (CNRS). The goals of the project are

1. to create a platform for ongoing efforts to document and study Tibetan folk music, by providing hands-on training, advanced equipment, and comparative experiences to Tibetan researchers through a cultural exchange program in the Appalachian region of the U.S.;
2. to explore different regional traditions and genres of Tibetan folk music, their historical roots in local communities, and emerging trends in contemporary folk music;
3. to give web access to recordings of Tibetan folk music in “thick” format: songs and interviews presented in audio and video, with Tibetan transcriptions, English translations, and information on the recording and performance contexts.

The initial field research and cultural exchange dimensions of the project were carried out from June, 2000 to April, 2001. Funding for these activities was provided by a grant from the United States Information Service, Office of Citizen Exchange. In the first phase of the project, during the summer of 2000, a group of scholars and technicians traveled to Tibet, to work with the Academy of Social Science in Lhasa on the recording of Tibetan folk music, and to study the social context in which that music exists. Members of the group made recordings in Lhasa, Basum, Shigatse, and Ngari.

In phase two of the project, the three scholars from the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences who worked with us in summer 2000 came to the U.S. to take part in a study tour of the Appalachian region, during October and November 2000. Tenzin, Konchok Jiatso, and Tsering Gyalbo participated in the Old Time Week at the Augusta Heritage Center (Elkins, West Virginia), attended and gave a presentation at the American Folklore Society annual meeting, and took part in a number of workshops and site visits on Appalachian music and its community coordinated through the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University. As part of their study tour, the group gave presentations of their research to students at area colleges and universities and to audiences from the broader community. The three visiting Tibetan scholars also wrote a brief, but quite thoughtful, reflection on their experiences during the study tour, included on the project website.



Tsering Gyalbo with a banjo at the Augusta Heritage Center, Elkins, WV

In the final phase of the project, the Tibetan visitors stayed at the University of Virginia to undergo five months of intensive training in digital archiving, learning computer skills and developing abilities in logging, editing, and processing audio and video data. In addition, the Tibetan scholars collaborated with American colleagues to begin the work of putting the audio and video materials documented in Tibet into a web-accessible archive of Tibetan folk music.

Project Participants

During the project’s research over the summer of 2000, three scholars with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences—Tsering Gyalbo, Konchok Jiatso, and Tenzin—worked with a team of researchers consisting of Paul Brown (folklorist and independent producer, working at National Public Radio), John Flower (University of North Carolina at Charlotte), Frances Garret (University of Virginia), David Germano (University of Virginia), Pamela Leonard (University of North Carolina at Charlotte), Travis McCauley (University of Virginia), and Nicholas Tournadre (CNRS, France). The whole team did fieldwork together in Lhasa and Basum. John Flower and Tenzin did additional work in Penam, and Germano, McCauley, Tournadre, Konchok Jiatso, and Tsering Gyalbo carried out the fieldwork research in Ngari.

In the second phase of the project (the workshops and study tour in the Appalachian region of the U.S.) many of the workshop arrangements were made by Mary Greene (Appalachian State University). Special visits and programs were made possible by the hospitality of Mrs. Bessie Eldreth, Mr. Rick Ward and Mr. Clint Cornett of Watauga County, North Carolina. Gerry Milnes and Margo Blevin of the Augusta Heritage Center at Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia were also generous in hosting the visiting Tibetans, while Daniel Knicely and Tara Lindhart of Loudon County, Virginia, served as hosts and musical guides. Many others participated in the study tour, and thanks go out to all of them for their service.



Tenzin, Tsering Gyalbo, Konchok Jiatso with ballad singer Bessie Eldreth

Phase three of the project—the training in digital archiving—was implemented by the staff at the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library, under the guidance of David Germano, and with support from John Flower. Kirk Moore and Travis McCauley did much of the work during this final phase of the project.

The Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library

The project's work can be found in the Thematic Collections of the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library. The archive includes a database of over 300 song recordings in audio format, along with selected video of song performances, contextual information, interviews, transcripts, translations, and interpretive essays. More materials are being added on an ongoing basis, and additional research on Tibetan music beyond the PLT project can be found in the THDL music collection.

The Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library, directed by David Germano, is a groundbreaking effort of the University of Virginia's Virtual Library initiative. THDL serves as host to a wide variety of scholarly projects related to Tibetan culture, environment, history, society, and language; the site thus constitutes a center of a virtual community of scholars, students, and the general public interested in Tibet. THDL presents both a deep set of content and a set of tools that bring cutting-edge technologies—GIS maps, virtual tours, interactive dictionaries—to the study of Tibet. The site is an outstanding contribution to scholarship, and an extremely valuable resource for teaching.

Weblinks:

Preserving Living Traditions Project: <http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/tibet/collections/music/folkmusic.html>

Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library: www.thdl.org

Inquiries about the project, or our program/performance: jmflower@email.uncc.edu

***The Chicago Koto Group
will be performing
Koto and Shakuhachi Music***

***5:00 pm, April 3 at the
Hickory Ridge Conference
Center in Lisle, IL
as part of the 12th annual
2004 ASIANetwork
Conference.***

Be sure to attend!

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