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Research Article

Resonances of the Silk Roads: The Curation, Background, and Context of the New Collection of Musical Instruments at the Yungang Academy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a window into current developments in curatorial practice and museum studies regarding a multicultural topic within China. Our case concerns a new kind of collection of musical instruments and its unique context in a leading archaeological and cultural heritage institution. It consists of 203 traditional musical instruments, primarily of more recent origin, from all around the world with a primary focus on Eurasia. It is the only collection of this scope and theme in China. It was assembled over decades by the renowned Chinese scholar Ziye Fan and curated by the authors at the Yungang Academy in Datong, China, in 2024. The Yungang Academy is situated at the Yungang Grottoes, a 5th-century Buddhist UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is also known for its music-related, multicultural Silk Road iconography. The study begins by analyzing this context, followed by an introduction to the collection. It then proceeds with a critical reflection on the curation process regarding preservation, documentation, classification, organological analysis, and the creation of a new Chinese musical instrument nomenclature. Within the Chinese museum landscape, this project can be characterized as a pioneering undertaking. The ethical provenance and unique placement context of the collection, which resonates with the collection's topic, invite new research perspectives. The study investigates whether the collection can serve as a pioneering postcolonial model for curating world heritage in a Chinese context. We discuss the collection's acquisition history and the symbolic value of its placement. As a result, the collection is established as an example of a novel postcolonial approach in China, bearing great symbolic significance for equal cultural exchanges and dialogue.

Keywords: Collection of Musical Instruments, World Music, World Heritage, Silk Roads, Cultural Exchange.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses a global collection of 203 traditional musical instruments of mostly rather contemporary origin, its recent curation process, and the context of its current placement. The curation was conducted by the authors as an interdisciplinary team of the 2024 project "Cataloging and Research of World Musical Instruments in the Yungang Academy Collection." Despite its global scope, the collection's main thematic focus is on items from Asia and Eastern Europe-the former Silk Road regions. To a lesser extent, it contains items from Africa, Southeast Asia, Oceania and the Americas. The collection is the only one in all of China with such a multicultural scope. It was sold to the Yungang Academy-and partly donated-directly by its original single collector, Ziye Fani, in 2019. He is a distinguished scholar and professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing. Fan had assembled the collection over several decades as part of his research on

cultural exchange processes in the areas of the historical Silk Roads. His research focus had been the cultural symbolism embedded in traditional musical instruments.

This background thematically resonates with the historical setting of the collection's new home at the Yungang Academy in a unique way. The latter is administratively attached to the premises of the world-famous UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Yungang Grottoes (Yungang Shiku) (UNESCO, 2001; UNESCO, n.d. c). These comprise several dozen major caves (45 of which are open to the public) and more than 200 smaller niches. Dating from c. 460 to 524 CE, the site features a great variety of Buddhist sculptures (over 51,000 in number) and many reliefs with varying topics and sizes. Several are music-related. In a general sense, Ziye Fan's collection of traditional instruments thematically corresponds to the so-called "Music Cave" (Cave No. 12), which contains an ensemble of stone sculptures and reliefs of late antique musical instruments and music performances from diverse cultures in Central Asia, India, and East Asia from one and a half millennia ago. The iconography of the "Music Cave" and its indication of a historical fusion of Eurasian music cultures influenced by Buddhist values of compassion, harmony, and non-violence provide a perfect context for the theme of Ziye Fan's modern collection and his underlying previous research. This research concerned the mutual cultural influences of the nomadic, semi-nomadic, and sedentary peoples along the Silk Road.

Another aspect of this study, which will be mainly explored in the third and last major segment, concerns the postcolonial interpretation of Ziye Fan's collection in correlation to its placement at the Yungang Academy. In this context, the use of the word 'postcolonial' is also meant to indicate that neither the instrument collection nor the curating institution nor the wider museum context nor the late antique historical context of the Yungang site are burdened with the problem of a colonial past, i.e., the "original sin" of important Western collections and museums. During the 18th to 20th centuries, Western colonial forces unethically appropriated traditional musical instruments from colonized peoples to assemble their national collections. Such items with a questionable acquisition history still form the bulk of non-European musical instrument collections in many Western museums. Our case example allows a perspective on how a former victim of colonialism deals with this set of issues today. Qing-dynasty China had been semi-colonized (including some areas that ended up as actual colonies) during the second half of the 19th century by eight foreign powers. The looting and burning of the Old Summer Palace (1860) epitomizes the widespread destruction and theft of Chinese cultural heritage. During World War II, the Yungang Grottoes were looted by a Japanese company accompanying the Imperial Japanese Army (see Choudhury 2020). Current local cultural heritage protection institutions, such as the Yungang Academy, were established in the aftermath of this violent robbery of cultural relics.

In view of this, our guiding research question is as follows: Does the new Yungang Academy collection of traditional musical instruments exemplify a new postcolonial approach in a modern Chinese context? We argue that the new collection can indeed serve as a pioneering postcolonial model for dealing with cultural heritage in a contemporary non-Western context. This includes an extended analytical perspective regarding its wider historical contextual and physical setting at Yungang as well as the preceding research-based process of assembling and curating the collection.

The three main segments of this paper provide important building blocks for this argument. The first discusses the general historical background and basic multicultural outlook of the Yungang Grottoes. It stresses their importance as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and makes reference to the "Music Cave" (Cave No. 12) as well as further indicators of a multicultural fusion of musical elements at the Yungang Grottoes. The second segment analyses Ziye Fan's world collection of 203 traditional musical instruments and their curation in the 2024 project "Cataloging and Research of World Musical Instruments in the Yungang Academy Collection." Our aims are twofold: one is to provide a proper overview of the collection's items and scope, the other is to provide a review of the curation methods and a critical reflection of the process. This includes perspectives regarding preservation, documentation, organological analysis, and linguistic questions. Regarding preservation, we discuss the implementation of CIMCIM preservation guidelines regarding storage, environmental control, cleaning, and restoration. Documentation processes that we describe include high-definition photography and the creation of a digital database/catalog. Organological analysis includes the use of the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, musicological literature reviews and expert consultations. We also reflect on the linguistic methods that were applied to create a new Chinese nomenclature for musical instruments previously lacking Chinese names. These "technical" aspects are presented in combination with critical remarks regarding challenges and limitations encountered in the process. As this is the first time that such a collection has been curated in China, and even the first time that a proper catalog for an instrument collection (including photographic documentation) has been developed in China, we believe that the inclusion of this reflection is of high value for research in intercultural museum studies. In the third segment, we discuss Ziye Fan's collection in the sense of a non-Western postcolonial approach. To further support this argument, we also follow additional questions concerning the original collector's motivation and the original contexts of its assembly. This includes the ethical evaluation of the

collection acquisition history and the reflection on the context of the collection's placement at a late antique Buddhist site that embodies the values of compassion, harmony, non-violence, cultural exchanges, and peace-based musical and transcultural fusion.

The study explores a new area in Chinese museum studies. It fills a gap in intercultural/international museum studies, because it represents the first reflection on the first attempt at curating a musical instrument collection with a global, predominantly Eurasian scope in a Chinese museum context. The collection, the history of its formation, and the cultural and historical context of its placement at the Yungang Academy provide a different perspective from traditional musical instrument collections with similar themes and scopes in Western museums.

