



# Resonance of Tradition: A Comprehensive Exploration of the Historical and Cultural Dimensions of Mongolian Ethnic Music in China

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the historical evolution and cultural inheritance of Mongolian ethnic music within China, particularly focusing on the nomadic traditions entrenched in Inner Mongolia. Tracing its roots from ancient times to the contemporary era, the research illuminates the profound connection between the musical heritage of the Mongolian people and their nomadic lifestyle. Through a meticulous historical analysis and literature review, the study unfolds the intricate layers of Mongolian ethnic music, showcasing the significance of traditional instruments and vocal techniques. The paper explores the impact of imperial influences, socio-political changes, and the challenges faced in the past decades on the musical landscape. Furthermore, it highlights the contemporary expressions and global resonance of Mongolian ethnic music, emphasizing its role as a cultural ambassador. The research not only contributes to the nuanced understanding of this musical tradition but also adds valuable insights to the broader field of ethnomusicology, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and addressing the dynamics of cultural preservation in a global context.

**Keywords:** Mongolian Ethnic Music, Inner Mongolia, Nomadic Traditions, Cultural Inheritance, Ethnomusicology

## I. Introduction

China's vast and diverse cultural landscape encompasses a myriad of ethnic groups, each with its own unique traditions, including distinctive forms of music that serve as sonic reflections of their cultural identity. One such rich musical heritage is found within the Mongolian ethnic community residing in China's Inner Mongolian region. The exploration of the historical evolution and cultural inheritance of Mongolian ethnic music in China is a scholarly endeavor that unveils layers of significance within the broader context of ethnomusicology.

Mongolian ethnic music, deeply embedded in the nomadic traditions of the Inner Mongolian grasslands, encapsulates the spirit of a people intimately connected to the natural environment. The nomadic lifestyle, characterized by vast expanses of open terrain and a close relationship with livestock, has profoundly influenced the musical expressions of the Mongolian people<sup>[1]</sup>. Traditional instruments such as the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle) and throat singing techniques serve as cultural artifacts, preserving a sonic narrative that echoes the ebb and flow of nomadic life<sup>[2]</sup>.

The historical evolution of Mongolian ethnic music in China has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical events, cultural interactions, and socio-political changes<sup>[3]</sup>. From the influences of imperial court music during the Ming and Qing dynasties to the challenges posed by the in the 20th century, the music of the Mongolian ethnic group has undergone transformations that reflect broader shifts in China's sociocultural landscape. Understanding these historical contours is essential for unraveling the layers of meaning embedded in contemporary expressions of Mongolian ethnic music.

This study aims to uncover the historical evolution and cultural inheritance of Mongolian ethnic music in China, with a focus on the nomadic traditions of Inner Mongolia. By tracing the musical journey from ancient times to the present day, the research seeks to illuminate the unique sonic expressions embedded in the nomadic lifestyle, showcasing the significance of traditional instruments like the morin khuur and throat singing techniques<sup>[4]</sup>. Through this exploration, the study endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the musical narrative that mirrors the ebb and flow of life on the Inner Mongolian grasslands.

The significance of this research lies in its dual contribution to the appreciation of Mongolian ethnic music and the broader field of ethnomusicology. By unraveling historical contours and synthesizing insights from extensive literature reviews, the study enriches our understanding of the unique cultural depth of Mongolian music. Furthermore, it sheds light on preservation efforts, educational initiatives, and the contemporary adaptability of this musical tradition, contributing valuable knowledge to the global discourse on the preservation of cultural heritage and the dynamic evolution of music within specific cultural contexts. This research is positioned to foster cross-cultural dialogue, emphasizing the global relevance of Mongolian ethnic music and its role as a cultural ambassador on the world stage.

## II. Literature Review

Existing scholarly works offer valuable insights into various aspects of Mongolian ethnic music, contributing to the understanding of its unique features, historical transformations, and cultural significance.

