



From Grasslands to Global Beats: A Study of Mongolian Ethnic Music Integration in Chinese Pop

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Abstract: This study goes into the integration of Mongolian Ethnic Music into Chinese pop culture, exploring its historical roots, musical characteristics, and contemporary manifestations. Mongolian Ethnic Music, rooted in millennia of tradition and nomadic heritage, reflects the spiritual essence and cultural richness of the Mongolian people. Through an examination of ancient origins, influences of shamanism and Buddhism, and modern developments, the evolution of Mongolian music is traced, showcasing its diverse melodic, rhythmic, and tonal qualities. The classification of Mongolian music genres and styles, including the Hulunbuir, Xilingol, Ordos, and Alxa styles, highlights regional distinctions and stylistic variations. Furthermore, the study examines the integration of Mongolian Ethnic Music into Chinese pop through the works of renowned musicians such as Tengger, Han Lei, and Dege Ma, exemplifying a fusion of traditional melodies with modern sensibilities. Ulan Tuya, Qi Feng, and Yang Weiling represent contemporary artists contributing to the diversification of Chinese pop music with their unique styles. This exploration underscores the cultural significance of Mongolian Ethnic Music as a bridge between traditions, enriching the global music landscape while preserving the heritage of the Mongolian people.

Keywords: Mongolian Ethnic Music, Chinese pop culture, integration, musical characteristics, historical roots, contemporary manifestations

I. Introduction

Mongolian Ethnic Music stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and illustrious history of the Mongolian people. With a legacy spanning millennia, the Mongolian ethnic group boasts a distinct cultural identity characterized by its vibrant traditions and unique customs (Figure 1). At the heart of this cultural tapestry lies traditional Mongolian music, an art form that reflects the essence of Mongolian culture with its rich diversity, historical significance, and regional distinctiveness.



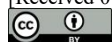
Figure 1, Mongolia people (Source, www.fengsuwang.com)



Figure 2, morin khuur (horsehead fiddle)

Dating back to ancient times, Mongolian folk music traces its origins to the daily lives and labor of nomadic Mongolian herdsman on the vast steppes. This music serves as a reflection of the Mongolian people's experiences, emotions, beliefs, and history. Throughout the ages, folk songs have served as a vital conduit for cultural transmission, preserving the collective memory and spiritual essence of the Mongolian people. Whether celebrating love and marriage, recounting heroic tales of the grasslands, or venerating the beauty of nature, Mongolian folk songs capture the essence of Mongolian life and customs^[1].

Mongolian folk music can be broadly categorized into two main genres: ceremonial songs and pastoral songs. Characterized by their grandiose vocal delivery, soaring melodies, and evocative lyrics, these songs showcase the rich



tapestry of Mongolian culture and heritage. From the majestic landscapes of the grasslands to the timeless traditions of nomadic life, Mongolian folk music serves as a lyrical tribute to the beauty, resilience, and spirit of the Mongolian people. Central to the allure of Mongolian folk music are its distinctive vocal techniques, traditional instruments, and melodic structures. Throat singing, or "Khoomei," is a mesmerizing vocal technique unique to Mongolian music, where singers produce multiple pitches simultaneously, creating harmonies that echo the vastness of the Mongolian landscape. Complemented by traditional instruments such as the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle) and the tobshuur (two-stringed lute), Mongolian folk music embodies a rich tapestry of sound that captivates audiences with its beauty and depth. (figure 2) As custodians of a cultural legacy that spans centuries, the Mongolian people continue to cherish and preserve their musical heritage as a source of pride and identity. Whether performed at festive celebrations, cultural events, or everyday gatherings, Mongolian folk music remains a vibrant expression of the timeless spirit and enduring legacy of the Mongolian people. Through its evocative melodies, poignant lyrics, and profound cultural significance, Mongolian ethnic music continues to captivate audiences and serve as a testament to the enduring resilience and cultural richness of the Mongolian people^[2].

II. Literature Review

The literature surrounding Mongolian ethnic music integration in Chinese pop encompasses a diverse array of perspectives and research methodologies. Palmer et al. delve into the intersection of popular music, postmodernism, and the poetics of place, shedding light on how ethnic diversity in music enables marginalized populations to assert their cultural identity within mainstream culture. Their work underscores the complex dynamics of ethnicity, culture, and identity in contemporary music^[3].

