

The Plateau Music Project

Grass-roots Cultural Preservation on the Tibetan Plateau

By Tsering Bum and Gerald Roche

China became a signatory to United Nation's Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization's convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. In doing so the Chinese government recognized in an international forum, the urgent need for the protection of the nation's intangible cultural heritage, given the threats posed by contemporary lifestyles and the process of globalization. The Plateau Music Project, a cultural preservation initiative based in Xining City, the capital of China's Qinghai Province, is part of the effort to preserve China's intangible heritage.

Before detailing the project, a description of similar projects, both contemporary and historical, is provided.

One of the first ever endangered music projects was undertaken in the early twentieth century by two Hungarian musicians and composers, Bela Bartok and Zolton Kodaly. They utilized an Edison wax-cylinder recording machine to record traditional music in rural Hungarian villages. At that time, this music was rapidly disappearing due to the building of roads, telegraph communication and military conscription in rural areas. Both Kodaly and Bartok used the music they collected as a basis for their own compositions, disseminating the music in 'improved', modified versions.

Another significant figure in the history of recording endangered musics is the American, Alan Lomax, who travelled throughout America recording traditional folk musics. He was successful in popularizing much traditional music through releases on the Smithsonian Folkways record label, without 'improving' or modifying the music. Lomax later travelled through parts of Europe, Asia and Africa, recording traditional musics and releasing them in the United States. Now, many of his recordings are available online through the website of Smithsonian Global Sounds: <http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/>.

Another preservation project, bearing similarity to the Plateau Music Project, is currently underway in Adis Ababa in Ethiopia. Starting in 2005, the University of Addis Ababa and the Yared Music School began offering courses in ethnomusicology in English and the national language (Amharic). This project aims to train a generation of local ethnomusicologists to collect and archive Ethiopia's diverse musics. It was funded by the Norwegian

Governments via UNESCO with a grant of 345,000 US dollars given over four years.

Our project, the Plateau Music Project began life as the Tibetan Endangered Music Project, because initially, all members were Tibetan. To begin, we prepared a list of traditional Tibetan song genres. For each genre, we proposed factors affecting this genre being maintained as a living tradition. These factors included the influence of mass media, and the mechanization of work. From this, we determined that work songs, lullabies and wedding songs were the most endangered song genres in Tibetan areas. The reasons for their endangerment differ. Wedding songs are endangered due to the influence of mass media. People are increasingly relying on cassettes and VCDs for entertainment at weddings. Works songs are endangered due to the mechanization of work. It is unclear why lullabies are endangered. Perhaps it is due to mass media's influence on people's perception of their own musical talent.

After conducting the survey, we solicited donations of recording equipment (minidisk recorders). This was done via email, using personal social networks, and provided us with some ten recorders. Small cash donations allowed us to purchase microphones, headphones and minidisks. After a two-month training period, project members returned to their home communities to record traditional music. Afterwards, we have conducted four training and four recording sessions. We have continued to receive donations of minidisk recorders.

During June 2006, two project members attended a joint conference and field training session in Shanxi Province, PR China, organized by CHIME (the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research). These project members have since taken over part of the training schedule, teaching equipment operation and data gathering. We received funds from a private donor to secure a dedicated computer for the program in September 2006. This allows us to process, organize, archive, and disseminate material collected by members. More recently, we have received funding to pay a full-time employee for the project, to oversee members' work and to conduct training.

Beginning in late 2007, our project expanded to record endangered songs of other ethnic minority groups apart from Tibetans, including Naxi, Pumi and Nanyi people from Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. To reflect this new diversity, we changed our name to the Plateau Music Project.

Having given an introduction of the project, we present project members explaining their work, their motives for doing it, and their feelings about it.

Tsering Samdrup, a twenty-one-year-old Tibetan, has been a member of the Plateau Music Project since 2006. He has recorded seventy-one endangered Tibetan songs. In June 2006, Tsering Samdrup traveled with another project member to attend the CHIME conference in Shanxi. When he returned he became the digital recorder trainer for project members at Qinghai Normal University.

“Some people think that recording music doesn’t require any training. However, that is not the case. A person needs to prepare for at least two months to be able to record a song well.”

Renchin Tso is nineteen years old and Diebu County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province. She said, “As more and more families have TV sets and VCD players, young people become fond of singers from outside their local areas, and no longer learn traditional songs. It was really awkward for me to encourage elders to sing when I recorded in my village. They are frail and had to rest several times during a recording session. Nonetheless, it was worth it. These songs are preserved at this crucial moment.”

Hu Qianma is a Pumi from Ninglang County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province. She commented about her work in the project, “I recorded as many Pumi songs as I could. I will take CDs home when I go back and give them to the singers and local villagers. They will be very happy to hear their own voices on CD. I will also make films of these songs with pictures I took while I was home, and put them online, making them available for people who are interested in Pumi culture.”

Regarding the return of endangered music into local communities, project member Lamo said: “I brought the CDs to the singers as gifts during the New Year. People listened to their songs on my lap-top and then I gave the CDs to the singers. When I recorded the songs, some singers refused to sing for me; they were too shy, and thought their voices were not good. However, when they listened to the songs sung by other villagers in my lap-top, some of them said that they regretted not singing before. They were surprised by the recording quality and volunteered to sing songs for me in the future.” Lamo Tso recorded songs from Xunhua Salar Autonomous County in the Haidong Region of Qinghai Province.

