

Chant de la Sérinde

Author: Yves Seban

A koto solo piece

A series of musical conjectures

Why a French title

La Sérinde: an imaginary region

Akira Ifukube, born in Hokkaido in 1914

Musical Sinicization for qin

The politics of a title

Thank you Peiyu for this wonderful interpretation of the Chant de la Sérinde, for which you've worked very hard. I think it was wonderful and I believe we succeeded in what we wanted to achieve. Also, we can boast here that this transcription is a Yaji 'world premiere' !

Since I'm not a historian or a scholar, I will present here what I consider 'musical conjectures' and I will not offer any firm conclusion, won't affirm anything and we can discuss afterward.



The piece *Chant de la Sérinde* was commissioned by Keiko NOSAKA to composer Akira Ifukube, and premiered on March 11, 1997.

The original piece on koto is built up from an interplay between a slow, exotic melody in West-Asian style.



During the early weeks of the pandemic I listened to a lot of koto music, It must have been that pentatonic scale, and my YouTube feed suggested this "Chant de la Sérinde", by Akira Ifukube, which I became obsessed with. Being very familiar with the (Japanese) koto repertoire, ancient and contemporary, this sounded quite different, and I entertained several thoughts and questions about it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApXJxMp_HmA



The album liners mention:

“The title refers to the song of the non-Chinese peoples who lived to the north and west of China in ancient times.

The composer may have had in mind the West-Asian peoples who dwelled west of China, from Dunhuang to Kashgar, at the time when the ancient Silk road was at its peak of prosperity.”

Along with the unusual melody, the evocative title in French *Chant de la Sérinde* was intriguing, as it posed a series of questions:

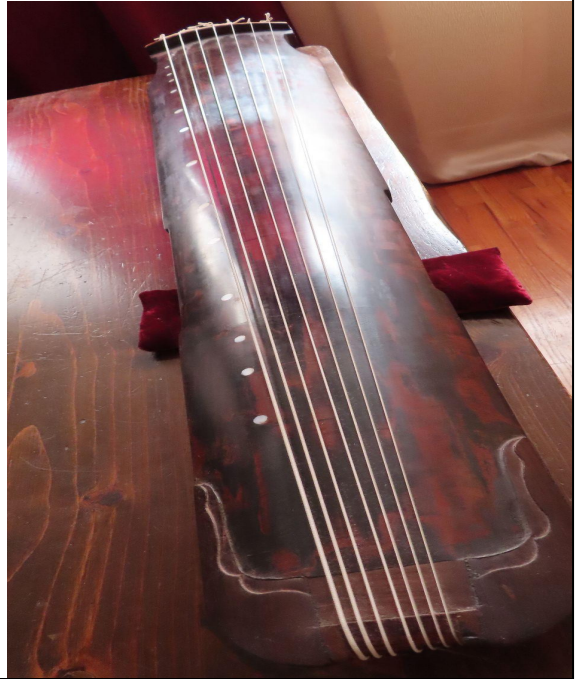
WHY A FRENCH TITLE

WHAT IS SÉRINDE?

WHO IS COMPOSER AKIRA IFUKUBE

WHAT'S THE PIECE ABOUT

Peiyou's Qin: , called the "Summer Qin" , silk strings, made in 1991, by Pei Jingbao, Suzho China. Good harmonic tones.



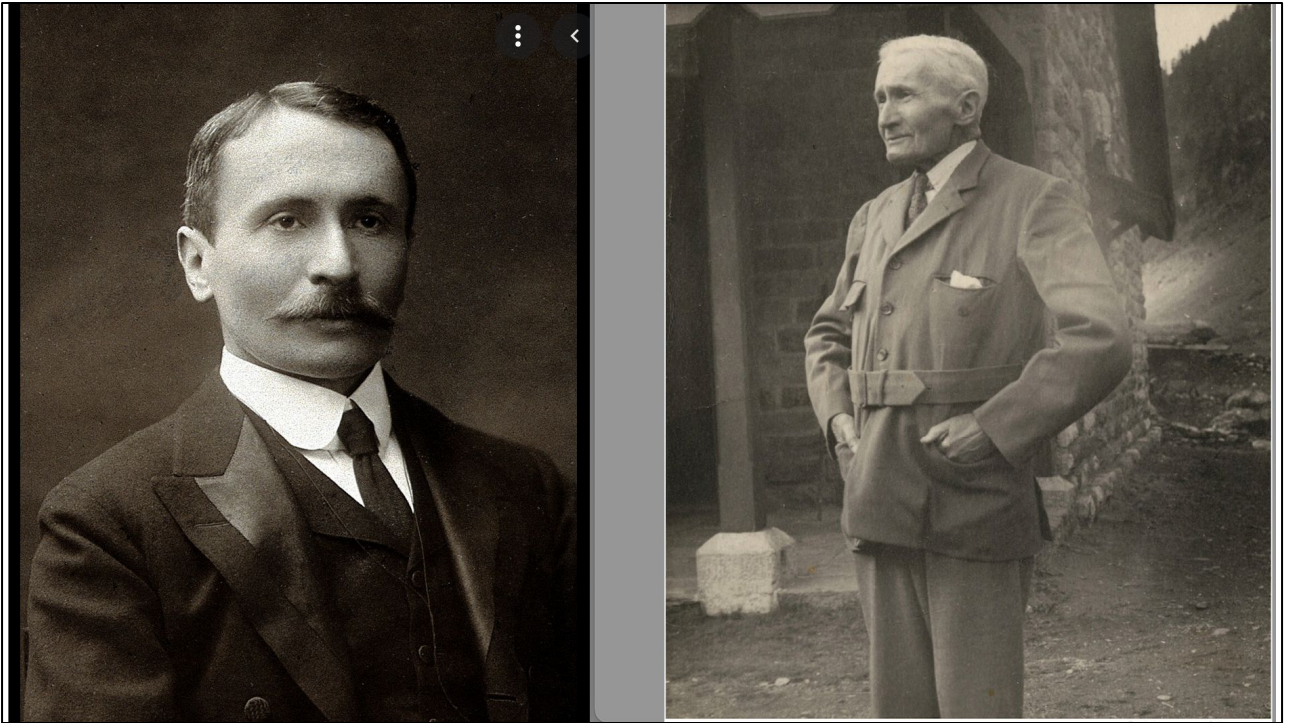
Thereafter, I sent the piece to Peiyou and we wondered whether the qin could provide a counterpoint to the koto, enter into a conversation, or bring a sort of commentary, and that was a first version that Peiyou recorded. And though we liked it a lot, somehow we thought: why not play the piece as a full solo on the Qin. And this is what Peiyou played.