Pegg^[4] provides insight into the rich diversity of Mongolian music, dance, and oral narrative, highlighting the role of these expressive forms in shaping diverse identities. By showcasing the myriad repertoires and performance arts of Mongolia's peoples, Pegg emphasizes the cultural richness and complexity of Mongolian ethnic music. Amogolonova et al. ^[5] offer a unique perspective on the ethnosphere phenomenon in post-Soviet Buryatia, exploring how narratives of the past, national heroes, spirituality, language preservation, and community ties contribute to ethnic identity. Their study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity construction and preservation in contemporary contexts. Wu et al. ^[6] focus on enhancing the attractiveness of Mongolian folk songs, suggesting strategies to engage audiences and promote cultural appreciation. Meanwhile, Guan et al. ^[7] investigate the impact of intercultural music courses on intergroup attitudes among middle school students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in China, highlighting the potential of music education to foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Additionally, Guan et al.^[8] advocate for a multicultural approach to music education in China, emphasizing the importance of incorporating ethnic music and native languages to enhance students' ethnic identity. Their findings underscore the role of music teachers and collective musical engagement in promoting cultural diversity and inclusion in educational settings. Ma et al. ^[9] contribute to the literature by studying the transmission of Yugu folk song knowledge in Sunan County, Gansu Province, China. Their research sheds light on the unique characteristics of Yugu music and the challenges and opportunities associated with preserving and transmitting folk song knowledge within the Yugu community.

Other influential works, such as Krüger , Whitener , and Si et al. , further enrich our understanding of the cultural, educational, and societal dimensions of Mongolian ethnic music integration in China^{[10] [11] [12]}. These studies collectively contribute to a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexities and implications of cultural fusion and identity formation in the realm of music.

III. Development and Formation of Mongolian Ethnic Music

Mongolian Ethnic Music has a rich and diverse history that spans thousands of years, reflecting the cultural heritage and nomadic lifestyle of the Mongolian people. The music has evolved and developed through various historical periods, influenced by interactions with neighboring cultures, social changes, and the spiritual beliefs of the Mongolian community. The development and formation of Mongolian Ethnic Music can be traced through several key stages.

3.1 Ancient Origins:

The origins of Mongolian Ethnic Music can be traced back to ancient times when the Mongolian people lived as nomadic pastoralists on the vast grasslands of Central Asia. During this period, known as the Mountain and Forest Hunting Era, the ancestors of the Mongolian people resided in the primal forests of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Their livelihood primarily revolved around hunting and gathering, with music serving as a reflection of their labor. This era, characterized by short tunes, akin to the "labor chants" in Han Chinese music culture, encompassed ritual songs, hunting chants, epic narratives, and throat singing^[13].

3.2 Influence of Shamanism:

Shamanism played a significant role in the development of Mongolian Ethnic Music, with shamanic practices deeply intertwined with Mongolian culture. Music formed an integral part of shamanic rituals, with shamanic songs, known as urtyu duu, featuring unique vocal styles, including throat singing, believed to possess healing and spiritual properties^[14].

3.3 Influence of Buddhism:

The 13th century marked a significant transformation in Mongolian Ethnic Music with the introduction of Buddhism to Mongolia. Buddhist chants and rituals integrated into Mongolian music brought forth new melodic structures, vocal

techniques, and instruments. Buddhist monasteries emerged as vital centers for music preservation and development, contributing to the formation of a distinctive Buddhist music tradition within Mongolian Ethnic Music^[15].

3.4 Influence of the Qing Dynasty:

In the 17th century, the Mongolian region fell under the rule of the Qing Dynasty in China, leading to the infusion of Chinese musical elements into Mongolian Ethnic Music. The Qing Dynasty's late-stage corruption prompted policies such as mass migration and grassland cultivation, altering the traditional way of life for Mongolian people. This cultural assimilation between Mongolian and Han Chinese cultures, including music, enriched short tunes and matured long tunes, making them more suitable for widespread dissemination.

3.5 Modern Developments:

In the 20th century, Mongolian Ethnic Music underwent further transformations due to socio-political changes and modernization efforts. The establishment of the Mongolian State Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1940s introduced Western classical music influences, resulting in the integration of orchestral arrangements and Western instruments into Mongolian music compositions.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to preserve and revitalize traditional Mongolian Ethnic Music. Efforts include documenting and transcribing traditional melodies, promoting traditional singing techniques, and educating younger generations about this cultural heritage. Contemporary Mongolian musicians have also explored innovative fusions of traditional and modern music genres, contributing to the evolution and continued relevance of Mongolian Ethnic Music.