Ethnomusicological studies on Mongolian ethnic music provide a foundational understanding of the musical traditions within the broader context of China's diverse ethnic groups. Works by scholars such as Tsultem<sup>[5]</sup>, who examined the



nomadic music of the Mongolian people, and Liang, who explored the intersection of traditional Mongolian music and contemporary influences, offer comprehensive overviews of the musical elements, including distinctive instruments like the morin khuur and throat singing techniques<sup>[6]</sup>. Scholarly investigations into the historical evolution of Mongolian ethnic music offer crucial insights into the interplay of cultural, political, and social forces. Works by historians like Wang and Zhao trace the influences of imperial court music during the Ming and Qing dynasties and shed light on the challenges faced by Mongolian music. These historical analyses form a contextual backdrop for understanding the dynamic changes that have shaped the musical heritage over time<sup>[7]</sup>.

Research focusing on the preservation and transmission of ethnic music in China, particularly within Mongolian communities, is paramount to understanding how cultural inheritance occurs. Studies by Zhang and Liu<sup>[8]</sup> <sup>[9]</sup>, which explore the role of education and institutional support in sustaining traditional music, provide a lens through which to examine contemporary efforts in preserving and transmitting Mongolian ethnic music within the context of China's evolving cultural landscape. Literature addressing the contemporary relevance of Mongolian ethnic music in the face of globalization and modern influences is also pertinent to this study. Scholars like Hu and Cheng investigate the impact of global trends on traditional music, offering insights into how Mongolian ethnic music adapts, evolves, or faces challenges in the 21st century<sup>[10]</sup> <sup>[11]</sup>.

Finally, works that study the intersections of Mongolian ethnic music with global audiences contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural dialogue. The studies by Yang and Jin, for instance, examine how Mongolian music engages with international audiences and influences global perceptions of Chinese ethnic traditions<sup>[12]</sup>.

### III. Research Methods

#### 1. Historical Analysis:

**Scope and Framework:** The study employs historical analysis to trace the evolution of Mongolian ethnic music within the context of China. This involves an in-depth examination of historical records, archives, and scholarly works to construct a chronological narrative. The historical framework spans key periods from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the contemporary era.

**Primary and Secondary Sources:** Primary sources include historical documents, court records, and oral histories, providing authentic insights into the historical trajectory of Mongolian ethnic music. Secondary sources encompass scholarly publications, research articles, and historical analyses by experts in the fields of Chinese history and musicology.

#### 2. Comparative Analysis:

**Cross-Cultural Examination:** The research incorporates a comparative analysis by examining Mongolian ethnic music in the broader context of Chinese and global musical traditions. This approach aims to identify influences, similarities, and distinctions, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between Mongolian music and larger cultural currents.

#### 3. Literature Review Integration:

**Synthesis of Existing Research:** The research methods involve synthesizing existing literature to contextualize findings. Integrating insights from previous studies enriches the analysis, providing a foundation for comparing historical trends, cultural practices, and musical expressions within Mongolian ethnic music.

### IV. Historical Evolution

#### 1. Ancient Time

The cradle of Mongolian ethnic music lies in the vast expanse of the Mongolian grasslands, where nomadic communities cultivated a rich tapestry of musical traditions. The sonic landscape of the steppe resonated with the rhythms of nomadic life, capturing the essence of a people intimately connected to nature. Traditional instruments, such as the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle) and the khoomei (throat singing), emerged as iconic elements in the musical repertoire, each note echoing the vastness of the grasslands and the nomadic spirit.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the Mongols' ancestors resided in the Erguna River basin, a pristine forest located in the Great Xing'an Mountains of Inner Mongolia. They sustained themselves through hunting and gathering. As a reflection of their hunting lifestyle, their music exhibited a fundamental style known as the "ancient short tune." During this period, the primary music genres encompassed shamanistic songs and dances, hula, hunting songs, heroic epics, and self-indulgent collective songs and dances. For instance, the Horqin region featured shamanic dance music such as "Baomule Zan."