The transcription on the Qin added another layer of complexity and questions: WHAT DOES THE TRANSCRIPTION FOR QIN ACHIEVES? And Peiyou will discuss her approach of the transcription after these remarks:

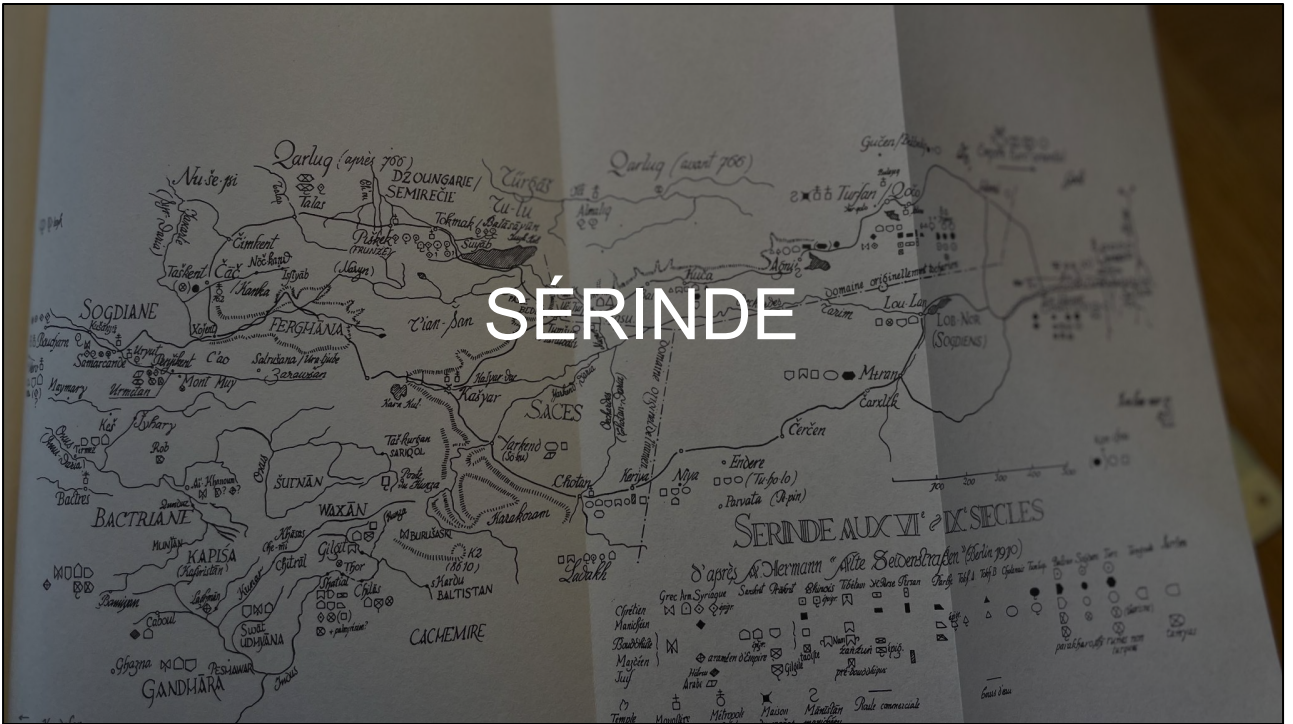
But before we speak about this instrumental 'Sinicization', so to speak, from koto to Qin, we need to consider the vast expanses of this so-called Sérinde, or Empire of the Steppes as historian René Grousset called them in 1939.



Of course, Sérinde doesn't figure on any contemporary maps, as it never really existed as either a country or a continent. It's been called an 'imaginary', a fabled region, and a *région muette*, (a mute region).



The name Sérinde was actually coined by Hungarian-born British explorer Aurel Stein during his many expeditions in the vast regions between China and India in the early 1900s. Aurel Stein 'owned' the field of Central Asian Studies for a good part of the early XXth century; he was an eminent and long-unrivaled explorer and historian of Central Asia in its largest scope.

