

THE TRANSMISSION OF CENTRAL ASIAN MUSIC TO THE EAST IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD: THE CASE OF THE PIPA LUTE

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Abstract

This paper examines the transmission of Central Asian musical traditions to East Asia during the medieval period, with a particular focus on the pipa lute. Although the pipa is now widely regarded as a quintessential **Chinese** instrument, early archaeological evidence from the Central States shows no trace of such lutes in early court music. This absence implies that the pipa was not originally part of early Chinese musical practice but was introduced later via cross-cultural exchange. Drawing on both textual and material evidence, this study traces how Central Asian music was gradually incorporated into Chinese court culture from the Han dynasty onwards. Historical records detail diplomatic missions, military expansion, and the movement of musicians from the Central Asian Regions to the Central States, culminating in the formal integration of foreign musical traditions into the Sui and Tang court through multi-ethnic ensembles. These performances, often staged in politically significant settings, fulfilled not only entertainment but also diplomatic functions.

Material culture, including mural paintings from the Kucha region, archaeological finds such as the Damagou lute, and preserved instruments in the Shōsō-in repository in Japan, further demonstrates the diversity and evolution of lute types transmitted across Central Asia and into East Asia. Furthermore, the discovery of musical manuscripts from Dunhuang and Japan provides evidence for the development of lute notation systems, reflecting the incorporation of foreign instruments into the Chinese writing tradition.

By synthesizing textual, visual, and archaeological evidence, this paper argues that the transmission of the pipa was part of a broader process of cultural exchange facilitated by political expansion, religious networks, and diplomatic interactions. The Tang court, in particular, served as a key hub in this process, enabling the adaptation of Central Asian musical practices into an integral element of the East Asian musical landscape.

Keywords

Central Asia, music expansion, medieval time period, lutes, pipa

CENTRAL ASIAN MUSIC IN TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

It was not until the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) that the term **Xiyu** (西域, Western Regions) came to designate all neighbouring states and territories west of the Han court. As Peter B. Golden (2011) noted, in 138 BCE, Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) sent Zhang Qian (195–ca. 114 BCE) on a mission to the West. Captured by the Xiongnu nomads, Zhang was held for several years, during which he acquired valuable knowledge of their culture. After his escape and return, Emperor Wu of Han launched campaigns into the Central Asian Regions between 134 and 133 BCE (Golden, 2011: 29). During his reign, the court began extending its influence westward, a period likely marking the initial introduction of Central Asian regional cultures to the central courts. Instruments such as the pipa lute began to shape musical rituals and court performances.

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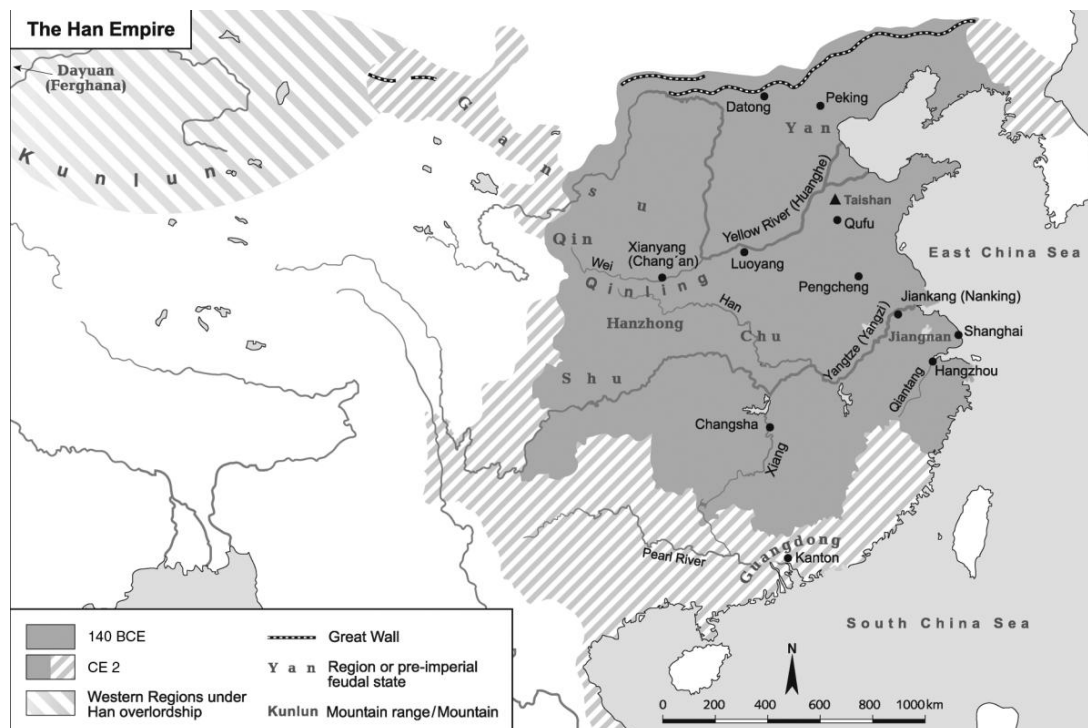


Figure 1: Map of the Central Asian Han Empire. Scheidel, Walter, ed. 2015. *Map of the Central Asian Han Empire. State Power in Ancient China and Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, XVII. Reprinted with permission.

During the Han Empire (202 BCE–8 CE), the capital was Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an, see Figure 1), and its territory extended from the East China Sea in the east to parts of present-day Gansu in the west and from the Great Wall in the north to the Yangtze River in the south.

