
AN EMBLEM OF TIBETAN CULTURE

The Dra-nyen (The Himalayan lute)

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Media images of Tibet, the 'Land of Snows' on the great Himalayan Plateau, with its desolate mountains, vast grasslands, deep blue skies – and its many Buddhist monasteries – do not often leave the average Western observer with much recollection of a rich musical culture. At times the striking timbres of ritual music feature: the distinctive sound of rows of maroon-clad monks chanting, rising and falling like the waves of the ocean, or the commanding resonance of a pair of long Tibetan horns. Rarely, however, are European viewers and listeners aware of the secular traditions. Visits by Tibetan performers from China or India have occasionally given us a taste of its variety and character, its elegance and its energy. This article gives attention to one instrument which seems to have come to symbolize Tibetan folk music more than any other – the Tibetan lute, the dra-nyen.

The Tibetan spelling for 'dra-nyen' is sgra-snyan. The Chinese pinyin spelling is *zhanian*¹. Its companion instruments in a typical traditional ensemble are the two-stringed fiddle (the 'pi-wang', pi-wang), the hammer-dulcimer (the 'gyü-mang', rgyud-mang, or yang-chin, pinyin *yangqin*), the flute (the 'ling-bu', gling-bu) and sometimes the small pellet-bells, known as 'E-ka' (g.yer-ka). In comparison with these and with the shawm, cymbals or drums in other secular contexts², the *dra-nyen* appears to many to be the most distinctively Tibetan in its shape and its timbre.

Furthermore, the *dra-nyen* takes pride of place among the folk music instruments of many Tibetan ethnic groupings. In particular, it is the principal instrument in most of the folk-songs and dances of Central and Western Tibet (much of Tibet Autonomous Region). In addition it is sometimes played in Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Yunnan,

¹ The phonetic rendering dra-nyen has been adopted in this study because of its use by Tibetans in the English-language context, its recognition of the separate syllables, and its ready comprehension among Western readers. Its pinyin equivalent is *zhanian*, and the word is pronounced in a variety of ways according to dialect, for example 'dranyen', 'dramnyen' and 'damnyen' (where 'dr' indicates the retroflex plosive). In this article, Chinese pinyin and other romanization systems are italicized, while the transliteration of Tibetan spellings (Turrell Wylie system) are shown in expanded printing. Pronunciation is expressed by means of inverted commas.

² These include the sur-na (also b su-rna) and 'daman' (brda-ma or l da-man) of the Ladakhi and Gar shawm and kettle-drum ensembles, as well as the cymbals (s bu b-'chai) and frame-drum (rng a) used, for instance, in Tibetan opera.



Central Tibetan Dra-nyen (Beijing model) in Chengdu.

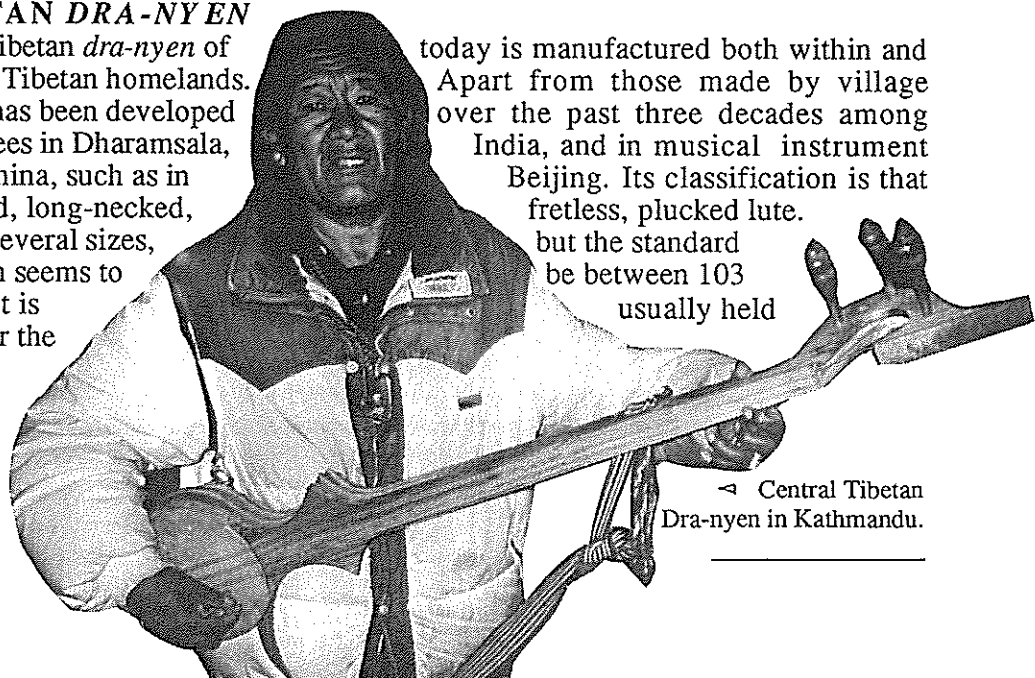
Qinghai and Gansu provinces. Outside of present-day China, it also takes priority among the *Chang-pas* of Ladakh, India, some groups such as the *Sherpas* and *Manang* people of Northern Nepal, and the Bhutanese. Its construction and performance techniques vary from place to place but in each of these areas it owns the same name: *dra-nyen* – ‘beautiful sound’. It could, therefore, be identified as the Himalayan lute. In this paper, however, it is the Central Tibetan lute which is the main focus of attention.

