
"SOUL EMANCIPATION!" WECHAT IN RURAL MONGGHUL (TU) AREAS OF
HUZHU COUNTY, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PR CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Duguasirang (b. 1976), an illiterate Mongghul man and well-known Mongghul singer from rural Xangri (Shenlu) Mongghul (Tu) Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Haidong City, Qinghai Province, PR China and his involvement with WeChat is described. While herding as a child, Duguasirang learned traditional Mongghul folksongs from his uncle. Once an adult, he did construction work in Xining and other places in Qinghai Province. In 2017 at the age of forty, he returned to his village and resumed farming. He has three WeChat groups for which he often sings love songs (in the local Chinese dialect), Mongghul folksongs, and Mongghul drinking songs with his group members. He also broadcasts Mongghul folksongs live and other Mongghul cultural materials with his Mongghul wife. His daily interaction with WeChat demonstrates how this phone app profoundly impacted Mongghul people in 2020. I interviewed and recorded Duguasirang at his home in Xangri Village on 5 October 2019. Two maps and five photographs are given.

KEYWORDS

Huzhu, WeChat life narratives, Monguor biography, oral Tu history, Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau

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LOCATION

FIG 1. Huzhu Tu Autonomous County.¹



¹ An edited version of <https://bit.ly/3aJ3QXb>, accessed 9 March 2020.

FIG 2. Xangri Village.¹

After he finished plowing a narrow field on a slope, Duguasirang² (b. 1976) parked his tractor, got off, and sat puffing on a cigarette while leaning against the slope.

It was the third lunisolar month, and the sunlight weakly shone on this barren, lifeless landscape. Strong gusts of frigid wind made Duguasirang shiver. He pulled a mobile phone from his pocket, took two pictures of the surrounding scene, and sent them to his circle of WeChat friends. A series of replies and "likes" were received. He checked his circle of friends and the content they had posted in their WeChat circles, learning their whereabouts.

He loudly burst into a love song, recorded it using his mobile phone, and sent it to his WeChat friends:

上去了高山望平川，
平川上人们来来往往。
非常想念我的心上人，
繁忙的犁地顾不上她。

Shangqule gaoshan wang pingchuan,
Pingchuanshang renmen lailaiwangwang.
Feichang xiangnian wode xinshangren,
Fanmangde lidi gubushang ta.

Climb up the high mountain and view the plain,
People come and go on the plain.
Yearning for my sweetheart,
But the work of plowing makes me too busy to think of her.

¹ An edited version of <https://bit.ly/2TS7WoW>, accessed 9 March 2020.

² Mongghul terms are given in the Mongghul written system (Li 1988:9).

This love song stanza echoed from nearby hills and gullies, dispelling the stillness. Soon, some of Duguasirang's WeChat friends replied, encouraging him to sing more, so he began another love song. His wife, Qishihua (b. 1977), shouted from some distance away, urging him to put away his phone and resume plowing. He then stood up while sending audio goodbye messages to his net friends.

Duguasirang, illiterate, is from Xangri Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, PR China. He is humorous and gifted at telling jokes. Qishihua is from the same village and is also illiterate. The two fell in love. Eventually, Qishihua moved into his home. He neither paid betrothal gifts to her parents nor held a traditional wedding ceremony. They have two sons. Sunduuqishiden (b. 1997) studies at Nanjing Normal University, and Lamusairang (b. 2009) attends Grade Two in Laoyouzhuang Village Primary Boarding School, which is about ten kilometers from Xangri Village. Lamusairang comes home on Fridays and returns to school on Sunday afternoons. A Xangri villager picks up the village's students in his private minibus and takes them to the boarding school for ten RMB (one-way) per passenger. This is convenient for the local students.

Xangri Village is atop high mountains with steep slopes and deep valleys, crisscrossed by ravines, making village access challenging, particularly on rainy and snowy days. Villagers historically used donkeys and mules to transport goods. After 1990, a few villagers began purchasing motorcycles and tractors, which improved access to and from the village. However, it was still tricky to walk on slippery snowy and rainy days until 2016. A narrow concrete road was built that made regular vehicle access to and from the village possible even on rainy and snowy¹ days, significantly improving the villagers' lives.