After the Han dynasty's exploration to the West, the court of the Northern Wei (fourth–sixth centuries CE) expanded its borders toward Central Asia through the Hexi corridor, which included Dunhuang, and extended to present-day Xinjiang province. The *Wei shu* includes the following description (Wei Shou, 1974: 2828):

世祖破赫連昌，獲古雅樂，及平涼州，得其伶人、器服，並擇而存之。後通西域，又以悅般國鼓舞設于樂署。

[When Shizu (Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei, r. 423–452 CE) defeated He Lianchang (d. 434 CE), he gained possession of the **old ritual music**. After pacifying Liangzhou (present-day Wuwei in Gansu Province), he acquired its musicians, instruments, and costumes, which he carefully selected and preserved. Following his expansion into the Central Asian Regions, he also introduced the drum and dance traditions of the Yuepan state (near present-day Yili in Xinjiang Province), incorporating them into the repertoire of the imperial Bureau of Music.]

The excerpt indicates that the Northern Wei court began accumulating musicians and instruments after conquering the state ruled by He Lianchang in the early fifth century. He Lianchang, emperor of the Xia state from 425 to 428 CE, governed from his capital at Tongwan 統萬 (present-day Yulin, Shaanxi Province), located to the east of Liangzhou. Following the attack on Tongwan, the Northern Wei likely extended their influence into Liangzhou and acquired its musicians. This practice of seizing and integrating foreign musicians into the court may have set an important precedent, influencing how the Sui court later organized its own musical performances. According to the *Sui shu* (Wei Zheng, 1973: 376):

始開皇初定令，置七部樂：一曰國伎，二曰清商伎，三曰高麗伎，四曰天竺伎，五曰安國伎，六曰龜茲伎，七曰文康伎。又雜有疎勒、扶南、康國、百濟、突厥、新羅、倭國等。

[Beginning in the Kaihuang period, [Emperor Wen] established an order, settled a seven-group music [in the court which included]: 1) State performers; 2) Qingshang performers; 3) Gaoli (Goguryeo) performers; 4) Tianzhu (present-day India) performers; 5) Anguo (present-day Bukhara) performers; 6) Qiuci (present-day Kucha) performers; and 7) Wenkang performers. Also mixed with of Shule (present-day Kashgar), Funan (present-day Cambodia), Kangguo (present-day Samarkand), Baiji (Paekche), Tujue (Turks), Xinluo (Silla) and Woguo (present-day Japan) [performers]].

In the Kaihuang period (581–604 CE), during the reign of Emperor Wen of Sui (r. 581–604 CE), the court established a set of musical categories known as **seven-group music** and those groups of musicians were all placed in the court.



Figure 2: Map of Sui dynasty. Created by SY. 2017. Map of Sui Dynasty and its administrative divisions as of 610 A.D. Available at <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/7323/sui-dynasty-map/>, last accessed on 17 March 2026. Reprint with permission.

As shown in Figure 2, the map indicates that the capital of the Sui dynasty was in Chang'an. To its northwest lies Liangzhou (also known as Wuwei). From Liangzhou, heading further northwest, after Dunhuang, which is located in the Hexi corridor, Kucha is positioned in its far west, connecting to Central Asia. Shule is not depicted on the map, but its approximate location is in the south of today's Xinjiang province, close to present-day Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The performance consisted of seven groups, each consisting of performers from a specific region or musical tradition. In general, the seven-group music in the Sui court appears to intentionally include various types of music, some of which are from its neighbouring states in the West Regions. In addition, *Sui shu* mentions that "in the ninth year of Kaihuang [589 CE], [Emperor Wen of Sui] pacified Chen dynasty (557–589 CE), obtained the old music of Liu Song (420–479 CE) and Northern Qi (550–577 CE) dynasties" (開皇九年平陳，獲宋，齊舊樂). Wei Zheng, 1973: 349). The Sui court appropriated musical traditions from earlier dynasties and likely absorbed musicians from other courts, integrating them into its own institutional framework. This process appears to have laid the groundwork for the development of more complex ensemble performances. Although instruments originating from the Central Asian Regions are already attested in Han sources, and the Northern Wei court is recorded as having captured musicians from the west, it was during the Sui period that Central Asian music was formally incorporated into court performance and subjected to systematic organization. As for the purpose of such performance in the medieval central court, one example from Tang time provides evidence. The *Jiu Tang shu* mentions that (Xu Liu, approx. 941-945: 515).

武德元年，始畢使骨咄祿特勒來朝，宴於太極殿，奏九部樂。

[In the first year of the Wude era (618 CE), Shibi (r. 609–619 CE) dispatched Qutlugh (r.682–691 CE) to the central court, whereupon a banquet [was held] in the Supreme Ultimate Palace and the nine-group music was performed.]

Shibi was the second emperor of the Eastern Turkic Khaganate; as we can see from Figure 3, the Central Asian Turkic Khaganate was located in the west of today's Xinjiang province and roughly in the region of today's Kazakhstan.