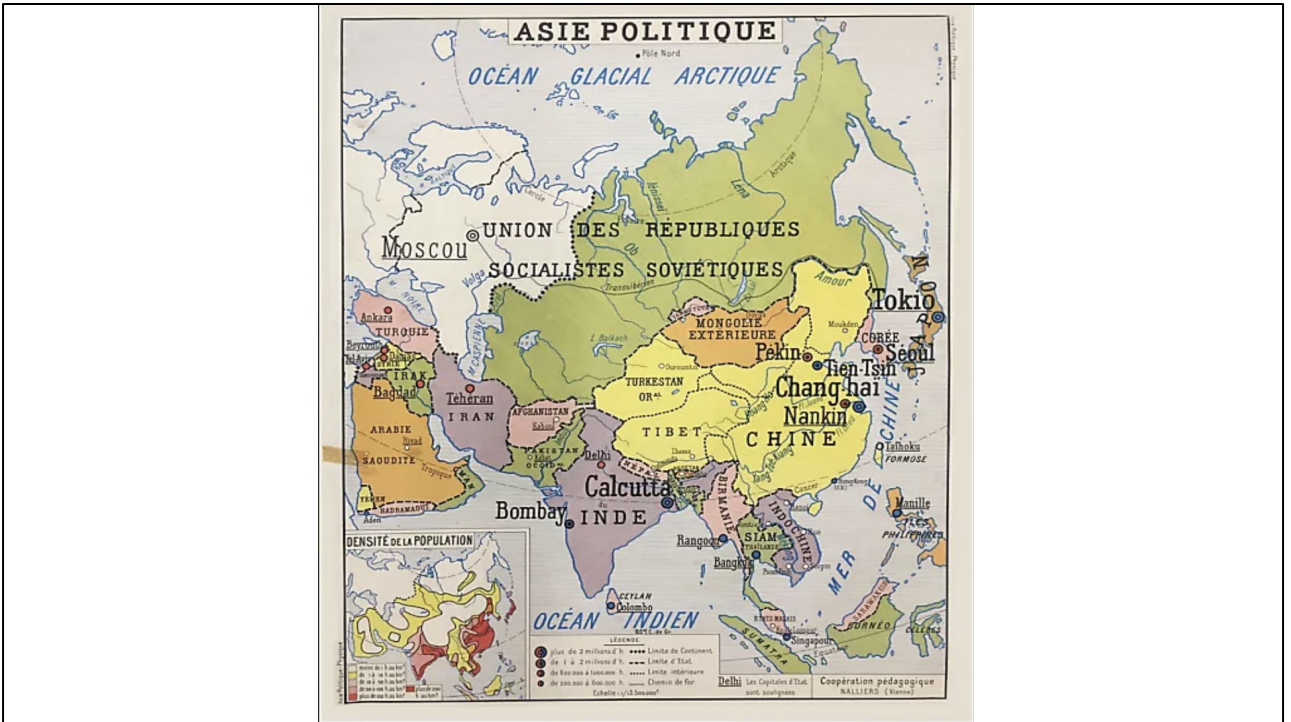


My first conjecture is that it was easier for Aurel Stein to ‘create’ one name for the large region that he was constantly visiting in every directions.

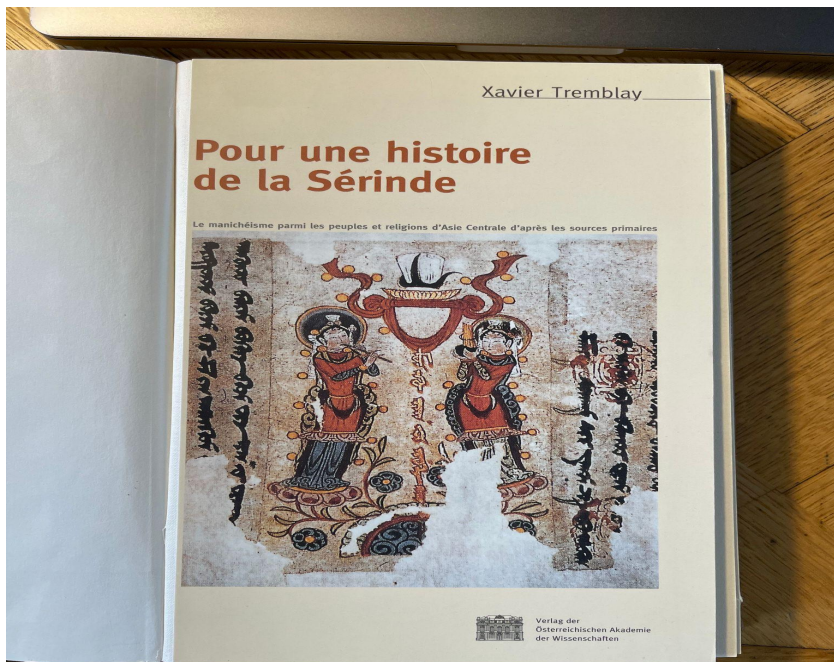
He must have felt that the borders, (if any), the names of empires, republics, khanates, tribes, hordes, though indispensable, were cumbersome, both geographically and historically, since his mind was stacked with centuries of history.

Or put differently: “Where should he tell his governess he was going? Bactriane, Kapisa, Gandhara, Sogdiane, Ferghana, Dzoungarie, Semirečie?”