In 840 A.D., a significant transformation occurred in the ethnic composition of the Mongolian Plateau. Migratory birds, pressed by northern craftsmen, departed from the central region of the Mongolian plateau and migrated westward. Seizing this unprecedented opportunity, the Mongolian ancestors courageously migrated from the virgin forests of the Daxinganling Mountains to the heart of the Mongolian plateau.

Subsequently, the Mongols transitioned from a hunting society to a nomadic one, resulting in a radical shift in their way of life. They progressively distanced themselves from the hunting culture prevalent in mountains and forests, embracing the nomadic culture of the steppe. This transformation had a profound impact on Mongolian music as well. As music tailored to the nomadic lifestyle, its basic style evolved into the "long tune." During this era, the main music genres included melodious pastoral songs, the choral ensemble known as "chaoer," and the horse-head fiddle, among others. Notable examples of this musical transformation are the "Pastoral Song" and the "Little Yellow Horse."

#### 2. Modern Period

Following the Opium War, the Qing Dynasty faced a crisis, prompting the adoption of the "Immigration and Border Realization" policy for Mongolia. Consequently, vast grassland pastures were converted into farmland. This shift

disrupted the traditional nomadic lifestyle of Mongols along the Great Wall, leading to a gradual abandonment of animal husbandry in favor of agriculture. Culturally, this transition marked a departure from the nomadic steppe culture towards that of agricultural farming villages .

Local Mongols, adapting to this change, constructed houses and settled in dispersed villages across the region. Concurrently, their music underwent transformation. Long-keyed folk songs, once integral to daily life, began to wane and eventually vanished. In contrast, a new genre of short-keyed folk songs emerged, gaining prominence. During this period, prevalent musical genres included short love songs, long narrative songs, and "Huren Uyunligar" (Mongolian storytelling), exemplified by long narrative songs such as "Gadamerin," "Senjidema," and "Bisman Girl" .

Traditional Mongolian society comprised an upper class of feudal lords, including princes, nobles, and high-ranking monastic lamas, and a lower class of wealthy country households, ordinary people, and general lamas. While some genres like *chaoer dao* and *asl* were monopolized by the aristocracy, most were shared across society. Long tune folk songs served as a shared cultural expression—from princes and nobles to common herdsman. These songs were performed in various contexts:

- Royal ceremonies or feasts for princes and nobles, differing between the Abaga and Abahanal flags in the royal house of Chao Er Dao and the Chahar banners.
- Large-scale ceremonial events like Naadam conferences and Ovoo sacrifices, featuring a repertoire that included Chaoer Road and Tuyendao genres.
- Folk rituals, including New Year's Day, birthdays, children's celebrations, housewarming banquets, weddings, and other occasions with a blend of ceremonial and entertainment songs.
- Self-indulgent singing during daily labor, a common practice.
- Milk songs, sung during lambing times.

Historical surveys in Urumqin, Sunit, Abaga-Abahanal regions revealed that, especially in the royal family, monasteries, and various ceremonies, long tunes predominated. This underscores the pervasive use of long tunes across all facets of Mongolian production and life .

### **3. Post-1949: Dual Transmission Channels for Mongolian Music**

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mongolian music underwent a bifurcation in transmission, manifesting through two distinct channels: grassroots and national. Post-liberation, renowned folk artists like Modge, Hazab, Baoyin Deliger, and Zhaunastu were not only invited to professional stages but also engaged in educational institutions. Consequently, the development of long tunes became segregated into grassroots and national inheritance pathways. Over an extended period, these two trajectories evolved in parallel, occasionally complementing each other. Despite the challenges faced by long tune folk songs and other national traditional music in the tumultuous half-century since the country's founding, their trajectory hinted at an overall tendency toward decline. Nonetheless, a relatively unbroken transmission persisted among herders in certain regions. Attempts to reform song structures met with limited success.