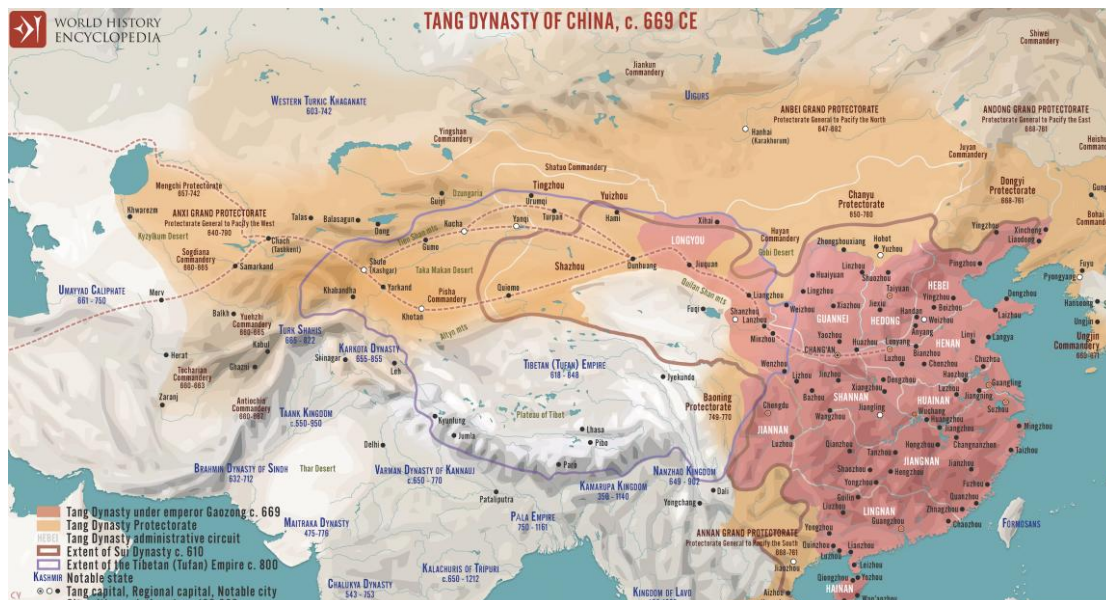


Figure 3: Map of Tang Dynasty. Netchev, Simeon. N.y. *Tang Dynasty of China, c. 669 CE*, World History Encyclopaedia, April 27, 2024, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/18873/tang-dynasty-of-china-c-669-ce/> , last accessed on 2 June 2024. Printed with permission.

According to the research by Howard J. Wechsler (1979), Emperor Gaozu was in a weak military position, which resulted in the Eastern Turks becoming a threat to the Tang court. Perhaps, this situation resulted in Gaozu proffering gifts to the Turkic Khaganate to secure his territory (Wechsler, 1979: 181). Thus, this description provides evidence of the diplomatic use of nine-group music in Gaozu's court toward his guests from the Turkic Khaganate in 618. Indeed, it seems that group music performance in the Tang court had evolved into grand musical galas during banquets.

In addition, the location of the performance was the Supreme Ultimate Palace (Taiji dian 太極殿). According to Wang Zhongshu (2003), this palace was situated in the main pavilion at the very center of Chang'an palace city during the Tang dynasty (Wang Zhongshu, 2003: 193-198). Togan Isenbike (2011) further explained that the Supreme Ultimate Palace was the hall where Emperor Gaozu met with high-ranking officials and held audiences (Isenbike, 2011: 171-198). Thus, staging the performance in this palace underscored its political significance, marking it as an official event rather than mere entertainment. The Tang court presented the nine-group musical performance at banquets held in honor of visiting ambassadors. While previous research has often regarded these performances as mere court entertainment, the specific occasions and settings indicate that foreign music served significant political functions and fulfilled diplomatic protocols. Chinese literary sources describe Central Asian music as hu (胡, barbarian), in its early stages; however, through processes of adaptation, it was eventually incorporated into official performances at the Sui and Tang courts.

CENTRAL ASIAN MUSIC IN MATERIAL CULTURE

Besides the textual evidence of Central Asian music in Chinese literary sources, material evidence provides crucial insight into the transmission and adaptation of Central Asian music in East Asia. Musical instruments, murals, manuscripts, and other archaeological findings illuminate how musical cultures from Central Asia were introduced, transformed, and integrated into local traditions. These sources reveal not only the craftsmanship and design of instruments such as lutes and flutes but also their ceremonial, diplomatic, and cultural significance within the Sui and Tang courts. By examining this material culture, we can trace the channels of cross-cultural exchange and better understand the processes through which Central Asian music became an integral part of the Chinese musical soundscape.

In 1905 and 1913, Albert von Le Coq, as part of a German expedition, visited the Kizil caves in the Kucha region and described their artistic style in his book *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan* (1928). He noted that none of the paintings exhibited any evidence of East Asian influence (von Le Coq, 1928).

Previous studies concerning the images portrayed in the murals located in the Kizil caves have focused on challenges concerning their dating; therefore, an accurate identification of their construction period may lead to an improved understanding of their artistic styles. Su Bai (1996) employed radio-carbon analysis (to analyze the remains of straw from the caves in Kizil), specific architectural criteria, and stylistic criteria to propose a new dating concept (Su Bai, 1996). Howard (1991) summarized Su Bai's dating results by dividing the Kizil periods into the following three phases (Howard, 1991: 69).

Phase 1—from 300+ / -80 to 350 + / -60 CE

Phase 2—from 395+ / -65 to 465 + / -65 CE

Phase 3—from 545+ / -75 to 685 + / -65 CE

From these periods, it is evident that the Kizil caves underwent three distinct phases of construction, categorized as the early, middle, and later periods. In addition, images of musical scenes are also found in the Kumtura caves, located south of the Kizil caves and dating from the fifth to the eleventh centuries. Furthermore, musical imagery dated between the fourth and ninth centuries appears in the Simsim caves, situated to the east of the Kizil caves. In general, three variations of lutes can be observed in the murals in the Kucha region. First is provided in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Musicians on the ceiling of the Kizil Cave 38.

This mural is located on the ceiling of Kizil Cave 38 (which was constructed in the very early period—fourth century) and portrays two musicians. The lute in this image is long ovoid/waterdrop in shape with a straight neck and is being held horizontally in the musician's arm. The musician appears to be using a plectrum to play the instrument; however, it is not possible to ascertain the number of pegs in the neck of the lute. In addition, the lute is showing a very sharp head. Examples of the same lutes' images are shown in Figure 5.

