

Folk Music Traditions of Endangered Languages

Personal Statement

All of my friends and family know that I am a language nerd and a folk music enthusiast. I have a gold medal in China's National Linguistic Olympiad. I speak five languages comfortably, have reading knowledge in ten, and am constantly ready to learn more. I have my own pages on Instagram, YouTube, and Chinese social media where I introduce folk songs for a general audience by performing the pieces. The Watson project that I wish to pursue - to explore and document folk songs in endangered languages—originated from a combination of these passions that are deeply rooted in my background and experiences.

I still remember clearly how I first discovered my passion with the idea of becoming a folk song collector in an unforgettable Chinese literature class in Middle School. During the class we learned about the Chinese *Book of Songs* “*Shi-jing*”, which includes the oldest literary pieces of the Chinese language. As the head of the “Five Classics” of Confucianism, it was for two thousand years the first book that every aspiring Chinese scholar would memorize. The book, however, is neither an instruction on morals nor a treatise on the philosophy of family and life. The *Book of Songs* is simply a collection of the lyrics of 305 folk songs in the different Chinese dialects of a period dating from the 11th to the 7th century BC.

The love for folk songs had always been deep in my heart. I grew up sitting by the sides of my two caring grandmothers with whom I first acquired a sense of beat and melody by listening to the folk songs that they took away from the Yellow sand of the Loess Plateau and the black soil of the Northeastern plain. When the Book of Song brought me to the spiritual world of the ancient people that lived and sang in the same regions, I felt a natural love for the beautiful yet unadorned lyrics of the folk songs that the ancient collection preserves for me. What increasingly fascinated me about the Book of Songs was not only the poetic qualities of lyrics themselves, but also the beautiful fact that a compilation of folk songs in regional languages lies at the center of our national mentality. Then, like the aspiring scholars of the ancient time, I took the effort to memorize the lyrics of every song in the book.

My desire to help protect minority languages is similarly rooted in my background and experience. Even as I learned to speak Shanghainese from my peers, I witnessed the rapidly decreasing influence of the language that was once the lingua franca of the “Paris of the East”. Like many other Chinese dialects, Shanghainese lost its vitality in its native land due to the dominance of Mandarin in almost every domain of the city's public sphere. As a Mandarin speaking immigrant, I benefited from the city's resources and prosperity while at the same time contributed to the suppression of the city's native tongue. Knowing that hundreds of Chinese languages are facing the same decline in this age of nation building, I began to think about power and language use at an early age.

As I learn more languages, my desire to preserve minority languages intensified. My knowledge in languages convinced me that the loss of linguistic, cultural, historical, and musical knowledge carried by any language will be an enormous pity for the entire human civilization. I made the first attempt to combine my interest in folk music and languages while in high school. I established the club of *Bayin Yuefu*, named after a government office in the Han Dynasty that served to collect folk songs from regional dialects. We had fun meeting weekly to share and sing with each other folk songs from our hometowns. We gathered musicians of traditional Chinese instruments and performed folk music pieces during the celebration of traditional Chinese festivals. The student body of my school is almost as diverse as the population of Shanghai itself

and students whose hometowns are situated in different parts of China were all interested in sharing their favorite folk songs in their languages or dialects. When I graduated from high school, I was extremely proud of the fact that, in my two years as the founding president, *Bayin Yuefu* had already had fifty members and collected almost a hundred Chinese and Tibetan folk songs.

If my interest in folk songs was mostly national in nature until the final year of my high school, the United States Academic Decathlon of 2018 was the first occasion during which I became captivated by folk music traditions outside of China. Responsible for helping my group members prepare for the music exam, I indulged in listening to folk songs from different African music traditions - the theme of the Decathlon that year. The songs in Swahili, Wolof, and Xhosa came as a pleasant surprise for me who was just starting to explore music from different parts of the world. Looking back, I can now tell that the gold medal that I gained from the competition was much less significant for me in the long term compared to my realization during the competition that there are more fascinating music traditions in the world that I would want to explore.

Then, at Carleton, this interest in folk music traditions truly became broadened with an internationalist vision. Already an international student, I have been seeking every opportunity to travel in between continents to learn a language, to conduct research, or simply to explore. In this process, I became a firm believer of the Chinese saying that “one must travel for ten thousand miles beside reading ten thousand books”. Indeed, I realized that it is the most natural way of learning for me to be out there in the world, to talk to people, to sing with them in their native tongue, and to experience life in its different forms.

I further discovered my talent in acquiring a language naturally when I was staying in Gaziantep, Turkey for an internship in the summer of 2019. I arrived in Turkey knowing only three words in the Turkish language. However, I took every opportunity to talk with native speakers. I learned Turkish songs with locals every day after dinner. Six weeks later, when I bid farewell to the people that I got so familiar with in my neighborhood, I could already speak Turkish with a Gaziantep flavor and with a satisfying fluency.