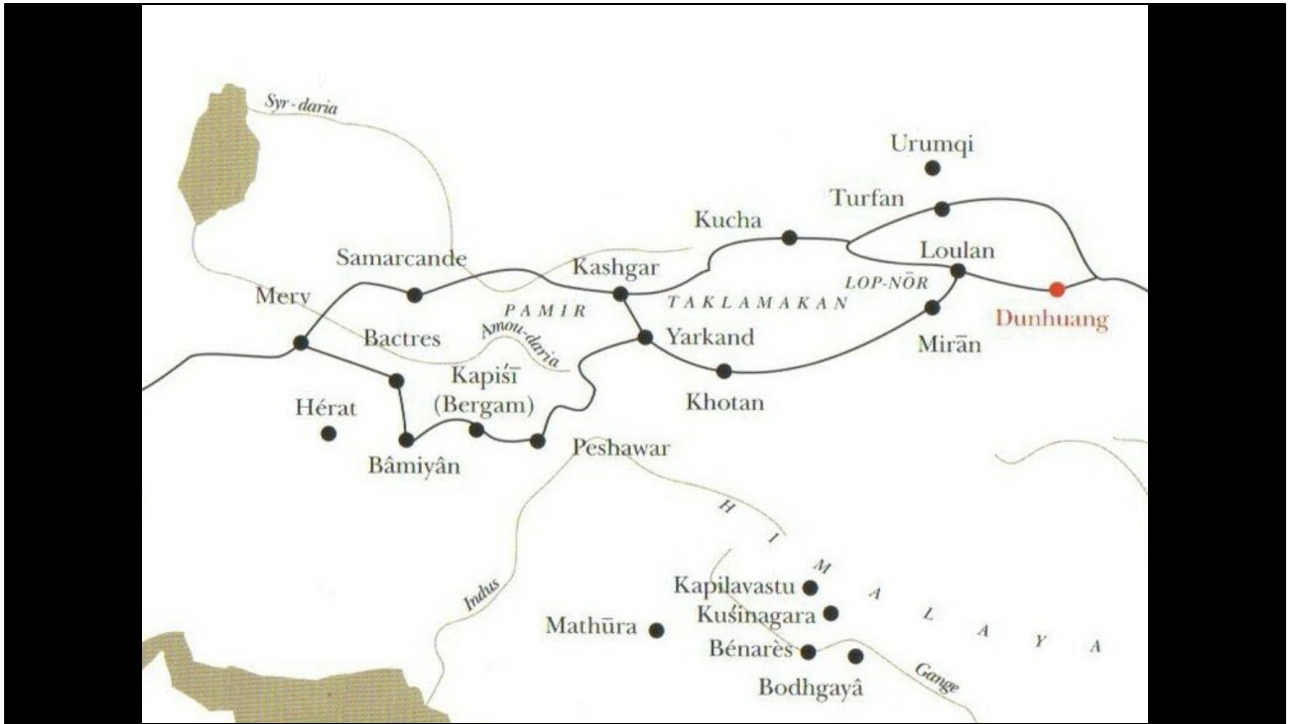
(Enlarge pic to show names: -----)



The French *Sérinde* has a 'colonial' ring to it, also because French was the language of diplomacy at the time and colonial powers were wont to rename places in their own languages. Names such as Indochine, Indonesia, Asie Mineure, Asie du Sud-Est, Eurasie, also come to mind, revealing whence the speaker speaks, more than the actual place. The all-encompassing' effect of the name *Sérinde* thus reveals the scope of the colonial enterprise: one name for a gigantic territory.



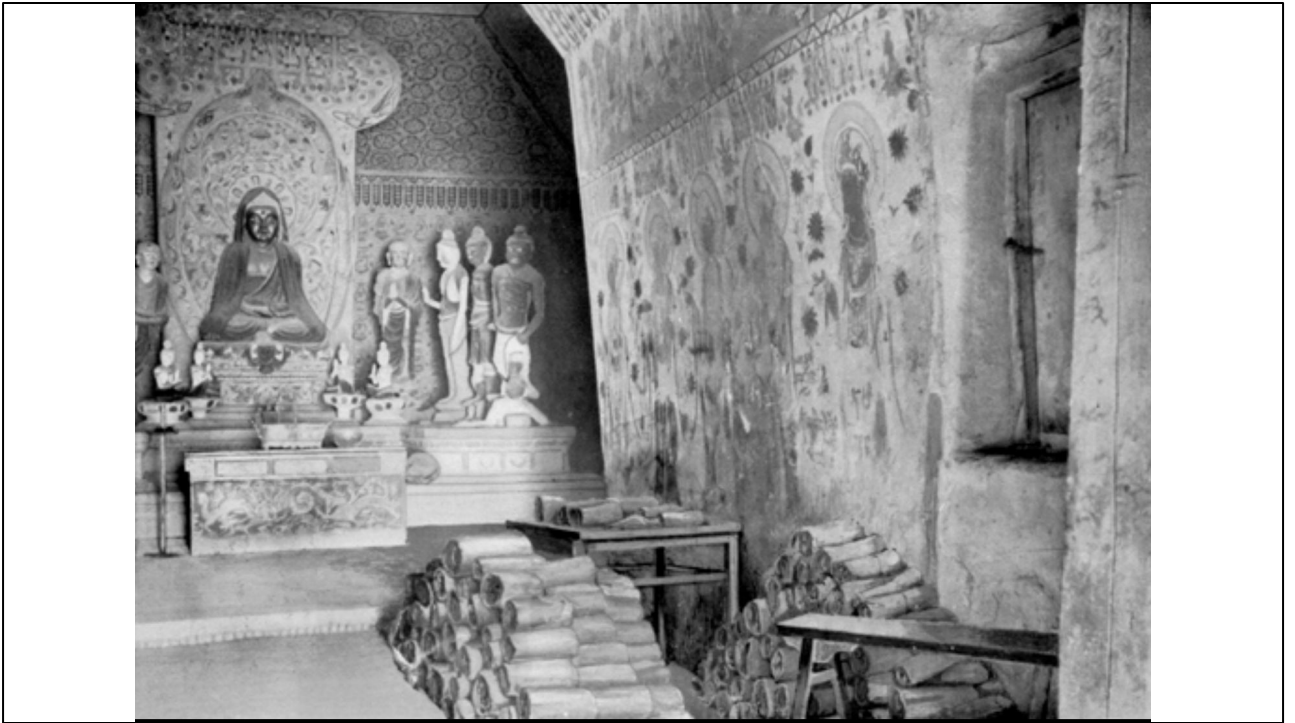
More contemporary, Canadian historian Xavier Tremblay, uses Sérinde for his book, maybe an homage to his illustrious predecessor, Aurel Stein, thus confirming some reality into the word Sérinde.