As the dark sky enveloped the landscape, Qishihua cooked noodles with pork and vegetables for supper. After Duguasirang and Qishihua finished eating, Duguasirang lay on his bed and, at the same time, his cell phone received a bevy of WeChat audio messages. He picked up his cell phone and found a series of voice chat records in the Love Song Group he had established in 2017. He opened voice chat and listened to dialogues between people using net names:

NET NAMES

SAD FISH female

BOOMING FLOWERS&FULLMOON male

HAPPY male

HEAVEN TIBET male [Duguasirang, founder of this love song group]

MAPLE LEAVES male

DREAM LOVER female

CHRYSANTHEMUM female

TRANSCRIPT

SAD FISH: Good evening, everyone!

MAPLE LEAVES: Good evening, everyone!

BOOMING FLOWERS&FULLMOON: All net friends come to chat, please!

DREAM LOVER: Sent a photo of a boy kicking a door violently [beckoning all net friends to come].

HAPPY: Why are you kicking the door?

CHRYSANTHEMUM: Net friend DREAM LOVE wants to enter your home, so open your door and let her in, please!

HAPPY: I'm on duty now. No time to chat.

DREAM LOVER: Dear Older Brother [HAPPY], I know you are busy with your work, but please find time to sing us a love song.

¹ The villagers sweep snow from the road early in the morning when it snows the previous night.

HAPPY: I won't sing a love song. I really cannot find time to sing now.

CHRYSANTHEMUM: Does Aunt DREAM LOVE miss Older Brother HAPPY?

DREAM LOVER: I'm missing all the net older brothers in this chat group.

HAPPY: Great! You're missing us all. Now please sing a love song because only love songs can express one's sincere feelings.

DREAM LOVER: Net Older Brother [HAPPY], I would like to sing a love song, but I sing poorly.

HAPPY: I'm sure you can sing a love song. Please start as soon as possible. Why is HEAVEN TIBET not here tonight to chat with us?

DREAM LOVER: HEAVEN TIBET'S lover may have left, which is why he doesn't want to sing or chat with us. Or maybe he's dead since his lover left this group.

HAPPY: Yes, HEAVEN TIBET may be looking for another lover in another WeChat group by singing love songs. Aunt DREAM LOVER, what do you do?

DREAM LOVER: I clean streets in Xining City. The Love Song Group founder, HEAVEN TIBET, isn't dead because he performed on Kuaishou¹ last night.

HAPPY: HEAVEN TIBET isn't dead. He seriously scolded me last night.

DREAM LOVER: Where do you clean streets? I want to find a job cleaning streets. I don't like my current job because I stay in a basement

with no sunshine every day.

HAPPY: This photo is of a parking lot. I'm working here.

CHRYSANTHEMUM: Dear aunts and older brothers, sing love songs now.

Duguasirang listened to their chat records. Finding no one had sung a love song, he immediately offered:

晒干的土块烧成了土灰，
黄草滩开垦成种地。
和心爱的人一起多幸福，
天黑时也难舍难分。

Shaigande tukuai shaochengliao tuhui,
Huangcaotan kaikencheng zhongdi.
He xinaideren yiqi duoxingfu,
Tianheishi ye nanshenanfen.

Sun-dried earth bricks burned to silver ash,
Yellow-grass uncultivated land is made into fields.
It's so wonderful to live with my lover,
That's why I don't want to leave my lover when night falls.

Duguasirang's Mongghul melody immediately broke the no-love-song-embarrassment of the evening. Quickly, a series of "likes" and emoticons came as feedback. HEAVEN TIBET is the best Mongghul love singer in the group. Duguasirang created this love song group to bring people together to share Mongghul songs.

¹ Video-sharing app.

A group member sent a "Red Packet"¹ to encourage and reward Duguasirang to sing more. Duguasirang received the "Red Packet" and expressed appreciation to the net friend. Before he started to sing again, DREAM LOVER had already begun:

羊肉做成的面条，
菜籽油拌成的大蒜。
只要群主和我们一起，
我们就有事做。

Yangrou zuochengde miantiao,
Caiziyou banchengde dasuan.
Zhiyao qunzhu he women yiqi,
Women jiuyoushi zuo.