During the initial years of the PRC's founding, the government introduced several exceptional ethnic music genres, including the long tune, horse head qin, storytelling, Hao Lai Bao, and the four hu, to professional stages and art colleges. The long tune, primarily a traditional folk song, maintained its essence while being influenced by regional styles, particularly those of Xilingol and Hulunbeier, embodied by Modge, Hazab, Baoyin Deliger, and Zhaonastu. Unfortunately, local traditions such as the Horqin long tune failed to attain recognition as professional long tunes. As professional long tunes developed, a convergence occurred in styles and repertoire, with the Xilingol and Hulunbeier styles emerging as models for Inner Mongolia's professional long tune field. Singers from literary groups embraced the skills and styles of renowned performers like Hazab and Baoyin Deliger, leading to a blending of techniques and repertoire. This trend, in turn, impacted ethnic music throughout Inner Mongolia, erasing distinctions based on regional origins and posing a particular threat to the already precarious survival and inheritance of the Horqin long tune.

### **4. Late 1970s and Early 1980s: The Partial Revival of Long Tunes**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, amid a more relaxed political and economic atmosphere, the long tune experienced a partial revival. As civil society reclaimed traditional ways of life, herders rekindled their interest in singing and learning long tunes. Numerous cultural and artistic groups introduced accomplished folk singers to enrich professional stages, while higher education institutions established specialized programs in long tunes. However, this revival remained localized, unable to fully restore the ecology of pastoral folk songs. Particularly in the 1980s, as reform and opening up intensified, a myriad of popular culture and new entertainment forms emerged, blending into the musical life of herders. The long tune lost its once-dominant position, becoming just one element in a diverse musical and cultural landscape .

### **5. 1980s Onward: Cultural Exchanges and Mongolian Music's Spread**

Since the 1980s, with deepening exchanges between China and Mongolia, Mongolian music and art found their way into Inner Mongolia. Popular music and songs quickly gained popularity among the Mongolian populace. With the rise of radio, television broadcasting, and modern music media like CD and VCD players, Mongolian music permeated pastoral areas. The survey observed extensive sales of Mongolian records in Xilingol flags, towns, and soums, surpassing domestic records. Mongolian songs echoed through the flags, soums, herding areas, city roads, hospitality banquets, song competitions, Ulan Maktoum performances, and herders' family weddings. Young people embraced Mongolian pop singers and bands, showcasing their familiarity with several Mongolian songs .

### **6. Early 21st Century: Diversification of Music Styles**

The contemporary musical life of the Mongolian population manifested as a blend of multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-level, multi-era, and multi-genre musical cultures. The Han Chinese population in Inner Mongolia primarily resided in

towns and cities, with little presence in pastoral areas. Despite their significant numbers in Xilingol, the Han Chinese lacked a distinct local musical culture, gravitating toward mainstream musical and cultural trends. Nevertheless, their influence on the musical life of the Mongolian people proved significant. The long tune, as a representative art genre of the Mongolian people, attained the prestigious designation of "Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO in 2005. This recognition spurred vigorous efforts in its protection and inheritance by the state, autonomous regions, and other areas in Inner Mongolia. Beyond Xilingol, Alashan, and Hulunbeier, regions with rich long-tone folk song resources, local efforts emerged to search, excavate, confirm, rescue, protect, and restore long tunes. Tongliao City and Xing'an League banners, central to Horqin culture, initiated the search and reorganization of local long tunes. A significant outcome was the publication of "Horqin Long Tune Folk Songs" (in Mongolian, Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 2006), compiled by Horqin national ethnomusicologist Ulan Jie. The book, based on years of investigation, features 91 folk songs of Horqin long tune, along with records of 72 related singers. This publication not only reveals the once-rich resources of long-tune folk songs in Horqin but also provides valuable information, serving as a crucial basis for the restoration and reconstruction of Horqin long-tune folk songs.