Therefore, Aurel Stein coined *Sérinde* for convenience, creating a portemanteau word, a 'mot-valise' as *Serinde* combines *Seres* (China in Greek) and *India*. *Sérinde* also been called the *India of the Chinese*.



'Sérinde' allowed Stein to have a handle on the material and a vantage point in history and geography. He could embrace the region in one go. Considering he dedicated his whole life and health to those regions, he awarded himself the naming rights, as was wont from someone hailing from the British Empire with a mission. But there's always a time limit on the naming rights.



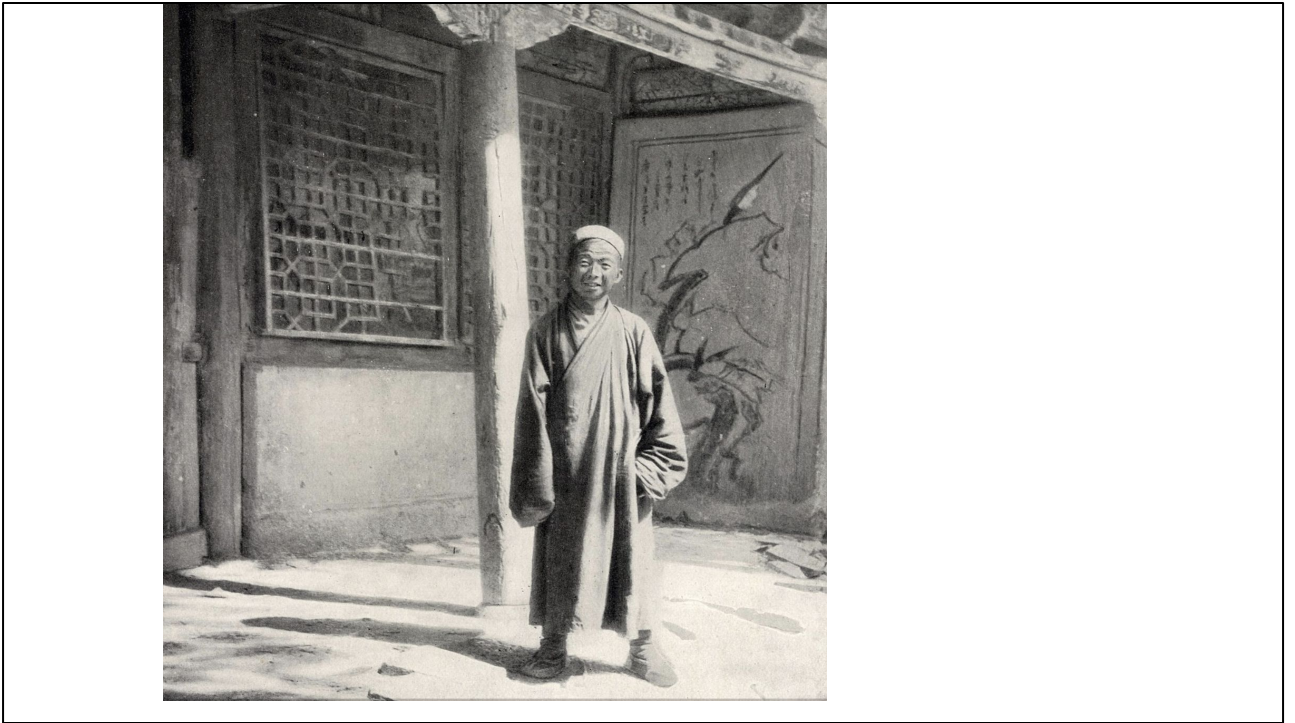
I would be remiss if I didn't mention Aurel Stein's exploration in the Dunhuang Hidden Library Cave Discovery, here in a picture taken by Aurel Stein in 1907, with some of the famous 10 000 Buddhist manuscripts that made the place....click



...one of the holiest site of Buddhism and a major tourist attraction today, in Gansu Province, China, as Sérinde was also called: The Land of Buddha.