The findings of this article seem to indicate that the *dra-nyen* is an emblem of Tibetan culture. In the modern era, this inevitably reflects the socio-political environment of the *dra-nyen* on either side of the Himalayas. First, a description of the instrument and an account of its possible origins is given. Then attention will turn to its traditional position within Tibetan culture and its use in the modern world.

THE TIBETAN DRA-NYEN

The Central Tibetan *dra-nyen* of outside of the Tibetan homelands. craftsmen, it has been developed Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, factories in China, such as in of a 6-stringed, long-necked, It appears in several sizes, modern length seems to and 115 cm. It is by a strap over the player’s right shoulder, and with the

today is manufactured both within and Apart from those made by village over the past three decades among India, and in musical instrument Beijing. Its classification is that fretless, plucked lute. but the standard be between 103 usually held



◀ Central Tibetan Dra-nyen in Kathmandu.

'waist' of the instrument nestling around his or her right thigh, when the player is seated. The strings are struck with a bamboo plectrum in the performer's right hand and the strings are stopped by the index and middle fingers of the left hand. There is no left-hand position-changing technique.

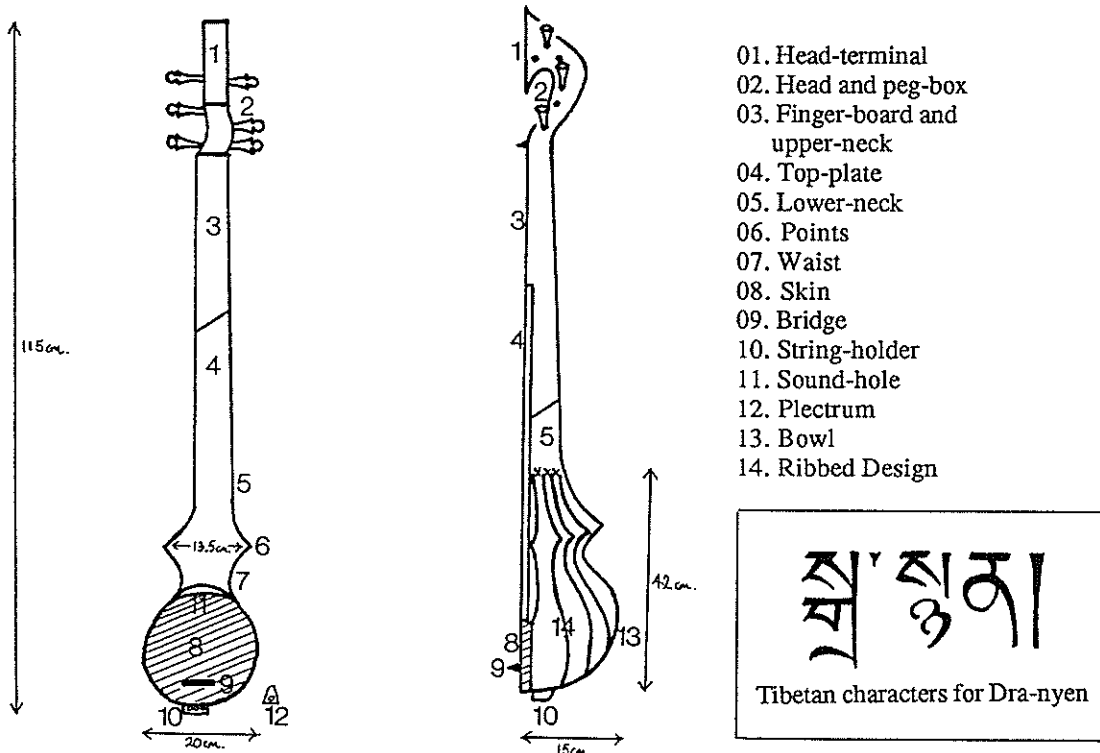


Diagram of a Central Tibetan Dra-nyen (Dharamsala model).

The strings are arranged in pairs and for Central Tibetan music these double-courses are tuned to the solfège designations of La-re-soh (or in cipher notation 66 22 55). Generally speaking, Tibetan specialist musicians pitch the tonic around the note d, and tune the *dra-nyen* as follows: BB ee AA. This 're-entrant' tuning, the instrument's limited range of a seventh and the consequent need for frequent octave transposition are distinguishing features of Central Tibetan *dra-nyen* music. Some instruments have 3 single-courses, and some players in China follow a 'modern' system of 5 or 6 single courses tuned in consecutive fourths ([B] e a d' g' c'')³.



top-plate made from the same kind of wood. The belly of the instrument is made from animal skin, usually goat- or snake-skin, which covers the hollowed-out bowl end of the instrument.