THE MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE YUNGANG GROTTOES AND THE "MUSIC CAVE"

This section provides a general introduction to the historical background of the Yungang Grottoes. Secondly, it prepares the perspective necessary to further reflect on the placement of Ziye Fan's collection—which is a precondition for developing our major argument in the third major section. As previously mentioned, our thesis is that the collection can be characterized as a novel kind of postcolonial setting within the specific Chinese context. This also concerns the symbolic value of the late antique musical iconography of Yungang's "Music Cave" site. For this reaseon, the relevant overview is provided here in one piece at the beginning rather than in small portions throughout the study:

The Yungang Grottoes UNESCO World Heritage Site represents the most important Buddhist center in the Northern Chinese region of the Silk Roads network of the 5th century CE. Its multicultural history starts with the the Northern Wei dynasty (Bei Wei, 386–534 CE). It had unified the whole of Northern China under Emperor Taiwu (408–452; personal name: Tuoba Tao; Xianbei name: Büri). Notably, the imperial family of this dynasty did not belong to the major Chinese ethnic group, the Han, but to the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei people. The culture and language of this small contemporaneous ethnic group had originated in the remote forests of the Great Khingan mountain region in today's northeastern Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang provinces (Cai et al., 2023; Holcombe, 2013; Watt, 2004, pp. 7–10). Unlike other ethnic groups who invaded China and founded new dynasties—e.g., the (Mongol) Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) or the (Manchu) Qing dynasty (1644–1912) (e.g., Franke & Twitchett, 1994; Rossabi, 1988; Elliot, 2001; Wakeman, 1985)—the (Xianbei) Northern Wei dynasty favored an "anti-colonial" strategy. While the former established systems of ethnic segregation to suppress and exploit the Han, the new rulers of the Tuoba clan saw the Han majority as culturally superior, leading to a policy of self-assimilation. Furthermore, they reintegrated China into the Silk Road trade network beyond their immediate sphere of influence, thereby helping the Chinese economy flourish.ii This has to be kept in mind with regard to the postcolonialism theme in correlation with Ziye Fan's collection (see further below in the third segment).

One important vehicle for the Xianbei's attempt at cultural fusion was the contemporaneous Silk Road Buddhism. It was characterized by a great degree of tolerance and intercultural openness. The founding emperor of Northern Wei, Emperor Daowu (386-409; also: Tuoba Gui; Tuoba Shegui) had adopted the role of patron of Buddhist structures, even "portraying himself as mytho-historical Indian authority figures such as Indra, King Bimbisara, Emperor Ashoka [who had introduced Buddhism as the state religion of the Mauryan Empire] and Vimalakirti" (Markhanova, 2023; our insertion). After a short-lived Daoist intermezzo, subsequent emperors of the Northern Wei dynasty cemented Buddhism as the guiding worldview and belief system. They were the ones who initiated the carving of Buddhist statues into Yungang's sandstone cliffs on the southern face of Wuzhou Mountain between 460 and 524 CE. The Yungang Grottoes site is located approximately 16 to 20 kilometers from the modern center of Datong city, which was called Pingcheng at that time. It functioned as the capital city (from 398 to 494) of the Northern Wei dynasty. As described by Watt, "[t]he monk Tanyao, in the year 460, when he became Shamentong (head priest-in-charge of Shamen [śramana]), started the construction of the first five cave temples at Yungang, outside of Pingcheng" (Watt, 2004, p. 22; also Rhie, 2010, pp. 467–480).

The most important and largest Yungang cave statues represent the first emperors of the Tuoba clan as living buddhas. In view of the present topic, it will be important to remember that this fusion of political and religious power on the foundation of Buddhism (Howard et al., 2006, p. 231; Y. Zhao, Xu, & T. Liu, 2022) also functioned as a bridge between different civilizations. At the same time, Buddhist art embodies the aforementioned principles of non-violence and compassion. Yungang, thus, symbolizes to the idea of a peace-driven network and related forms of intercultural diplomacy. Moreover, until 494 CE, the Northern Wei capital Pingcheng (today's Datong city) was the most important Chinese center of the Silk Roads trade network.iii With these many symbolic, religious, cultural, and economic functions, Pingcheng was the historical fountainhead of the subsequent cultural-historical fusions in the context of the inculturation of Buddhism and Western Silk Road cultures into Chinese

civilizational frameworks (Skaff, 2012, p. 31; P. Liu, 2021, pp. 46–47). This element of cultural fusion and exchange resonates with the abovementioned research background of Ziye Fan's musical instrument collection (which will be discussed in more detail in the third segment, see below). Although its items have no direct connection to the Northern Wei context and time, Fan's collection mainly emerged from anthropological research on intercultural exchange processes in more recent times of the ancient Silk Road region. Furthermore, amongst other things, the collector himself is also an expert on the Northern Wei dynasty.

In particular, the early and middle-phase Buddhist cave art of the Yungang Grottoes (c. 460–494) was shaped by Silk Road influences from the West. It is clearly based on the Gandhāra styleiv from the region in and around the Peshawar Valley in modern-day Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan (Rhie, 2010, pp. 404–466). Implicitly, this provides another thematic resonance with some rare traditional instruments from Afghanistan in Ziye Fan's collection.

The iconography of the stone-carved instruments and performances of the Yungang Grottoes' "Music Cave" (Cave No. 12) perfectly mirrors this multicultural context. According to R. Liu (2024), the entire cave contains 80 music scenes with over 513 identifiable instruments. This makes it an invaluable iconographic "time capsule" of musical instruments and music performances along the Silk Roads more than 15 centuries ago. For example, K. Zhao & Jia (2025) discuss representations of instruments of the Northern nomadic tribes such as a double-reed wind instrument called bili, a type of slender waist drum called xiyaogu, a type of vertical harp called shukonghou, and the Buddhist sacred conch amongst the music-related carvings in this cave. This iconography partly overlaps with Fan Ziye's collection as well: For example, his collection also contains a Buddhist sacred conch (from Tibet in this case). In the late antique "Music Cave," the Indian subcontinent is represented in the form of cymbals and clapper bells, while the Greater Iranian or Persian music culture is alluded to by a lute (K. Zhao & Jia, 2025). In our view, it represents a sort of barbat (بربت)-an instrument which probably has Graeco-Bactrian and Kushan origins (Pickins, 1955). Other representations of instruments in the "Music Cave" can be specifically matched with historical instruments from the Buddhist kingdom of Kucha (c. 2nd century BCE–648 CE) (Zhao & Jia, 2025, p. 63), which is located in today's Aksu Prefecture in the present-day Chinese province of Xinjiang. Others can be attributed to the Chinese dynastic state of Western Liang (Xi Liang, 400–421), the area of which contained parts of present-day Northwest China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, or to the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (c. 37 BCE–668 CE), for example (K. Zhao & Jia, 2025, p. 61). Goguryeo comprised the area of the northern and central parts of the Korean peninsula and central parts of modern-day Northeast China. Whether in terms of iconography or regarding regions of origin, this background often resonates with items in Ziye Fan's collection.

