

SINGING ACROSS CONTINENTS: REVIVING POST-PANDEMIC TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL DIALOGUE THROUGH THE 2025 NAXI TOUR OF PORTUGAL

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Abstract

In May 2025, Naxi folksinger He Jinhua (和金花) and instrumentalist Huang Limei (黄丽梅) from southwest China embarked on a two-week tour of Portugal. The anchor for the tour was the 8th Lisbon Conference: Chinese Music and Musical Instruments. Based in Lisbon and Mafra, this is an important annual European venue for Chinese music. He Jinhua and Huang Limei performed twice and co-presented a paper on Naxi folksong at the conference. They also gave concerts in the northern cities of Braga and Aveiro, led a workshop on Naxi music and dance at a local Chinese cultural centre in Lisbon, and recorded a CD. This was the first appearance outside China for Naxi traditional music since the pandemic, and the small scale and focus on concentrated scholarly and artistic interaction contrasted markedly with the many high-profile international tours and major festival appearances before 2019. The 2025 tour illustrated an individual-focused, dialogic model of musical exchange arising out of long-standing personal friendships and reciprocity rather than institutional or state fiat. The two artists invested months of time adapting their repertoire and mode of presentation for this flexible format, aiming to honour tradition while also undertaking artistic experimentation and inviting in-depth engagement from their Portuguese audiences.

Keywords

Naxi music, international concert tours, Chinese music in Portugal, post-pandemic international cultural exchange

INTRODUCTION

On 30 April 2025, two Naxi musicians from Lijiang in Yunnan Province, southwest China, landed in Lisbon to begin their first tour of Portugal. Renowned folksinger He Jinhua (和金花, born in 1971) and veteran guzheng zither performer Huang Limei (黄丽梅, born in 1975), both born into families that have passed down Naxi musical traditions for generations, were invited to Portugal as featured artists at the 8th Lisbon Conference: Chinese Music and Musical Instruments, held over 7–10 May 2025 in Lisbon and the neighbouring municipality of Mafra (Figure 1)². With the Jorge Álvarez Foundation as the principal sponsor since its inception in 2016, the conference has become an annual event featuring academic papers and performances, both open to the public. Drawing dozens of participants from Portugal and further afield, it is now a noted venue in Europe for Chinese music³. In 2025 it was held at two prestigious venues, the Institute of Ethnomusicology of NOVA

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² Mandarin-language names and terms are romanised in Hanyu pinyin. Naxi-language names and terms are romanised in Naxi pinyin.

³ The Jorge Álvarez Foundation is the major Portuguese funder of Macau and Chinese cultural exchange. Further financial support comes from sources including NOVA University Lisbon, the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research (CHIME Foundation), Fundação Casa de Macau, and Confucius Institutes in Portugal (Rees & De Souza, 2026: 17–24). Portugal hosts five Confucius Institutes, centres under the Chinese Ministry of Education that

University Lisbon and the National Palace of Mafra⁴. Conference organiser Enio de Souza⁵ and UCLA-based ethnomusicologist Helen Rees built a two-week tour for He Jinhua and Huang Limei before, during, and after the conference, with Rees and Tang as the accompanying interpreters, guides, and co-presenters. The tour showcased performances and presentations in Lisbon, Mafra, and the northern cities of Braga and Aveiro; it concluded with a workshop for a local Chinese cultural centre in Lisbon and the recording of He Jinhua's second solo CD at the city's highly regarded Namouche Studios (Figure 2)⁶.



Figure 1: Conference programme with He Jinhua on the cover. Used with permission.

DATE	LOCATION	ACTIVITY
30 April	Lisbon	Arrival from China
1 May	Lisbon	Rest and sightseeing
2 May	Lisbon–Braga	Travel by train, Lisbon to Braga
3 May	Braga	University of Minho, Salão Nobre da Reitoria: lecture-presentation on Naxi culture and music by Helen Rees and Tingting Tang; performance by He Jinhua and Huang Limei (organised by the Confucius Institute, University of Minho)
4 May	Braga–Aveiro	Travel by car, Braga to Aveiro University of Aveiro/Fundação Engenheiro António Pascoal: lecture-presentation on Naxi culture and music by Rees and Tang; performance by He and Huang (organised by the Confucius Institute, University of Aveiro)
5 May	Aveiro–Lisbon	Travel by car, Aveiro to Lisbon
6 May	Lisbon	Rest and sightseeing
7 May	Mafra	Conference, National Palace of Mafra: lecture-demonstration “Folksongs

facilitate language learning and cultural activities overseas (Instituto Confúcio na Universidade do Porto, 2026). They are often compared to Germany's longer-standing Goethe Institute.

⁴ For major Portuguese institutions with an established English version of their names, we use those English names. Otherwise, we give institutional names in Portuguese.

⁵ Enio de Souza's engagement with Chinese arts spanned almost four decades as a civil servant, first at the Macau Cultural Institute in Macau (1983–1999), then at the Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre in Lisbon (1999–2019). Since retirement in 2019 he has continued to organise Chinese arts-related events while pursuing a PhD at the Institute of Ethnomusicology, NOVA University Lisbon. Helen Rees has worked with him and others to programme all eight Lisbon conferences.

⁶ The first CD, *He Jinhua: Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China* (2022), was recorded at UCLA in 2018 and published by Smithsonian Folkways Records. For a sampler, visit <https://folkways.si.edu/news-and-press/announcing-songs-of-the-naxi-of-southwest-china>, last accessed 2 January 2026.

		of the Naxi of Southwest China” by He, Huang, and Tang Conference concert, Casa da Música Francisco Alves Gato, Mafra: performance by He and Huang
8 May	Mafra	Conference, Mafra
9 May	Mafra	Conference, Mafra
10 May	Lisbon	Conference, Institute of Ethnomusicology, NOVA University Lisbon: closing performance by He and Huang
11 May	Lisbon	Rest and rehearsal
12 May	Lisbon	Namouche Studios: CD recording
13 May	Lisbon	Namouche Studios: CD recording Centro de Línguas e Culturas Shumin (淑敏语言文化中心): Workshop by He and Huang for Portuguese Chinese children and teachers
14 May	Lisbon	Visit to Tasca da Bela, Casa de Fados to hear fado
15 May	Lisbon	Departure to China

Figure 2: Schedule for May 2025 tour of Portugal by He Jinhua and Huang Limei.