Noodles cooked with mutton,
Garlic mixed with heated rapeseed oil.
As long as the group master has come with us,
We all have things to do.

Duguasirang's appearance immediately encouraged many of them to sing love songs. Duguasirang and his wife listened, chatted, and joyfully sang with them until midnight. Qishihua urged Duguasirang to turn off his cell phone and sleep after saying good night to his net friends because they needed to get up early the following day to dig potatoes. Others continued chatting, laughing, joking, and singing.

Duguasirang's uncle, Jiradanzhuu (1929-1994), was a famous Mongghul singer who taught Duguasirang love songs and traditional Mongghul folksongs while herding. Jiradanzhuu learned folksongs from his father, who was also an outstanding Mongghul folksong singer. Duguasirang doesn't know his grandfather's name and birth and death dates because his grandfather died before Duguasirang was born.

Duguasirang never attended school and began herding sheep when he was seven years old with his uncle. Duguasirang has an excellent voice, so his uncle encouraged him to learn songs. Duguasirang didn't want to learn, thinking it was useless. His refusal angered his uncle, who threatened to beat him with his herding whip. Most of the time, however, Jiradanzhuu encouraged him to learn rather than forcing him. Jiradanzhuu said, "Learn folksongs and love songs well. This will be useful in your future."

As time went by, Duguasirang's interest in learning folksongs increased. He not only learned from his uncle and other village elders. Duguasirang benefited from his uncle's encouragement. He sings in Mongghul, Chinese, and Tibetan.

Duguasirang annually attends love song festivals, for example, the Rgulang² Lamasery Monks Mask Dance Festival on the seventh to eighth days of the sixth month, the Danma Love Song Festival on the eleventh to fifteenth days of the sixth month, and the Weiyuan Town Love Song Festival on the

¹ To send gift money on WeChat, users click on a "red envelope" button in the menu, choose an amount, and enter a gift message. Depositing money into each other's WeChat Pay accounts is fast and convenient (<https://tcn.ch/2PZhZRs>, accessed 9 March 2020).

² Rgulang (T, Dgon lung byams pa gling; C, Youningsi) is a Dge lugs Monastery located in Sitan Village, Wushi Town, Huzhu County, Qinghai Province. Pu (2013:71-75) reports 396 monks in 1957, while Smith (2013) reports "over 300 monks" (291) and also "340 monks" (293).

second day of the second month. Village-level meetings are also held annually in Huzhu County. Duguasirang actively participates in officially organized love songs and traditional Mongghul folk song competitions during Spring Festival and is often awarded prizes.

Duguasirang and Qishihua had supper early this evening. Next, dressed in Mongghul clothes, they walked to the studio of the Qinghai Huzhu Hua'er Zhibojian 'Love Song Live Broadcast Huzhu [County], Qinghai [Province]', located in a newly built wooden room on the west side of their courtyard, and turned on the lights. Duguasirang sat on a sofa and faced his cell phone, which he put on a supporting holder. He put on his earphones and opened up the live broadcast audio. His short video platform Kuaishou started with a love song:

黑云翻滚，
即将下雨。
有人挑拨离间，
这对情人即将分手。

Heiyun fangun,
Jijiang xiayu.
Youren tiaobolijian,
Zhedui qingren jijiang fenshou.

Black clouds are rolling,
It will rain soon.
Someone has sown discord,
The lovers are about to break up.

As his melodious love song reached his listeners, fans and viewers joined one after another. Some orally praised him, while others sent him a rose emoji.

HEAVEN CLOUDS, a young Mongghul woman, challenged him to compete, and he accepted. Duguasirang's and HEAVEN CLOUDS' real portraits were displayed on viewers' cell phone screens. HEAVEN CLOUDS' head was covered with a pink headscarf. Sometimes, Duguasirang chatted with her joyfully, and at other times they sang antiphonally as viewers praised them by sending various emoticons and comments.

Duguasirang felt tired and thirsty after a period of singing and chatting, so Qishihua replaced him and sang love songs antiphonally with a new net friend. They talked, laughed, joked, and sang until finally, they said goodbye very late in the evening.