This musical concordance of diverse elements from different civilizations harmonizes with the rich variety of music scenes in this cave. The overall concept of the "Music Cave" is that of the Pure Lands, the Buddhist "paradise." Here, beautiful sounds emerge from celestial beings' performances on divine instruments. Buddhists view music as a divine offering (e.g., Lotus Sutra, 1993, I.3b). The "Music Cave" functions as a perpetual offering of music frozen in stone and time. The stone instruments produce the Dharma music of enlightenment (Lotus Sutra, 1993, II.9a; P. Williams, 2009, p. 62), and the stone musicians' postures represent the joy and bliss that come with it. The musicians are heavenly devas of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology (Lotus Sutra, 1993, III.12a). Within this symbolism of Cave No. 12, several aspects coincide in a pluralistic setting: the nomadic origin and Silk Road connections of the Tuoba Xianbei; their Buddhist beliefs and converging rulership over a Han population and their majority culture; and influences which had arrived from India via Central Asia, and the Hellenistic, Graeco-Bactrian, and Kushan heritages that merged with these traditions (e.g., Watt, 2004, pp. 8–9). It is not surprising that this period "is commonly recognized as a turning point in Chinese art history" (Hung, 1995, p. 261). The affinity with the scope of Fan's collection of musical instruments and his research on the living music traditions related to these historical backgrounds is striking.v

ZIYE FAN'S COLLECTION AND ITS CURATION AT THE YUNGANG ACADEMY

A large proportion of instruments in the collection and those depicted in the caves share the same geographical and related cultural origins. This is a key thematic parallel between Fan's collection and the late antique context of the Buddhist musical iconography of the Yungang Grottoes. Much like the musical instruments that are represented in the caves, a large proportion of items in the modern collection also originate from the various regions and cultures of the Silk Roads. However, a key difference here is that the bulk of the curated collection dates from the 20th century. In addition, the overall geographical scope of Fan's collection also transcends the said geographical overlap with the sculpted and carved musical instruments at Yungang. Although the collection contains musical instruments that are genetically related to some of those depicted in the Yungang Grottoes, Fan did not put together his collection to mirror the musical iconography of the Yungang Grottoes. On

the other hand, some genetic and systematic correlations occur. Furthermore, the general "resonances" and overlaps between the "Music Cave" and Fan's collection cannot be ignored either. We argue that the general parallels regarding Silk Road cultural horizons, the preeminence of multicultural elements in both cases, and the placement of Fan's collection in such a context of a Yungang-related research institution and museum context itself also bear great significance for the further reflection of the collection regarding the post-colonial debate. To be able to further unveil this relevance, which will be the topic of the third main section, the present section aims to provide an overview of the collection itself. Furthermore, a detailed account of the curation process in our 2024 project "Cataloging and Research of World Musical Instruments in the Yungang Academy Collection" is provided here.

The Characteristics of Fan's Collection in Detail

Ziye Fan's collection comprises 203 objects. In terms of its variety, the team cataloged the instruments according to the internationally recognized Hornbostel–Sachs classification system. The distribution of instrument types and quantities is as follows: (a) With 135 items, chordophones account for 66.5% of all instruments in the collection. In this category, composite chordophones (mainly lutes) make up the vast majority, amounting to 119 pieces. (b) Aerophones make up the second-largest category with 49 pieces. This includes jaw harps (free aerophones) as the most numerous, followed by wind instruments proper. (c) There are 12 idiophones, (d) 4 membranophones, and (e) 3 unique and rare hybrid instruments.

The geographical origin of the instruments is diverse, but there is a clear regional concentration, as previously mentioned. The geographical scope encompasses 48 countries and regions. With regard to continental distribution, 87 instruments are from (predominantly Eastern) Europe, 84 from Asia, 28 from Africa, 2 from the Americas, 1 from Oceania, and 1 item is of unknown origin. The majority of the instruments originate from various regions across the Eurasian continent, reflecting the original collector's focus on the Silk Road. China is the country of origin with the strongest representation, with 37 objects. This includes instruments from Chinese ethnic minorities in Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan, etc. Furthermore, 19 instruments (all of them are gusle) are from Serbia, 18 from Russia, and 10 from Montenegro (all gusle). Countries or regions that are represented with at least 5 instruments are: the Balkan region (unspecified location), Germany, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal (see also **Figure 1**), and Ukraine. Countries or regions that are represented with up to 4 instruments in the collection are the following: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Australia, Bulgaria, Buryatia, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chile, Congo, Croatia, Ethiopia, France, Gabon, Georgia, the Himalayan region, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mali, Mexico, Monaco, the Philippines, Romania, Sudan, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Uzbekistan, and West Africa. In four cases, instruments could only be identified by continent as it was impossible to determine specific countries or regions of origin.

Figure 1. Nepali sarangivi, Nepal, back of the soundbox, c. 1960, catalog no. 2019JY-44

Figure 2. Gusle, Serbian, frontal view, c. 2000, catalog no. 2019ZYG-22

A significant portion of the traditional instruments in the collection is rather new. Based on information and estimates provided by the original collector or dates inscribed on the instruments, instruments made after 2000

form the largest group (73 pieces), followed by instruments from the first half of the 20th century (26 pieces) and items from the second half of the 20th century (24 pieces). Eighty instruments from before 1900 require further expert assessment to verify their age. In most of these cases, it can be assumed that these instruments are not older than the 19th century. The oldest instrument is from c. 1500 (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Jaw harp, England, c. 1500, catalog no. 2019JY-18

Figure 4. Kouxian (jaw harp), China, c. 1980, catalog no. 2019JY-20

The collection contains some special thematic clusters: (a) The gusle collection (see also **Figure 2**) is by far the biggest cluster or subcollection. It includes 41 instruments from the Balkan region, featuring diverse forms (sheep-headed, horse-headed, human-shaped, etc.), showcasing exquisite craftsmanship, and spanning a rather long period. This collection of gusle is unique among Chinese musical instrument collections and probably surpasses even those of most foreign museums. (b) As an internationally renowned authority on jaw harps, Ziye Fan donated 22 instruments from his general jaw harp collection as samples to the Yungang Academy collection (see **Figures 3** and **4**). They are from Europe, America, and Asia, dating from the 15th to the 20th centuries. (c) The collection includes a full set of kurai flutes, covering multiple keys, including B, C, A, and D-flat. (d) Furthermore, the collection includes several rare instruments seldom seen in museums worldwide: an Afghan plucked instrument (catalog no. 2019ZYT-2), which is yet unidentified and remains a subject of expert debate; an African human-faced lute (catalog no. 2019ZYT-41), which is exquisitely carved and extremely rare; two rare instruments from the Santal people of Central India, called dhodro banam (catalog no. 2019ZYG-2, 12); and two extremely rare Albanian lahutas (catalog no. 2019ZYG-36, 37).

The Curation and Inclusion of Fan's Collection at the Yungang Academy

Regarding the preservation and storage of the instrument collection, the authors followed the recommendations of the CIMCIM (Comité International des Musées et Collections d'Instruments de Musique) (CIMCIM, 1993; Barclay, 1997). In the following, we describe how, based on these guidelines, a series of scientific and systematic measures was implemented to ensure that the instrument collection is properly preserved for the future. These protective measures were conducted concurrently with a detailed and comprehensive scholarly analysis of the collection. This comprehensive curation process included environmental control, cleaning, restoration, measuring, photography, the creation of a complete catalog, and the establishment of a specialized musical instrument archive. In the following, we also describe the challenges, limitations, and debates that emerged during the curation process.

Environmental Preservation Control and Protective Measures

The most important factor in preserving a musical instrument collection is the storage environment. First, a designated storage facility was assigned for the archive at the Yungang Academy. The team customized metal racks suitable for displaying instruments of various sizes. The items were then categorized and arranged according to form and type, making them easily accessible via the catalog that was developed and continuously enhanced over the course of the project. Customized cases were commissioned for valuable and important items.

Regarding environmental control and the physical protection of the collection's items, several important measures were taken. The first concerns temperature and humidity management. A constant environment is fundamental to preserving the physical integrity of musical instruments. Based on Yungang's environmental conditions with very low air humidity and a significant seasonal temperature difference, the team procured humidifiers and monitoring devices for precise regulation. Secondly, light control was a crucial consideration. The instruments were shielded from prolonged exposure to intense light via newly installed special curtains in the storage facility to particularly avoid exposure to ultraviolet rays. Thirdly, we ensured proper shock and impact prevention. The instruments were wrapped in shock-absorbing materials such as foam, rubber, and tissue paper,

or placed in boxes. In relevant cases, such materials were also installed on instrument display stands with fragile components packaged separately. Last but not least, the prevention of damage from possible insect infestations and rodent activity had to be considered. Consequently, the tasks of temperature control and humidity management as well as pest and rodent prevention have since led to the establishment of a system of regular inspections of the instrument storage environment in the facility.