This Portuguese tour took place nearly three decades after Naxi musicians first performed in Western Europe: in October 1995, ten members of Dayan Ancient Music Association (大研古乐会) had brought the elegant strains of Lijiang’s dongjing (洞经) ensemble music, renamed Naxi ancient music (纳西古乐), to concert halls in England. The success of these concerts jumpstarted a remarkable international touring career that took the group all over Europe and East Asia, and to the 2002 Seattle International Children’s Festival⁷. Almost 30 years on, the more modestly conceived Portuguese tour by He Jinhua and Huang Limei marked the first reappearance of Naxi traditional music on the international circuit in the post-pandemic era. It thus carried significance not only in terms of international academic exchange and cultural dialogue but also for continued global visibility of Naxi folk traditions. Both musicians had participated in numerous foreign tours—indeed, Huang Limei had been one of the ten musicians visiting England in 1995—but for both, this was their first time in Portugal, and a new, smaller-scale, flexible style of tour that encouraged artistic creativity and in-depth engagement with committed audiences⁸.

This article first situates the Portugal tour within the history of Naxi musicians’ international engagements, highlighting how it differed from earlier large-scale, widely publicised cultural exchanges in which the two artists had participated. The discussion then turns to how the musicians negotiated their presence on the Portuguese stage, working to honour tradition while also engaging in artistic experimentation. Finally, the musicians’ own post-tour reflections, together with comments from organisers and conference participants, underline the most valued experiences and achievements of the fortnight.

NAXI INTERNATIONAL MUSICAL ENGAGEMENT

HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL MUSICAL ENGAGEMENT

Numbering just over 326,000 (National Population Census of China, n.d.), the Naxi are a Tibeto-Burman group from southwest China, concentrated in northwest Yunnan Province, southwest Sichuan Province, and southeastern Tibet (Figure 3). Traditionally they have primarily engaged in agriculture and pastoralism⁹. Their demographic centre has long been Lijiang, Yunnan, which is consequently looked upon as the cultural heartland of the ethnic group. In 1985, shortly after China embarked on its reform and open policy, Lijiang County (丽江县), since renamed Yulong County (玉龙县) and Gucheng District (古城区), was officially opened to foreigners, and the area’s dramatic

⁷ Found throughout Yunnan Province, dongjing music features a delicate heterophonic ensemble of flutes, bowed and plucked strings, percussion, and voices. This genre and the early Naxi tours are described in detail by Rees (2000; 2002). The name Dayan Ancient Music Association derives from the original name of the county town, Dayan Town (大研镇) (Figure 3). The group is also known as Lijiang China Dayan Naxi Ancient Music Association (丽江中国大研纳西古乐会).

⁸ He Jinhua’s comments on her overseas performances are documented by Tang (2025: 329–339), and Huang Limei’s participation in the 1995 British tour by Rees (2002).

⁹ Naxi history and culture are set out in detail by Yunnan sheng minzu shiwu weiyuanhui (1999).

mountain landscapes, distinctive architecture, and enigmatic ethnic culture quickly became a tourist magnet¹⁰.



Figure 3: Map of southwest China showing places mentioned. Dayan and Tacheng are both in Lijiang. Base map made in ArcGIS 10.4 by Wang Guangzhi (王光志), used with permission.

Dongjing music, exceptionally well preserved among the Naxi in a unique local form, proved appealing to foreign audiences, and in 1988 the county town ensemble, the Dayan Ancient Music Association, received permission to put on concerts for foreign tourists, which were extremely popular (Rees, 2000: 147–157). As a result, this genre became the first Naxi musical tradition to develop a major international profile: within a few years of the 1995 British tour, the Association had gone on to perform in numerous locales outside China, including Japan, eight European countries, and the United States, attracting widespread foreign newspaper coverage (Li Hailun, 2020: 135).

In contrast to Lijiang's dongjing music, traditional Naxi folksongs initially received far less international exposure. Ironically, their first appearance abroad actually predated that of dongjing music: in 1956, Naxi singer Zhou Qiongzhi (周琼芝) performed at the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. Naxi folksongs did not reach the international stage again until more than three decades later, and then only as a one-time occurrence. In 1987, eight Naxi folksingers—including a young He Jinhua—appeared at the Asia-Pacific Arts Festival in Japan (Li Hailun, 2020: 135). Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s, the primary outward-facing performance context for Naxi

¹⁰ Yang Fuquan (2005) offers an excellent overview of planning for cultural tourism, heritage conservation, and mentoring of tradition-bearers in Lijiang and nearby.

folksongs remained Lijiang's rapidly expanding ethnic tourism and entertainment industry (Tang, 2025: 167–168).

It was only in the 21st century that Naxi folksingers received more opportunities to perform abroad. For instance, over September–October 2005, folksingers Li Xiuxiang (李秀香) and He Jinhua, along with young dobbaq Yang Yuhua (杨玉华)¹¹, were invited—alongside artists from other Yunnanese ethnic groups—to perform at Connecticut College and other universities, colleges, and concert halls across the United States (Li Hailun, 2020: 135; Tang, 2025: 329). This was part of the lead-up to the Mekong River programme at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where He Jinhua and two young dobbaq appeared as part of the 30-plus-strong Yunnanese delegation (Rees, 2012). Afterwards, He Jinhua's international appearances continued, including the Eastern Voices programme of the Culturescapes China 2010 festival in Switzerland; the 2013 Berlin International Trade Fair and subsequent concerts in four more European countries; and, the same year, Yunnan Cultural Week at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva (Li Hailun, 2020: 135; Tang, 2025: 329).

