

Washington Post, Feb. 6, 1995



# Hungry for Their Roots

By John Pomfret  
Washington Post Foreign Service

## BUDAPEST

Five years after tossing off the cloak of Soviet Domination in the social sciences, Hungarians are again asking a question that has bewitched them for centuries: Where are our roots?

During communist times, Soviet scholars backed the idea that the Hungarians, like the Finns, originated in Russia's Ural Mountains, a hypothesis that somehow justified Hungary's inclusion inside the Soviet orbit. But new research has brought that hypothesis into question, and Hungarians are looking even farther east for the sources of their culture.

In Hungary's universities, the study of Inner Asia is booming, bucking a trend throughout Central Europe favoring more practical subjects such as science, computers and business. In Hungarian cities, Buddhist temples, inquiries into the mysteries of shamanism, epic songs and traditional healing abound. Among the rock-and-roll set, dreams of a nomadic existence and horses from the steppe run through their raucous tunes.

Two years ago, Budapest's Eotvos Lorand University began offering degrees in Tibetan and Mongolian--perhaps two of the most obscure languages one could study in a small Central European country. This year, for the 10 spots in each discipline, the Inner Asian studies department got 80 applications for Tibetan and more than 40 for Mongolian.

"It is flourishing," said Alice Sarkosi, acting head of the department and a noted Mongolian scholar. "When you are 18 years old, a lot of students are not so interested in economic problems. But there are fascinated by these subjects."

Hungarians say the revived interest in their roots is partly a result of the unavoidable growth of patriotism and nationalism following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, which kept a tight rein on such passions, especially in Hungary following its failed 1956 uprising against the Soviet domination. Another reason is that with the social sciences now depoliticized, Hungarians can exercise the natural curiosity they have about themselves.

A self-described ethnic riddle caught in the middle of a triangle of Slavs, Latins and Germans, Hungarians first came to Europe in A.D. 896, moving into the Carpathian Basin, which contains present-day Hungary, from the east. From the onset, Hungarians have felt and been a people apart from the rest of Europe. Their language has only vague similarities with just one other European language, Finnish; their food is by far spicier, and their nostalgia for a nomadic existence appears anomalous in settled Europe.

While scholars agree on the date of the Hungarian arrival in Europe, they have bickered about almost everything else. Hungarian scholars have claimed variously that their people were descended from Turkic tribes in central Asia, from the Mongols, from the ancient Finns in Siberia or from a tribe of their own people who were lost amid the Mongol invasions in the 13th century.

The latest research began in 1986, when, after a break of 79 years, the Chinese government allowed Hungarian researchers back to a graveyard about 30 miles east of Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang Province in the northwest corner of China. The cemetery was discovered in 1907 by the Hungarian explorer Aurel Stein.

Hungarian researchers have excavated 1,200 graves and have found archaeological objects similar to those found in Hungarian cemeteries dating from the 9th and 10th centuries. Weapons placed in the graves are similar, and the methods of burial and the writing systems are the same.

"In these parts are hidden secrets never before seen," said Istvan Kiszely, a prominent Hungarian ethnographer.

Near the grave site, Kiszely and other researchers happened upon a small ethnic group called Ugars by the Chinese--a group distinct from the more populous Uighurs, a Turkic people that dominates Xinjiang. The scientists discovered that among them, the Ugars, who only number 9,000, knew 73 songs that fit exactly into the pentatonic, or five toned, musical scale that has made Hungarian folk music, popularized by composer Bela Bartok, famous worldwide.

"We found the last lady who is singing their folk music, and she sings it just like we Hungarians," Kiszely said.

While the Ugars adopted Islam centuries ago, he said, they also maintained a strong shamanistic tradition of medicine men and spiritual healers. Their use of these echoed practices popular in Hungary before the 11th century, when it adopted Christianity. "We think we have found our roots. But we must return again and again to be sure," he said. Kiszely said he believes ancient Hungarians left Xinjiang no later than the 5th century and fell into a pattern of settling down and then moving westward. As centuries passed, and they mixed with ancient Finns, their unusual language evolved. Over time, they approached Europe and their present home.

The search for the cradle of Hungarian civilization dates back to 1235, when a Hungarian monk, Julian, traveled to a region near the Volga River about 600 miles northeast of Moscow in search of a Hungarian tribe.

But the man revered as the greatest Hungarian explorer of all is Alexander Csoma de Koros, a 19th-century linguist who ultimately became the father of Tibetan studies in the West. De Koros spent more than a decade living with Buddhist lamas in western Tibet and authored the first English-Tibetan dictionary as well as a number of groundbreaking studies and maps of Tibet.

His original destination had Xinjiang, where he believed the roots of the Hungarian people lay. But when he ended his Tibetan sojourn and set out for Xinjiang in 1842, he contracted malaria and died.

In Budapest, students of Inner Asia look to de Koros for inspiration. Judit Szelenge, who is studying Mongolian at the university, traveled to Mongolia several years ago--following what she said was a feeling that the two peoples have intangibles links.

In the capital, Ulan Bator, she met a Mongolian who later became her husband. They have since returned to Budapest and are studying at the university.

"I know that Hungarians are not a European people," she said "We have a lot in common with Asian people, especially with the Mongolians." She listed several commonly cited examples: Both cultures revere horses, both have strong traditions of shamanism. Then she paused.

"We're both quite melancholic," she said. "Also, even though Hungarians are starting to become time-oriented like you Americans, it's not in our nature. We tend to be late, forget about dates. That is normal, too, in Mongolia."

---

Html by [Glenn Campbell](#). 8/18/95.