Furthermore, occasionally playing select instruments can be considered a form of controlled "functional maintenance" in some cases. This preserves the acoustic properties and structural integrity of the instruments. It also respects and perpetuates the instruments' "vitality" as sonorous objects.

Cleaning and Restoration

Proper environmental preservation and protection emerged as an urgent task. The instrument collection had already been stored at the Yungang Academy since 2019 without having undergone a proper curation process. During these approximately five years, dust had collected on the instruments. Due to the very dry climate in Datong, issues such as cracks in some wooden and leather components had already occurred. In some cases, we found pieces detached, strings broken, and also some insect eggs during our first inspections of the collection. The team commissioned a company specialized in the field of relics conservation and restoration at the Yungang Grottoes (Datong Yungang Movable Cultural Relics Conservation and Restoration Co., Ltd.) to perform comprehensive cleaning and basic restoration of the instruments. The work process was monitored by the team to ensure that it adhered to scientific and professional principles in the field. It encompassed steps such as disinfection, dust removal, and component repair without endangering the original structure or coloration. To ensure the traceability of the process, detailed documentation was undertaken, including photography and weighing before and after the restoration. The preservation and restoration efforts significantly improved the condition of the collection's items. The goal was to lay the foundations for future maintenance and research. However, in some cases, restoration procedures could not be completed due to a lack of sufficient funding, or the unavailability of missing parts in China, or the need to send them to specialized instrument makers for repair. These very few cases had to be left pending in view of a future continuation of the 2024 curation project.

Image Acquisition and Documentation

Furthermore, photography sessions were undertaken. They served the purpose of digital documentation. The photos of the instruments provide a foundation to properly communicate about the collection with experts worldwide. The professional image acquisition of each item also enables the collection to be exhibited online in the future. Moreover, the documentation is indispensable for future research publications about the instruments.

Two photography sessions were carried out: During the first one, color calibration charts and rulers were applied to accurately capture and reproduce the authentic colors and dimensions of each instrument. During the second session, a high-definition camera was employed against a light grey background. The digital images produced in this way are suitable for online exhibitions. The instruments were photographed from multiple angles to capture, for example, characteristic patterns and ornaments, unique form characteristics, or carvings, signatures, and labels. Ultimately, the team had to ensure a clear and detailed presentation of each instrument's characteristics. After the completion of this step, the image files were categorized and archived electronically, including detailed information about the instruments. Several copies of the digital catalog were printed. This work process also facilitated more detailed academic exchange among the researchers and team members involved.

In retrospect, it is worth noting that this task posed a few challenges for our project's professional photography team. The prior experience of the team mainly involved the documentation of sculptures and reliefs in the Yungang Grottoes. Musical instrument photography is a completely new area in Chinese museum contexts. Thus, existing Chinese museum inventories that we had consulted in the preparatory phase did not provide any guidance. The lack of established standards and methods in regard to professional image acquisition led to a phase of experimentation to develop the best possible approach. The photography team consisted of three members. The whole collection was photographed over a period of three months. One matter of debate concerned the best possible placement of the objects. The team developed special methods. For example, in some cases, the items were hung to be able to take photos from all sides and various angles. Another discussion between the photography team and the researchers of the project team concerned the additional image acquisition of instruments' details, such as patterns, ornaments, symbols, or insciptions. The curators discussed whether there were such details to be documented photographically and in which way in each individual case. Such close-up shots are important for future research. They enable detailed research on the instruments without the necessity to actually visit the archive.

Organological Analysis of the Instruments

Organology (from Greek ὄργανον [organon] for 'instrument,' 'tool,' 'organ') is the methodological and

scientific study of musical instruments, their construction and function, including historical analysis, classification, and the exploration of cultural context. In view of this, another important component of the project "Cataloging and Research of World Musical Instruments in the Yungang Academy Collection" involved musicological research into the origins as well as the information gathering about the instruments and their contexts as well as the creation of a catalog.

In this respect, the team encountered several specific challenges. The first one concerned the identification of instruments due to missing information. The instruments had been collected by Ziye Fan over many years in various situations and locations around the world. In many cases, information on the date of manufacture or regarding the origin was missing. Some instruments turned out to be extremely rare. This also made their origin difficult to determine. In a few cases, the previously recorded data and origin information of instruments clearly did not match the instruments themselves. For this reason, the original collector's information was not always sufficient. The team had to examine each instrument from an ethnomusicological perspective.

This investigation included the identification of the collection's items based on morphological and other characteristics. These observations included the analysis of the shape of the instrument and the measurement of its exact dimensions. Furthermore, the color, the surface texture, and, where applicable, decorative patterns of the items were analyzed. Additionally, we paid attention to the materials used to assemble or craft the instrument, such as wood, metal, leather. In addition, the craftsmanship or manufacturing techniques behind each musical instrument's production were analyzed. This analysis was also conducted in view of the fact that different materials and techniques can be associated with specific geographic or cultural regions. For example, if an instrument is made from coconut shells, one can infer an origin in a tropical region, while other instruments made from particular plant fibers or animal skins may point to a specific region or climate zone. Thirdly, the project team paid attention to any instrument markings such as labels, signatures, tags, or other identifying information on the instruments or inside the soundboxes of stringed instruments, etc. Such markers can provide important clues about the instrument maker, the place of manufacture, or with regard to dating the instrument. In this regard, we encountered some challenges, because we found that some of the dating provided by the original collector (who is not a musicologist) could not be correct. Comparisons of the respective instruments with similar ones in Western databanks led to reassessments regarding the dating of some of the items.

The research phase also included an in-depth literature review: One of the basic challenges was that there is no Chinese literature on most of the instruments in the collection. The team members from Beijing Normal University, who have a musicology background, consulted various forms of relevant academic literature and other research materials in English, German, French, Spanish, and Russian. Relevant information was translated and summarized in Chinese. Sources included: (a) standard dictionary entriesvii, monographs, research reports and articles, dissertations, etc.; (b) online databases, e.g., MIMO, MGG, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar that provided direct information on particular instruments or articles and research reports; (c) video material (Youtube, BiliBili, etc.) providing information regarding the original environments and musical contexts of the instruments; (d) auction catalogs to identify items or their origins and names (in case other sources were not available); (e) museums and musical instrument collections outside of China providing information about similar instruments. (f) In addition, we consulted experts in their native music cultures as well as (g) scholars in the fields of organology, musical anthropology, ethnomusicology, and (h) instrument collectors. The original collector's expertise was specifically sought for the authentication in case of rare and hard-to-identify items as well as to obtain information regarding the acquisition process. Furthermore, inscriptions on some of the instruments in less common languages, e.g., on some gusle in Serbian, were transcribed and translated using translation software and with the help of native speakers. Many instruments did not even have Chinese names. The two team members from Beijing Normal University therefore had to develop a new Chinese nomenclature (see below).

Furthermore, we would like to stress that the organological curation work presented quite a challenge. It meant an intense research phase and included many discussions on particular issues, such as the exact location of origin and the cultural context of individual items. One of the main reasons was that many of the items in Fan's collection had hitherto been rarely discussed. For example, one instrument had only been described once in a German book. In the case of one rare African instrument, we could only trace one other specimen. Here a collaboration with the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Germany, and direct consultations in Berlin proved to be helpful. This also shows the importance of international networking and data sharing in the context of global musicology research. And it also indicates the significance of making the research and photographical documentation of existing collections available online. This has helped us more than once to figure out the background of particular instruments in the collection. We emphasize this here, because there are no proper internet catalogs for musical instruments research available in China at the moment. This also relates to Chinese musical instruments collections which could be of great information value for international scholars.

