

# Music among the Sibe of Xinjiang

*Ethnomusicologist and former British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, Dr Rachel Harris spent long periods of fieldwork in Xinjiang, in the remote desert region of Chinese Central Asia, listening and learning about the music of the Sibe, descendants of Qing dynasty military garrisons. In the following edited extract from her book, Singing the Village, Dr Harris gives a biographical sketch of a village musician G'altu, and describes a typical wedding in Çabçal, a county in Sibe.*

## G'altu

Tiny, irrepressible G'altu. His clan name was Anjia; his Chinese name, used in the official testaments to his existence, was An Darong; but he was known to all the people in the village as G'altu or Pointy Head. I was never able to verify the basis of this nickname, for G'altu's flat cap always stayed firmly on his head. G'altu was a great talker, a great drinker and smoker, and a great party man. He could generally be found squatting at the cross-roads of Third Village where the local bus service unloaded its passengers, smoking and gossiping with the other old men of the village, waiting for the next form of entertainment to arrive and claim him. He played at all the weddings, the spontaneous parties of the older villagers, and the government-organised festivals.

G'altu was a village character, and he enjoyed a small reputation beyond the confines of the Sibe villages. To the outside world he incarnated the Sibe folk musician, and the outside world frequently came to seek him out, primed on the proper etiquette of visiting, bearing the expected gift of a bottle of spirits or a packet of cigarettes. G'altu was always ready to oblige. He had been interviewed by local and regional newspapers, and over four hundred of his songs had been recorded by regional television and radio and more recently for Taiwanese television. A stylised black and white photograph of G'altu playing his mandolin hung on the wall in his guest room, taken by a Beijing photographer. For the people of Third and Fourth Villages he was the centre of every celebration, an unflinching source of *renao* (heat and noise; fun), dispenser of drinks and courtesy, and accompanist to singers. His shouts of 'Wansui!' (in Chinese: 10,000 years!) could be heard echoing around the village as another cup of spirits was drunk or a good line of poetry was sung. G'altu is at the heart of many of my best memories of

Çabçal, with his huge bottle of Chinese wolfberries and ginseng stewing in spirits. He claimed that strong spirits were beneficial to the health if exposed to ginseng, however briefly, and constantly replenished his store with bottles brought to him as gifts. Words poured from G'altu at the same rate as alcohol poured down his throat, and they were often inspired.

A whiff of scandal always clung to G'altu. Perhaps it was his divorce and remarriage, hinted at with disapproval by certain of the villagers. Perhaps it was the drinking, or perhaps it was his habit of revealing the particulars of his personal life to everyone he met. At our first meeting he told me that he had given up drinking throughout his second marriage for fear of succumbing to his former bad habit of wife-beating. After the death of his second wife in 1994, he said, he saw no reason to keep up the ban.

He was a dedicated student of the supernatural, and kept a small library of books on the *I Ching* and Western and Chinese horoscopes. He was also the guardian of the ritual gear of a former shaman of the village, which he kept carefully folded and hidden away except for twice a year at New Year and in the eighth month when he took them out for worship. For a suitable fee, however, he could be persuaded to take them out and model them for the curious eyes of foreign camera crews. Apparently the ancestral spirits, in line with the times, did not take offence at his spirit of enterprise, although normally they were not to be trifled with. G'altu delighted in story-telling, passing with ease between the Sibe and Chinese languages. His favourite subject was the supernatural, and he took pleasure from the uncertainty of his belief. In one of his stories, he once had a stiff arm for a year and went to see the *siyangtung* (female healer). She lit incense and made paper cuts to divine his problem, then described an incident to him. He was carrying

the bones of an ancestor on a cart and had lost his way. He had dropped the bones in a stream and left some of them behind when he gathered them up, and thus he had offended the ancestor. She told him to burn certain paper cuts and incense outside the south wall of the village and to return home without speaking to anyone – not an easy feat for G'altu. He didn't believe that this cured him, he told me, for he was a man of science; it was the course of acupuncture that cured him. But how did she know about that incident?

