China’s Musical Secrets

An ambitious Folk Music of China series by Naxos World features folk songs from all of the country’s 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups. The compilations offer a COVID-proof musical journey to rural China. Frank Kouwenhoven reports

China’s ethnic minorities may not occupy more than nine per cent of the country’s population, but they contribute considerably to the country’s amazing patchwork of different languages and cultures. In China’s rural south every next village may yield new surprises in terms of ethnic costumes, musical instruments or ritual ceremonies. But other parts of the country, too, are sometimes impressively rich in contrasts. The official number of 55 ethnic minorities (plus the Han Chinese majority) acknowledged by the Chinese government is, by any reckoning, an understatement: the number has been kept artificially low by lumping together culturally disparate groups, even groups who speak different languages.

A new series of compilation albums – seven released so far, with another 12 to come over the next 18 months – by Naxos World offers no more than a first taste, albeit an impressively sizeable one, of China’s ethnic vocal riches. Each album only offers a handful of songs (on average between five and ten) for every minority – the Han Chinese majority is not included. Nevertheless, they display a wonderful array of different vocal techniques, styles and ways of singing, ranging from solos to choral songs, and a welcome opportunity to dive into such little known musical treasures.

In recent decades a number of anthropological films were made about Chinese minority cultures, and some fine albums of specific regional traditions of minority music in Yunnan were produced (by PAN Records and ARC Music). But this is the first time that we get such a wide-ranging sonic overview, covering practically every officially acknowledged minority in China. It is primarily thanks to the Chinese musicologist Hou Dudu (46) that we now have direct access to these songs. He started the entire project out of sheer enthusiasm for “minority sounds.”

The recordings are generally brief (one to five minutes), but they are of unique value as cultural vignettes, introducing us to ethnic groups that have often made little or no impact outside their own native regions. Who can claim to have heard songs of the Salar, a Turkic people of north-west China (featured on Volume I)? And how many people outside China – or indeed inside China – can claim to be familiar with songs of the Lahu, a small hill tribe in Yunnan Province?

The Lahu songs are special because many Lahu have become Christians under Western missionary influence. After Western tunes and harmonies and psalm texts entered Lahu territory, many traditional songs were affected. Today a great many Lahu villagers love to play guitar and apply Western harmonies and invent new tunes using Western scales. The Lahu have turned their music into a profitable business, by erecting huge stages and attracting big tourist audiences. Listeners may need to wait for a later instalment in the series to hear these Lahu Western-influenced songs.

Basically every album in the series contains musical surprises. What to think of the intricate vocal harmonies of the Zhuang, Yao or Buyi, complex and dissonant, yet in no way indebted to Western harmonies? Or what about the intricate vocal ornaments of Tibetan singers, or the high-piercing voices of Miao mountain singers?

“I myself was often taken by surprise by what I heard,” says Hou Dudu, the collector of all these materials. A native of Beijing, Hou is currently resident in Shanghai but in the
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Hou and Li carried out their fieldwork intermittently, travelling thousands of miles by train or plane to provincial capitals, and from there further on by bus or hire car. “Finding singers was the hardest thing,” says Hou. He profited from the knowledge of local cultural bureaus set up by the Chinese government in the 50s, but also mobilised many friends to help him trace performers. The recordings were mostly made on the spot, in or near singers’ homes, and were then carefully edited, giving the voices a more spacious ‘studio’ ambience. Hou and Li sometimes managed to get hold of full texts, but often had to make do with summaries. But local people were hospitable and supportive and eager to co-operate. In poor areas Hou and Li paid the singers token fees.

Clockwise from above: Hou De Fu with Miao people, in Guizhou province; recording Dong singers in Xishuang, Guizhou and Hou and Li Zhao with children in Zaidong Dongzhai in south-east Guizhou.

earl 2000s: he was a student of viola and composition at the Central Conservatory in Beijing. When he began to work for Kuke, a commercial recording company in Shanghai, he developed broader musical interests. His attention was caught by ethnic minority songs sung during a music contest on Chinese TV. “It was so strange, so appealing, so unlike anything else I knew,” says Hou. He then got the idea to collect folk songs from all of the country’s formally recognised minority groups.

The central Chinese government had already commissioned officials to collect rural songs in the 1950s and later, in an effort to document and preserve the country’s folk traditions. Unfortunately, many recordings made at that time were poor in quality and not well-preserved. Hou managed to get Kuke interested in his ambitious project: to produce high quality recordings of songs by every known ethnic minority in China. Although the aim was not commercial, Hou was willing and the idea was primarily to set up a professional database for future reference.