IV.Characteristics of Mongolian Ethnic Music

Mongolian Ethnic Music is characterized by its rich ethnic flavor, serving as a significant component of the "borderland songs" and contributing significantly to the advancement, inheritance, and optimization of such songs.

4.1 Melodic Characteristics:

The melodies of Mongolian Ethnic Music possess a unique charm, offering a sense of expansiveness and emotional depth both in performance and appreciation. With a wide range, the melodies often follow a parabolic trajectory, commonly referred to as an "arch" shape. Consequently, there are frequent large leaps in the melody, with intervals of the seventh, ninth, and eleventh being commonly employed. A typical song may include fourteen to fifteen large interval jumps, demanding strict vocal control from the performer to interpret the piece perfectly. Additionally, vocal techniques such as sustained notes, vibrato, and embellishments are often employed, as seen in songs like "Farewell Song" and "The Prosperous Younger Brother."

4.2 Rhythmic Characteristics:

The rhythm of Mongolian Ethnic Music can be categorized into two types: "long tunes" and "short tunes," each contributing to distinctive melodic and rhythmic qualities.

"Long tunes" generally feature a relaxed rhythm with subtle variations in emphasis, characterized by a prevalence of melodic phrases over lyrics. These songs often express emotions of praise or homesickness, incorporating interjections such as "ah" and "hey," resulting in irregular rhythmic patterns that combine both fast and slow, tight and loose elements. On the other hand, "short tunes" exhibit a structured and clear rhythmic pattern, predominantly in duple or quadruple meters. The beats are usually fixed and follow a two- or four-phrase structure, exemplified by songs like "Gada Meilin."

4.3 Tonal Characteristics:

Most Mongolian Ethnic songs adhere to the pentatonic scale, with the Huai mode being predominant in earlier compositions, followed by the Gong and Shang modes, and the Yu mode being the least common. However, with cultural integration, there has been a shift in musical styles towards more melodic compositions, with the Yu mode gradually becoming the primary mode, followed closely by others. This change is reflective of the evolving preferences for smoother melodies among listeners.

V. the Classification of Mongolian Ethnic Music Genres and Styles

The classification of Mongolian Ethnic Music genres and styles primarily stems from regional distinctions, with variations in style and genre attributed to differences in tribes and geographical locations. There are four main stylistic divisions: the Hulunbuir, Xilingol, Ordos, and Alxa styles.

Hulunbuir Style:

This style is predominantly found in the Hulunbuir League region, characterized by a focus on pure tonality and dynamic vocal delivery akin to the undulating peaks of mountains, showcasing advanced singing techniques. Control over breath is crucial in this style, ensuring smooth vocal lines even amidst fluctuating pitches. Songs in this style are often passionate and exuberant, reflecting high spirits and emotional fervor, with an overall style marked by vigor and sweetness.

Xilingol Style: The Xilingol style is primarily found in the Xilingol and Ulanqab regions, known for its splendid and expansive style. Vocals in this style are characterized by smoothness and restrained elegance, emphasizing the use of ethnic singing techniques such as "Huogula" and "Nuogula," which add a touch of grandeur to the songs. The Xilingol style is the only one that continues to employ the "Chaorduo" song art and method.

Ordos Style: The Ordos style, prevalent in the Ejina Banner region, emphasizes simplicity and sincerity in singing style, with minimal use of embellishments. It mainly employs the "Nuogula" singing technique, contrasting starkly with the style of Xilingol.

Alxa Style: The Alxa style, primarily circulated in the Alxa League region, focuses on tonal variations and employs vocal techniques such as "Qiqirige," "Hayalaga," and "Delesu He," characterized by the use of vibrato and embellishments. Songs in this style often feature prolonged tail notes, with an overall tone that is deep, solemn, and serene.

VI. Mongolian Ethnic Music Integration in Chinese Pop

After years of modernization and transformation, Mongolian ethnic music culture has demonstrated remarkably open diversity. A multifaceted music culture has emerged among the Mongolian people, encompassing diverse ethnicities (such as Mongolian and Han), multiple countries (including China and Mongolia), various levels (professional and amateur), different eras (past and modern), and a range of genres (traditional and creative). Notably, several renowned Mongolian music artists have successfully brought Mongolian music into the realm of popular music, influencing a significant number of music enthusiasts and listeners. Below are several prominent musicians and their works that exemplify the fusion of Mongolian ethnic music with modern pop music.