G'altu was also a great talker about music, and this talk often overflowed the boundaries between speech, poetry and song. He would break into snatches of *talai uçun* (steppe songs, outdoor songs); or sing-recite (*holem*) an excerpt from a classical Chinese novel to underline a point in his argument. He structured his speaking about music in parallel metaphors, like the verse structure of the improvised *talai uçun* lyrics which he sang so well: 'Life and death come in waves. Where do they come from? Only the gods know. My music is like that. There is a baby in the belly.



*G'altu playing the mandolin*

How was it conceived? Only its mother and father know. I don't write music, it comes to me just like that'.

His good humour, he said, was handed down to him from his grandfather, as was his music. G'altu was born in 1925 into a musician family. His grandfather sang *pingdiao* opera, and his father played the *saxian* (three-stringed Chinese lute) to accompany the singers. He has a younger brother and a younger sister who married into Fourth Village, thus extending the range of G'altu's contacts and hence invitations to weddings and parties, but neither of them was musical. When G'altu was five years old he caught measles and nearly died. His mother prayed for him in the temple of the goddess Niangniang and he recovered. His father died aged forty when G'altu was young, he told me, and his mother died when he was thirty, in the 1950s. The family was poor. Both his parents were opium addicts, and his father used to drink and beat his mother. Thus far his story was acceptable material for publication in China, bearing all the hallmarks of 'speaking bitterness' about the old society. He learned *pingdiao* opera tunes as a child from listening to his father and grandfather, and tried his hand at a number of instruments. He learned the violin, accordion, piano and *yangqin* (Chinese hammer dulcimer), before finally settling for the mandolin. Western instruments were good, he thought, they were versatile. He learnt the mandolin from a Russian émigré named Sokarov who had great influence on the musical life of Third Village. Sokarov, a White Russian – one among the many who fled east into Xinjiang – arrived in Çabçal in the 1930s and stayed in Third Village until his death in 1951. He played the guitar and mandolin, and he could read music. Owing to a war wound he never married, said G'altu, gesturing darkly at his loins, but he taught his music to many of the youngsters in Third Village. G'altu remembered that there were many Russians in Çabçal at that time, even before the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic (1944–9). They loved to play the accordion and they all drank heavily. They made Russian dances popular in Çabçal, especially the waltz and the polka.

In the 1940s and 1950s G'altu tried to learn the more complex opera style of *yuediao*,

which used a small group of instruments and added movement to the performers' words. Because he was physically small he was assigned to the women's roles; only after Liberation did it become acceptable for women to perform on stage in the conservative Sibe villages. He found the style of *yuediao* difficult to master and was overwhelmed by the number of librettos he was expected to learn. Eventually he abandoned the attempt.

After Liberation, he spent three years studying in the new college in Çabçal county town. He learnt to read and write in Sibe and Chinese, and he learnt a great deal about politics. He was then sent to Second Village to teach in the new primary school. In school they sang the new revolutionary songs, and marched up and down like the army. During this period he became seriously ill again. When he began to recover, his family took him up to the open grasslands outside the village to watch a festival. The musicians were no good and the dancers couldn't dance, so he took up his mandolin, though he was still seriously weak, and played. When he started to play his music, he said, suddenly he was strong again.

In 1958 G'altu married a girl from the neighbouring county, Kongliu, his mother's home before her marriage. The couple were introduced through his mother's family. Villagers like to tell a story about G'altu's courtship. G'altu's mother sent him to Ghulja to buy engagement presents for the bride's family. Unfortunately a Russian-made pianola in the bazaar caught his eye. G'altu was entranced, and spent all the money intended for the presents on the pianola. He put it on a cart and started out for home. Even more unfortunately the cart tipped on the rough winter road and the pianola fell and was damaged. Afraid of what his mother would say, G'altu found a carpenter to repair the pianola, and took it home. Afterwards he would carry it up on to the roof of the family house and play it there where the whole village could hear him.

G'altu did not do well as a teacher. As he put it, he disliked responsibility; he was not temperamentally suited to the work. Moreover the wages were poor: 30 *yuan* a month, at a time when by working the land

he could earn three times that amount. When his mother grew old he went back to Third Village and worked again as a peasant for two years. After the death of his parents he started to sing *yuediao* opera again. Then he went to study as an electrician in Ghulja, and worked in the Ghulja electricity factory for five years. Then he transferred to the Çabçal county town electricity factory where he stayed until 1967. At this point, work in the factory was brought to a halt by the Cultural Revolution, and he went back to Third Village and the family land.