The majority of international tours and festival appearances by Naxi musicians before the pandemic were large-scale events involving between ten and 40 performers and accompanying officials; organisation, funding, and oversight by high-level government entities, non-profits, concert agencies, and/or corporate sponsors; internationally renowned performance venues; months or years of preparation; and a blitz of publicity. The 1995 British tour, for example, featured ten musicians (one of whom was a Lijiang Prefecture propaganda official doubling as a percussionist). Organised and funded primarily by London-based concert agency Asian Music Circuit, it included concerts at the renowned Purcell Room and the Chinese Embassy in London, with voluminous publicity in the British and Chinese press (Rees, 2002)¹². In February 1997, the Hong Kong Arts Festival underwrote expenses for 27 members of the Dayan Ancient Music Association to give two performances at the festival (Ng, 1996); shortly thereafter, in 1998, the government of Norway invited the Association to give several concerts at the Bergen International Festival, with Norway covering the costs for 32 visitors (Johansen, 1998). The 2002 Seattle International Children's Festival, held in the landmark Seattle Center, invited 17 Association members to perform as part of an event supported by a plethora of government and corporate sponsors, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Seattle Arts Commission, two banks, IKEA, and Boeing (Seattle International Children's Festival, 2022). And, as noted above, once Naxi folksong joined the international circuit, He Jinhua participated in numerous touring groups of Yunnanese performers at similarly high-profile venues. Especially noteworthy were the United Nations and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival—the largest such festival in the world, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors annually (Rees, 2012). Furthermore, such events were opportunities not only for prestigious presentations of Naxi culture, or of Naxi culture as part of Yunnan's multi-ethnic heritage, but also for furthering wider diplomatic and development goals, as attested by numerous comments from diplomats and other officials (Rees, 2002; Rees, 2012).

The May 2025 tour of Portugal by He Jinhua and Huang Limei was very differently conceived, planned, and funded from these earlier large-scale events. Centred around an academic conference rather than a huge festival or high-profile concert venues, it grew out of personal friendships and networks rather than government or institutional initiatives; prioritised in-depth interactions between performers and small, committed audiences; ran on a shoe-string budget¹³; largely

¹¹ The dobbaq (Chinese: dongba, 东巴) are indigenous Naxi ritual specialists. Their mysterious pictographic scriptures, sonorous chants, and ritual choreography have long attracted Chinese and foreign scholarly and popular attention (McKhann, 2010). Yang Fuquan and Yu Liying (2025) set out the history of foreign engagement with the Naxi dobbaq tradition and Naxi culture more generally, which stretches back to the second half of the 19th century.

¹² The starting-point for the 1995 tour was Rees's approach to Asian Music Circuit in summer 1993 at the request of the Dayan Ancient Music Association; it took over two years to come to fruition, with substantial involvement by the Lijiang authorities (Rees, 2002).

¹³ Partial support came from research funds granted to Rees by the UCLA Center for Community Engagement. The Confucius Institutes of the Universities of Minho (city of Braga) and Aveiro covered travel and accommodation for the events in those cities. The rest was underwritten by private funds. The entire budget was approximately US\$10,000.

eschewed publicity; and both encouraged and required an unusually high level of creativity on the part of the musicians.

HE JINHUA, HUANG LIMEI, AND THE GENESIS OF THE 2025 PORTUGAL TOUR

Both He Jinhua and Huang Limei are celebrated figures in Naxi music today. Their complementary performing skills made them a particularly versatile duo for the Portuguese tour: He, primarily a folksinger and skilled exponent of the Naxi jaw harp and Naxi folk dances, has also performed dongjing music; while Huang, trained initially in the dongjing tradition, also performs folksongs and folk dances. This versatility was crucial, because funding limitations did not allow for a larger group.

He Jinhua was born in a mountain village in Tacheng Township (塔城乡) at the northwestern edge of what is now Yulong County, bordering Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (迪庆藏族自治州). She grew up in a multiethnic region inhabited by Naxi, Tibetans, and Lisu. In this culturally rich environment, she learned folksongs while living and working alongside village elders. Recognised early for her talent, at 16 she was invited to join Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe (丽江纳西族自治县歌舞团, now Yulong County Ethnic Cultural Work Team (玉龙县民族文化工作队) as a professional performer. Since then, she has built an enviable career, winning numerous awards in national competitions and holding the prestigious title National First-Grade Performer (国家一级演员). Abroad, she has performed in over 20 countries across Europe, Asia, and North America. She also researches and teaches Naxi folksongs, expanding her repertoire by learning songs from all Naxi regions and seeking to pass the tradition on (He Jinhua, 2022; He Jinhua & Tang, 2024; Tang, 2025: 174–175, 306–312).

Huang Limei was born into a musical family in Dayan Town. Her father, Huang Erya (黄尔雅), was a respected musician proficient in multiple traditional instruments, and a member of both the Dayan Ancient Music Association and the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe. Huang Limei first learned the erhu fiddle, then guzheng, becoming the first female member of the Dayan Ancient Music Association and performing with them throughout China and Europe and in Seattle. In 2006, because of her diverse skill-set in instrumental performance, singing, and dance, she was selected for the award-winning all-female Hanmijin Ensemble (涵蜜金组合) organised by the Gucheng District Cultural Bureau, which collects, arranges, performs, and transmits Naxi folksongs and dances (Huang Limei, 2024).