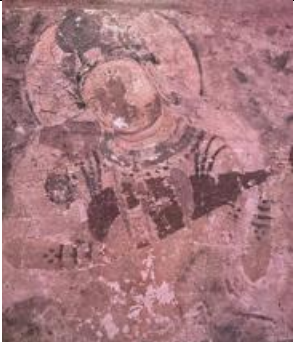
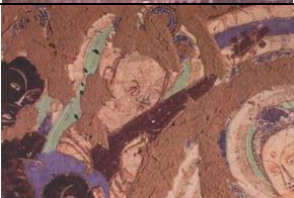
Location	Period (CE)	Images
Simsim Cave No. 26	Fourth to fifth centuries	
Kizil Cave No. 14 (Also found in Kizil 69 and 196; Simsim 48).	Sixth century	
Kizil Cave No. 8 (Also found in Kizil 80, 123, 181, 189, 206; Gongha Cave No. 30; and Simsim 42).	Seventh century	
Kizil Cave No. 135 (Also found in Kizil 192)	Eighth century	

Figure 5: Images of straight neck lutes from the Kucha Region. From up to down rows: Simsim Cave 26, *wendu daxi*-XJ, 143; Kizil no. 14, 34; Kizil no. 69, 46; Kizil no. 196, 109; Kizil no. 8, 27; Kizil no. 80, 56; Kizil no. 123, 85; Kizil no. 206, 120; Gongha no. 30, 154; Simsim no. 42, 144; Simsim no. 48, 148; Kizil no. 135, 79; no. 181, 118, no. 189, 102, no. 192, 106. Reprinted with permission.

The images in Figure 5 are identical in both the size and shape of the instrument's body. Some of the paintings contain a single heavenly musician (although some, such as Kizil 38, depict a duo of musicians). Particularly, Kizil 8 reveals that the lute has a straight neck and consists of five pegs connected to five strings. Additionally, it is evident that the lute player is using a plectrum and that the body is long ovoid in shape. This model of a lute can be seen throughout the majority of construction periods in the Kucha region.

The second type of lute (also from Cave 38) is given in Figure 6.

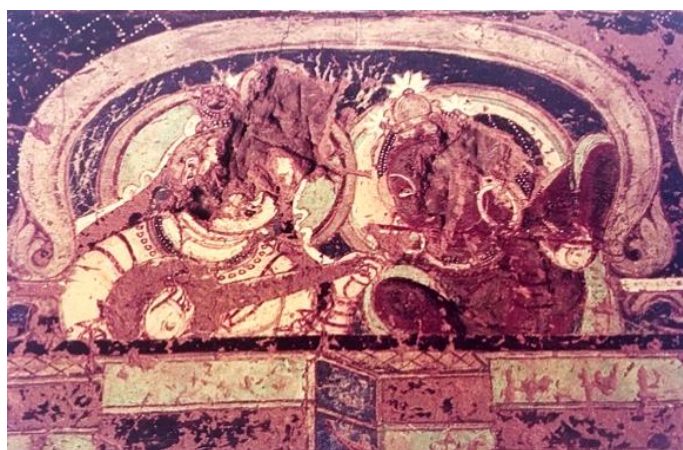


Figure 6: Heavenly musician with round lute in Kizil 38. Reproduced with permission.

In this image, the lute has a round body, and the neck of the instrument is straight; however, it appears to be much thinner than the ovoid lute. From this image, it is not possible to ascertain the number of tuning pegs and strings on the instrument. Also, it appears that the musician's left hand is in a holding position and that he/she is playing the round lute with a plectrum. Since images of **waterdrop lute** and the **round lute** have been found in Kizil Cave No. 38, it appears that, both of them, were depicted during the early period of the Kizil caves. Alongside the development of the construction of the caves, additional evidence of the round-shaped lute is located throughout the caves of the later period (Figure 7).

Location	Period (CE)f	Image
Kizil No. 118	Third century	
Kizil No. 77	Fourth century	
Subash monastery	Fourth to fifth century	
Kizil 14	Sixth century	

Figure 7: Round lutes found in Kucha region. Kizil 118, wenwu daxi-Xinjiang, 78; Kizil No. 77, 50; Subash monastery, 156; Kizil No. 14, 34. Reprinted with permission.

From the images in Figure 7, it is evident that the musicians are holding the lute horizontally, with the head of the instrument pointing slightly downward. Notably, in the image from Kizil 14, the lute appears to have a round-shaped body combined with an arched neck. However, the mural is damaged and lacks sufficient detail to confirm this observation. This type of lute is referred to as the **round lute**. The third variety of lute represented in the Kucha images displays an arched neck (Figure 8).

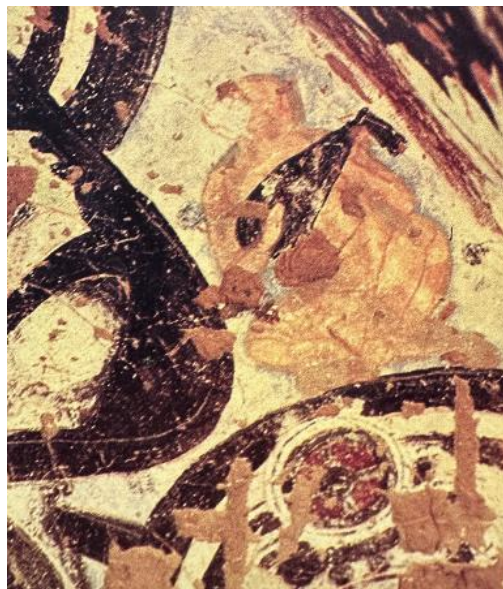


Figure 8: Lute with an arched neck in; Kumtura no. 46, wenwu daxi-Xinjiang, 133, available at https://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=15459873&from=wifiKey#, last accessed on 5 March 2023. Printed with permission.