The couple had four daughters who all went on to higher education and who now work as teachers. G'altu had to struggle to pay the girls' tuition fees. His three sons were not good students. They now farm in Third Village where each son cultivates a separate plot of land. G'altu's house and garden are large and kept well by his daughters, though the house is almost devoid of furniture. They keep a cow, and a donkey and cart. His third daughter, now a teacher in the middle school in Third Village, plays the guitar and sings Han Chinese pop songs. The youngest daughter is learning the accordion. When I stayed with G'altu, I shared a *kang* (brick bed) with the girls at night. We sang Chinese pop songs while G'altu gamely attempted to pick out the melody on his mandolin. He had no musical prejudice – all new kinds of music were grist to his mill – but I never heard his daughters sing the traditional-style improvised songs, even though their spoken Sibe language was fluent.

Like many others, the family was caught between the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity. G'altu told me that 1994 was his year of disaster according to Chinese cosmology, and it was the year when his second wife died and his son was injured in a fire. At *Qingming*, the Chinese grave-sweeping festival, he wanted the whole family to go to the family grave, but on the day his sons didn't turn up. As he made his way towards the grave an eddy of wind blew up around him, and he knew that the ancestors were angry. When they got back to the village the neighbours told him that his eldest son's house had caught fire and his son had been badly injured. As far as G'altu was concerned, the ancestors had taken their revenge for his son's lack of respect. The relationship

between parents and children, and the continuity of the family and of Sibe culture were common subjects of his songs.

Clouds fill the sky  
 The burdens of parents are many  
 The threads of a hemp rope are woven together  
 The songs of the Sibe are passed down through the generations  
 The roots of the leek are buried in fine earth  
 The white bones of our ancestors are buried in yellow earth  
 Wild flowers flourish in the gullies  
 Our parents have many cares because of us  
*alhari tugi abkai jalu oho*  
*akane gasara baita amo emede labdu oho*  
*sisari tere tonggo be sirge be sirame ara*  
*sibe tere uçun be sibe unggga araha*  
*ului fulehe be uluke boihon i umpune*  
*onggoloi unggan be gunihangge buktan boihonde*  
*alin tere piyalangse de ai ilha fitherku*  
*ama eme oho niyalma ai baita be peolerku*

Sung by G'altu: recorded in Third Village,  
 5 Nov. 1995

'The musician's life is a good one,' he told me. 'He is invited to parties, festivals and weddings everywhere. Lenin said, "A life without culture is barbarism, a life without labour is robbery", that's written up on the wall of the village hall (*julebu*).' At these occasions G'altu exercised his skill as an improviser of songs and brought the festivities to life with his mandolin, which led the dancing or provided an accompaniment for *talai uçun*, 'moving the song along', as he said. At a wedding he took me to, he turned to me after an exchange of songs, and said with great pride, 'They are calling me elder brother even though they are older than me. It is because they respect my songs.'

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The concept of social or collective memory was first developed in the 1920s by the French anthropologist Maurice Halbwachs, a pupil and colleague of Emile Durkheim. Halbwachs sought to explain the ways in which families, religious groups or social classes bind themselves together in everyday cultural practices through a collective reworking of the past. Halbwachs' ideas have more recently been revived and developed by contemporary writers, among them the British social historian Paul Connerton.

Connerton defines social memory as the recollected knowledge of the past which is conveyed and sustained by performances, customs or habits. Such modes of remembering contrast with the knowledge of the past which is preserved through written histories. Social memory is sustained through informal, oral media such as the stories told to grandchildren or village gossip. Social memories are especially those which are acted out, entrusted to the body, what he describes as incorporated practices. Thus Connerton emphasises the importance of commemorative ceremonies, rituals and expressive culture in the maintenance of social memory.

Kay Kaufman Shelemay's study of songs and remembrance amongst the Syrian Jewish diaspora brings these ideas into the field of ethnomusicology. She foregrounds the use of musical performance in social memory, arguing that songs are 'intentionally constructed sites for long-term storage of conscious memories from the past'. Her descriptions of pizmon songs as venues for commemorating individuals, for nostalgia, as well as the transmission of core sacred historical texts, chime with my account of Sibe music and remembering on many levels. Especially relevant for the purposes of this study, and here providing a link between this biographical sketch of a Sibe musician and the account of collective music-making below, is Shelemay's argument that songs, created and taught by individuals but sustained in collective contexts, straddle the divide between individual and collective memory (Shelemay 1998:204).