The origins of the 2025 Portugal tour were very much personally driven. In February 2024, all four of us (He Jinhua, Huang Limei, Rees, and Tang) met in Lijiang to celebrate the wedding of He's son. One afternoon, a relaxed dongjing music jam session stirred Huang's memories of the 1995 tour. Half-jokingly, she remarked, "How wonderful it would be if we could perform abroad again!" Rees suggested that perhaps we could collaborate with Enio de Souza the following year to bring Naxi musicians to the 8th Lisbon Conference. De Souza enthusiastically agreed, but funding constraints meant that ultimately only two musicians could be invited. All logistical arrangements, including visa paperwork, air travel, accommodation, and coordination with the Confucius Institutes in Braga and Aveiro, were undertaken personally by De Souza and Rees, with assistance from Tang. The result was the two-week schedule of performances, lectures, workshop, and recording set out above (Figure 2).

REVIVING TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL DIALOGUE: FROM INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES TO FRIENDSHIP-DRIVEN COLLABORATION

Within China's cultural diplomacy framework, earlier invitations for large-scale tours represented not only a rare honour and form of national recognition, but also the primary channel through which most tradition-bearers could gain international exposure. Being selected to perform abroad often became a turning-point that significantly advanced a career, and Naxi performers were among southwestern Chinese artists most sought-after for high-profile events. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, brought in-person exchanges to a halt worldwide. Schools,

workplaces, and—notably—live music and cultural events were suspended, often for two or three years. The internet swiftly became a vital medium for sustaining musical and social ties, and this digital transition has persisted into the post-pandemic era, exaggerating a general slow-down in large-scale cultural exchange events already underway by the second decade of this century (Kouwenhoven, 2026: 242). In-person international artistic dialogue, especially with Chinese regions such as Yunnan, where exchanges have historically tended to be large-scale and state-organised or state-supported, has been slow to resume. Based on annual fieldwork in Yunnan between 2019 and 2024 (ranging from four weeks at a time to 14 months), Tang observed no major international cultural activities showcasing traditional performing arts during that period.

When Naxi musicians did re-emerge onto the international stage, in summer 2024, it was in a privately funded novel enterprise, unexpectedly meshing He Jinhua's voice with death metal at the Wacken Open Air Festival in Germany. On 1 August, the death metal band Juwuxing (俱五形, Five Penalties), formed in 2014 by four Naxi musicians, collaborated with He Jinhua in Wacken 2024 Metal Battle global finals¹⁴. Their performance fused Naxi funeral music with modern death metal, blending traditional folk melodies with contemporary rock to express Naxi perspectives on death and nature. Competing against bands from 30 countries, they earned third place, the first time a Chinese rock band had achieved this at Wacken (Tang, 2025: 59). Thus, the Portugal tour in May 2025, also privately funded, represented the second instance of in-person international cultural dialogue undertaken by Naxi artists since the pandemic, and the first that showcased traditional genres.

No government-sponsored international tours or plans have yet emerged for Naxi musicians since these privately organised and funded German and Portuguese trips. However, in December 2025, the multi-ethnic language and music preservation project Everyone's a Curator: Digitally Empowering Ethnic Minority Music Sustainability in China, led by Lijuan Qian at University College Cork, Ireland, signed collaboration agreements with Naxi singers Mu Cheng (木诚), He Huiqiong (和慧琼), and He Dongmei (和冬梅) to record vocal demonstrations of commonly used Naxi folksong vocabulary and/or songs. As a postdoctoral researcher on the project, Tang recommended these singers and is overseeing the development of the Naxi-language corpus.

Notably, all three recent international initiatives—the German festival appearance, the Portugal tour, and the Irish preservation project—were realised without direct involvement from Chinese, foreign, or local government bodies, or from major sponsors. Juwuxing's participation at Wacken was self-funded by the Naxi rock band and its manager; they had first won a national underground rock competition in China to qualify. The Portuguese tour and the Irish project were both facilitated by ethnomusicologists personally friendly with the Naxi musicians concerned. This pattern reflects a bottom-up revival of transnational cultural exchange in the post-pandemic era. The Portugal tour's organisation further illustrates an enduring legacy of ethnomusicological work: friendships and reciprocal relationships between scholars and the communities with whom they engage that typically extend far beyond a single research report, dissertation, or monograph (Seeger, 2008).

BETWEEN PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION: NAXI MUSIC ON THE PORTUGUESE STAGE

The Portugal tour by He Jinhua and Huang Limei to some extent carried forward, yet also broke with, patterns of previous international cultural exchange, both in programme design and in presentation. There were staged concerts, for sure, but more emphasis than usual on pairing these with informative lectures, question-and-answer opportunities, and workshop segments that created interactive, learning-focused encounters for local audiences. Meanwhile, the selection and arrangement of musical pieces demonstrated notable creativity and a willingness to depart from tradition, as well as diversity within Naxi communities, which the performers' stage attire emphasised. Wearing Naxi attire from their respective hometowns—along with, in He Jinhua's case, an older linen style now preserved around Eya Township and nearby Lugu Lake—they paired

¹⁴ This performance can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZOjojVUGXI>, last accessed 2 January 2026. Death metal (死亡金属, or 死亡摇滚) first emerged in China in the early 1990s (Zhanfu Yuedui, 2018).

musical diversity with a visual display of Naxi cultural variety. Furthermore, the itinerary was designed to give the performers as many opportunities as possible to share their musical heritage while also facilitating their experience of Portuguese culture. Several of De Souza's local friends and Rees and Tang's UCLA colleagues volunteered to help in various ways.

THE EVENTS

The first two events of the tour were scheduled for 3 and 4 May 2025, hosted by the Confucius Institutes of the Universities of Minho (in Braga) and Aveiro. Both had requested a 30-minute English-language talk by Rees and Tang on Naxi culture and music followed by a 45-minute performance by He and Huang (Figure 4). The presentation in Braga took place in the imposing main hall of the university rectory, with an audience of about 30; that in Aveiro was organised in the first-floor exhibition space of the Fundação Engenheiro António Pascoal, which holds about 60 people, and was packed.



Figure 4: Publicity for the event in Braga, 3 May 2025.