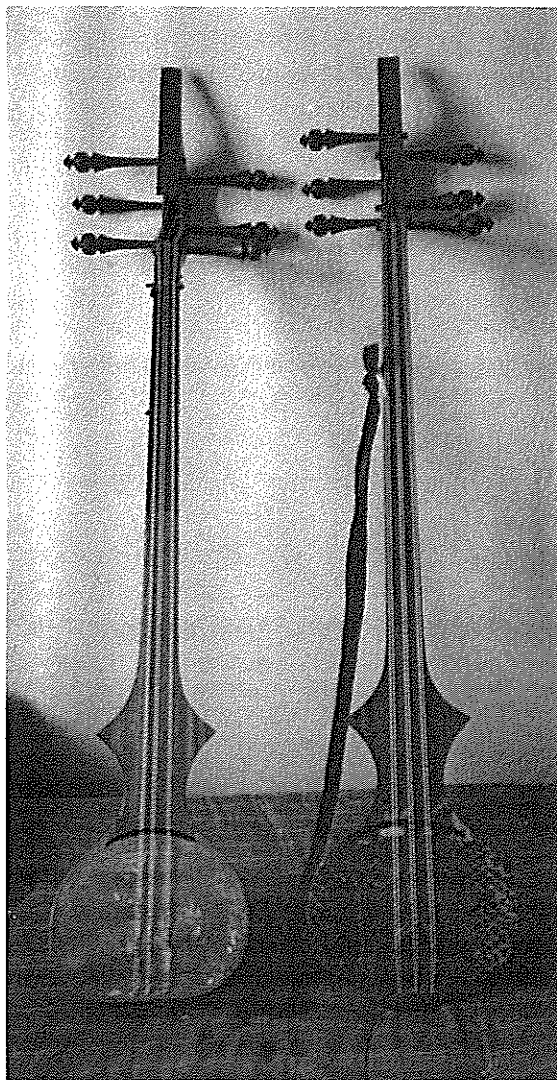
The result of this hollowing-out process is an instrument with one continuous sound-chamber, extending from the bowl to the upper end of the neck. However, the lower-neck is characterized by a prominent point on either side. This creates a 'waist' between the points and the skin-covered bowl section. Acoustically, therefore, the sound-chamber is divided into three differently-shaped sections, the rounded bowl, the lower-neck with its points, and the long, hollow (slightly tapering) upper-neck.

The sound-hole traditionally appears as a crescent-shaped slit at the junction of the skin and the lower-neck. Chinese factory-made instruments and some other designs feature the 'rose-hole' in the centre of the lower neck between the points. A hard wood such as sandalwood is chosen for the bridge. The back of the bowl and lower-neck usually have a ribbed design. Strings have traditionally been made from gut, but more recently nylon (in India and Nepal) and metal-wound string (in Beijing) have been used.

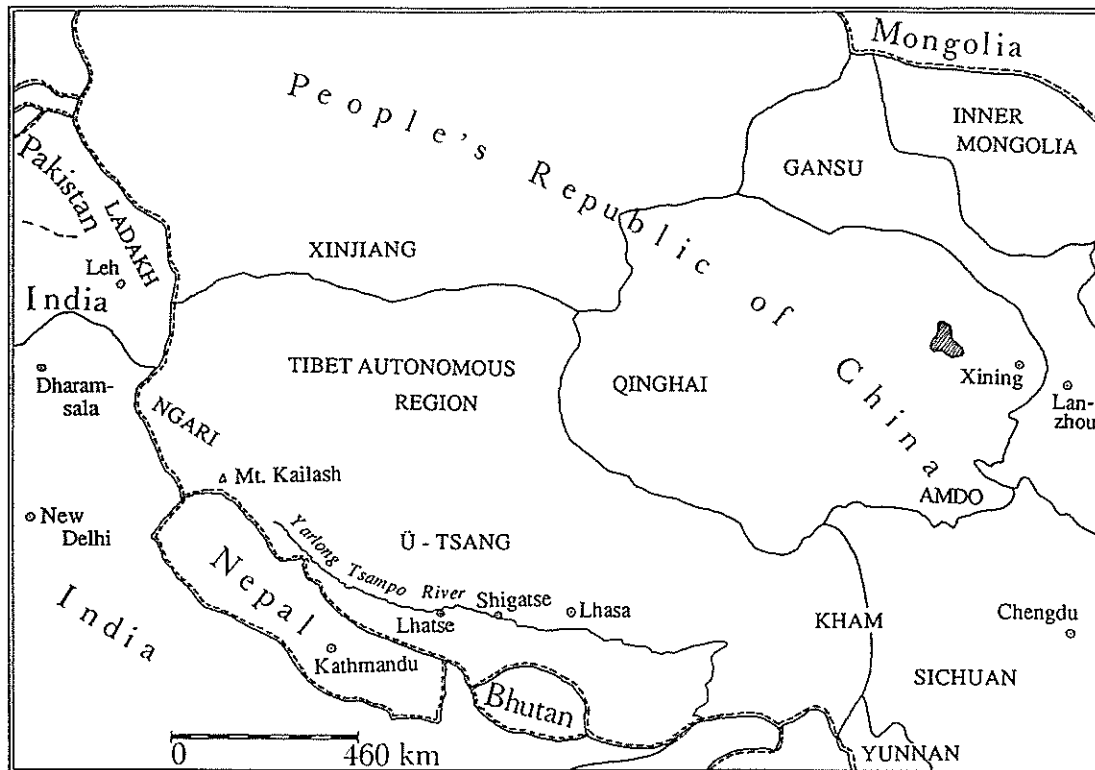
The head and tuning-pegs are also distinctive features of the Central Tibetan models. The former is called a 'horse-head' ('*tan-go*', *rta-mgo*). The heads of *dra-nyens* from other regions often depict the actual features of a creature's head, and some Tibetan fiddles have horse-head finials, but the Central Tibetan *dra-nyen* retains this characteristic only in its barest outline. A curved 'horse-neck' and flattened 'head' serve as a front-opening peg-box for six long conical tuning-pegs, with their distinctive vase-shaped heads.

The external decoration of the modern Central Tibetan *dra-nyen* is comparatively simple. Rather than paint their instruments, craftsmen in Dharamsala prefer to make use of the natural grain pattern of the wood (described as the *ri-mo*, 'picture'), while *dra-nyens* made in Beijing are more heavily varnished.