From 2009 to 2013, Hou and his wife Li Zhao (who acted as sound engineer) criss-crossed China and gathered folk songs from every recognised ethnic group, including the aboriginal tribes of Taiwan. Hou was mainly interested in the minorities, not in Han folk songs, which were not sufficiently ‘exotic’ to his taste.
The recordings were eventually published as 55 short albums – one for each ethnic minority group – by Kuke under the name Tiandai (Sounds of Nature) and were mainly distributed among a number of music libraries and Chinese university departments. The series won a state prize for Best Folk Music Album in December 2017.

Now Naxos World is releasing the complete recordings for the first time outside China, as 19 albums, one for each geographic region. The CDs are well documented, providing descriptions of the songs, names of singers, locations, and substantial introductions to every ethnic group. Every minority is represented only by a handful of songs and performers, which naturally creates gaps and disparities. Some groups like the Zhuang, Yi, Uyghur, Tuja and Tibetans comprise millions of people while other groups only consist of a few thousand. Even though the bigger ethnic communities are granted more playing time, the music selections cannot result in a fully representative overview. As Hou himself admits: “if we had wanted to collect songs of, say, all the different Yi communities in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi, it would have taken us many extra years”.

Clearly the series only reveals the tip of the proverbial iceberg. People familiar with ethnic music from Yunnan will search in vain for the incredible eight-part harmony songs of the Hani. Songs of the Salar are represented by just one single performer; some other tribes by only two or three singers. But this should not deter listeners from enjoying these albums. Perhaps a more substantial critique of the series is that it offers a too neat picture of China’s ethnic groups, all lined up as separate cultural islands. However, this is how the minorities are frequently portrayed in China: as peripheral peoples, each with their own specific habits and characteristics, colourful, and usually somewhat behind the Han majority in terms of social progress and ‘modernity’. Chinese TV frequently celebrates minority groups in somewhat derogative terms – the ‘wonderful, colourful dancing Yi People’ – as if dealing with exotic animals or circus acrobats. Naxos World thankfully avoids such descriptions, but maintains the fiction of cultural islands floating in a sort of vacuum.

The reality is that local people in China – whether Han or minority – usually do not identify first and foremost as ‘Chinese’, but as ‘Gansu nese’ or as ‘Qinghai nese’. They often feel more closely related to their direct ethnic neighbours than to any visiting outsiders. There is extensive exchange among many ethnic groups within regions. On this basis, it would have been fairer to group China’s rural folk songs (including Han songs) by region, rather than to devote albums to separate ethnic groups. To give an example: the songs sung by Dongxiang in Volume 7 of the series would sound exactly the same if sung by Han Chinese! The inter-ethnic connections and joint social settings are often overlooked.

One other thing that is absent from the series is the bawdy and erotic songs. Hou claims that such songs are mainly sung by Han Chinese – not by ethnic minorities. I think that’s debatable – sturdy Tibetans may get red in the face even when they’re singing about the chanting of a cuckoo (a love metaphor), but not all ethnic groups in China are this prudish! Unfortunately, due to strict censorship, songs of this kind still cannot be published in the People’s Republic of the 21st century.

However, as a series Folk Music of China remains a superb musical treasure trove, and as long as China remains out of bounds for travellers, the best thing to do is indulge in these fine sounds from a still underestimated major cultural region of the world. ✪

+ **ALBUMS** Volume 6: Tajik and Russian Minorities and Volume 7: Yi & Qiang Tribes in Sichuan & Yunnan will be reviewed in the next issue
+ **ONLINE** www.bbt.ly/NaxosChineseFolk
Africa REVIEWS

Al Bilali Soudan
Tombouctou

If you like your desert blues raw and unmediated and think Tinariwen are over-produced, then Al Bilali Soudan is for you. Taking their name from an ancient name for the city of Timbuktu, some may remember their self-titled first album eight years ago and the sound here is just as wild and untempered. Led by Abélou Yattara, a virtuoso on the three-stringed fiddle tehardt (the Tamashakt word for ngoni), the band consists of a quartet of inter-related fathers and sons, cousins and uncles. Yattara is a veteran who played on Ali Farka Touré’s first cassette recordings 40 years ago and he brings his long great experience to bear on a set of mostly traditional songs, grimly proclaimed and chanted in Tamashakt, Songhai and French over nothing more than a backing of two amplified tehardens and calabashs. The songs range from hypnotic dance tunes (‘Yermakol’ and ‘Tabattra’) to swinging Touareg grooves (‘Hounmaina’) and lightning-fingered work-outs infused with an almost punk-like energy (‘Djaqes’). The production values are invisible, which is not a criticism for such intrusion would interfere with the authenticity of the experience. However, one might have appreciated a little more variation in the somewhat relentless monophonic onslaught.