Tang and Rees divided the 30-minute lecture so that Rees covered Naxi history, culture, and dongjing music, while Tang focused on Naxi sub-group diversity and folksong traditions. We split concert documentation through photography and video recording between us¹⁵. On both evenings, the performance highlighted Naxi folksongs sung by He Jinhua, in some cases accompanied on guzheng by Huang Limei; dongjing pieces arranged by Huang Limei for solo guzheng; jaw harp performed by He Jinhua (Figure 5); pieces from the Naxi funeral repertoire Bbesheeq xil li (Chinese:

¹⁵ These materials will be placed in the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive.

Baisha xiyue, 白沙细乐, Refined music from Baisha)¹⁶; and a final performance of the lively le bbaq dance typical of He Jinhua's home region (Figure 6). Extra interest was generated because the dance features imitations of the movements of several animals (frog, monkey, and tiger), which everyone present was invited to try to identify.



Figure 5: He Jinhua performing the Naxi jaw harp in Braga, 3 May 2025. Photo by Helen Rees.



Figure 6: Huang Limei (left) and He Jinhua (right) performing the le bbaq dance in Aveiro, 4 May 2025. Still from video by Tingting Tang.

In Braga, where there was more space, after the formal programme, He and Huang led several people in learning the steps to a simple Naxi folk dance with a pre-recorded accompaniment. Both performances were warmly received. Audience members, mostly local Portuguese community

¹⁶ Bbesheeq xil li was originally a funeral repertoire comprising eight or nine pieces variously played on solo flute or by a small ensemble of flutes, double-reed pipe and bowed and plucked strings, with some pieces including singing and dancing. Its haunting melodies are emblematic of Naxi sonic identity (Rees, 2000: 65–68).

members and students, showed particular interest in the jaw harp, He Jinhua's vocal techniques, and the melodic contours of Naxi songs. After both sessions, the four of us were surrounded by people, with Tang and Rees fielding questions while also translating for He and Huang.

After a day resting and sightseeing in Lisbon, on 7 May we assembled in Mafra for the central platform for the tour, the 8th Lisbon Conference: Chinese Music and Musical Instruments. This year, the conference theme was Expanding Horizons: Embracing the Wide Variety of Asian Music and Dance. Thus, a large minority of speakers and performers represented cultures from beyond China's borders, so this offered an excellent opportunity to introduce Naxi performing arts to many who were barely aware of the rich variety of ethnic minority cultures in China. With the conference's main concert organised for the evening of the first day and the Naxi guests the headlining performers, the programme committee scheduled their lecture-demonstration *Folksongs of the Naxi of Southwest China* for that afternoon. A collaboration among He Jinhua, Huang Limei, and Tang, this presentation prepared the audience for the evening's performance by explaining and demonstrating different genres of Naxi folksong and singing styles. With He Jinhua the main singer, in a few songs, Huang and Tang joined in to show the effect of several voices singing together (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Left to right: Tang, He Jinhua, and Huang Limei singing together in their lecture-demonstration at the 8th Lisbon Conference, National Palace of Mafra, 7 May 2025. Photo by Maureen Russell. Used with permission.

The evening concert, *Ásia em Música* (Asia in Music), held at the Casa da Música Francisco Alves Gato concert hall near the National Palace of Mafra, featured short programmes of music from Thailand, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Han China, with the Naxi performance, at 20 minutes, the final and longest part of the concert¹⁷. While the time allotted was only half that available in Braga and Aveiro, He and Huang chose a similar variety of repertoire to keep the audience of about 70 intrigued, resulting in an equally enthusiastic reception (Figure 8).

On the last day of the conference, 10 May, at NOVA University Lisbon, He Jinhua and Huang Limei presented another joint performance, listed in the programme as *Musical Intermezzo: Folksongs of the Naxi*. This was scheduled immediately before the closing ceremony. He and Huang spontaneously decided to conclude by teaching the audience a traditional Naxi group dance, inviting participants to join hands in a semi-circle. They aimed to lighten the mood after days of academic sessions and end the gathering on a joyful note. The decision proved highly effective: as a dance commonly performed at Naxi festivals and weddings—and one that consistently delights both domestic and international tourists in cultural tourism settings—it created a spirited, inclusive finale that resonated warmly with the audience (Figure 9)¹⁸.

¹⁷ Considerable ingenuity allowed such a richly varied concert despite severe budget limitations. Performers were either residents of Portugal or else attending the conference as paper presenters.

¹⁸ Extensive photographic documentation of the conference is provided by Russell (2025a).



Figure 8: He Jinhua singing (left) and Huang Limei on guzheng (right) at the Casa da Música Francisco Alves Gato in Mafra, 7 May 2025. Photo by Helen Rees.

Figure 9: Naxi communal dance at NOVA University Lisbon, led by He Jinhua (third from left) and Huang Limei (fourth from left), 10 May 2025. Still from video by Helen Rees.

The final public presentation of the tour was the workshop on 13 May 2025 for children and teachers of Lisbon's Centro de Línguas e Culturas Shumin (淑敏语言文化中心), established to provide Chinese language and culture lessons, activities, and resources to Portuguese children of Chinese descent. With approximately 20 children and teachers participating, He and Huang devoted about half their hour-long presentation to teaching Naxi dances, which the children, initially quite shy, ultimately enjoyed greatly.

ADAPTING REPERTOIRE FOR PORTUGAL

The fact that available funding allowed only two musicians to come to Portugal posed notable challenges for the repertoire. With no ensemble support, genres requiring group participation, such as call-and-response songs or multi-instrumental dongjing music, could not be presented in their original form. Repertoire selection therefore required careful planning and creative adaptation. In February 2025, after the tour invitation was confirmed, He Jinhua and Huang Limei began intensive preparations. He Jinhua faced the additional challenge of planning her second folksong CD, to be recorded in Lisbon, which included many new pieces she had not publicly performed. One example is the nearly lost Naxi woodcutting song sung to the *We muf ddaq* tune (Chinese: 默达调) from Markam County, Tibet, which she and Tang collected in June 2024 from an octogenarian singer. For two weeks before departure, He and Huang held intensive joint preparation sessions daily: running and vocal exercises in the morning at a local park, followed by afternoon rehearsals at He's work unit (He Jinhua, Huang Limei & Tang, 2025).