Dharamsala makers often use two natural wood-colours, 'red' wood for the main body, including the fingerboard section of the neck and 'white' wood for the top-plate covering the lower neck and sometimes a thin plate covering the head-terminal (head-plate). A goat-skin belly is sometimes painted green. They also like to emphasize the instrument's 'water-drop' shape by narrowing the waist. Beijing models are often decorated by the addition of a white rose-hole and head-plate of bone or plastic, both in a star-shaped design.



Two Central Tibetan Dra-nyens used at a Tibetan school near Kathmandu.



The Tibetan world.

Older Central Tibetan instruments⁴, many shorter in length (around 63 – 86 cm), were frequently painted in reds and greens, with floral and/or Buddhist motifs adorning the lower neck. Some finger-boards had a blue background decorated with intersecting lines forming small diamond shapes. Some instruments had zoomorphic head-terminals. Similarly, most older instruments had back-opening peg-boxes, where the strings were attached to the pegs via a slit at the uppermost point of the neck, a feature retained by nearly all other regional forms of the instrument (i.e. in Ladakh, Nepal and Bhutan). Although, prior to Chinese rule, *dra-nyens* made in the area around Shigatse and Lhatse (*Xigaze* and *Lhaze*) were sought after, the variety demonstrated by these older instruments suggests that performers and village craftsmen often made their own instruments and that by a similar means the various regions of the Tibetan world developed their own distinctive *dra-nyens*. Today, players of the Central Tibetan *dra-nyen* often look for instruments made by specialist makers in Dharamsala or Beijing. Many of these features (eg. the shape and position of the sound-hole, the style of the 'horse-head', the size and outline of the tuning-pegs, the tuning and number of the strings, the contour of the lower-neck with its protruding points, barbs, scallops or bulges, and the type and degree of decoration) distinguish the Central Tibetan instrument from its counterparts in Ladakh, Nepal and Bhutan.

DRA-NYENS FROM OTHER AREAS

The Ladakhi *dra-nyen* (pronounced 'damnyen'), played by a Tibetan-related group called the *Chang-pas*, is fairly short and has a horse-head finial. Some of these

⁴ A number of Tibetan-related musical instruments are kept in museum collections in Europe, including *dra-nyens* of the older type. I am particularly grateful to the staff at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Horniman Museum, London, and the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, for allowing me to examine their Tibetan stringed instruments.

instruments have up-turning barbs, while others have broad points at the lower end of the neck. The lower neck is sometimes hollowed-out but left open, not covered with a top-plate. Instruments with a very similar appearance are bowed and are called 'pi-wang' (pi-wang). The bowed tube spike-fiddle common in other Tibetan areas, known as the 'pi-wang' (sometimes called by the Chinese name *hu-qin*) is not known among the *Chang-pas* in Ladakh. The accordatura of the Ladakhi *dra-nyen* is three double-courses of sequential fourths, i.e. 5 5 11 44. The *dra-nyen* played in Western and parts of Southern Tibet is also tuned in rising fourths.⁵



A Sherpa Dra-nyen in Kathmandu.

The 'Nepalese' *dra-nyen*⁶ (pronounced 'damnyen'; Nepali name: *Tung-na*), is that played by musicians of Tibetan-related ethnic groups in Northern Nepal (areas like Lo Mustang, Dolpo, Nyishang and Yolmo). It is often characterized by a zoomorphic head-terminal (usually that of a horse, lion or bird). Sometimes one head is surmounted upon another. The number of strings varies (usually four or five) and the tuning might be a mixture of single and double courses (eg. 5 11 4). Here in Nepal, the *dra-nyen* is very small in size (58–70 cm long). Here, too, is the greatest variety of shapes, and embellishment is primarily a matter of motifs carved into the wood. Within this category falls the short *sgra-snyan* found within Central and Western Tibet itself, some of which have found their way across the Tibet-Nepal border with Tibetan refugees. For example, a former nomad from the *Chang-Thang* region, who now lives in Nepal, plays a 5-stringed short *dra-nyen* tuned in sequential fourths (6 22 55). It features a peacock-head and lotus designs, carved into the wood. The bowls of some short *dra-nyen* from Southern Tibet display a ring of animal designs.

⁵ For information about the *Ladakhi dra-nyen*, I am especially indebted to Mark Trewin. Also see A.H. Francke, 'La Musique au Thibet', in *Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire: Histoire de la musique, Russie etc. 1re partie, Vol. 2* pp. 3084–93, 1913–31; notes by David Lewiston to the disc, *Ladakh: Songs and Dances from the Highlands of Western Tibet*, Nonesuch H-72075, 1971; and review of the latter by Mireille Helffer in *Ethnomusicology*, May 1981, pp. 360–361.

⁶ The Musée de l'Homme in Paris houses a collection of *dra-nyens* from Nepal. See Mireille Helffer, *Art Tribal du Népal*, catalogue exposition, Paris, Galerie Ile du Démon, 14 mai – 4 juin 1981, ills. 23–30. Also see Corneille Jest, Dolpo, *Communautés de Langue Tibétaine du Népal*, Paris 1975, pp. 377–380. The Pitt Rivers Museum collection in Oxford contains a four-stringed bowed *dra-nyen* (bow missing) from Sersium, Nepal. See (mss. report) Mary Marlow, *Oxford University Expedition to Nepal*, 1982.