## Weddings in Çabçal

Sibe weddings are the context for varied and significant musical activities. I have thought it most useful to include a full, generalised account of a wedding, drawing together a number of different occasions and accounts. Sibe families may choose to incorporate all or some of the features described below in their celebrations, or they may choose Western-style features, such as a white bridal gown and an evening disco, depending on the degree of modernity or tradition to which they aspire. In recent years a trip to the photographers, where the bride and groom pose for the camera in a variety of borrowed outfits, has become an almost obligatory part

of the process. The exchange of gifts between the two families and the feasts held by each family are the essential central features of village weddings today.

Wedding celebrations should properly last for three days. On the first day, the groom's family send the bride car – formerly a sedan chair, now usually a jeep – to the bride's home. With it they send a truck carrying the bride price, which includes a cow and a sheep which will be slaughtered for the feast, and oil, soy and salt for the cooking. It also includes clothes and jewellery for the bride. Some teasing goes on as the bride's family checks that the animals are young and fat. Friends of the family come to help with the preparations. A wedding mother (*doro jorire eme*), a friend of the bride, and wedding father (*doro jorire ama*), a friend of the groom, are appointed before the wedding. Their task is to ensure the smooth running of the festivities and to convey messages between the two families. On the afternoon of the second day, the bride's family holds a feast (*anba sarin*). The groom arrives with a group of young people from his village; these are known as the *dingba* group. They represent the best talent of the village – dancers, singers, speechmakers and one or two *dombur* (Sibe two-stringed lute) players. They sit at a separate table during the feast. The bride does not appear at this feast. She prepares herself with the help of her friends: in the past they plucked the hairs from their faces to make themselves beautiful for the following day; contemporary notions of beauty require lipstick, eyebrow pencil and a thick layer of white face powder. The dowry is sent off to the groom's home, again by truck. It should include a chest full of bedding with examples of the bride's embroidery: pillows and traditionally an embroidered pair of shoes for each member of the groom's family. In recent years a television or washing machine might also be included.

In the evening the *dingba* group must perform for the bride's family and friends. The groom offers wine to each family member, two small cups presented on a tray. The bride's mother and other older women sit on the *kang* (brick bed), the men of the family sit to one side. They request songs and dances from the group and set them riddles to answer. The group are under pressure to put on a good performance as the reputation of their village is at stake. When the elders are satisfied with the group's performance, the dancing begins. The practice



The groom's mother offers a toast at a wedding in Fourth Village

of *dingba* was revived in 1978 but the performances of the *dingba* groups became increasingly simplified during the 1980s. Today it is usual for the group to offer wine to the bride's parents and perform a dance, but no more. If there is a musician at the wedding, the older people dance the *beilen*, accompanied by the *dombur*. The dance is based around rhythmic twitches of the shoulders; either the hands are placed on the hips or the arms make circular movements, while the feet move very little. The basic style is very similar to Mongol and Kazakh dancing in Xinjiang. There are around twelve commonly known dance tunes, each with its own particular dance movements. Each tune consists of a series of flexible variations on a simple basic riff in a strong 6/8 rhythm. The player can switch between tunes in mid-performance and the dancers follow the music into the new dance. The music continues often without a break until the dancers are tired.

Like Kazakh and Mongol dancing, many of the Sibe *beilen* dances incorporate a theatrical element, and they can be highly comical. As one village musician commented, 'The Sibe are not content with dancing just for the sake of it, they like some meaning in the performance'. *Dorolum beilen* incorporates into the dance different ways of saluting from around the world, for example the Western military salute, the Islamic hand over the heart, the handshake. *Chaifubul*, danced by women, is a mime of tea-making. *Sohtu Monggo* (Drunken Mongol), a barb rather

accurately aimed at the Sibe's Mongol neighbours, mimics the clumsy attempts of a drunken man to dance. Still, the satire is double-edged. It is not always possible to distinguish between the mimicry of a drunken Mongol and the dancing of a genuinely inebriated Sibe man. If there is an accordionist or mandolin player present at the feast, the wedding guests may turn to dancing the polka or the waltz, dances which were brought to Çabçal by the Russians in the 1930s. The older villagers happily switch between the two styles, while younger people feel it beneath their dignity to dance the old-fashioned *beilen*.