Naturally, I continued my exploration of folk music traditions in this process. At Carleton, I took part in the performance of Arabic folk songs as a singer and oud player in the Middle Eastern music ensemble. For research projects and during school breaks, I conducted field studies on musical traditions of the Coptic Egyptians, the muqam music of the Uyghurs in Western China, as well as the folk songs of Kurdish farmers that harvest apricots along the banks of the Euphrates. I took every opportunity to connect with those that are willing to share their favorite folk songs with me. I indulged in singing with people in their native tongue: Arabic songs with Syrian refugees in Turkey, Georgian songs with the hosts of my guesthouse in Tbilisi, Armenian songs with a group of Lebanese-Armenians on the busiest street of Yerevan...I fell in love with the diversity of languages and musical traditions in the world. I decided that, if I were to compile my own Book of Songs, it must reflect this diversity of the world that we are living in.

Therefore, the idea for my Watson project took shape. Watson is the only opportunity at this stage of my life through which I can conduct a project of this scale and one that connects so intricately with my passions in life. All the above-mentioned experiences that made me who I am right now have been preparing me for such a journey that is definitely going to be a self-realizing and life-changing experience.

My final project for history major examines Turkish modernity through the lens of Turkish music. During the field research enabled by Carleton's research fellowships, I indulged in singing and performing *Türkü*s, Turkish folk songs native to Southeastern Turkey, with musicians that took pride in the Turkish folk music traditions. After our performance of an Azerbaijani folk song at a musical gathering, a musician said to me, quoting Yahya Kemal Beyatli - the national poet of Turkey, "our folk songs are our novels (*bizim romanlarımız - bizim türkülerimizdir*)". This saying took me back to the Chinese *book of songs*, the starting point for my own national literature and my interest in collecting folk songs. I know that it will always be the most enjoyable thing for me to travel to village after village, to sit together with folk musicians, and to sing in their language folk songs - the kind of literature that is the closest to my heart.

Project Proposal

PROPOSED PROJECT TITLE (8 WORD LIMIT)

Folk Music Traditions of Endangered Languages

EQUIPMENT NEEDS

Camera and audio recording devices.

PROPOSED PROJECT COUNTRIES

Moldova, Russia, Algeria, Malaysia, Tajikistan, Mexico

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED PROJECT

During my Watson year, I will explore folk music traditions of languages that are at risk or endangered for different reasons. Inspired by the ancient Chinese Book of Songs, I will travel to a diverse set of locations and work with folk musicians to create a documentary and a modern Book of Songs that document the musical, linguistic and cultural diversity of the world we are living in. I will be part of the documentation by listening to people's stories, learning to speak the endangered languages, and immersing myself in the folk songs.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

My project will be an intersection of music, languages, and culture. With a diverse set of destinations in Russia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Algeria, Malaysia, and Mexico, my project will allow me to explore and document the folk songs of each of the regions through a variety of means. Inspired by the Chinese Book of Songs, I will compile a modern Book of Songs that documents and annotates the folk songs through explorations that will allow me to establish deep connections with people in my destinations. Besides, I will also produce a documentary that introduces all the folk music traditions that I will explore. While the Book of Songs will be of great significance for me personally, I also desire to share my passion in folk music and languages with a general audience through the documentary. Along the journey, I will be learning to speak the local languages and learning to sing and perform the folk songs that I will encounter to the best of my ability.

From six different language families, the languages that I selected for my project are Gagauz, Kalmyk, Yagnobi, Kabyle, Penang Hokkien, and Yucatan Maya. Throughout the year, I will spend approximately two months exploring and documenting the folk music traditions of each of these languages.

While maximizing the geographical and linguistic diversity of my project that Watson fellowship can help me achieve, I limited the selection of locations and target languages based on my personal interest as well as the accessibility of these locations. Each of the locations has a language that is either threatened, vulnerable, or endangered and folk music traditions associated with the language that are relatively understudied. While I wish to be able to speak at least one of the dominant languages of the region, there will certainly be instances where I seek help from local music or language institutes to make exploration and documentation possible. Furthermore, reflecting on my own experience, I selected this set of locations to expose myself to a diverse range of geography, religions, languages, and cultures in general. This will also allow me to

better raise awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world we are living in and subvert the established hierarchy in music, culture, and languages.

1. Gagauzia, Moldova

I will take advantage of the mild weather in the region by initiating the project in the Gagauzia region of Moldova. The Gagauz are Turkic-speaking orthodox Christians that make up the biggest minority population of Moldova. With 180,000 native speakers, the Gagauz language is nevertheless considered definitely endangered by UNESCO as young Gagauz prefer to speak the more advantageous language of Russian over their native tongue. The Gagauz music and culture in general present an interesting example of the combination between nomadic and Orthodox Christian traditions. Since Gagauz is mutually intelligible with Turkish, I will be able to study this unique musical tradition without much language barrier. I will work with the Gagauzian folklore ensemble “Altanjic” in the city of Comrat to learn, document, and perform traditional works of folk music. I will also travel to Vineyards in rural areas around Comrat and Ceadir-Lunga to learn to sing regional folk songs with farmers and carpet makers.