These points are extremely relevant with regard to the postcolonial ambition behind our project. Based on interviews and materials provided by the original collector Ziye Fan, we could verify that the collection had been assembled in an ethically sound fashion. But it is also important to acknowledge that it is impossible to say with absolute certainty whether at least a few of the older items, especially those from Africa, have an absolutely flawless preceding backstory. In view of this topic, the image acquisition and curatorial work can be viewed as an important step towards global digital publication which is paramount to enable global access and ensure radical transparency. Another postcolonial approach in the process of organological research included oral interviews with native speakers and people from source cultures in relevant cases (e.g., in the case of Afghan instruments) (**Figure 5**).

The Creation of a Chinese Musical Instrument Nomenclature

A very special and novel problem occurred in this research project: Due to the longstanding limitations in China's research on non-Chinese and non-European traditional musical instruments, we were faced with the problem that many instruments lacked established Chinese names. Consequently, the project members had to determine how to assign Chinese names to specific instruments. This task, which turned out to be a major element in the project, is linked to several disciplines, including linguistics, translation studies, musicology, and cultural communication. In such cases where established Chinese instrument names were lacking, it was our goal to create new names that accurately reflected the basic characteristics of the respective foreign instrument, conformed to Chinese linguistic conventions, and could be easily disseminated and accepted by future Chinese musicologists and interested laypersons. The authors believe that this work in the context of the 2024 project at Yungang has opened new horizons for Chinese transcultural musicology and ethnomusicology.

Regarding the problem of the lack of established terms, transliteration represents the most direct and widely used approach to select the respective Chinese characters to transfer a foreign instrument name into the Chinese linguistic environment. According to this method, one ought to choose Chinese characters, the standard pronunciation of which most closely matches the pronunciation of the instrument's name in its original language. As this approach largely preserves the phonetic information of recognized names, it also makes intercultural communication easier. Examples in the Yungang Academy collection include 'kobza,' transcribed as 'kebuza 科布扎,' 'sarangi' as 'salangji 萨朗吉,' or 'gadulka' as 'gadouerka 嘎都尔卡.' A second primary methodology is semantic translation. In this case, instrument names are translated based on a salient feature, namely providing descriptive qualities through the meaning of the Chinese characters themselves. This is a standard approach which is in accord with general Chinese conventions regarding word formation. It makes new names intuitively intelligible as well as easier to learn and to remember. For example, 'jaw harp' is translated as 'kouxianqin 口弦琴,' literally meaning 'stringed mouth zither.' Finally, a third approach combines both transliteration and semantic translation. This is practical and efficient, because it usually involves the translation of the phonetic core as a proper noun followed by a semantic element that indicates the instrument category. Such compound terms are, e.g., the translation term for 'sapeh' (a Bornean stringed instrument), which is 'sapeiqin 萨佩琴' ('sapei zither'), or that of 'domra,' 'duomuqin 多姆琴' ('duomu zither').

Furthermore, this new nomenclature also contributes to the further development of a global postcolonial discourse. The inclusion of Chinese speakers challenges the linguistic dominance of Western languages in this field. We hope that this will lead to global expansion of the postcolonial discourse on this kind of multicultural instrument collection. By introducing Chinese speakers to this field, the project aims to develop the foundations for such a more inclusive global intercultural dialog.

Creation of a Database and Catalog

Finally, also in the sense of a modern understanding of organology, it was another core objective of the project to explore the historical value, cultural significance and artistic essence of the instruments in Ziye Fan's collection. The data collection for the catalog, or rather, the database that was created to document the research outcomes therefore extends beyond mere physical descriptions of the items. Whenever possible, the researchers also strove to reveal the anthropological context inherent in the instruments. The archival database incorporates the Hornbostel-Sachs international musical instrument classification system and essential preservation data for each instrument. In view of the aforementioned lack of Chinese musical instrument internet databases, we hope that our database/catalog will also be made available online by the Yungang Academy. It would surely benefit the integration of the developing Chinese musicological research in this field into the global discourse.

The documentation of the catalog is organized into multiple sections. Each section of the catalog/database is designed to ensure comprehensive and accurate documentation for each of the 203 instruments: (a) The first section is under the category of basic information: Here, the instrument's name is recorded and, if available, its place of origin, the date of manufacture, its creator/producer, the date of acquisition, the acquisition location, the

collector, collecting institution, and acquisition method. The subcategory of the collector's name is added in view of future acquisitions and a possible extension of the existing collection at the Yungang Academy. So far it applies exclusively to Ziye Fan. (b) The second major category is conservation information: In this section, the item's conservation status, protective measures, and restoration history are documented. Conservation measures can also include specific protocols for temperature and humidity control, light exposure management, shock and impact prevention, and pest control. (c) The third entry section is for the condition description: It is supposed to provide a detailed account of each instrument's current state. It covers the criteria of visual integrity, completeness of components, and, if applicable, the presence of damage. In view of this, the specifying subcategories 'initial inventory condition summary' and 'current condition description' provide the possibility to track possible changes over time. (d) The fourth section contains the image documentation with the photographs of each instrument. In this section, the date, the name of the photographer, and the image ID are also captured. This part of the catalog provides crucial visual support. (e) The last category of the database and catalog concerns background information: This entry records each instrument's historical origins, the forms of transmission of each particular kind of instrument as well as the representative repertoire, performance techniques, and the overall cultural significance and embeddedness. The information in this section is supposed to convey a basic understanding of each instrument's cultural value and respective societal function. In addition, it contains links to materials that show the instruments in their original cultural context of musical practice. This category is open to further additions, aligning with the present authors' postcolonial ambitions. The catalog is supposed to provide a foundation of a global presence of the collection. It is supposed to enable radical transparency and ethical stewardship.

THE YUNGANG ACADEMY COLLECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT

In our view, the new Yungang Academy musical instruments collection serves as a pioneering postcolonial model in the Chinese context for dealing with cultural heritage in the 21st century. This thesis is based on two perspectives: One is directed at the collector Ziye Fan and his own context. The other concerns the placement of the collection at Yungang and the further symbolic implications of this in view of the historical context of Yungang itself.

The Collector and His Vision: Professor Ziye Fan as the Initiator of the Collection

Ziye Fan (Chinese: Fan Ziye 范子烨, b. 1964) is a researcher at the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a professor and doctoral supervisor at the College of Liberal Arts of the University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He is also a director of the Chinese Society for the History of the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties. His fields of research and expertise comprise classical Chinese literature, mythology, and the history of cultural exchanges along the Silk Roads. Fan's academic vision is interdisciplinary, integrating disciplines such as literary studies, history, art history, and anthropology. Fan is interested in the exploration of cultural elements that originated in Central Asia and have had a significant influence on Chinese culture. He demonstrates a particular sensitivity to cultural details and material culture that is often overlooked by others.

Fan's collection of musical instruments represents a more specific material extension of his wider scholarly interests into the field of music culture(s). In particular, it was his long-standing interest in the Eurasian traditions of oral storytelling that motivated him to systematically collecting musical instruments from this continental area. Although the collection can be labelled as 'global' due its inclusion of some items from Africa, South America, and Oceania, the major focus is on Asia and Eastern Europe.

To a large extent, Fan's collection thereby also serves as evidence for the thesis that seemingly disparate instruments from various regions of the historical Silk Roads share an underlying and inseparable connection in the context of the history of the nomadic peoples of ancient Central Asia and the Eurasian steppes. Overall, they indicate a cultural and historical network, the key disseminators of which have been such nomadic or semi-nomadic communities.