Tengger rose to fame after winning the championship in a popular song competition in 1989. He gained recognition in 1986 with his composition and performance of the song "Mongolian People." His grassland-style pop songs, such as "Heaven" and "Mongolian People," have become widely popular, earning him the title of a "model soldier" in the artistic community. (figure 3)



Figure 3 Tengger



figure 4 Han Lei



figure 5 Dege Ma

Han Lei, born in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia in 1968, is a Chinese male singer. Since entering the Chinese pop music scene in 1991, he has sung nearly 700 film and television songs. His notable works include "Borrowing Five Hundred Years from Heaven," "Traveling Far and Wide," and "Waiting," earning him the title of the "voice of emperors." (figure 4)

Dege Ma, a renowned Chinese mezzo-soprano and a national first-class actress, hails from Ejina Banner, Inner Mongolia. Her song "Beautiful Grassland, My Home" made her famous nationwide in 1979. Dege Ma's singing voice is rich and mellifluous, with a wide vocal range and profound emotional expression. She has successfully combined Mongolian long-tone singing with bel canto, establishing herself as a unique figure in ethnic vocal music.(figure 5)

Ulan Tuya: Born on the beautiful grasslands of Hulunbuir, Ulan Tuya is known for her songs like "Lasso Pole," "I'm Waiting for You on the Grassland," and "Fiery Sarila." As a professional ethnic singer, Ulan Tuya possesses deep vocal skills and a unique voice that captivates listeners. Her singing style can be described as lively, beautiful, crisp, and sweet, adding finesse to Mongolian grassland songs.(figure 6)



figure 6 Ulan Tuya:



figure 7 Qi Feng



figure 8 Phoenix Legend

Qi Feng, born into a military musician family of Mongolian ethnicity in Hohhot, possesses an innate sense of Mongolian music despite growing up in the city. His representative works include "Love of Ordos" and "Blue Mongolian Plateau." Qi Feng's singing style combines long and short tones, gradually evolving into a beautiful singing style over the years, garnering him a large following of loyal fans.(figure 7)

Yang Weiling (Ulaan Chimeg): the lead singer of the Chinese mainland singing group Phoenix Legend, hails from the Ordos Grassland in Inner Mongolia. Her vibrant and distinctive voice, reminiscent of the old generation of Ulan Muqirij, has earned her the title of the female version of "Tengger." Phoenix Legend was the runner-up on CCTV's Star Avenue and released albums such as "Most Dazzling National Style" and "I Come from the Grassland." (figure 8) These musicians exemplify the integration of Mongolian ethnic music into Chinese pop, contributing to the diversification and enrichment of the contemporary music landscape in China. Through their unique styles and creative endeavors, they bridge cultural boundaries, enriching the tapestry of Chinese pop music with the vibrant colors of Mongolian ethnic music.

VII. Conclusion

This study explored the rich tapestry of Mongolian Ethnic Music and its integration into Chinese pop culture. Mongolian music, with its roots in ancient traditions and nomadic lifestyles, has evolved through various historical periods, influenced by shamanism, Buddhism, and cultural interactions. From the primal forests of the Greater Khingan Mountains to the modern era of globalized pop music, Mongolian Ethnic Music has remained a vibrant expression of the Mongolian people's identity and cultural heritage.

The characteristics of Mongolian Ethnic Music, including its melodic, rhythmic, and tonal qualities, reflect the diverse landscapes and traditions of Mongolia. Through throat singing, traditional instruments like the morin khuur, and distinct regional styles, Mongolian music captivates audiences with its beauty and depth. The integration of Mongolian Ethnic Music into Chinese pop represents a convergence of cultures and artistic expressions. Renowned musicians like Tengger, Han Lei, and Dege Ma have successfully blended Mongolian melodies with modern pop sensibilities, reaching a wide audience and influencing the contemporary music scene. Ulan Tuya, Qi Feng, and Yang Weiling further exemplify this fusion, contributing to the diversification and enrichment of Chinese pop music with their unique styles and voices.

As Mongolian Ethnic Music continues to evolve in the context of globalized music culture, it serves as a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Mongolian people. Through innovation and collaboration, Mongolian musicians uphold their cultural heritage while embracing new artistic possibilities. The integration of Mongolian Ethnic Music into Chinese pop not only enriches the music landscape but also fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. In an ever-changing world, the timeless melodies and enduring spirit of Mongolian Ethnic Music continue to inspire and enchant audiences worldwide.

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