And just to set the record straight: Aurel Stein was involved but didn't discover this Library Cave in the [Mogao Caves](#) of [Dunhuang](#),



The actual discovery belongs to this man: Abbot [Wang Yuanlu](#).



Geographical names are a human 'construction', a wilful act since a place doesn't name itself.

When a civilization disappears, the names may remain in place, fossilized in the annals of Empires, then just a name on a map, itself a contentious bit of representation.



Khorezm Fortress, Uzbekistan

The vast expanses of those regions have been named and renamed time and again throughout history, roughly drawn into the dizzying mosaic *découpage* of the land at a time of history when the Nomadic Empires were the dynamic and violent forces against sedentary empires and civilizations.

So the enigma of the title of the song gives us a clue for the appreciation of the piece: a vast expanse of land seen from Japan side of the East Sea.

The elusive title makes us more aware that geography is not an exact science, and a wandering mind is the best thing to compose music, drawing its source from the *imaginaire*, so dear to the *French surrealists*.

Since the distance between the three elements of the title, melody and 'Sérinde' are so far apart, from Japan, to Central Asia and France, the song sets out to bring all these elements together seamlessly by offering a confounding tune.



Akira Ifukube was born in 1904 in the northern Hokkaido of Japan. His repertoire is vast, solid and varied, with symphonies, concertos, quartets, largely composed in a modern/Western Styles,....

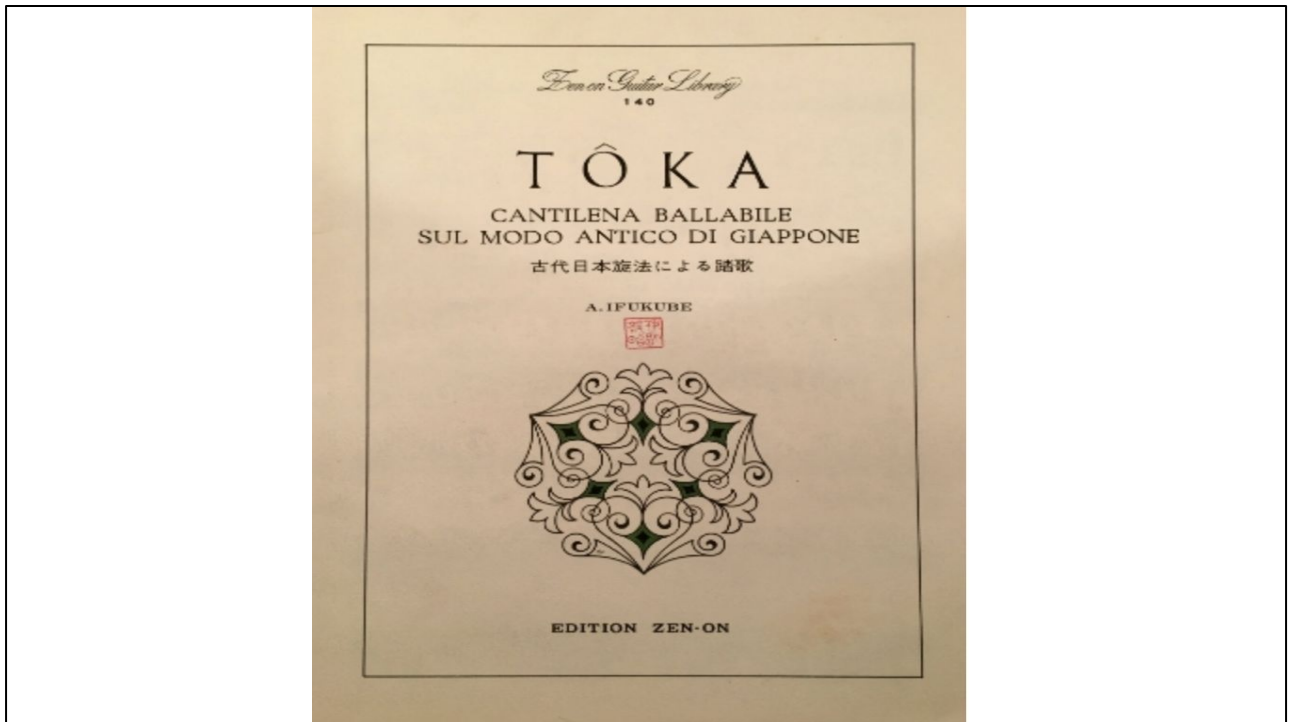


...with incursions into medieval and baroque compositions for the lute, thus running the gamut of European composition styles from various centuries. Naturally, he also wrote pieces for Japanese instruments, as in the *Chant de la Serinde*.



Ifukube also wrote 250 film scores, all Japanese. He famously wrote the Godzilla score.

And here I want to think that the Chant de la Serinde, whether on koto or on qin could well be used as the score for a epic-type of movie about the Sérinde.



Here Ifukube using Italian in another composition for guitar: a TÔKA is a Japanese musical form, here titled 'Cantilena Ballabile Sul modo Antico di Giappone'. It means: Danceable Cantilene on an antique mode from Japan

Maybe we perceive here a certain cultural 'snobism' or cultural appropriation, as we would say today, which Japanese are wont to practice.