At this time, Duguasirang had been intermittently doing live Kuaishou broadcasts for three months. With about 3,000 followers, he does live Kuaishou shows in his leisure time in the evening when people are relatively free. Qishihua assists by singing. Duguasirang is often invited to join other love song WeChat groups, but he mostly refuses. He is a well-known singer, and many fans want to talk with him on WeChat. Only love songs and Mongghul-language folksongs are live broadcast on his Kuaishou platform. He usually starts live broadcasts between eight to eleven PM.

When Duguasirang was sixteen, he followed other young men in his village to look for work in Xining City, Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and Ge'ermu in Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Prefecture, Qinghai Province. While engaged in high-risk tall building construction, a workmate fell from a building and died. Duguasirang was frightened, stopped doing construction work, returned to his village, and resumed agricultural work.

After the year 2000, more and more villagers went to cities for full-time work as street cleaners; sanitation workers at companies, administrative units, parks, and public toilets; security

work at the front gates of companies; and any job with monthly payment. At one time, the village was home to fifty-four households (120 residents). In 2019, only seventeen Xangri Village families (fifty residents) remained. The remaining thirty-seven families lived in cities (most in Xining). They had abandoned their farmland.

In 2018, Duguasirang bought a tractor, a seeder, a harvester, and other agricultural machinery with his construction work earnings. He currently farms 130 *mu*¹ of fields from fellow villagers. Sixty *mu* are rent-free because these fields belong to his clan members who refuse to charge rent. He pays thirty RMB per *mu* for the remaining seventy *mu*. In 2018, Duguasirang earned no profit due to low yields and heavy snow just before harvest. Moreover, extra effort was required to plow land that had been abandoned for years.

In 2019, his hard work paid off. Potatoes, rapeseed, and soybeans grew well. Harvesting at a time to avoid snow also contributed to better yields, resulting in 70,000 RMB in earnings. He looks forward to earning more in the future by farming more fields.

Duguasirang is busy with three *qun* 'WeChat groups' on which he often sings and chats. Tuzuge kaixin wenmingqun 'Mongghul Song Happy Civilization Group' has about 200 participants who mainly sing traditional Mongghul folksongs. Duguasirang rarely sings and talks with others in this group. He started Tuzu wenmingqun 'Mongghul Civilization Group', which has fifty participants. He created a third group, Hua'er shaonianqun 'Love Song Youth Group', that has forty participants. The three groups' participants are Mongghul from Huzhu County, Ledu Region, Haidong Municipality; Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; and Xining City, which are all in Qinghai Province. There are also participants from Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County, Wuwei Municipality, Gansu Province; the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; and Mongghul from other areas of China and beyond.

Young Mongghul work in various parts of China. Many Huzhu Mongghul have moved to Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Prefecture, Qinghai Province, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where they now live permanently and rarely visit their homeland. WeChat provides a platform that brings them all together by singing, chatting, and sharing Mongghul culture. All participants in the three groups speak and communicate in Mongghul. However, love songs are sung in the Qinghai Chinese dialect. Furthermore, many Mongghul traditional folksongs are sung in Tibetan.²

Using WeChat has helped Duguasirang learn some simple Chinese characters such as his name, "How are you?" "Goodbye," and so on. Unable to write text messages, he sends voice messages, snapshots, and emoticons.

Duguasirang enjoys sharing with others. WeChat is now part of his life. He also uses WeChat to buy and pay for nearly all of his needs (e.g., WiFi fees and phone bills) and send funds to his older son for his monthly living expenses. Through WeChat, Duguasirang hired ten farmers to weed, seed, and harvest. He told them when and where to work and what tools to bring. WeChat Pay saves a lot of his time.

Duguasirang is also keen to watch videos and play online games when he is free. He also gets information and news via WeChat, which is now an essential part of his life.

Duguasirang and his family regularly make video calls with his older son to ensure he is not homesick.

Increasingly addicted to WeChat, Duguasirang, communicates more often electronically than face to face.

¹ One *mu* = 666.6 square meters, 0.067 hectares, or 0.16 acres.

² For an example, see and hear Huzhu Mongghul women singing a drinking song in Tibetan in 2004 (<https://bit.ly/35CGeLL>, accessed 7 May 2020).