The Bhutanese *dra-nyen*⁷ (pronounced 'dramnyen') is the most elaborately decorated. Several features make this model quite unmistakable: a 'head' of a *makara* (a mythical sea-monster, *chu-srin*); a seventh peg along the left side of the long neck; a scalloped lower-neck; a figure of *Sarasvati* (Tibetan: *Yan-chen-ma*, Dbyangs-can-ma, goddess of melody) playing a lute in front of a Buddhist *stupa* (Tibetan: 'chorten', *mchod-rten*) and cloud motifs painted onto the lower-neck, which also incorporates 'ram's-horn'-shaped sound-holes. Furthermore, the skin is painted green and much of the instrument is red, while the Chinese character for 'long life' often appears on the back. This seven-stringed instrument is tuned in an unusual arrangement of fourths and octaves (5 5 1 1 1 4 4, for example e E a A d d). There are two sizes of Bhutanese *dra-nyen*, the larger one (about 115 cm long) for solo playing and the smaller one (eg. 84–95 cm long) for the player to accompany his own singing. Both, in other words, are fairly long.

POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF THE DRA-NYEN

Common features of these different types of *dra-nyen* indicate, therefore, that as a genus the *dra-nyen* is a long-necked fretless plectrum-plucked lute used in the folk music traditions of the Himalayas. The 'waisted' shape (or at least the presence of some distinctive protrusion at the lower end of the neck), a zoomorphic head and a skin belly are specific identifying traits. Geographically, it is particularly associated with the Himalayan region, i.e. with today's Tibet Autonomous Region and its neighbour-regions to the South and West.

Long-necked lutes do not appear in Indian culture until the 10th century AD. Likewise the existence of the Chinese *san-xian* (a three-stringed long-necked plucked lute) is not well attested prior to the 13th century AD⁸. The history of the Tibetan lute, however, precedes these dates. For this reason and in view of the primary areas of the instrument's distribution, it is perhaps to Central Asia that we should look for clues to the *dra-nyen*'s origin.⁹

It is well established that 'barbed' short-necked lutes were to be found in Central Asia during the 1st century AD in the area to the North West of present-day India, depicted in the reliefs and sculptures of Gandharan art.¹⁰ The culture of this area brought together people from NW China and the Persian world. The barb also features in certain present-day Central Asian long-necked lutes, perhaps most notably in the Kashgar *rubab* of Xinjiang Province¹¹. This lute, however, differs from the *dra-nyen* in several important respects: it is fretted, solid-necked, with a back-turning peg-box. Furthermore, its barbs are solid.

The two instruments which appear to bear the closest resemblances to the *dra-nyen* are the Pamir *robab* and the *Bulanzikum*. The former is a 6-stringed, fretless, waisted lute, made from one piece of wood, with a tapering hollow neck, curved peg-box, skin

⁷ The Horniman and Victoria and Albert Museums in London both have examples of *Bhutanese dra-nyens*. Also see notes for the disc: *Tibetan and Bhutanese Instrumental and Folk Music*, John Levy 1973, Lyrichord LLST 7257–58.

⁸ See Sibyl Marcuse, *A Survey of Musical Instruments*, London 1975, pp. 408, 434.

⁹ See James Hamilton, *Sitar Music in Calcutta*, an ethnomusicological study, Univ. of Calgary Press 1989, p. 48; Geoffrey Samuel, 'Songs of Lhasa', in *Ethnomusicology* 1976 Vol.20/3 pp. 407–449; Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, *The Dra-nyen*, Vol.9/1 1986 inside cover and p. 31.

¹⁰ See Laurence Picken, 'The Origin of the Short Lute', in *Galpin Society Journal* 1955 Vol.8 pp. 32–44; Shigeo Kishibe, 'The Origin of the P'i p'a, with particular reference to the five-stringed P'i p'a preserved in the Shôsôin', in *The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, 2nd series Vol.19, Tokyo 1940, p. 269; Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments*, New York 1940, pp. 159–161.

¹¹ *Kashgar rubab: Yuan and Mao Dictionary* p. 208 (and colour photo 7 pp after p. 240); John Bailey, *Rabab*, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, ed Sadie, Macmillan 1984, pp. 181–183.

belly, protruding spurs and is played with a small wooden plectrum. Its tuning is re-entrant (d' a d d g g). The latter is also a 6-stringed, long-necked, fretless, waisted lute. Its lower-neck sports points and a scalloped waist. The head curves in a concave direction and the tuning is also re-entrant (c# a e c# f# f#). These are both Tajik instruments.¹²

The horse-head finial of the *dra-nyen* is another feature which associates it with Central Asia, especially with those cultures we could call 'horse cultures'. Horse carvings appear on instruments, especially fiddles, across a definable Eurasian area, from the Balkans to Tibet and Mongolia.

Design features and geographical distribution, therefore, seem to indicate that the *dra-nyen*'s origins lie more within Central Asia than in other areas. Indeed, the resemblances between the Tajik and Tibetan lutes suggest the existence of "a series of high-mountain lute types in a special region at 'the roof of the world'"¹³

The first historical records of the *dra-nyen* are those describing elaborate royal celebrations during the reign of the famous king Songtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan sgam-po; 620–649 AD).¹⁴ An eighth century document describes the dedication of the first Tibetan monastery, Samye (Bsam-yas) between the years 775–779 AD.¹⁵ The lute that was played for these celebrations is referred to as a pi-wang, a term now more often applied to the two-stringed fiddle (*huqin*), but which in classical literature denotes the plucked lute, including that represented in Buddhist iconography.¹⁶ This period of Tibetan history saw much cultural interaction between Tibetans and their neighbours on all sides. According to these records, music and entertainments of many different types and from different cultures were performed under the auspices of the royal Tibetan court.¹⁷

Other historical and musical considerations fairly clearly suggest the Central Asian origin of the *dra-nyen*. It is significant that the principal Central Tibetan musical genres with which the *dra-nyen* is associated are all thought to have been brought from South and/or Western Tibet.¹⁸ These are the 'Khar' (Gar) music and dance tradition, and the styles known as ' *nang-ma*' (*nang-ma*), '*tö-she*' (*stod-gzhas*), and '*gor-she*' (*sgor-*

¹² *Tajik areas* include parts of Afghanistan, Tajikistan (CIS), and the extreme West of Xinjiang Province, China.