Drawing on her extensive international performance experience, He Jinhua contributed many creative ideas for programming and adaptation. She emphasised that with only two performers, they could not simply present solo pieces, which might quickly lose audience interest. Instead, they needed to select works that allowed mutual participation and rearrange them accordingly (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025c). This may sound straightforward, but putting it into practice involved many challenges. Huang Limei had to retune her guzheng to match He's vocal range—sometimes to C-sharp instead of C, other times to D. Huang also rearranged ensemble pieces originally intended for multiple instruments. As she explained (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025c), “This adaptation presented technical hurdles; it required unconventional fingerings not found in traditional guzheng practice. To realise the artistic intent, I had to develop new ways to execute them.”

The main adapted dongjing pieces she played were *Song of a Water Dragon* [水龙吟], *Goat on the Mountain* [山坡羊], *Waves Washing the Sand* [浪淘沙], *Summer Has Come* [到夏来], and, performed on solo guzheng for the first time, *Eight Trigrams* [八卦]¹⁹. To enrich the programme,

¹⁹ Dongjing repertoire titles are in Chinese because the genre and its melodies originated from Han Chinese precursors (Rees, 2000).

she expanded her vocal and dance repertoire by learning Naxi folksongs such as *Sseiq mei co* [热美蹉] (Dancing Away the Sseiq Mei Ghost) and the folk dance *le bbaq* from He Jinhua's home region. As noted above, He Jinhua added an interactive layer to this dance by inviting the audience to guess which animals the movements imitated. During the Lisbon rehearsals, Tingting Tang was recruited to join in two folksongs, *Keel lee lal bee* [打谷调] (Threshing Song) and *Ji zzoq zol* [金佐措] (Cloud Bridge) —showcasing a three-voice arrangement in the conference lecture-demonstration (Figure 7).

Huang Limei's presence facilitated selection of three collaborative pieces from the old Bbesheeq xil li funeral repertoire. Inspired by the Wacken Festival award in 2024 for the rock adaptation of Bbesheeq xil li song *Saiseeq jjiq* [三思吉] (Saiseeq Stream), He and Huang rearranged the piece for voice and guzheng. Traditionally performed by a small ensemble, the song demanded creative reinterpretation for a duo setting. Besides this, two more Bbesheeq xil li pieces were adapted for the tour: *A lil lil jiq perq* [美丽的白云] (Beautiful White Clouds), and *Dduq* [笃] (Preface).

The idea to adapt *Dduq*, originally a solo flute piece, came from He Jinhua, who had long loved the melody. Though she had internalised it through years of listening and had often hummed it quietly, she remained aware that her vocal skills might fall short: "I knew my attempt might draw criticism within the Naxi community, but I believe innovation is necessary, even if my vocal skills have limitations in conveying such a demanding work . . . That's why I chose to debut this adaptation for music experts and scholars who have come from all over the world to Portugal—they have no preconceptions about the piece. I wanted to see if they could accept my interpretation" (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025c). Seeing the tour as a precious opportunity to perform for—and learn from—a global community of researchers and artists, He Jinhua invited Huang Limei to collaborate. Through humming and improvised vocal gestures, He Jinhua communicated her musical intuition and feeling; Huang Limei crafted corresponding guzheng accompaniment. After extensive experimentation and rehearsal, they presented a voice and guzheng rendition of *Dduq* in Braga, Aveiro, and Mafra. The piece resonated powerfully with listeners in all three cities, frequently arising in post-concert conversations and recalled as one of the tour's most memorable artistic statements.

POST-TOUR RESONANCES AND REFLECTIONS

FORTHCOMING SOLO CDs BY THE ARTISTS

The creative adaptations that He Jinhua and Huang Limei developed for the Portuguese stage have also been incorporated into their forthcoming solo albums. These adaptations mark important artistic breakthroughs for each musician that will endure beyond the tour itself.

Even before planning the Portugal tour, He Jinhua and Rees had been discussing where to record He Jinhua's second folksong CD. With De Souza's support, Lisbon emerged as an ideal site. The recording sessions took place at Namouche Studios on 12 and 13 May, with one of Lisbon's most experienced sound engineers, Jorge Gonçalves. The production approach differed markedly from studio practices He Jinhua is accustomed to in China. Because the album is intended primarily for international release, Gonçalves took multiple test recordings to determine an appropriate acoustic approach. We agreed that foregrounding the natural timbre of He Jinhua's voice and the unembellished quality of the songs—rather than employing the heavy reverberation commonly favoured in Chinese folk music markets—would both carry greater ethnomusicological value and resonate more strongly with global acoustic sensibilities. This minimalist approach placed significant demands on He during the recording process, as it allowed little room for post-production correction or sonic enhancement. She had to deliver highly precise vocal takes, and the pressure was evident in her concentration. Afterwards, she reflected with a mixture of relief and pride, "I'm very happy—I met this challenge. Thank you all for being with me through it" (He Jinhua, Tang & Rees, 2025).

The album features two pieces rearranged specifically for the Portugal tour—*Keel lee lal bee*, and a harvest celebration melody blending two Lijiang folk tunes: *Laq wei ge* [啦喂歌] (Joyful Tune) and the Lijiang-basin-style *We muf ddaq* tune, alongside traditional folksongs that He Jinhua has collected, arranged, and adapted from various Naxi regions over the years. Among them are *We*

ssei q ssei q from Tacheng; three *le bbaq* vocal pieces, also from Tacheng; the Markam County woodcutting song sung to the *We muf ddaq* tune; and a love song from Eya, Sichuan. The project, which, like He's earlier Smithsonian Folkways CD, will feature trilingual Naxi-Chinese-English liner notes, still requires substantial post-production work, with release expected in 2027.