Smartphones improve rural life and are transforming how traditional Mongghul love songs and folksongs are performed. Mongghul sang love songs on special occasions, such as when people gathered at the Danma Love Song Festival held informally in conjunction with the time of the Younging Lamasery Mask Dance Festival. On such occasions, people met and sang, expressing their love. Sometimes, they sang love songs while weeding fields and herding sheep in summer. Now with WeChat, people sing love songs whenever they have free time. Furthermore, love songs were once prohibited in a home, but this old norm is now ignored.

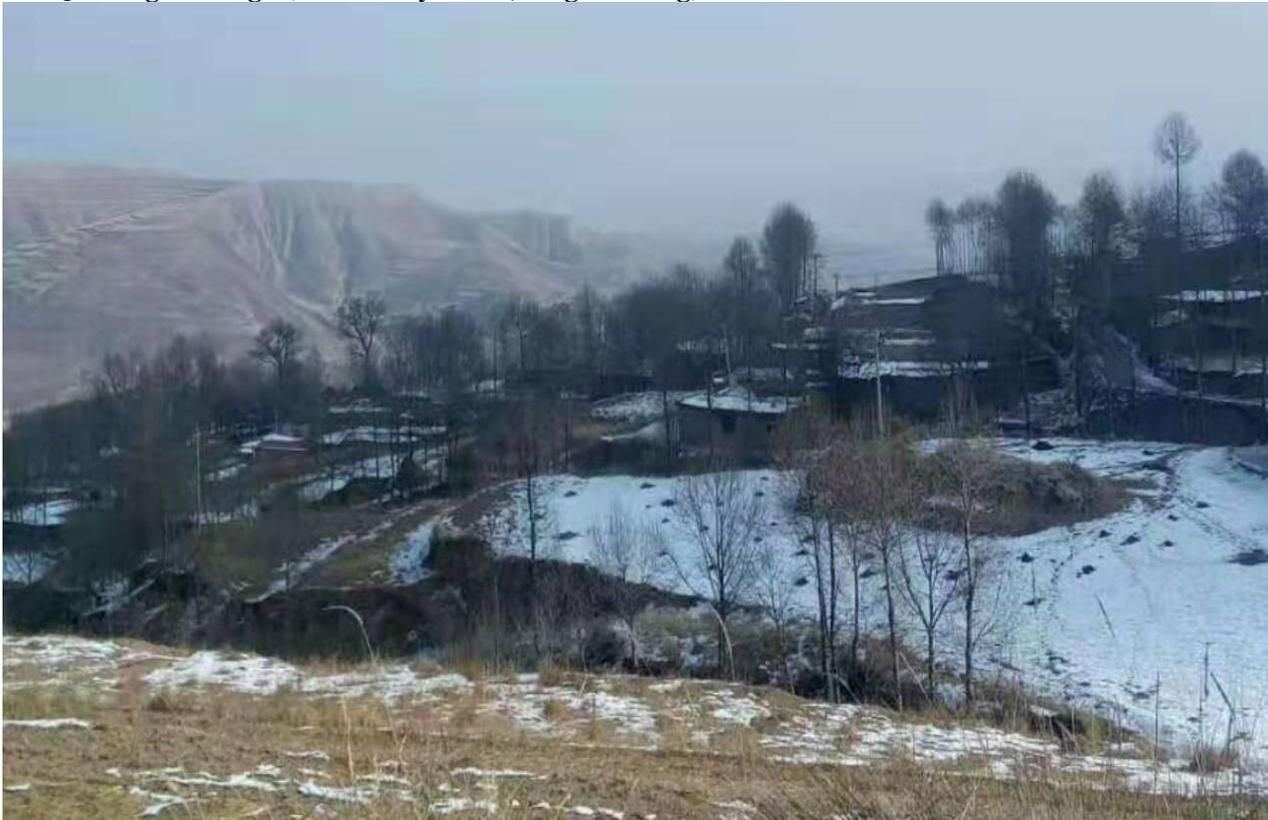
WeChat provides a platform where Mongghul frequently interact, though they increasingly leave their countryside homes and move to cities to work and live.

Why does Duguasirang use WeChat? Why does he sing love songs and Mongghul folksongs? Here is his answer:

I love WeChat! I'm passionate about singing Mongghul praise songs and love songs. Like everyone else, I'm occasionally depressed. Singing makes me forget annoying things. Live broadcast emancipates my soul!

PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG 3. Xangri Village (1 February 2020, Duguasirang).



FIGS 4 & 5. (L) Harvesting potatoes (2019, Duguasirang). (R) Leveling fields. Lamusairang poses as the driver (2019, Duguasirang).



FIG 6. Duguasirang sings love songs in a competition held in Danma Town (10 October 2019, unknown photographer).



FIG 7. Duguasirang (right) with his wife, Qishihua, broadcast live in their family studio (30 December 2019, Sunduuqishiden).



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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

caiziyou banchengde dasuan 菜籽油拌成的大蒜, garlic mixed with heated rapeseed oil

Danma 丹麻, 'dan ma འདན་མ། Town

dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས། a sect of Tibetan Buddhism

Duguasirang, gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུགས་དཀར་ཚེ་རིང། a person's name

fanmangde lidi gubushang ta 繁忙的犁地顾不上她 'but the work of plowing makes me too busy to think about her'

feichang xiangnian wode xinshangren 非常想念我的心上人 'yearning for my sweetheart'

Gansu 甘肃 Province

Ge'ermu 格尔木 City

Guoluo 果洛, mgo log མགོ་ལོག་ Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Haidong 海东 City

Haixi 海西 Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Han 汉, an ethnic group in China

he xinaideren yiqi duoxingfu 和心爱的人一起多幸福 'how wonderful to live with my lover'

heiyun fangun 黑云翻滚 'black clouds are rolling'

Hongyazigou 红崖子沟 Township

hua'er shaonianqun 花儿少年群 'love song youth group'

huangcaotan kaikencheng zhongdi 黄草滩开垦成种地 'uncultivated land covered with yellow-grass is cultivated'

Huzhu 互助 County

Jiradanzhuu, a person's name

jijiang xiayu 即将下雨 'it will rain soon'

Kuaishou 快手, short video live broadcast platform

Lamusairang, a person's name

Laoyouzhuang 老幼庄 Village

Ledu 乐都 Region

Limusishiden, klu 'bum tshe brtan ལུ་འབུམ་ཚེ་བརྟན། Li Dechun 李得春, a person's names

Mongghul, Monguor, Mangghuer, Tuzu 土族

mu 亩, unit of land measurement; 1 hectare equals 15 *mu*

Nanjing 南京 Municipality

pingchuanshang renmen lailaiwangwang 平川上人们来来往往 'people come and go on the plain'

Qinghai 青海 Province

Qinghai Huzhu Hua'er Zhibojian 青海互助花儿直播间 'Huzhu, Qinghai Love Song Live Broadcast'

Qishihua 七十花, a person's name

qun 群, group

Rgulang, dgon lung dgon pa དགོན་ལུང་དགོན་པ།, Youningsi 佑宁寺, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Huzhu County

shaigande tukuai shaochengliao tuhui 晒干的土块烧成了土灰 'sun-dried earth bricks burned to silver ash'

shangqule gaoshan wang pingchuan 上去了高山望平川 'climb up the high mountain and view the plain'

Sunduuqishiden, a person's name

tianheishi ye nanshenanfen 天黑时也难舍难分 'that's why I don't want to leave my lover when night falls'

Tianzhu 天祝 Tibetan Autonomous County

Tu 土 Monguor, Mongghul, Mangghuer

Tuzu wenmingqun 土族文明群 'Mongghul Civilization Group'

Tuzuge kaixin wenmingqun 土族歌开心文明群 'Mongghul Song Happy Civilization Group'

Weiyuan 威远 Town, the seat of Huzhu County

women jiuyoushi zuo 我们就有事做 'we all have things to do'

Wuwei 武威 Municipality

Xangri, Shenlu 神路 Village

Xining 西宁 City, the capital of Qinghai Province

Xinjiang 新疆 Uyghur Autonomous Region

yangrou zuochengde miantiao 羊肉做成的面条 'noodles cooked with mutton'

youren tiaobolijian 有人挑拨离间 'someone has sown discord'

zhedui qingren jijiang fenshou 这对情人即将分手 'the lovers are about to break up'

zhiyao qunzhu he women yiqi 只要群主和我们一起 'as long as the group master has come with us'