Pamir robab: Yuan and Mao Dictionary, p. 215, photo 10 pp after p. 240; Mark Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*, Arizona 1976, p. 120; John Bailey *ibid.* p. 181. *Bulanzikumu: Yuan and Mao Dictionary*, p. 252.

¹³ Mark Slobin *ibid.* p. 122.

¹⁴ Kun-bzang Rgyal-mtshan, *Gar gyi Lo-rgyus dang 'byung-khung Mdo-tsam* ('A brief history and origin of Gar') in *Mchod-sprin Gar-rol*, Lhasa 1985, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Rgyal-po'i Bk'a-thang* ('Royal Edicts'), p.274–276 cited in Ter Ellingson, *The Mandala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music*, Ph.D thesis, Wisconsin 1979, p.76.

¹⁶ Tsong Kha-pa (1357–1419), cited in Ter Ellingson, 'Meditative Realization of the Melodious Goddess', in *Asian Music* 1979 Vol.10/2 p. 1–2. The term pi-wang appears in the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, the well-known Sanskrit–Tibetan dictionary of the early 9th century AD; see Alexander Csoma de Körös, *Sanskrit–Tibetan–English Vocabulary*, being an edition and translation of the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, ed. E.D. Ross and M.S.C. Vidyabhusana, *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.IV no.1, Calcutta 1910, pp. 182–3. It is also referred to in the *Amarakosa*, translated into Tibetan in the 13th century (see Dr. Lokesh Chandra (ed.), *The Amarakosa in Tibet*, being a new Tibetan version by the great grammarian Si-tu, New Delhi 1965; folios 12–14). In both places the word translates the Sanskrit word *vīṇā*, "the Indian lute" (Körös, *ibid.* p. 183).

¹⁷ See Ter Ellingson, *Mandala* (*ibid.*) pp.7 3–78; David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 1968, repr. by Shambala 1986, pp. 64–65.

¹⁸ Jamyang Norbu and Tashi Dhondup, 'A Preliminary Study of Gar, the Court Dance and Music of Tibet', in *Zlos-Gar, Performing Traditions of Tibet*, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala 1986, pp. 132–133; and Zhol-khang Dar-rgyas, 'Glu-gar gyi Rgya-mtsho', in *Shes-bya'i Zegs-ma*, Beijing 1985, p. 29,37.

gzhas). It is generally agreed that the first three of these were introduced into the Tibetan court and capital (Lhasa) during the 17th century. There is also a view that certain types of Tibetan music (especially these genres) have traditionally travelled from the West ('*Ngari*', Mnga-ris) to Central Tibet ('*ü-Tsang*', Dbus-gtsang) and then on to Eastern Tibet ('*Kham*' Khams and '*Amdo*', A-mdo).¹⁹

Tibetan and Ladakhi musicians themselves express the belief that the *dra-nyen* had its origin in South-Western Tibet. If they are right, and these other considerations are taken into account, the evidence seems to confirm the opinion that the *dra-nyen* is a Himalayan lute, related most closely to the Central Asian long-necked lute family and that its early forms were already known in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Tibetan musicians have the right to affirm, therefore, as they have expressed to me, that the *dra-nyen* is a "truly Tibetan" instrument.

THE NAME 'DRA-NYEN'

The status of the *dra-nyen* in Tibetan areas appears to be reflected in its name, its association with the gods, and in its role in a variety of musical contexts.

The name '*dra-nyen*' (sgra-snyan) has a meaning which suggests that the instrument holds some position of prominence within Tibetan musical culture. The flexibility of Tibetan terminology clouds the issue a little, but in comparison with '*pi-wang*' (pi-wang), '*gyü-mang*' (rgyud-mang) and '*tam-bu-ra*' (tam-bu-ra), all of which are at times used to denote the *dra-nyen*, the term '*dra-nyen*' (sgra-snyan) has the most emotive and evaluative connotations. It is the most common and standard term for the instrument and it means "sweet-sounding".

The Tibetan term '*dra*' (sgra) means 'sound'. The word '*nyen*' (snyan) derives from the adjective '*nyen-po*' (snyan-po) and means 'beautiful', 'interesting', 'pleasant' or 'sweet', in respect of the ear (snyan, honorific for 'ear'). In addition, the adjectival phrase 'sweet-sounding' ('*dra nyen-po*') has a special evaluative function in contrasting, for example, different styles of chant composition. Here one genre is classified as aurally 'more beautiful'. In the context of monastic chant, this concept is inextricably tied up with notions of greater ritual effectiveness and technical skill involved in chant performance.

By contrast, the alternative names have little to offer in terms of a specific Tibetan meaning. The terms *pi-wang*²⁰ and *tam-bu-ra* are of foreign origin and their lexical significance is unclear, while '*gyü-mang*' (rgyud-mang) simply means 'many-stringed'. In addition, *pi-wang* and *rgyud-mang* are more often used nowadays for other instruments, the two-stringed fiddle and the hammer-dulcimer respectively.

INSTRUMENT OF THE GODS ?