Another important aspect that has to be considered in this context is the contemporaneous commercial exchange and also the proliferation of belief systems—such as the spread of the Buddhist Dhamma.[viii] This also connects the general historical focus of Fan's work with the historical background of what is expressed in the "Music cave" (see above). Buddhist monks and merchants often travelled together and Buddhist monasteries also functioned as hubs in oasis cities along the Silk Roads (Foltz, 2010; Hansen 2012). Since at least the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE), musical instruments have been transported along the Silk Roads and ethnic migration routes—spreading eastward and westward in Eurasia. In his own research, Fan shows that this established a long

and complex historical connection (e.g., Fan, 2021, 2024). Although the collection's instruments from that region are mostly of comparatively recent manufacture, the traditions they represent can be traced to these origins. Fan's expertise in Northern Wei history means another implicit correspondence between his collection and its placement context at Yungang.

Furthermore, Fan is an expert in epic traditions. He quickly realized the common functions of many musical instruments from the Silk Road regions and Eastern Europe within their respective cultures. Their function was to accompany oral epics and sung narratives. Originally, the collection of instruments served explicit comparative research goals in the study of such epics. Ziye Fan's research on musical instruments in this context is based on the thesis that these often function as exceptional "vehicles" or explicit or implicit of representations pan-cultural phenomena. The shapes and symbolisms of musical instruments make it possible to trace early migrations or cultural transmissions. Taken as implicit information carriers, the musical instruments also allow the reconstruction of spiritual connections, e.g., in the context of Shamanic worldviews or the Buddhist context of Yungang in the 5th century CE (also Mastnak, 2023, p. 2), for another example). A good example for this is provided by Fan's special focus on the research field of jaw harps. In this field, he is regarded as one of the most distinguished experts on this instrument worldwide. He has been collecting jaw harps from different regions and ethnic groups to compare their shapes, materials, timbres, and playing techniques. Fan has traced the spread and development of this type of musical instrument along the ancient Eurasian trade routes. In Fan's view, each jaw harp can be considered a specific cultural sample that should nevertheless not be viewed as an isolated commodity. As previously mentioned, Fan had donated some items from his larger jaw harp collection to the new Yungang Academy collection that we curated.

One of Fan's motivations to assemble his collection was to understand how music, poetry and cultural memory become intertwined through material carriers that are comparable across civilizations. This background can be perceived with regard to all kinds of instruments in the collection. The comparison of the musical instruments in terms of their iconography or construction enables valuable morphological and genealogical comparisons in the overall context of this interdisciplinary research. The collection grew steadily over several decades, mainly through purchases and gifts from around the world. During this time, Fan also acquired instruments that transcend the usual geographical scope of his research. For example, he bought African instruments. Here, he took care to select only instruments that, to the best of his knowledge, were free of colonial histories, for example, by buying directly in the countries of origin or by buying only instruments of certified origin. In view of this, the digitalization of the instrument collection, including photographical documentation, aims to provide an additional element of transparency and global accessibility necessary from a contemporary postcolonial perspective. Another example is Fan's assemblage of a rather large collection of gusle instruments. This is an ancient bowed single-stringed instrument from the Balkans that was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2018 (UNESCO, n.d. b). Like some of the African specimens, the gusle is not related to Central or East Asia. But this type of musical instrument is still highly resonant with Fan's research interest from a general point of view. It is still used to accompany epic poetry and represents Europe's oldest living culture of epic chant. In this context, Fan's collection also reveals a systematic comparative perspective that extends far beyond Central Asia and into Russia and Eastern Europe—which also belong to the larger horizon of the historical Silk Roads network.

The Yungang Academy's Collection as a Postcolonial Approach in China

The inclusion of Ziye Fan's musical instrument collection in the Yungang Academy provides a fresh opportunity to address the complexities central to postcolonial discourse.

The "Original Sin" of Western National Museums Founded in Colonial Contexts

It is well known that the Western concept of "universal museums," as exemplified by the British Museum, has been deeply intertwined with the history of colonialism (e.g., Cormack 2025). It has been claimed that these museums merely function as facilities to store, protect, and display the cultural heritage of mankind. However, many items in these museums also allude to the respective colonial history that led to their placement there. The beginnings of the modern public museum can be traced back to the 18th and 19th centuries. This was the time when the Eurocentric ideals of the Enlightenment and affirmative views regarding the subjugation of "wild" and "uncivilized" or "backwards" peoplesix as well as early bourgeois capitalist expansion started to go hand-in-hand (Said, 1978; Césaire 2000). One cannot ignore that the historical foundation of these museums is a colonial one (see Rooney 2021). Moreover, the founders of these kinds of museums had been inspired by the Renaissance Wunderkammer (Impey & Macgregor, 2001) which in turn can be traced to the cosmopolitan approach of the ancient Hellenistic Μουσεῖον τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας (Mouseion of Alexandria) in Alexandria. It is crucial to note that this classical archetype of Western museums of the colonial era had been financed by violent conquest and the exploitation of the conquered subjects and territories (e.g., Hölbl, 2001).

In a certain sense, the pattern of the modern colonial era repeated the expansive and exploitative patterns of the revered Alexander the Great or the Imperium Romanum but on a global scale, in a competing fashion between several colonial empires, and with the intent to concentrate the most valuable artifacts and material carriers of foreign cultural memories in each of the modern-day "Romes" of Western or Central Europe. With the shift to the Enlightenment societies of Europe and Northern America, which expressed a mix of feudal or early parliamentary structures, early capitalist economy driven by advanced technology advanced and various forms of exploitation, such as slavery, serfdom, and other forms of forced laborx (e.g., E. Williams, 1944), came the public display of foreign objects for those who were included in the dominating social stratum. These were also the ones who could afford the necessary education to comprehend the colonial knowledge order. This included the cultural appropriation of elements of ancient civilizations, such as ancient Egypt, to suggest that the new "owner" was of comparable historical importance (de Andrade Eggers 2016) or, in the case of Roman artifacts, that they were a direct colonial "successor empire" (Somos 2020, 104). Additionally, it involved the display of artifacts from other cultural systems that were defined as less advanced or even primitive in comparison to the colonizer. Even more disturbingly, it included the "exhibition" not only of artifacts but of human beings themselves (Blanchard et al., 2008). Under the guise of "universal education," museums of that era often employed a linear Eurocentric and chauvinistic view of history to construct their narratives ("us vs. them").

As mentioned earlier, China became one of the victims of colonialism at least since the First Opium War (1839-1842). Many artifacts still to be found in European and American museums and private collections were either looted, stolen, or have other questionable acquisition histories. Zhong (2017) has revealed how countless cultural objects were removed from China between 1840 and 1945. As Cohn (1996) has argued, colonialism meant a dual conquest of territory, where cultures and knowledge systems were destroyed and dismantled. In the case of China, too, the artifacts, not unlike trophies, found their way into national museums, serving as key instruments in this process.

In this sense, the earlier-mentioned large-scale plundering of the Yungang Grottoes by the Japanese company Yamanaka & Co. (Choudhury, 2020) also cannot be separated from the geopolitical ambitions of Imperial Japan during World War II. The objects looted from Yungang and other sites in China-acquired through violence and asymmetrical power relations-became symbolic extensions of imperial power when they entered the colonizer's museums. They were used to construct an ethnocentric narrative of "the Other." The restitution of heritage that was "wrongfully removed" from China remains a formidable legal and ethical challenge today. This issue leads back to the problem of the "original sin" concerning the provenance of many non-European artifacts in Western museums-including musical instrument collections: A significant portion of core collections in former colonizers' museums consists of "colonial spoils" that were acquired through coercion, violence, or unequal transactions during colonial times (e.g., Watkins, Madiba & McConnachie 2021).