On the third day, the bride leaves for her new home. She dresses traditionally in red, often quite simply in red padded jacket and trousers and a red veil. Before the couple leave, the *dingbadui* group must obtain a formal letter of consent to the marriage (*ulumbite*) from her parents. This can be made into another opportunity for teasing and demands for more songs. The bride and groom may be given eggs to eat for fertility and long noodles for longevity, and the bride scatters grains in the courtyard for a good harvest. Chinese written accounts note that in the past, before the Communist Party liberated Sibe women from their feudal chains, the bride would lament as she left her home. Although she may still weep as she leaves, the practice of lamenting appears to have died out in the Sibe villages. However, published versions of bridal laments exist,

like this extract from a lament by Xiu Ying and transcribed by Shetuken:

The lion roars fiercely  
 Across the mountains and forests  
 Father and Mother's cursing and weeping  
 Shatters their daughter's innocent heart  
*Erie!* Shatters their daughter's innocent heart  
 Aunt, say one word  
 Why have you condemned me to this cruel fate?  
 Sister, come and save me  
 Your little sister is walking into the flames  
 Fine rain falls unceasingly  
 It soaks the roots of the date tree  
 My tears fall day and night  
 They soak through my bedding  
 The horse refuses to go forward  
 I will never pass through his door  
 Brother, where are you?  
 Can you not hear my cries?

*Erie!* Can you not hear my cries? (He, Tong & Tong 1995:158).

The structure of this lament shows the use of parallel metaphors which is so typical of Sibe lyricising in other contexts. The practice of bridal lamenting is well documented amongst the Kazakhs and amongst the Han Chinese, though it is increasingly rare today. Such ritually bounded outpourings of grief and anger from disempowered young women have been described as expressions of ritual reversal, permissible only in the bride's liminal state, which is compared to a death of one life and rebirth in another, as she moves between her old unmarried status and the new. As the bride leaves, her mother may also sing words of advice (*ailinde*) to her daughter on how to behave in her new role as wife and daughter-in-law.

The couple ride in the bride car to the groom's village, escorted by the *dingbadui* group. As in Han Chinese custom, the bride car may not be halted nor should the bride set foot on the ground until she enters the groom's family home. On arrival at the groom's family courtyard, the couple bow to heaven and earth. The groom stands on the threshold and twitches aside the bride's veil with a riding whip. The bride enters the house and bows to the family ancestral altar and to the living family members. The couple burn fat in the stove for prosperity. The groom's family then holds a feast. Two tables are set aside in a separate room for the bride's family and friends. The guests, especially the male



relatives of the groom, sing special wedding songs (*sarin uçun*), welcoming the guests from the bride's village, congratulating the groom's family, giving advice to the couple, or talking of the friendship between the singer and the host. The words may be improvised on the spur of the moment, or carefully composed and written down before the wedding. The wedding songs are lyric-led, and the melody varies little from singer to singer. After each verse, the guests' shouts of approval – *je!* – are incorporated into the performance.

The lyrics given here are translated from songs recorded at a wedding in September 1996 in Fourth Village. I sat with a group of old men from Third Village, the bride's village, in an inner room of the groom's family home around a table laden with high-quality Chinese-style fried dishes of fish, duck and mutton, and bottles of 60 per cent proof Ili Special Brew (*Yili Tequ*).