Figure 8 is an image from Kumtura Cave 46 (Kumtura no. 46, wenwu daxi-Xinjiang, 133) which dates to the fourth century. This type of lute, which appeared in the same period as the **waterdrop lute** and the **round lute**, has a pear shape and an arched neck. The type of lute in this paper is defined as **arched lute**.

In 2006, an archeological remain of a lute was discovered in Khotan, located in the south of the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang province. This lute was found in the remains of a monastery in Damagou Topuluk-dong, which has been dated back to the sixth to seventh century, based on the artistic style of its mural paintings, its size, which is about 68 cm, and its width, which is about 16.8 cm (Chen Suyu, 2016).

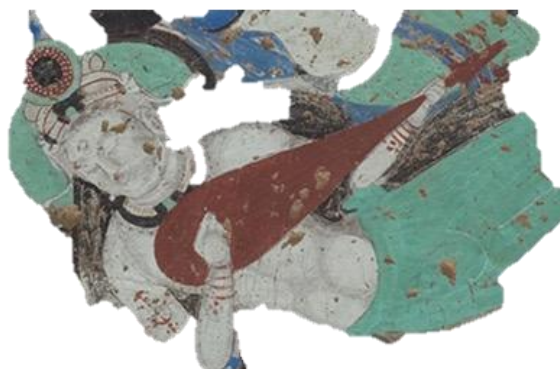


Figure 9 (left) and 10 (right): Long-waterdrop-shaped lute from Damagou. Lute musician from the cave Kizil 8, seventh century. Both printed with permission.

Since the monastery was built between the sixth and seventh centuries, the lute is therefore considered to be from the same period. As we can see in Figure 9, the lute has a long, ovoid-shaped body with a straight neck. In addition, three holes can be seen in the soundbox, indicating that it is a three-stringed lute. Although the Damagou lute has three strings, Damagou lute's form and shape still match those of the lutes depicted in the Kucha region. More importantly, the long ovoid-shaped lute appears much less frequently in Turfan and Dunhuang (Liu Guoliang, 2021). Notably, during the later construction period of the Dunhuang murals, this type of lute is almost entirely absent. As a result, it is possible that the waterdrop-shaped lute was more commonly used in the Kucha region.



Figure 11: Remains of a lute from the tomb of Honghua. (Wenwu Daxi Gansu, N.y. ms.: 62)

In Gansu region, a piece of head of a lute had been discovered in 1980 in the tomb of Princess Honghua (弘化), who was born in 623 and died in 698 CE and is the grandniece of Empress Wu Piece of lute (Wenwu daxi-Gansu, N.y.: 62). Julia Barbara Escher (2019) stated that Princess Honghua married the king of Tuyuhun (Escher, 2019). As such, Honghua is a marriage alliance from the central court to the West. As we can see from Figure 11, the head and the neck of the lute had been decorated with the patterns of plum blossoms. The technique of decoration is not to paint patterns on the lute but to insert “plum blossoms” into the lute’s surface. The head is about 14.3 cm long, and the neck is around 12 cm (Wenwu daxi Gansu. N.y: 62. The head of the lute contains four pegs, which may indicate that it’s a four-stringed lute. It seems that the neck of the lute resembles a long **stick** shape, making it similar to the round-shaped lute images found in both Xinjiang and Dunhuang.



Figure 12: Tang round-shaped lute in Shōsō-in, Nara. Kunaicho [The Imperial Household Agency, 宮内庁]. N.y. 螺鈿紫檀阮咸 (Raden Shitan no Genkan) [The Entrance of Raden Shitan]. Genkan lute of shitan with mother-of-pearl inlay. Shōsō-in. Available at <https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures?id=0000010077&index=8>, last accessed on 10 November 2024), reprinted with permission.

In fact, the eighth-century lute neck from Wuwei shares several features with a round-shaped lute (see Figure 12) preserved in the Shōsō-in, Nara, which belonged to the collection of Emperor Shōmu (704–756 CE). This period is slightly later than that of Prince Honghua’s tomb. The lute from Shōsō-in measures approximately 100.4 cm in length (Kunaicho, N.y.), appearing larger than the lute from Honghua’s tomb. It has four pegs and four strings, and its design closely corresponds to the round-shaped, long-neck lutes depicted in murals from Xinjiang and Dunhuang. Notably, this lute is decorated with the same plum blossom patterns, possibly reflecting craftsmanship very similar to that of the lute found in Honghua’s tomb. Therefore, these two lutes may be classified as belonging to the same type. Moreover, Shōsō-in has also preserved other types of Tang lutes:

Tang lute No. 1
 Length: 97 cm
 Tang lute 1, Kunaicho. N.y. Available at
<https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures/?id=0000014802&index=6>,
 last accessed 19 April 2026



Tang lute No. 2
 Length: 98.7 cm
 Tang lute 2, N.y. The Imperial Household Agency. [Kunaicho 宮内
 庁]. Available at
<https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures?id=0000014803&index=7>,
 last accessed 19 April 2026



Tang lute No. 3
 Length: 98.5
 Tang lute 3, N.y. The Imperial Household Agency. [Kunaicho 宮内
 庁]. Available at
<https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures?id=0000014804&index=8>,
 last accessed 19 April 2026



Tang lute No. 4
 Length: 98.5
 Tang lute 4, N.y. The Imperial Household Agency. [Kunaicho 宮内
 庁]. Available at
<https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures?id=0000014805&index=9>,
 last accessed 19 April 2026



Tang lute with five pegs
 Length: 108.1 cm
 Kunaicho [The Imperial Household Agency, 宮内庁]. N.y. 螺鈿紫
 檀阮咸 (Raden Shitan no Genkan) [The Entrance of Raden
 Shitan]. Genkan lute of shitan with mother-of-pearl inlay. Shōsō-in.
 Available at
<https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/treasures?id=0000010077&index=8>,
 last accessed on 10 November 2024.