The New Postcolonial Approach of the Yungang Academy Collection

We argue that, in view of this problem, the new postcolonial ethics of collecting and displaying musical instruments are especially salient to bridge gaps that have been caused by the past. Such collections encapsulate rich information regarding the ecological understanding, languages, and social systems of the victims of colonialism, as well as the "living" cultural heritages of their rituals. This raises the question of whether a new form of curating musical instrument collections can contribute to healing the wounds of colonialism and inspire a new postcolonial vision of sharing the heritages worldwide on an equal footing in an increasingly multicultural, historically and culturally intertwined network of civilizations and social subsystems (Chávez & Skelchy, 2019).

In this context, the special case and the curation practice of the Yungang Academy offer an illuminating case study of how "world culture" can be collected, studied, and displayed in a context that also bears cultural memories of having been a victim of Western and Japanese colonialism. This approach pioneers a new paradigm that is centered on cultural understanding and aligned with postcolonial ethics.

Ziye Fan's collection, now archived at Yungang, is based on the acquisition of his personal purchases and his donation. Its assembly was purely driven by academic purpose, as part of Fan's academic research. The collecting activity was not an act of wealth accumulation or in service of an "imperial will," but represents a material extension of Fan's intellectual inquiry, namely as a process of knowledge generation undertaken to validate scholarly hypotheses and, in particular, to construct an unbiased comparative cultural perspective. In addition, although the instruments themselves are traditional ones, most have been produced rather recently and cannot have a problematic colonial context for that reason. In the case of older instruments, Fan had made great efforts to ensure to the best of his knowledge that instruments had no colonial historical trajectory (e.g., purchasing them directly in their countries of origin). The Yungang Academy itself does not have a historical colonial backstory. It is part of an administrative complex that has been established as a reaction to colonial looting. It was established to protect Chinese cultural heritage. Yungang is just one Chinese site among many that had been systematically

looted by colonial powers. Many such artifacts, stolen or looted, remain in European and American museums-a fact that remains ethically questionable. The absence of such problems in the case of Fan's collection at Yungang is also reflected by the fact that the team had to create new Chinese names for instruments. Chinese musicology, which is also a comparatively recent subject, had no background in collecting such foreign items. It lacks a colonial background. In postcolonial museology, an object's provenance is the foundation of its ethical legitimacy (e.g., Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Hicks, 2020). The Yungang Academy musical instrument collection's scope might not be comparable to that of some world music instrument collections in European or American museums (e.g., Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), Tervuren, Belgium; The Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany; The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), New York, NY), but its true distinction and value lies in its unproblematic origins. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, this contrasts sharply with the "original sin" inherent in many Western collections.

Moreover, placing a world musical instrument collection within the specific cultural site of the Yungang Grottoes represents a profound curatorial and research statement in itself. The Yungang Academy has no historical ties to colonialism. The forerunners of this institution were established in the 1950s in the aftermath of foreign looting of the sites, specifically, to protect the domestic Chinese heritage and to revive the domestic cultural memory. In other words, they were not founded to symbolize colonial power or display items of subjugated and degraded cultures. Ziye Fan's own research has also been related to the historical exchanges along the Silk Roads. His historical expertise is also related to the question of the role of Buddhism and its correlation with trade and as a spiritual "lingua franca." Another focus of Fan's research is the correlation of epic narratives and musical instruments withing the complex historical network of Eurasian nomadic and trading peoples. Here, the placement of the collection in the context of Yungang bears a particular symbolic relevance. As magnificent symbols of cultural exchange along the ancient Silk Road, the Yungang Grottoes and especially the "Music Cave" No. 12 are silent "epics" of musical history, "frozen" in stone.

Although they have been established with the help of the Xianbei Emperors and also represent their power, they do not represent objects of colonization in the Western sense. The Xianbei did not colonize or suppress the cultures of the Han or other Chinese ethnic groups. On the contrary, the Xianbei leadership consciously and quickly adopted the majority culture of the Han, which they deemed more advanced than their own. They were eager to become part of what they had conquered. They actively pursued a process of self-Sinicization. We would like to emphasize again that this is completely different from the governance of the Mongols (Yuan dynasty) or the Manchu (Qing dynasty). After these groups had conquered the Chinese empire from the outside and extended its borders, they suppressed their new subjects by introducing extreme forms of ethnic segregation and stratification, including various measures of oppression (Franke & Twitchett, 1994; Rossabi, 1988; Elliot, 2001). The Yuan and Qing rulers outlawed intermarriage. The Yuan rulers forced new writing systems (Mongol 'Phags-pa script). The Qing rulers forced Han men to wear Manchu clothing and hairstyle (Manchu queue) etc. (Coblin, 2007; Wakeman, 1985, 646–650, etc.).

The Xianbei developed the exact opposite approach. They furthered intermarriages with the Han and even suppressed their own language and culture by imperial decree to consciously adopt Han culture. At the same time, they introduced an element that would open and integrate China into the surrounding network of languages, cultures, and civilizations: Buddhism. By fostering equality, compassion, and non-violence, Buddhism established a spiritual communication platform between various ethnic groups but also in regard to international trade and peace-based foreign policy on the basis of "diplomacy as Eurasian ritual" (Skaff, 2012, pp. 134-155). This particular process of self-Sinicization and Eurasian networking is very different from the phase and characteristics of Western colonialism since the so-called "discovery" of America.

Against this background, studying world instruments at Yungang emphasizes the necessity of not treating "other" cultures as exotic curiosities. Rather, it illuminates the respective local historical contexts and seeks to amplify resonances and dialogue patterns between ancient and contemporary world civilizations with the aim of fostering historical reflection of cultural exchanges and present-day transcultural practices of learning as well as joint explorations into shared world heritages. Ziye Fan's research, which led to the assemblage of the collection, is itself a great example of a non-Western postcolonial approach that endorses "accepting multiple truths, rather than thinking in universalist views" (Chávez & Skelchy, 2019, 137) and bridges "music studies and ethnic studies" (Chávez & Skelchy, 2019, 138).

Figure 5. Dutar, Afghanistan, c. 1900, catalog no. 2019ZYT-1

CONCLUSION

The present study has introduced the 2024 project "Cataloging and Research of World Musical Instruments in the Yungang Academy Collection." It described the context of the project at Yungang and the collection that was curated. Furthermore, it described the curation process itself. This included a critical reflection that pointed out limitations and problems and refered to related discussions of the curators. From an overall perspective, it described how the authors managed to realize the transformation of Ziye Fan's collection from a private holding into a public intellectual asset. His collection now forms the basis of the new collection of musical instruments at the Yungang Academy. Based on a structured methodology, both the curation process and the present reflection have established the collection's scholarly legitimacy. The study has shown that Ziye Fan's original motivation and modus operandi of assembling the collection fulfill the criteria of a postcolonial approach. The social value of the collection lies, thus, in providing a viable alternative that prevents the problem of predatory collection paradigms and the placement of this kind of collection in historical contexts of colonial oppression and exploitation. In this sense, the curation of the collection discussed here can be understood as an innovative, self-aware act of postcolonial (or anticolonial) cultural practice itself.

