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COLUMN ONE

In China, Echoes of the Past

A musical archeologist connects with aging folk masters, many of whom almost died — along with their customs — in the Cultural Revolution.

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XILINHOT, China — Video recorder in hand, Wang Hong sat inside a small stone-and-brick house with one of China's aging musical masters — a Mongolian vocalist named Hajab who once sang his region's ancestral melodies for Chairman Mao Tse-tung.

Wang had ventured from his home in San Francisco to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia on a quest to mine the ancient harmonies of the Middle Kingdom. He had lobbied state authorities and waited months for permission to visit Hajab.

He brought beer to their first meeting.

Imprisoned as a traitor in the 1960s, Hajab says he drinks to forget the past. He is 85 now, and his hearing is nearly gone. A lone yellow tooth protrudes from his lower gums, and cataracts have stolen his sight.

Once known as the King of the Grasslands, he rarely sings anymore.

Although it was well before noon, he sipped warm beer from a yellow plastic cup. His mood was dour.

Then two Chinese musicians, one a former student of his, began tuning their Mongolian horse-head fiddles. Hajab grew silent. As the two played the song "Old Bird," his head began moving to the rhythm.

Slowly, he began to sing.

Wang's hands shook with excitement. He glanced at his video camera to make sure he was capturing the moment for posterity.

Wang, 46, is a musical archeologist. For years he has crisscrossed mainland China in search of folk virtuosos, recording impromptu performances on some of the country's 400 ethnic instruments.

He has learned to play two dozen himself. There's the banjo-like *ruan*, or moon guitar, a four-stringed instrument used in the Beijing Opera. There's the *xun*, a clay-vessel flute resembling a beehive with finger holes, and the *laba* trumpet, which mimics bird song. "I see these instruments — mute, beautiful, mysterious — and I have to play them," Wang said. To find the old masters, he has traveled by donkey and bicycle over mountain passes. He has played cultural detective, coaxing information from residents, tracking down musicians wary of disclosing the secrets of their craft.

For everyone, Wang has many questions: How are the instruments played? Can they find an audience in a generation obsessed with electronics?

Back in the United States, through his nonprofit Melody of China, an ensemble of musicians trained at some of China's most prestigious conservatories, Wang stages performances by traditional musicians to give the folk music a broader spotlight.

He performs and lectures around the world on Chinese music — all while struggling to meet deadlines for grant applications to keep his dream alive.

Sometimes he worries that he may be too late. He once tracked down an expert on the four-string *sihu* in a village near Nanjing and was fascinated by the musician's stories. But before he could return, the man died.

Wang still is searching for the *zhui hu*, a two-string bass fiddle thought to be extinct.

He reached Hajab in time. On a cool summer morning, the master performed a favorite piece called "A Fine Horse."

"Riding a quick red horse, you should tighten the halter going to a far distance," he sang in his native Inner Mongolian

dialect as the two fiddlers accompanied him. "You should persist and be patient."

Hajab explained that during the Cultural Revolution, one of his songs angered the Communists. The lyrics evoked a mountain in bordering Mongolia, which became independent from China in the 1920s.

Party leaders demanded to know why he had immortalized a foreign landmark even though China had many beautiful mountains. Red Guard students smashed most known recordings of his music and burned his scores.

Hajab spent 11 years in prison. Talking of the ordeal, he began to weep.

Wang has witnessed such emotions often. Many old musicians never recovered from the Cultural Revolution and live in poverty. "Many cry, which makes me cry," Wang said. "I try to stick to the music. But these musicians can never forget the past."

The Cultural Revolution wounded Wang's family as well.

His father, an engineering professor in Nanjing, was blacklisted, and Wang, then 18, was sent to the countryside with his aunt and uncle. He spent a year planting tea and digging canals. Back home, his father was placed under house arrest.

Wang continued to pursue music. After training as a singer and dancer, he learned to play the *erhu*, a two-string violin shaped like a large croquet mallet.

While Wang was studying music at Nanjing Normal University, one of his professors sought a volunteer to learn the oboe.

Wang raised his hand and was rewarded with an initiation into Western music. What he learned astounded and fascinated him. Everything was different — breathing techniques, fingering charts, musical notation.

"Music blends feeling and skills," he said. "To learn it, you have to put time into it. You wake up earlier. You go to sleep later."