Huang Limei has likewise re-recorded pieces she adapted or co-adapted for the tour—*Eight Trigrams*, *Waves Washing the Sands*, and *Dduq*—for inclusion in her own forthcoming solo album. Music videos for these three works have already been completed and are scheduled for release in China in 2026 (Huang Limei & Tang, 2025a).

PERFORMERS' REFLECTIONS

In a discussion on her Portugal experience that raised the lack of adulatory publicity so common with earlier tours, He Jinhua responded that such publicity was unnecessary. Instead, "My greatest wish now is to do meaningful work in a down-to-earth way—like carefully collecting and rearranging Naxi folksongs so they can be preserved . . . My focus is on . . . not wasting this precious opportunity—I must sing well" (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025a). She also reflected on how the Portugal tour differed from her earlier experiences in government-organised overseas performances:

With most official delegations, I was just a singer—I only had to perform and didn't handle anything else. But this time was different: we took part in an international academic music conference, where I performed, co-presented papers, and led workshops. Though the scale wasn't as large as some official shows I've done, the audience was so professional and enthusiastic. Scholars from around the world didn't just listen; they seriously discussed and studied our music. That was a first for me (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025b).

When asked whether she had any regrets about the tour, she replied,

If I had to name one, it might be that because most of the songs on the upcoming album were new and hadn't been thoroughly polished, I couldn't present each one in its best possible version. Still, I'm very happy that at least two endangered folksongs from Eya and Yanjing [Markam] have now been preserved . . . Such opportunities are incredibly rare . . . Opportunities favour the prepared, though I felt my own preparation was a bit rushed this time (He Jinhua & Tang, 2025c).

For Huang Limei (Huang Limei & Tang, 2025b), the tour also carried deep personal significance. Throughout rehearsals and performances, she steadily gained confidence. As she explained,

I grew up learning and performing Naxi music in an ensemble setting, so I'm more accustomed to playing collaboratively, with mutual support among musicians. Solo performance wasn't something I felt especially confident about, but going to Portugal forced me to stand on my own. I feel I've improved enormously in both guzheng technique and solo stage experience. Jinhua generously shared so much of her stagecraft with me . . . The warmth and openness of the foreign scholars also moved me deeply. While interacting with them in Portugal, I even felt inspired to study English seriously.

As a final reflection, Huang Limei (Huang Limei & Tang, 2025d) commented, "This trip to Portugal was truly unforgettable—every performance, conference session, recording session, and tourist visit was filled with joy. I will always cherish the friendships formed. The encouragement from Helen and Jinhua has made me feel I should continue sincerely passing on Naxi music, keep pushing my own boundaries, and sustain the legacy . . . inherited from my musical family for the next generation."

AUDIENCE AND ORGANISERS' REFLECTIONS

Reflecting the scholarly slant of the conference, three participants out of six invited to comment on the event noted how helpful they found the joint presentation on Naxi folksong genres by He Jinhua, Huang Limei, and Tang as preparation for the evening concert (Jiang Yixuan & Tang, 2025; Kouwenhoven & Rees, 2025; Russell, 2025b). One person was especially impressed by how He and Huang had adapted their repertoire using the large, modern, factory-made guzheng: "At first, seeing the guzheng, I wondered if it might sound too modern or urban, but I was pleasantly surprised. He Jinhua's vocal artistry blended beautifully with the guzheng's timbre" (Jiang Yixuan & Tang, 2025).

Indeed, the quality of the singing was noted by everybody, with another participant remembering that "The moment they began singing, I felt transported to the mountains" (Wang Guanjie & Tang Tingting, 2025). The most in-depth comments came from Feng Jun (冯俊), a postdoctoral scholar at

SOAS, University of London, who noted the “delicate, beautiful quality of Jinhua’s amplified voice on stage” (Feng Jun & Tang, 2025). She added, “That’s meant entirely as praise. It’s not that ‘authentic’ minority singers shouldn’t use microphones; rather, it reflects her studio experience and stagecraft, showing she is an adaptable, quick-learning, reflective performer—which is rare” (Kouwenhoven & Rees, 2025)²⁰. A further conference participant (Merchant, 2025), herself a scholar and practitioner of dance as well as music, stated that she had previously heard recordings of Naxi music, but that “Seeing how [they] incorporated dance . . . seamlessly into their performances was informative in ways that recordings can’t communicate”.

Outside the conference, the Confucius Institute in Braga posted photographs of the Naxi performance on their Instagram account, writing that “He Jinhua’s voice and Huang Limei’s guzheng transported us to the landscapes of Lijiang. There was also time for those present to join the artists for a few dance steps, joyfully celebrating this cultural encounter” (Instituto Confúcio, Universidade do Minho, 2025).

Indeed, one thing that marked our personal observation of all the events was the enthusiastic audience reception, and people’s eagerness to pose questions. In broader terms, Enio de Souza (2026) notes the increasing number of Portuguese students now interested in Asian music, such that a research centre on Asian music and dance has recently been proposed for NOVA University Lisbon; as a result, the focus at this conference on music of the Naxi ethnic group helped expand understanding among interested Portuguese academics and audiences of the diversity of music from China.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The 2025 Portugal tour differed from many high-profile predecessors not only in terms of scale and financial constraints, but also in terms of objectives and means for realising them. Designed with Enio de Souza to provide highly informative presentations of Naxi music to audiences with a pre-existing interest in China’s performing arts, it leveraged his connections to Portugal’s Confucius Institutes and Lisbon’s Centro de Línguas e Culturas Shumin to reach their constituencies, as well as the dozens of Asian music specialists and enthusiasts attending the conference and its concerts. The Naxi presence, therefore, enriched and complexified many audience members’ and conference participants’ sense of the musical cultures of China. At the same time, the necessarily flexible tour arrangements encouraged a high degree of individual creativity on the part of the artists, which has widened their own repertoires and influenced the conception of their forthcoming solo albums. In addition, the networks of personal friendship and reciprocity that made the tour possible facilitated the guests’ experience of Portuguese culture and music, with three encounters with fado a particular highlight.