We would like to emphasize again that this reflection describes the first-ever attempt with such a theme and in this direction in a Chinese museum context. The curated collection offers a new basic model for Chinese museums. It contributes a Chinese approach to the global museum community's efforts to move beyond the "specter of colonialism" and also symbolizes the understanding of a new multicultural order based on equality and understanding. Among other factors, this is due to the following aspects: ethically sound forms of collecting; the application of a research framework which is highly innovative within the Chinese context; the respect for the original "vitality" of its items; the symbolic value of the collection's placement at Yungang ("Music Cave"), etc. The curation activities have shown that Chinese musicology still has much efforts to make in engaging with intercultural ethnomusicology and world music organology. Western musical instrument collections have to be analyzed further from a critical postcolonial perspective to inform successful development work in China. The research and curatorial activities at Yungang have to be integrated into the international discourse in this field. The project and paper have provided important foundations in this direction.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study has provided an overview of the new collection at the Yungang Academy. Future studies could provide detailed analyses of the subcollections, e.g., the gusle collection or the samples of jaw harps. Individual musicological studies about the very rare items in the collection also represent an important future task. The project has resulted in a complete catalog and image data of each instrument. The results of the project provide an

important foundation which would enable such studies. The instruments could also be further investigated from the angle of cultural history or ethnology. Single items could also be explored in correlation with related aspects of the musical iconography of the Yungang Grottoes. The possibilities for further research are manifold. Furthermore, we hope that the collection will become the foundation to also cultivate the related music practices as a joint intercultural effort. The collection and its context provide the opportunity to keep the related intangible heritages of making music and of comprehending the traditional sounds alive. One may envision a new meta-set of interaction and reciprocal learning that should also include further technological innovation. Instead of the presentation of static "specimens" or videos of vanished original contexts as a sort of "excuse," it should be a long-term goal to turn the—hopefully growing—collection into a place of real-life encounter for musicians, musicological experts, and the general international public to interact in new decentralized forms of mutual learning, aesthetic experiences (e.g., Teodorescu-Ciocanea, 2022), and further interdisciplinary approaches to music and human experience (e.g., Mastnak, 2023) as well as music as psychological and social practice (e.g., Liritzis & EASA Expert Group, 2024, n.p. pp. 6-7). The Yungang Academy and its wider context would provide an ideal background for such activities.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Bei Peng and David Bartosch are co-first authors and contributed equally to this publication.

[i] Chinese names are provided in the "Western" order in this article, that is, the given name is in the first position, followed by the family name. Regarding the transliteration of names, we refer to the Pinyin system, but have omitted diacritical signs. Chinese characters are only provided if deemed necessary.

[ii] In 494, Emperor Xiaowen (467–499; personal name: Tuoba Hong; later: Yuan Hong) further implemented the policies of Empress Dowager Feng (Feng Taihou, 442–490) (Howard et al., 2006, 236). For example, he forbade his own native language at court, abolished traditional Xianbei clothing, forced his own (Xianbei) people to adopt Han surnames, furthered mixed marriages between Xianbei and Han, etc. (Holmgren, 1981; Watt, 2004, pp. 23–24). Furthermore, Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital from Pingcheng (today's Datong) to Luoyang, the former capital city of the Eastern Han dynasty (Dong Han, 25–220 CE) (Watt, 2004, pp. 29–30). His successors continued the tradition of Buddhist sculpture in the area of the Longmen Grottoes (Longmen Shiku), which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2000 (UNESCO, n.d.[a]). This shift from Yungang (where the artistic work also continued) to Longmen also further amplified the transformation to a more Han-Chinese aesthetic in this context. The Longmen Grottoes contain statues from Northern Wei times (starting c. 493) but also from later dynasties, in particular from the Tang dynasty (618–690, 705–907 CE). This dynasty was arguably the most multicultural era in Chinese history. Like the founders of the Tang dynasty, the emperors of the preceding Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) had had mixed Xianbei–Han ancestry (Chen, 1996; Wang et al., 2025).

[iii] The Xianbei rulers introduced Northern Han populations to new technologies and new forms of music, clothing, as well as lifestyles especially during the time before 494. Their openness and growing appreciation of Chinese culture laid the foundations for the later cultural fusion and cosmopolitanism of the Sui and Tang eras.

[iv] The Gandhāra style had emerged during the time of the Indo-Greek Kingdom (c. 185 BCE–10 CE), when Greek kings, descendants of those who had remained after Alexander the Great's conquest (c. 327 BCE), ruled over Indian populations in the region. They patronized both Greek and Indian religions, which quickly resulted in a fusion of Greek sculpture with Buddhist imagination. The subsequent rulers of the Kushan Empire (c. 1st–5th centuries CE), who had emerged from the steppes of Central Asia, also adopted the Gandhāra style—which then found its way to the Xianbei and their new imperial center in North China (see also Boardman, 1994, pp. 75–153). In her paper on Iranian and Hellenistic architectural elements in Chinese art, Svobodá (2018) uses the Yungang Grottoes as a case example, identifying, amongst other things, "three foreign types of column capitals in Yungang" (Svobodá, 2018, p. 2) as well as shafts of pillars decorated with vine scroll and palmette motifs, which "are of course of Western origin, [while] the floral design on the shafts of the columns and pillars [is] known from Roman art [...]" (Svobodá, 2018, p. 3, insertions are ours). The first and second types of columns resemble a Mathuran capital from the Kushan empire and the Indo-Corinthian capital, both of which also appear in Gandhāran art (Svobodá, 2018, pp. 3, 8). The third type of "pseudo-Persepolitan [from 'Persepolis'] columns, showing two animals back to back" (Svobodá, 2018, p. 12) can be seen in the fore-chamber of the "Music Cave" (Svobodá, 2018, p. 13).

[v] Moreover, Zhao and Jia have shown that musical imagery is not restricted to Cave No. 12, but also appears in Caves No. 1, 2, 5-4, 5-11, 5-33, 5-38, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32-12, 33-4, 36-2, 37, 38, 39, and 40-6. The total number of musical instruments represented in all the caves is almost 600, with 38 distinct types categorized into four groups as follows: 11 types of wind instruments, 7 types of stringed instruments, 15 types of membranophones, and 5 types of idiophones (Zhao & Jia, 2025, p. 58). This provides the wider context of the placement of Ziye Fan's collection at the Yungang Academy.

[vi] All photos in this publication are courtesy of the Yungang Academy, Datong, China. Used with permission.

[vii] E.g., from The Oxford Dictionary of Music, MGG: Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 《中国大百科全书·音乐舞蹈卷》, 《中国音乐文物大系》, and Afrikanische Saiteninstrumente.

[viii] It has been a hallmark of Buddhism since the days of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (c. 304–232 BCE). In the fifth century CE, it was deeply intertwined with the lifelines of the Silk Roads.

[ix] The philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) expressed this colonial mindset in his Grundlinien einer Philosophie des Rechts (Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 1820) as follows: "It is the absolute right of the Idea to make its appearance in legal determinations and objective institutions [...]. The same determination entitles civilized nations [...] to regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are in the substantial moments of the state (as with pastoralists in relation to hunters, and agriculturalists in relation to both of these), in the consciousness that the rights of these other nations are not equal to theirs and that their independence is merely formal" (Hegel, 1820/1991, p. 376).

[x] All Western colonial powers of the era—including the USA, which de facto colonized and robbed the land of Native American tribes—were slave-holding and slave-trading societies. Others, such as German kingdoms of the 18th and earlier 19th centuries, may not have had colonies or not as many colonies as other Western European nations, but they were also engaged in the slave trade. In addition, they practiced medieval forms of serfdom towards their own population until the 18th and 19th centuries. When slavery was "abolished" by the colonial powers throughout the 19th century, it was often replaced by other cruel forms of forced labor in the still existing colonies, e.g., the concentration camps in German South-West Africa for the survivors of the Herero and Nama genocide (1904–1908).