Figure 13: Collection table of Tang lutes in Shōsō-in, Nara, Japan. Photographs with kind permission of the museum situated in Nara.

As shown in Figure 13, there are four Tang lutes (No. 1 to No. 4) in Japan that resemble a four-stringed lute with an arched neck and one with five pegs. All these lutes share almost identical sizes, and their shapes closely match the arched-neck lutes depicted in imagery from Xinjiang and Dunhuang murals. In addition, all four-stringed lutes have four frets. More importantly, its features remained the same from the image presented in the relief image from Gandhāra in Figure 9 from the first century CE to the Tang Dynasty. In addition, according to Chen Yang's *Yue shu* during the twelfth century, he has provided two lute images (Figure 14).

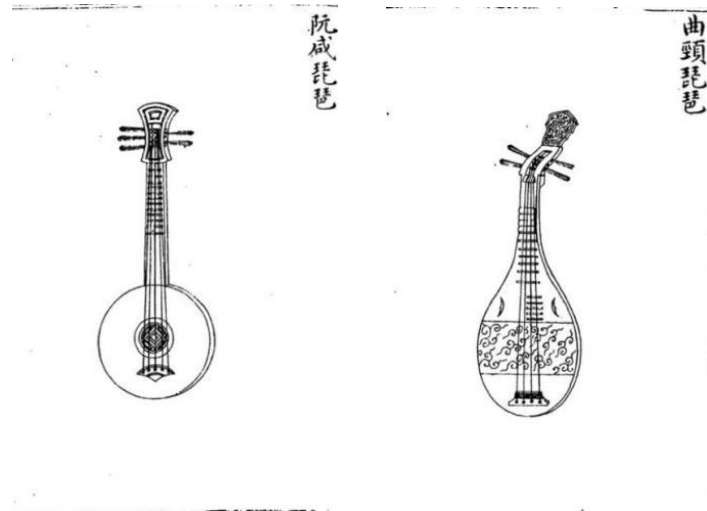


Figure 14: Two pipa lutes from *Yue shu*. (Chen Yang, 1195, vol. 145, 4 and 6). Reprinted with permission.

First, there is a time gap between the dates of the Shōsō-in lutes and the illustrations from *Yue shu*. By simply comparing the two lutes in Figure 14, it appears that the **ruanxian pipa** (阮咸琵琶)'s shape resembles the round lute from Shōsō-in but has a slightly wider neck, and there are five strings. **The arched neck pipa** (quxiang pipa, 曲項琵琶) resembles the four-stringed arched lute from Shōsō-in partially, but its neck became wider, altering the lute's overall shape. Besides, the number of frets on the arched lute increased. As such, it seems that Tang lutes underwent a development in the later period. The growing size of the lutes' necks was very likely due to the increasing number of frets, which required more space.

The evidence from *Yue shu* also proves that, since the pipa lute changed its shape over time, the term **The arched neck pipa** from the Song period cannot accurately reflect the arched lutes of the Tang period. Thus, someone should be cautious when directly linking imagery to terminology found in Chinese literary sources. Overall, both the round-shaped, long-neck lute and the four/five-stringed arched lute were represented in imagery and actively used during medieval times from the West Regions to Japan. In addition, the Tang lutes preserved in Japan are larger than the Damagou lute from Khotan, which suggests that Tang lutes were likely played while seated, whereas the smaller Khotan lute was more portable and easier to carry.

So far, I have examined evidence from both Chinese literary sources and imagery that demonstrate Central Asian musical instruments. Coincidentally, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 17, also known as the Library Cave, was sealed in the eleventh century; it contains a vast collection of manuscripts, documents, and fragments. Among the Dunhuang manuscripts discovered in Cave 17, P.3539, P.3808, and P.3719 contain lute notations. These manuscripts are now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Notably, no such musical notation was known before the discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts in China.

As shown in Figure 15, these are partial sheets from P.3808. In these sheets, each musical piece in P.3808 consists of a title followed by the musical notation in the adjacent column. The musical symbols resemble Japanese scripts and also appear similar to abbreviated Chinese characters. This suggests that after the lute arrived in the East, it developed its own notation system during the medieval period, adapting to the Chinese writing system. This provides a clear example of how a foreign instrument was integrated into and transformed within the local musical tradition.