Closely connected with the concept of aural beauty in Tibetan culture, is the use of the lute in various offerings and in ritual art. The 'silent lute' placed on an altar, like the conch-shell, is a symbol, an offering connected with the sense of hearing. This may be a *dra-nyen* which an individual wished to donate to a shrine or it might be a decorative

¹⁹ Rakra Tethong, 'Conversations on Tibetan Musical Traditions', in *Asian Music*, 1979 Vol.10/2, p.8; Ter Ellingson, *Mandala* (ibid) p.236-237.

²⁰ Various theories are propounded concerning the etymology of the term *pi-wang*. The most coherent is the connection with words such as (Chinese) *Pipa* and (Mongolian) *Bi-ba* (cp. Japanese *Bi-wa*), which commends itself on the grounds of: i) linguistic similarity; ii) the *pipa*-like shape of many of the lutes of Tibetan iconography (also see note 17); and iii) Tibetan acquaintance with Chinese instruments from the Tang dynasty at the latest (AD 618-907). Its association with the Tibetan fiddle (*pi-wang*) may have arisen from its close connection with the Mongolian 4-stringed fiddle, the *dörvön chikhteï khuur*, also called *bi-wa*.

instrument not intended for performance. Before the Communist era, a processional silent display of musical instruments including lutes, normally stored in a state collection, was made each year in Lhasa – also as an offering of the sense of hearing.²¹ Likewise, on the fifteenth day of the Tibetan New Year a performance-offering ('*chö:she*', *mchod-gzhas*) was made (a tradition maintained in Dharamsala). The music played in this religious setting included that of the secular lute, the *dra-nyen*.

When held in the hands of an iconographic Buddhist deity, the lute of iconography takes on a significance quite beyond that of the secular lute. It is an attribute of the deity. Nowadays it is generally referred to as a *dra-nyen*, and some examples depict it in a form resembling the secular instrument. This close association between the religious and secular lutes lends to the secular *dra-nyen* certain religious connotations, even though it is almost entirely prohibited from ritual performance.

This is the reason why the *dra-nyen* has sometimes been described as 'the instrument of the gods' by Tibetan secular musicians. It is associated with a number of iconographic figures, among them the celestial musicians (*Gandhara* or *Kinnara*; Tibetan: *Dri-za*), with their king, the guardian king of the East, who is depicted with his lute at the entrance to most Tibetan shrines (*Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, *Yu1-'khor-bsrung*), and most of all with *Sarasvati* ('*Yang-chen-ma*', *Dbyang-can-ma*), goddess of melody, the Buddhist embodiment of sound in its purest form. In other words, the heavenly music played on this symbolic lute exceeds even the most beautiful, most efficacious and most skilfully executed chant of the monasteries. In the Tibetan theoretical scale of values, this 'mental music', heard only in meditations and dreams, is the peak of aural beauty ('*dra nyen-po*', *sgra snyan-po*).²²

The name of the secular lute, the '*dra-nyen*' ("sweet-sounding"), then, has lofty associations, although its primary reference must surely be to the secular entertainment music and village folk dances in which the *dra-nyen* plays a prominent role. This non-religious role, though, is the very reason why the instrument is barred from monastic ritual music. The prohibition is softened a little by its inclusion in certain exceptional ritual contexts – but no stringed instrument is otherwise permitted space in Tibetan Buddhist religion. In real life, however, many monks have become some of the best performers of folk music. One former monk testifies that the very 'sweetness' of the sound of stringed instruments is a distraction to meditation or study.²³ What, then, is this 'sweetness' of sound which is so attractive to the Tibetan ear, monastic or otherwise?

SECULAR CONNOTATIONS – A MOTHER'S VOICE

The answer to that question must surely lie in the cultural connotations of the traditional performance context of *dra-nyen* music. In some folk-song texts the *dra-nyen* is sometimes referred to as a person with a name (eg. *Dra-nyen Tashi Wangyal*), whose parts (wood, skin, strings, etc.) are identified as those making up his closest circle of relationships (father, mother, brother, friends). In another song-text, the appeal of the *dra-nyen*'s timbre is likened to the sound of one's mother's voice. This suggests that the "sweet sound" of the instrument has something to do with its evocation of homely associations and cherished relationships, especially one's home-community with its festivals and dances, led by the melody of the *dra-nyen*. In addition, prior to the 1950s, troupes of travelling entertainers from Eastern Tibet (*Khams-pa rel-pa*)²⁴ would sometimes visit communities and some might perform the *dra-nyen* with great skill.

The aristocratic setting of the *dra-nyen* in courtly entertainment music for the Dalai

²¹ Rakra Tethong, *Asian Music* 1979 Vol.10/2 p. 5.

²² Ter Ellingson, *Asian Music* 1979 Vol.10/2 p. 115,151.

²³ Rakra Tethong, *Asian Music* 1979 Vol.10/2 pp. 9–10.

²⁴ Also called *ras-pa* or *res-pa*. See Rakra Tethong, *ibid.* p.8; Lobsang Lhalungpa 'Tibetan Music: Sacred and Secular', in *Asian Music* 1969 Vol.1/2 p. 9; Jamyang Norbu, in *Zlos-Gar* (*ibid.*) p. 3.

Lamas or for other regional rulers (eg. the Gar and Nang-ma ensembles of the 19th and early 20th centuries) lends to the instrument a certain air of elegance. The nang-ma and 'tö: she' (stod-gzhas) ensemble styles also became very popular in the capital during the 1930s and 1940s under the creativity of a well-known musician, Teacher Nam-gye (Rnam-rgyal).²⁵ The instrument is popular, therefore, both as a specialist's and as an amateur's instrument.