In Europe in 1991, Wang heard an Irish group called the Red Army playing a respectable version of Chinese traditional music. That's when he realized the Chinese themselves should promote their music to the rest of the world.

Wang moved to the United States in 1993, settling in San Francisco.

He continued his musical studies and began conducting workshops on Chinese music in elementary and high schools. But his musical mission was never far from his thoughts.

He returned to China at least once a year in search of such instruments as the *banhu*, a stringed instrument with a sound box made of coconut, and the *pipa*, a Chinese lute.

He found the master of the *hujia*, a kind of flute, who would not discuss how it was played: "He wanted his daughter to be the sole master. I would have been competition."

So Wang bought a used *hujia* and taught himself.

One night in 2003, while Wang was in Oakland attending a performance by a visiting Chinese orchestra, a thief was outside his San Francisco home, disengaging the alarm on his van and making off with 40 traditional instruments valued at \$17,000.

Wang's Melody of China ensemble was scheduled to begin a series of performances just three weeks later.

He dashed back to China, buying *erhus* in Beijing and gongs and cymbals in Nanjing. He took a 17-hour train ride to Suzhou to buy flutes and three sets of pigskin *paigu* drums. He put everything on his credit card.

The concerts went as planned. Since then, Melody of China has performed with jazz quartets and symphony orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic. His repertoire includes "Squabbling Ducks," which features a dialogue between two cymbals; "Camel Bells on the Silk Road," a solo for the *ruan*; and "Galloping Horse," in which the *erhu* creates sounds like hoofbeats.

"The Beatles introduced the sitar to America. Wang is doing a modern version of that. He brings new instruments to our musical palate," said Anthony Brown, leader of the Bay Area-based Asian American Jazz Orchestra.

Chinese American composer Jon Jang recalled the night Wang, playing his *suona*, or Chinese oboe, joined the American jazz drummer Max Roach.

"Hong played a musical melody and Max responded," Jang said. "Then they played together. It was a musical conversation between two cultures, two musical traditions.

"Who knows what will happen politically between China and the U.S. in the next century? But that night, two musicians built a bridge. The audience loved it."

Wang's most recent project involves the *matouqin*, the horse-head fiddle, so named because its scroll is shaped like a stallion's head.

The instrument dates back 800 years, to the era of Genghis Khan. Its sound can be mournful, but also expansive and unrestrained, like a wild horse's neighing. Below the elegant figure of the horse head is the frightening face of a gargoyle — carvings that express the *matouqin*'s range.

This summer, he went to Inner Mongolia in search of the sages who played it best.

Wang's muddied SUV rumbled over an axle-snapping dirt road near Xilinhot. All around him, the grasslands reached out in rolling waves.

He passed ox carts and shepherd boys atop motorcycles tending to their flocks. As wandering cows slowed the flow of battered trucks and cars, he stared out a grimy window — humming an old Mongolian folk tune that was stuck in his head.

A day after interviewing Hajab, Wang recorded the music of one of the master's pupils, Li Bo, also a grassland native. Wang wanted to videotape Li inside a yurt, a dome-shaped Mongolian herdsman's tent.

The two sat cross-legged on the yurt's carpeted floor, dining on a freshly slaughtered lamb, drinking sour horse milk. Li told about how he once used his *matouqin* to make camels weep.

Herdsmen used to summon musicians whenever a pregnant camel had trouble delivering, he said. If shepherds assisted in the birth, they often left a human scent, causing the mother to reject the calf. The strains of the fiddle could make her reconsider.

Li explained that he would draw his bow across the horsehair strings in languid strokes, trying to evoke tears from the moody animal so she would accept the newborn. "Camels, like humans, have complex emotions," he said.

Later, Li and Wang visited a 92-year-old *matouqin* player named Maxibataar, who was imprisoned for 15 years by the Communists. His brother, a more celebrated player, committed suicide by jumping off a bridge rather than face such a fate.

The old man, frail and bent, listened as Li played the *matouqin*. His eyes had a distant look, as though he was remembering his own performances.

Li coaxed him into playing for the first time in years.

He finished with a flourish, playfully plucking the strings.

He asked for a cigarette, exclaiming: "I am happy."

Wang was overjoyed as well: His camera had never blinked.

John Glionna, who usually is based in San Francisco, was recently on assignment in China and Pakistan.

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ON THE WEB

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