“Music is part of Tibetan life. Tibetan music explains who Tibetans are and what Tibetans do. Most importantly, Tibetan music is facing extinction,” said Dawa Drolma, one of our project members from Tianzhu (Huari) Tibetan Autonomous County, Gansu Province, PR China.

We now discuss more general concerns motivating the project.

The Plateau Music Project is both a cultural preservation project and a training initiative. In China, rural minority peoples have access to fewer educational possibilities than people in urban centers, and often lag far behind in terms of digital technology skills. Various levels of government are working to ameliorate this situation, but vast distances, lack of teachers, and rural poverty make this difficult. We hope that our project will contribute to making more educational opportunities available for rural minority people.

Traditional music in these areas is critically endangered. Industrialization, development, modernization and globalization are all responsible for eroding traditional life-ways that form the basis of traditional music, which is intimately linked to such day-to-day subsistence activities as herding and farming. Given the rapid pace of change in China's western regions, much traditional music will disappear in the next decade. Now is a crucial time to preserve it.

Additional changes complicate this situation. With a shift to a consumer culture, people become more likely to consume culture than to produce it. As highways, power-lines, and satellites bring in more and more music from inner China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, and the West, people have become creatively less self-sufficient and more dependant on external sources of music. One example of significant impact is in the singing of lullabies.

A third cause of music loss is the influx of mass media and recording technologies. This has eroded local musical differences within rural minority areas. Tibetan wedding songs, for instance, have been particularly affected. People are more likely to sing songs they learn from cassettes, radio, and VCDs, rather than from family members or local villagers.

Project members have recorded approximately 540 songs, amounting to over twenty-six hours of recordings. These materials have been edited, and digitized in accordance with international digital archiving standards. We have also prepared 540 text documents, giving contextual data for each song. Currently, about seventy percent of the data has been compiled and the remaining thirty percent is in process. The contextual data includes information on singer demography, song learning methods, song lyrics, song genre and the socio-cultural context of the song. These provide in-depth contextual information, explaining recordings to non-local audiences.

Project members who record songs can choose appropriate methods of dissemination. Recordings can be repatriated to their community of origin on CD, as most households now possess CD players. Written materials can be printed in the local language and distributed to local communities. Materials can be lodged with international archives, such as the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures and the Archives of Traditional music at Indiana University, Bloomington.

To date, our work has been covered in *China Daily*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *National Geographic* and *That's Beijing Magazine*. On radio, the project has been featured in both Australia and the USA.

Some project members have made short videos of songs and put them online. Currently, we have fifteen videos on youtube.com, which, as of April 4 2008, had been viewed 21,654 times. These twelve films were recently made available on 56.com, a popular Chinese video sharing website. As of April 8 2008, the films had been viewed a total of 3,1971 times. We also have two collections of songs at www.Digitalhimalaya.com, with more collections currently under preparation. This website contains a large collection of materials on Himalayan cultures in China, India and Nepal. On average, the site receives eighty hits a day.

Finally, we mention certain strategies used by the Plateau Music Project.

The Plateau Music Project partly relies on obsolete, and hence available, technology. When digital minidisk recorders were first released, they were recognized by such institutions as the British Library Sound Archive as being capable of producing digital recordings of permanent archival quality. These recorders also became popular with radio broadcast journalists because of their high-quality recordings, portability, and durability. Within a decade of their release however, these recorders were superseded by the release of such personal musical devices as iPods, resulting in a large number of high-quality digital recorders suddenly being disowned. Our project began by soliciting donations of such equipment, and continues to receive them.

A second strategy is to focus on specific locations and local residents as recordists. Large-scale survey projects attempting to sample all the musical traditions of a region are expensive and miss much musical diversity. In a region as culturally diverse as the Tibetan Plateau, many traditions are village-based. Training local people to record their own village traditions acknowledges this. Moreover, having locals preserve music avoids many of the problems faced when strangers enter a community unannounced, with intimidating equipment, and limited understanding of local conditions and etiquette. Local recordists are also able to make use of their kinship and social networks to find tradition bearers to consult.

Another strategy is to focus on young people. Although current trends in cultural preservation lean towards professionalism, local amateurs often do a better job than highly paid professional outsiders. Years of theoretical training are unnecessary. By allowing young people to intervene in their local traditions, we are giving provide their input in if, and how, this music is transmitted to future generations, including the choice of what to record and how to disseminate it. Through this process, many members have discovered and

newly appreciate aspects of their own musical heritage they were previously unaware of.

Finally, in a climate in which economic participation and success are highly valued, cultural preservation must be able to offer more to young people than the abstract satisfaction of preserving their culture. Consequently, our project emphasizes building skills of young people, particularly in relation to digital technologies. For example, in presenting members with a range of options for disseminating music, we also provide them with such skills as online broadcasting, desk-top publishing, film-making, and so on. Although these skills are useful for cultural preservation, they can also be applied in other, more economically pragmatic, contexts.

Modernization and globalization have greatly impacted Tibetan and other ethnic minorities' cultures over the last decade. Eroding traditions give way to imported, global norms. Traditional music embodies a corpus of musical techniques and theories which, if not preserved, will soon vanish and be lost not just to local communities, but to all humanity. Ethnic minority music presents a record of the viability of an alternative world-view, and the integrity of a different aesthetic logic. Its loss is a blow to global cultural diversity, and, indeed, the ability of human beings continued survival in a very uncertain future. We believe that the Plateau Music Project is playing a small part in reversing these global trends of loss and homogenization.