THE DRA-NYEN IN EXILE

In the very different political context of today, Tibetan musical traditions have to compete with Western, Indian and Chinese music. Both exile and non-exile communities have discovered the need to distinguish their musical culture from the music they are absorbing around them. Although Tibetan Buddhist music is strikingly different, to a casual non-Tibetan listener much of their secular music is less obviously so. The distinctiveness and status of the *dra-nyen* in Tibetan folk traditions has, therefore, given it something of a role as an emblem of Tibetan folk music.

The journal of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala, was given the name '*dra-nyen*'. This publication described the instrument as "by far the most popular instrument among Tibetan musicians", which "has dominated Tibetan secular music for many centuries". Along with the long horn (*dung-chen*) used in Tibetan Buddhist music, it is singled out in TIPA's programme notes as "uniquely Tibetan".²⁶

In newly composed music, this evaluation is expressed in a variety of ways. Some music uses traditional instrumentation, often with the *dra-nyen* as the only instrument. More popular and westernized styles include the *dra-nyen* as a very obvious musical 'emblem' of Tibetan ethnicity. Alongside a drum-kit, electric guitar and keyboards, the sound of the *dra-nyen* is striking. In other words, there has been a determined effort to retain a degree of cultural distinctiveness alongside influences from Western music. This reflects the geographical and social context in which the exiled communities live and for some Tibetans this is a political statement deriving in no small measure from a fear that cherished parts of Tibetan culture might otherwise become extinct, swallowed up by a more dominant musical culture. It is a nostalgic symbol of a land they or their parent have left behind.

THE DRA-NYEN IN PRESENT-DAY CHINA

In the Tibetan homelands, the *dra-nyen* is still performed and appreciated, though with the younger generation here, as in exile, it encounters a great deal of competition from more modern-sounding musical instruments, especially the guitar. The traditional popularity and long history of the *dra-nyen* is acknowledged²⁷ and it features today alongside Western and Chinese instruments. Sometimes new compositions feature the *dra-nyen*, setting idiomatic *dra-nyen* music against a clearly Chinese accompaniment, or use it rather like a bass *pipa*, with glides and tremolos characteristic of the Chinese *pipa*. Likewise, the sandalwood and snake-skin appearance of the Beijing model of the *dra-nyen* has given to it certain resemblances to the Chinese long-necked lute, the *saxian*. In other words, these elements demonstrate a sinicizing of the instrument.

On the other hand, a very popular regional idiom has emerged among the North-Eastern Tibetan sub-grouping known as Amdo-Tibetans, in Qinghai, N.Sichuan and

²⁵ Geoffrey Samuel, *Ethnomusicology* (ibid) pp. 408–409; Zhol-khang Dar-rgyas, *Shes-bya'i Zegs-ma* (ibid) p. 40.

²⁶ *The Dra-nyen* (ibid) 1986 Vol.9/1 inside cover; and Programme for the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts tour of the United Kingdom in 1988.

²⁷ *Yuan and Mao Dictionary* p. 249.

W. Gansu Province. This genre is called '*dram-nyen dung-len*' (sgra-snyan rdung-len), meaning "*dra-nyen* play and sing", in which the lutenist also sings the words of the song. This style is featured on local radio broadcasts and on tape-cassettes. It could be that this new style makes special use of the *dra-nyen* because of its Tibetan-ness, as an emblem of cultural identity.

Chinese influence was by no means absent from some kinds of Tibetan secular music before the Communist era. This is clearest in the nang-ma ensemble. A well-respected 18th century Tibetan army officer, Tenzin Panjor (Bstan-'dzin Dpal-'byor), received musical instruction while in Beijing. On his return to Tibet in 1793, he introduced the Chinese hammer-dulcimer (the *yangqin*) and established the now traditional ensemble of lute, fiddle, dulcimer and flute.²⁸ That situation demonstrated a degree of cultural borrowing. However, much of present-day Tibetan music has been drawn almost completely under the Chinese cultural umbrella. The tunes may be Tibetan, but the orchestration and overall sound is Chinese. This too is a musical illustration of the socio-political context of the *dra-nyen*.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented the *dra-nyen* as an emblem of Tibetan culture, especially of its folk music traditions. For the nomads that emblem is a particular style of singing or the flute, for Eastern Tibetans it is the fiddle (*pi-wang*). However, for Central and Western Tibetans and their Himalayan neighbours, the *dra-nyen* is equivalent to the harp in Wales, the Hardanger fiddle in Norway or the *morin khuur* in Mongolia.

The last forty years have made such a symbol all the more desirable. Prior to 1949 most Tibetan communities lived in virtual isolation from the outside world. Now, their folk-music culture has to thrive in the midst of at least three imposing and historic music-cultures and faces the grim possibility of gradually being usurped. At present that situation does not apply. New Tibetan popular music styles are being developed. Not all of it makes use of the *dra-nyen*, but one thing is evident: where there is Tibetan folk, dance, or popular music, a *dra-nyen* will not be far away. In some senses, it would appear that the very circumstances in which the Tibetans find themselves are thankfully serving to preserve and promote this instrument. For the world of music that must be good news.

The author collected data while studying language for two years (1988 – 1990) in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, including a field-trip to Central Tibet, and has been able to interview some of the members of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (India) during their visit to London in the Summer of 1991. The material was originally collated for a dissertation for the author's Master's degree in Ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

²⁸ Zhol-khang Dar-rgyas, *Shes-bya'i Zegs-ma* (ibid) p. 42.