As we saw in the last yaji, copying, emulating, borrowing comes naturally to 'Asian' cultures, and Japan took from the West wholeheartedly and 'with a vengeance'.

Writing music beyond borders, so to speak, must have felt very natural for this Japanese composer, and certainly 'Eurasia' holds a strong pull for the Japanese imaginaire as well.

琵琶行
伊福部昭作品集
野坂恵子

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1 二十五絃箏曲「琵琶行」(1999) 20:42

2 二十五絃箏曲「胡哦」(1997) 10:35

3 二十五絃箏曲「箏篋歌」(1969) 18:04

野坂恵子(二十五絃箏)

録音: 1999年8月11日 ①
1998年7月10日 ②③
秋五町文化ホール山梨

Total Time 48:49
STEREO DIGS
98Hz-R-9990094

PIPA XING
Works of AKIRA IFUKUBE / KEIKO NOSAKA

Akira Ifukube (b.1914)

- 1 PIPA XING — d'après poème de Bo Jü-yi — pour Koto à vingt-cinq cordes (1999)
- 2 CHANT DE LA SÉRINDE pour Koto à vingt-cinq cordes (1997)
- 3 KUGO-KA Aria Concertata de Kugo-harpe pour Koto à vingt-cinq cordes (1969)

Keiko Nosaka. 25-Stringed Koto

Camerata
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93 × 766 August 11, 1999 ① & July 10, 1998 ②③ / Makioka Arts Hall, Yamanashi, Japan

PIPA XING—WORKS OF AKIRA IFUKUBE / KEIKO NOSAKA

Japan has always welcomed foreign cultures into its own and here I'm tempted to call the French title Chant de la Sérinde, a 'coquetterie', a high-brow one no doubt, but a sort of affectation from the composer for things foreign. The Japanese infatuation for all things foreign started in the Meiji era and never stopped.

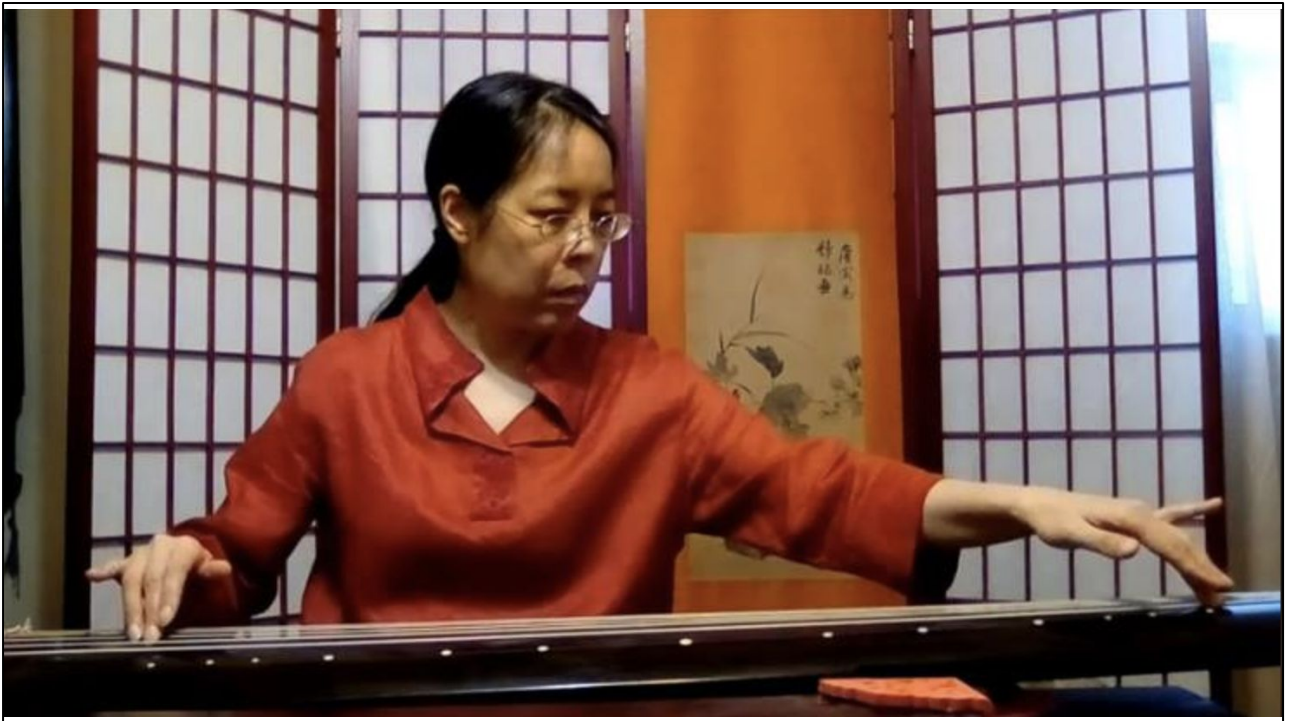


L'Asie avec les Nouvelles découvertes* - Asien Asia Japan China
Russia Persia Kontinent ...

The melody sounds like a heart-felt longing for the imagined steppes and deserts of the Sérinde, evoking the histories of countless empires, peoples, traditions, cultures, long disappeared into the holds of history and whose names induce almost a malaise: The Greco-Bactrian, the Tocharian, the Scythian, the Xiongnu Empire, the Göktük Empire, names that would have no doubt enchanted Jorge Luis Borges.