#### **V. Musical Characteristics of Mongolian ethnic music**

Mongolian ethnic music primarily adheres to a pentatonic scale, devoid of semitones, where each tone can function as the dominant in modulation. Levitation and plagal tones often serve as dominant tuning elements. The melodic structure exhibits significant fluctuations, marked by substantial jumps of six, seven, eight, nine, or ten degrees. The range is expansive, typically spanning fourteen or more degrees, conveying a sense of vastness and exuberance that mirrors the bold and generous character traits of the Mongolian people. The vocal technique involves the use of both true and false voices, characterized by high pitch, loud and clear tones, and dynamic modulations. Singers frequently embellish long, slow tones with decorative notes or trills to evoke lively moods or euphemistic styles. Concluding sentences with short upward glissandos enhances the softness and mellowness of the tunes. Additionally, the Mongolian singing method known as "chaoer" or "huomei" employs mouth air vibrations to resonate vocal cords, creating a continuous low note with simultaneous high notes, typically performed by multiple individuals, adding depth and complexity to the music <sup>[13]</sup>.

The rhythmic aspects of Mongolian ethnic music can be broadly categorized into two types. One exhibits clear rhythms, often in two or four beats, with occasional compound beats that maintain the fundamental duality. The second type features more obscure and slower rhythms, sometimes resisting easy division by bar lines. Even if divided, the time values of beats may not be uniformly equal, and the distinction between light and heavy beats remains subtle. Consequently, Mongolian folk songs are characterized by a strong melodic emphasis and relatively weak rhythm. Commonly used musical instruments include the Horse-head fiddle, Fire-bush, Sihu, Three-string, Mongolian Zither, Mongolian Pipa, Hu Jia, Xinglong Sheng, and Flute<sup>[14]</sup>. Mongolian instrumental music is known for its softness and quietness, with the Horse-head fiddle being the most representative instrument. It possesses a low and soft tone, subtle volume, and rich expressive capabilities, making it suitable for solo, ensemble, and accompaniment roles. Besides playing melodies, the Horse-head fiddle excels in conveying the dynamic sounds of running and neighing horses. Much of Mongolian instrumental music draws inspiration from the melodies of folk songs

#### **VI. Conclusion and Future Perspectives**

In conclusion, the study unravels the intricate layers of significance embedded in the historical trajectory and contemporary expressions of this musical tradition. The research makes noteworthy contributions to the field of ethnomusicology. By meticulously tracing the musical journey of the Mongolian ethnic community from ancient times to the present day, the study unravels the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors that have shaped this musical tradition. The incorporation of diverse research methods, including historical analysis, comparative examination, and literature review integration, enhances the methodological repertoire of ethnomusicology. Moreover, the paper emphasizes the global relevance of Mongolian ethnic music, positioning it as a cultural ambassador that engages in cross-cultural dialogue. The focus on preservation efforts, educational initiatives, and the contemporary adaptability of Mongolian music contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on the preservation of cultural heritage and the dynamic evolution of music within specific cultural contexts. Overall, this research enriches the understanding of Mongolian ethnic music while advancing the methodologies and thematic scope of ethnomusicological studies.

Contemporary efforts in preservation and transmission, particularly through educational initiatives, play a pivotal role in ensuring the continuity of Mongolian ethnic music. Institutions of learning, both within Inner Mongolia and beyond, contribute to passing down this cultural treasure to the younger generation. Future perspectives on the cultural inheritance of Mongolian ethnic music involve a continued focus on preservation and transmission. Efforts should be intensified to document and safeguard the diverse elements of this musical heritage. Collaborative initiatives between educational institutions, cultural organizations, and communities can further strengthen the foundation for future generations. Additionally, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and international collaborations will contribute to a deeper understanding of Mongolian ethnic music on the global stage. Research endeavors should explore innovative ways to integrate traditional elements with contemporary expressions, ensuring the continued relevance and vibrancy of Mongolian ethnic music in the 21st century.

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