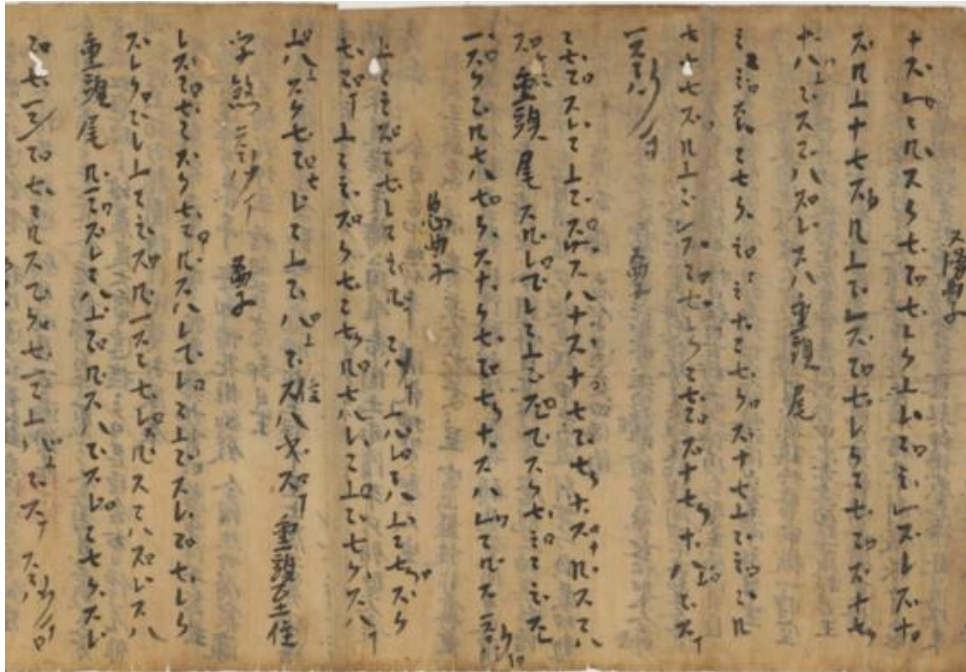


Figure 15: Music pieces in P.3808. Reproduced with permission.

Besides the transmission of the pipa lute from the central states to medieval Japan, its musical notation was also adapted there. There is a manuscript titled *Shakyo ryōshi nōju* 寫經料紙納受 [the Receive of Sutra Copying Paper] (Figure 16), kept in the Shōsō-in (Sasaki Nobutsuna, 1921).

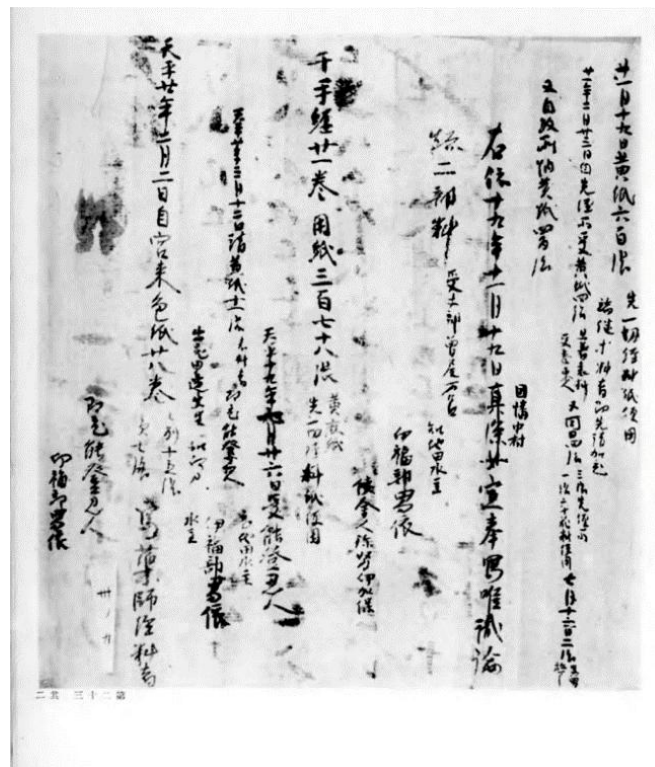


Figure 16: *Shakyo ryōshi nōju* manuscript from the Shōsō-in. Sashaki Sasaki Nobutsuna, 1921:23. Reprinted with permission.

As it is apparent from the image (Figure 16), this manuscript is a fragment (or a single sheet) of very thin paper, which has permitted the ink from the other side to bleed through. Descriptions such as six hundred sheets of yellow paper (黃紙六百張), twenty-one rolls of The Thousand) [Avalokiteśvara] Hands Sutra in 378 sheets of paper (千手經二十一卷用紙三百七十八張) and terms such as **yellow hemp paper** 黃麻紙 (huangma zhi) are evident. This fragment documents the usage of paper for the copying of sutra text and includes the number of sheets and the type of paper as well. Additionally, the manuscript indicates that the year of writing is the nineteenth year of the Tempyō era (747 CE)

and that in the twentieth year of Tempyō [748] on the second day of the second month, eighteen rolls of coloured paper arrived from the court (天平二十年二月二日自宮來色紙十八卷). Thus, this fragment originally records the delivery of paper from the court and can be presumed to have been written by the person responsible for recording deliveries and documenting paper usage between 747 and 748 CE.

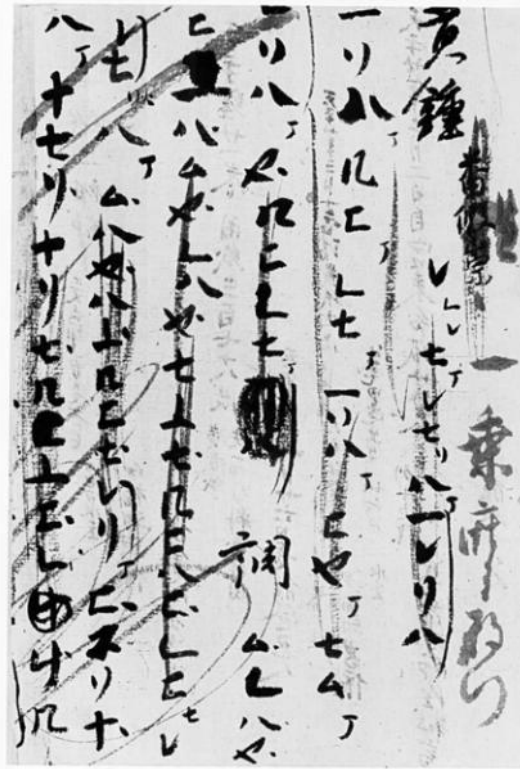


Figure 17: *Tempyō biwa fu*, Shōsō-in, Nara, Japan. Nobutsuna, 1921:23. Reprinted with permission.