NAPTHA SWINCOCK
TRACK TO TRY Djaqes

Fadhilee Itulya
Kwitu

Kwitu is the debut album of East African pop – Kenya believe it! This is the debut from an extremely versatile singer and guitarist from Kenya, Fadhilee Itulya. Itulya’s music is a modern fusion of world music and pop with an underlying influence from the Luhya music of western Kenya. Although this is his first recorded, he has been performing professionally since 2008 and he hosts a popular monthly gig called Fadhilee’s Garage, an intimate performance that takes place in different residences and is a showcase of local talent.

On this album he deftly switches between modern and more traditional material in a way that is reminiscent of late South African Johnny Clegg. ‘Shomor’ and ‘Flora’, for example, are beautifully realised productions with acoustic guitars and lavish female harmonies. Both songs demonstrate the power of his voice. ‘Freedom’ and ‘Tabasaak’ are potentially classic stadium rock songs and ‘Nairobi’ is a tastefully conventional Swahili rumba. These are balanced by four purely traditional songs that feature the nimble percussion of western Kenya. Kwitu is an impressive and varied debut from an artist who is keen to promote his home country’s music while simultaneously exploring global rhythms, singing in a mixture of Swahili, Luhya and English language.

NAPTHA SWINCOCK
TRACK TO TRY Flora

Kadiayal Kouyate
Nemo

Finding Nemo: kora player discovers a rockier sound

Kadiayal Kouyate is a longtime London-based kora player. A maestro of the West African 21-string harp-lute, he is also a respected consultant, educator and in-house composer at institutions including SOAS, Olly Carter and the Royal Shakespeare Company. In demand as a sideman for a wealth of projects including those by Brazilian percussionist Adriano Adewale, Venezuelan harpist Leonardo Jacome and Sheffield all-stars Fadilk Jazzi, Kadiayal has proved himself a versatile solo artist whose humanity seems to shimmer from the strings. Where last year’s release, Taling Dimanuk: Beautiful Tales, was a gorgeous waterfall of steady sounds and soft, keening vocals, this new work sees the Senegalese artist rocking out in ways fierce and surprising. Nemo means ‘Blessings’ in Wolof, Kadiayal’s mother tongue, and this glass half-full aesthetic busts an album rooted in the traditional griot repertoire. It is given a contemporary vibe by a tight-knit crew on bass, guitar, percussion and intermittently bombastic kit drums, the driving rhythms leavened by Griselda Sanderson’s fiddle playing and the sparkling patterns of Kadiayal’s kora. This time around, too, it’s Kadiayal’s strong deep voice that impresses, whether on the Yousou N’Dour-esque opener ‘We Nake’, the rollicking, perfectly phrased ‘Agna Bara’ and the alternately mellifluous and punchy ‘Mamadou’, recorded live. More kora solos, or even more extended kora passages, would have been welcome. No matter: brave, again.

JANE CORNELL
TRACK TO TRY Agna Bara

Capturing the primal spirit of Gnawa ceremonies in Brussels

A label, venue, and performing arts foundation, Musée du Maghreb’s latest release focuses on Brussels’ population of Gnawa musicians, which numbers some 40 players, 17 of whom have come together as Jola, which means “Tour” in Moroccan Arabic and refers to travelling from town to town to meet other Gnawi on the initiatory road to tagawiat, or “the way of the Gnawa”. Here, that sonic road opens with the hypnotic caterpillar of the massed garagab (metal castanets), the under-floor rumbling of the gimbri bass lines that guide and define each of the performances, and the muscular call-and-response vocals. The lead voice and chorale wind around each other as the cuts deepen from the opening music of sacrifice (alhumid) through the drum procession (gudale) to the celebration dances (fesale) and possession trance (midal) that are the culmination of the Ifa night ritual that this record encapsulates in miniature form (a full Ifa may last for hours). The performances are powerful and well recorded. Like Innova Gnawa from the US and London-based DJ U-Cel’s excellent digital releases of smaller ensembles recorded in Marrakesh, Jola