2. The Republic of Kalmykia, Russia

Traveling in the direction of the Caucasus, I will continue my journey in the cities and grasslands of the Republic of Kalmykia. Known as the only Buddhist nation of Europe, the Kalmyk people are the descendants of a Mongolian tribe that immigrated to the Northern Caucasus from Central Asia in the late 17th century. The Kalmyk language and culture were significantly disrupted during the Second World War when the Soviet authorities accused the Kalmyks of collaborating with the Germans and deported the entire population away from their homeland. Although the Kalmyks managed to return to their homeland in the late 1950s, their culture was continually suppressed until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, with only 80,500 native speakers, the Kalmyk language is considered by UNESCO to be “definitely endangered”.

I will spend time in Elista joining the students at the Elista School of Arts of Chonkushov to get familiar with traditional Mongolian instruments including dombra and morin khur. I will be most excited to learn the throat singing characteristic of Mongolian music in general. Besides conducting research in and around the capital city, I will also visit Okna Tsagan Zam-a Kalmyk national artist in throat singing-in his native village of Ketchenery to learn and document his performance of traditional folk songs and epics.

3. Kabylia, Algeria

The Kabylia region of Algeria occupies a very special place in the entire contemporary Berber world due to the importance and dynamism of its elites, its decisive role in the emergence of contemporary Berber consciousness and claims. Besides, Kabyle, the Berber language native to the region, greatly attracts my attention as it only gained official status in 2016 after decades of protests and social unrest in the region. I will take part in the celebration of the Berber new year in mid-January to study the Kabyle musical tradition. There, I will be excited to observe and document the traditional storytelling techniques in which music plays a significant role. With my knowledge in Arabic, I will learn to speak the Kabyle language and sing folk songs to the beat of the Kabyle drums of t’bel and bendir.

4. Penang, Malaysia

Soon after the Berber New Year, I will set out for Penang, Malaysia to join the local Chinese community in the preparation for the Lunar New Year. Penang is a center of the Malaysian Chinese community. Perhaps I will have to start with speaking English with locals because the Chinese language prevalent in the city is Penang Hokkien, a dialect of Hokkien completely unintelligible for a Mandarin speaker like myself. Nevertheless, the language is vulnerable since it lacks a writing system and young people are increasingly choosing to speak Mandarin or English. During my stay there, I will learn to speak Penang Hokkien. While doing that, I will be excited to learn Malaysian Hokkien folk songs that are intricately connected to the historical experience of the Chinese immigrant community. I will document the many Chinese musical traditions that the Penang Hokkien community has managed to preserve and develop until this day.

5. The Sughd Province, Tajikistan

As the long winter comes to an end and mountain roads resume their functions in the Pamir Mountain Range, I will travel to the Yaghnob valley of Tajikistan to study the language and folk music traditions of the Yaghnobis. The Yaghnobi people are considered the descendants of the ancient Sogdian people that were once the most famous merchants on the entire silk road. Yaghnobi, the only direct descendant of the classical Sogdian language, is considered definitely endangered by UNESCO with merely 12,000 native speakers.

Finding Yaghnobis will be a challenge as the population scatters in various cities and villages. With knowledge of the Tajiki Persian dialect, I will be able to locate and visit Yaghnobi folk musicians with the help of Saifiddin Mirzozoda at the Institute of Language and Literature of the Tajik Academy of Sciences. Mirzozoda is himself a Yaghnobi and has for many years been engaged in efforts to preserve the Yaghnobi language and culture. With his help, I will take part in folk activities with the Yaghnobis in cities and villages to document their music traditions that are extremely understudied.

6. Yucatán, México

For the final investigation of my project, I will travel into the jungle of the Yucatan peninsula where the Yucatec Maya language is still widely spoken in the central regions of the Mayan civilization. The language has official status in the province but is nevertheless considered at risk by UNESCO. Like the modern Yucatec Maya language itself, Yucatec Maya music demonstrates the synthesis of cultures that are intricately associated with the history of the region. Regional musical traditions such as "música jarana" include Spanish, Maya as well as Caribbean influences. Since I do not speak Spanish, I will mainly be working with the Na'atik Language and Culture Institute to visit the various music venues in the region. Following the information given by anthropologist Philip K. Bock, I will be focusing on exploring the many "cultural performances" in the city of Merida which can lead me to musicians that are familiar with Yucatec folk music traditions.