The *Tempyō biwa fu* (Figure 17) was copied on the other side of the manuscript. In fact, Tempyō (天平) reign name appears on the side of the manuscript, leading to the assumption that the musical notation on its verso was created during the Tempyō period; hence it is known as the *Tempyō biwa fu* and is dated 747 CE as well. In addition, a portion of the musical notation has been crossed through as well, suggesting that perhaps the transcriber made some mistakes or that it was crossed out by someone else later. Moreover, the term 黃鐘 (huangzhong), which indicates the first note of a scale consisting of 12 musical notes, appears early on in the manuscript. Here, it refers to the tuning of the pipa, providing the tune of the musical piece's mode. Naturally, when performing on the pipa, the first step is to tune the strings; as such, the tuning for the pipa is always given at the beginning of the piece. In general, the *Tempyō biwa fu* features the title and instructions for tuning and music notation, which might explain how lute pieces were being written/copied in medieval times. The tuning of the pipa is particularly essential in musical notation.



Figures 18a (left) and 18b (right): character 黃 copied in the recto of *Tempyō biwa fu* and character 黃 copied in the verso of *Tempyō biwa fu*. Excerpted from mentioned figures by the author.

By examining the character 黃 on both the recto and verso (Figures 18a and 18b), it is evident that the characters are written by two different hands, implying that a different person created the verso of the manuscript. Additionally, this evidence suggests the existence of a chronological gap between the creation of the document and the addition of the lute score on its verso. Because the manuscript's

recto and verso were not created on the same occasion, it is not accurate to date the *Tempyō biwa fu* exactly to 747 CE. Besides, Gasparini (2019) mentioned that documents and manuscripts started to be added to the Shōsōin collection during the tenth century (Gasparini, 2019). As such, the earliest date for the score would be during the eighth century and the latest in the tenth century.

The musical notation copied in Japan during the Nara period closely resembles the notes found in Dunhuang manuscripts, suggesting a continuity in the use of this notation from eighth-century Japan to later Dunhuang. The study of musical texts, imagery, and manuscripts from the Tang dynasty and neighboring regions highlights the complex cultural exchanges between Central and East Asia. Round-shaped, long-neck lutes depicted in murals from Kizil, Dunhuang, and Xinjiang, alongside physical examples such as the Wuwei lute and the Shōsō-in lute, demonstrate the transmission and adaptation of Central Asian musical forms within the Chinese court. These instruments reflect sophisticated craftsmanship as well as political, diplomatic, and cultural interactions, from marriage alliances and war captives to official court performances. The movement of musicians and the adoption of their instruments and traditions facilitated the integration of Central Asian music into Chinese ceremonial and artistic life. Central Asian musicians, who taught and performed in court music offices, likely played a pivotal role in embedding these traditions into the official repertoire of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Still, at this moment, the precise date of the invention of pipa notation remains uncertain. Although these instruments originated in Central Asia, the scarcity of preserved music manuscripts, such as those from the Sasanian kingdom, limits direct comparison with Dunhuang sources. Nonetheless, Tang-era lute and flute notations were based on the Chinese writing system, marking a transition from textual performance descriptions to tablature-based notation. The same musical notes appear in both Dunhuang manuscripts and Japanese biwa scores, likely due to Japanese officials studying Tang court culture. This evidence suggests that the Tang court served as a hub for the transmission and adaptation of musical instruments, notation, and repertoire from Central Asia to its east.

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ABSTRACT IN CHINESE LANGUAGE

本文以琵琶为个案，探讨中亚音乐在中世纪时期向东传播的过程。尽管在当代中国音乐实践中，琵琶常被视为具有鲜明“中国性”的乐器，但早期中原地区的考古发现，均未见琵琶或类似拨弦乐器的证据，表明其并非中国本土早期音乐体系中的固有乐器，而是经由跨文化交流传入。

本文结合文献与物质文化证据，梳理自汉代以来中亚音乐逐步融入中原宫廷的历史过程。史料显示，随着对“西域”的开拓、外交往来以及战争俘获，来自中亚的音乐家与乐器进入中原宫廷，并在隋唐时期通过“七部乐”“九部乐”等制度化形式被正式纳入宫廷音乐体系。这类音乐演出不仅具有娱乐功能，更在宫廷礼仪与外交场合中承担重要的政治意义。

与此同时，来自龟兹地区的壁画、达玛沟出土的琵琶实物，以及日本奈良正仓院保存的唐代琵琶等物质资料，展示了琵琶在传播过程中的多种形制与演变路径，包括长椭圆形、圆形及曲项等类型。这些形制既体现出与键陀罗艺术传统的延续关系，也反映了在东亚地区的在地化发展。此外，敦煌与日本出土的琵琶谱本进一步表明，该乐器在传入后逐渐形成了依托汉字体系的记谱方式，标志着其被纳入本土音乐传统的过程。

综上所述，琵琶的东传是中亚与东亚之间广泛文化交流的一部分，这一过程受到政治扩张、宗教传播及外交互动的共同推动。尤其是在唐代，宫廷不仅是外来音乐汇聚的中心，也是其转化与再创造的关键场域，从而促成中亚音乐传统在东亚音乐体系中的深度融合。