Previous large-scale tours reached many hundreds, sometimes thousands, of audience members; this one touched perhaps 220, but it did so with a rare level of in-depth engagement. To give Enio de Souza the last word (2026), “I must thank . . . He Jinhua and Huang Limei for dedicating two weeks of hard work to presenting Naxi music for the first time at the Lisbon Conference. I believe that this tour was an excellent contribution to the development of ethnomusicology in Portugal”.

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²⁰ Similar comments on He Jinhua’s adaptability and openness to new things were made by Frank Kouwenhoven, director of the CHIME Foundation, who has known her for almost 20 years and co-organised the 2010 Eastern Voices tour (Kouwenhoven & Rees, 2025).

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ABSTRACTS IN THE LANGUAGES OF THE CULTURES INVOLVED

NAXI TRANSLATION OF ABSTRACT

ni dvq ni zerq ual kv ual mei loq, Zugof Yi ggv ddiuq nee ceeqgge zzer geeq Hoq Jihua nef zaiq kail mil geeq Huai Limeiq ni gvl nee Putayaq ceiq lul ni zzer neiq kail gge nil wa ga gol sei. taf ni gvl tee kvq bel Eze nee kai gge dil baq gail Li see bei gge huil: Zugo zzer bee nef yoq qil ko mi sel gge cher huil loq ceeq. taf zzeeq ni sseeq zzer neif kail gge jiefmu cvf sei, Naqxi zzer co nef kail gge bee per perq gge tei ee la ddee peil berl eq zziul bel lei heq. taf zzeef tee Bulaja nef Aweilo sel gge chee ni ddiuq la tv, zzer neiq kail gge jief muf ni sseeq cvf. lei jeq gge Liseebeiq gge Zugof weiqhualzuxi loq nee Naqxi zzer bee nef zaiq kail gge yaiceef nisse bbei sei zeel. tafzzeef chee sseeq Liseebeiq nee yiyof guaipaig la ddeepeil malma sei. tafzzeef chee sseeq muq diul ceeq tee jaif ni hei jigaiq sei. zzer co nef yoqqi kail ee gge xi tal xissua ddee hual gol zzeeqggue sai ddoq yeil Naqxi gge zzer co kailbee ozzei la ddeehual gol bbei jajul saiddoq sei, ko ee sal ee la Puqtayaq selgge cheeguof loq eq ziul bel ceeq sei. taf zzeef nef Puqtayaf gge mil cheehual gol nvlmei ddoddoq bbei zzercockailbee zzeeqggo saiddoq yerl sseidaq soqmai bel leif ceeq.

PORTUGUESE TRANSLATION OF ABSTRACT

Em maio de 2025, a cantora Naxi He Jinhua (和金花) a instrumentista Huang Limei (黄丽梅), do sudoeste da China, iniciaram uma digressão de duas semanas a Portugal, sendo o ponto alto da digressão a participação na 8th Lisbon Conference: Chinese Music and Musical Instruments, decorrida em Lisboa e Mafra. Este é um importante evento anual europeu dedicado à música chinesa, onde He e Huang atuaram em dois concertos e apresentaram uma comunicação sobre a música tradicional Naxi. Realizaram igualmente concertos nas cidades de Braga e Aveiro, no norte do país, e um workshop sobre música e dança Naxi em um centro cultural chinês em Lisboa. Realizaram, também, uma gravação cujo resultado será a produção de um CD. Esta foi a primeira apresentação da música tradicional Naxi fora da China desde o início da pandemia.

Consequentemente, o foco na interação académica e artística contrastaram consideravelmente se se comparar esta com outras digressões internacionais de grande impacto e participações em importantes festivais realizadas antes de 2019. A digressão de 2025 ilustrou um modelo de intercâmbio musical individual que resultou do diálogo, de amizades pessoais de longa data e reciprocidade, em vez de determinações institucionais ou estatais. Os músicos investiram meses a preparar, a adaptar o repertório e a forma de atuação a este novo formato. Sem deturpar a tradição musical Naxi, conseguiram manter a sua música e, ao mesmo tempo, efetuaram novas experiências performativas que resultaram num envolvimento profundo do público português nas suas atuações.

CHINESE TRANSLATION OF ABSTRACT

2025年5月, 来自中国西南地区的纳西族民歌手和金花(He Jinhua)与器乐演奏家黄丽梅(Huang Limei), 在葡萄牙展开了为期两周的音乐之旅。此次远行的核心, 是参与在欧洲颇具影响力的中国音乐交流平台——“第八届里斯本会议: 中国音乐与乐器”。在会议的舞台上, 她们呈现了两场演出, 并联合发表了一篇关于纳西民歌的学术论文。巡演期间, 她们的足迹北至布拉加与阿威罗, 在那里举办了两场音乐会; 又在里斯本的一处中国文化中心, 主持了一场纳西音乐与舞蹈工作坊。此外, 她们亦利用此次机会, 在里斯本录制了一张音乐CD。这是疫情之后, 纳西传统音乐首次于海外响起。有别于2019年前那些浩荡阵容的高规格国际巡演, 这次渡海的活动虽规模较小, 却是一场群贤毕至的深度交谈。2025年的这次葡萄牙巡演, 展示了一种以个体为中心的对话和音乐交流模式: 它源自艺术家与学者之间经年的私人友谊与彼此回馈, 而非机构或政府的指定行程。为了这次特别的交流, 两位艺术家精心准备了数月。她们重新编排曲目, 调整表演形式, 只为了让传统能在新的语境中既保持本色, 又能舒展地交谈。这是一次朝向传统的躬身, 亦是一场面向未来的艺术实验。她们最终希望递交给葡萄牙观众的, 是一次真诚的邀请, 一场可沉浸、可共写的相遇。