[Nine phoenixes fly over]  
And land in the reed bed  
When we see everybody sitting here  
All the elders of the house are delighted  
The trees on the mountain [are numerous]  
The wine in guests' cups is sweet  
Today my host offers me this toast  
More precious than the mountain forest  
If we do not drink this wine today  
You will be unlucky in the future  
*[uyun funghuang deyeme jihe – je!]*  
*olhuye ekcinde dooha – je!*  
*enenggi inenggi oronde enggeleme jihe be tuwaci – je!*  
*musei ungganda be urgunjebuhe – je!*  
*alinde banjija weji – je!*  
*aguye huntahan i amten – je!*  
*enenggi alibure huntahan be tuwaha – je!*  
*alinni weji deri ujen – je!*  
*enenggi omirku oci – je!*  
*siramei inenggi de umesi koro – je!*  
Sung by Chang Jiu: recorded in Fourth Village,  
25 Sept. 1996

These lyrics are among those commonly used in wedding songs. A song is the proper response to a toast, which comes in the form of two cups of wine on a tray, presented by the couple or the parents to respected guests. The guest first sings, then drains both cups. To refuse to drink for any reason would cause great offence. In response to a good song, or for a close or respected friend, the host may refill the wine cups and respond with a song

of his or her own, draining the cups after the song. In response to Chang Jiu's song, the groom's mother sang:

A bird flew in circles  
Then landed on a tree by a river  
Through the good karma built up by my ancestors  
I have brought home a new wife, clever with her hands  
The sun rises in the east  
And lights up the whole earth  
Today you are my honoured guests  
You light up my home  
Recorded in Fourth Village, 25 Nov. 1996

The singing continues round the table, with each guest toasted by the host and responding in song. The song melodies vary. The singers move between *sarin uçun*, various *talai uçun* melodies, and may even set their words to modern composed melodies or Kazakh, Mongol or Kirghiz tunes. These very traditional words were sung to a post-Revolution composed melody, *Xiangsi Ge*:

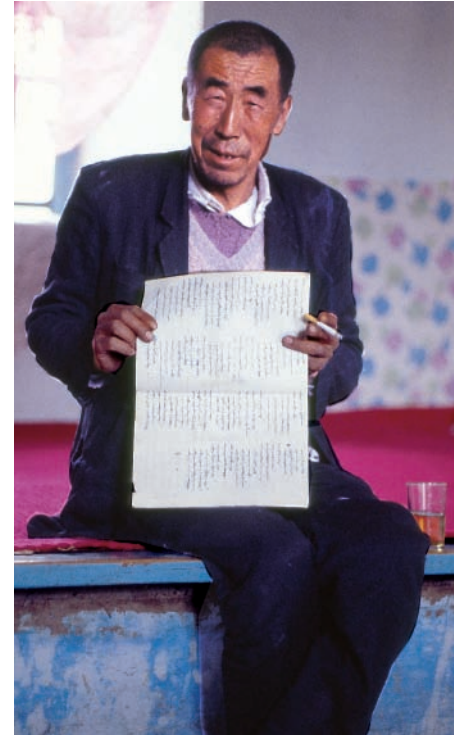
Rope is twisted together  
You bring home your grandson's bride, binding generations of the family  
The meadow grass is nourished by water  
We have grown old by the care of our parents  
The *mokna* [jaw harp] was handed down to us from our ancestors  
When elder sister offers me wine, I must drink  
Recorded in Fourth Village, 25 Nov. 1996

A great deal of alcohol is consumed in these exchanges, particularly by the host, and is central to the courtesies, but I never saw a member of the older generation drunk. Having exchanged a song and wine with each guest, the groom's mother concluded with a final toast and short *talai uçun*:

Lake water is never used up  
I will never forget your songs  
Recorded in Fourth Village, 25 Nov. 1996

The importance of the lyric content in these song forms is underlined by their name (*uçun*) which refers to the meaning of the words. *Uçun* is clearly distinguished from the other Sibe term used to denote song – *mudan*, as in laments (*songgoro mudan*) – which refers specifically to the melody. *Mudan* may also refer to the curve of a hunting bow, an apt metaphor to describe the contours of a melody.

G'altu and I eventually went out into the courtyard, where the younger guests were conducting their own festivities. The groom's male friends were gathered around several tables, Madonna was playing on a stereo, and they were very drunk. Several of them attempted to accost the *devushka* (Russian girl, as they took me to be), ignoring G'altu's admonitions, and we departed with despatch.



Lao Zhao holding lyrics for a wedding song

*Singing the Village: Music, Memory and Ritual among the Sibe of Xinjiang*, with accompanying CD containing recordings principally made by Rachel Harris in the Çabçal area, was published by the British Academy in the *British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monographs* series in 2004. Details can be found on the web site via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

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