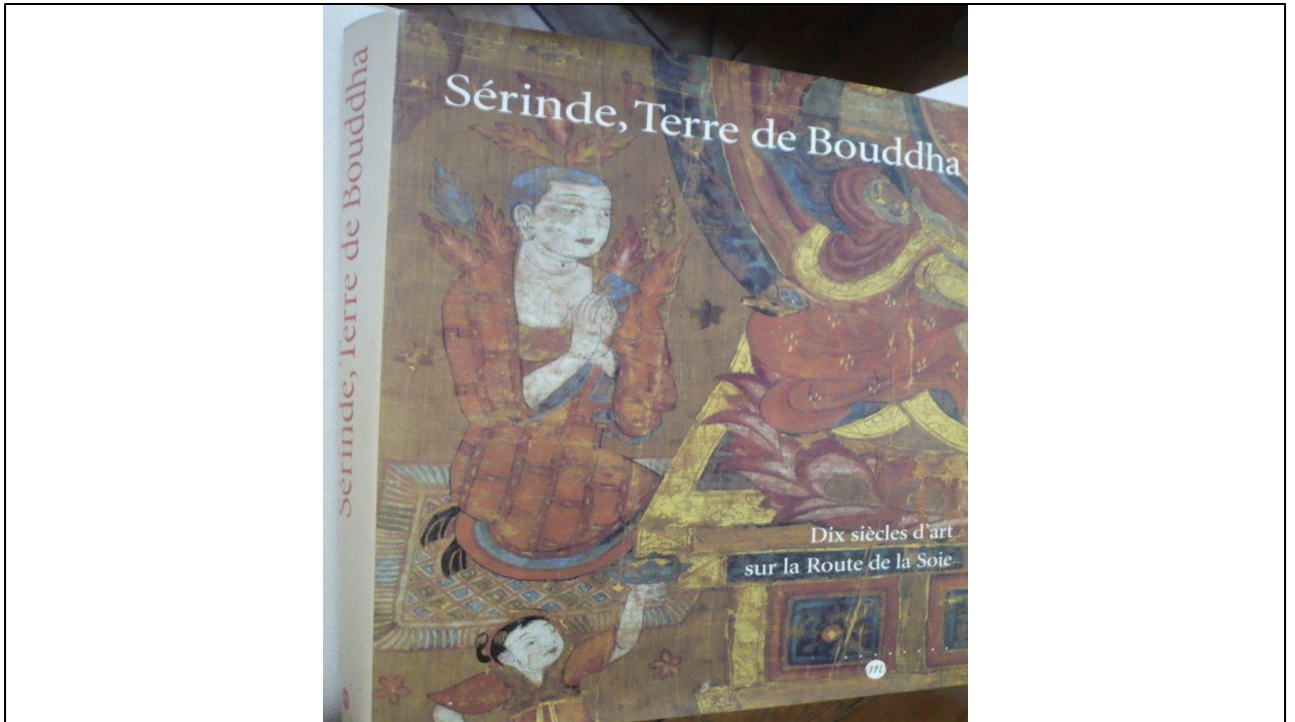
The slow rhythm of the piece, made slower in the transcription, evokes a long narrative, an epic moving at the pace of a caravan of camels in the desert along the Silk Road.



Here we practiced what I called an act of Sinicization: it felt irresistible to commit this act of 'lèse-nationalité' since the Qin is a distant ancestor of koto, and I was and I was curious to hear what the effect would be; the fretless rounded neck of the qin introduces a freer style of glissandi and harmonics than the more clipped and mat sounds of the koto. The somewhat erratic and sliding notes so particular to the Qin, often refer to a drunken state, and are introduced here on the qin to great effect.

Maybe unconsciously we tried to 'destabilize' the original composition, a sort of re-appropriation of an area that is more Chinese than Japanese and the qin version adds a 'freer' style, veering off-track, to reveal things that the original version doesn't because the koto brings Japan in mind right away. Like an ineffable evocation of something long lost and disappeared, the piece brings out the evanescent nature of history and geography.

And if the solo koto *Chant de la Sérinde* is an evocation of the land and the people of the now defunct Sérinde, what does it 'say' if it is played on a Chinese instrument?



For me, the Chant de la Sérinde is a reminiscence, an ‘air’ that aims to evoke something ineffable and long gone, as if a short piece of music could reconstitute a borderless and vast area with a devastating history of constant land grabs, claimed by powerful empires, now long gone, some still present and roaring as never before.

And the rumbles of civilization are always ‘on the march’, the battle cries are here reduced to a melancholy ‘ritornello’, which aspires to some serenity, in the immense geography and complicated history of the continent-size region.

A musical instrument is like an anthropological tool that evokes lost histories and traditions through specific musical scales.

And this last note:, which may tell us that Sérinde may have been in the news in Japan at some point before the composition by Ifukube and may tell give us a hint of what triggered Ifukube to write his song in 1997: “Since 1993, A Sino-Japanese team of thirty six archeologists and scientists has led expeditions to the Niya site with the approval of the State Bureau of Cultural Relics.”

We hope Peiyou’s transcription gave the piece a new life and a new turn, and also restored something closer to the historical and geographical realities of place and time. A vision of ‘Sérinde’, however imaginary, has better optics if considered from China.