

A study on the mutual integration and evolution of musical elements in wedding rituals of Mongol-Han marriages in Ordos from a cultural interfusion perspective

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Abstract: Ordos, situated within the agricultural-pastoral ecotone of Inner Mongolia, represents a critical geographical and cultural area for the convergence of nomadic and agrarian lifestyles, as well as the integration of Mongol and Han traditions. The historical "Zou Xikou" migration, involving a large-scale movement of Han Chinese into the region over centuries, has gradually transformed Mongol-Han intermarriage from a longstanding social taboo into a widely accepted norm, fostering deeper cross-cultural exchanges. Wedding music, as a vital medium for displaying ethnic identity and heritage, vividly illustrates processes of co-creation and adaptive change through ongoing intercultural interaction. Current academic studies predominantly focus on broader folk songs or marriage customs, often neglecting the specific mechanisms, practical applications, and cultural significance of wedding music within intermarriage contexts. Adopting a cultural integration framework, this paper examines the dynamics of Mongol-Han coexistence in Ordos, compares traditional wedding music forms of the two ethnic groups, analyzes emerging fusion patterns of ritual music in cross-ethnic marriages, and explores the socio-historical factors driving these musical transformations. The findings advance the understanding of how Chinese folk music functions as an expressive vehicle for ethnic identity, revealing the nuanced mechanisms through which cultural elements evolve and interact within multi-ethnic communities.

Keywords: Ordos; Mongol-Han intermarriage; musical elements in wedding ceremonies; cultural integration; evolution

1 Introduction

Ordos, in southwest Inner Mongolia, is bordered by the Yellow River to the west, north, and east, and the Loess Plateau of Shanxi and Shaanxi to the south. It has long been a site of interaction between nomadic and agricultural cultures. Since the Qing Dynasty, the "Zou Xikou" migration brought many Han people from Shanxi and Shaanxi to areas like Zhungeer Banner and Dalate Banner in eastern Ordos, where they lived with Mongolians, leading to sustained cultural integration in daily life, production, customs, and arts. Marriage customs, as a typical carrier of ethnic culture, are a place for cultural exchange; wedding ritual music, embedded within such cultural mixing, manifests cultural integration through its stylistic transformations.

Previous studies typically either broadly analyze ethnic musical integration or focus on specific ethnic marriage customs; research on the integration process and logic of ritual music within Mongol-Han marriages remains scarce. Therefore, this paper investigates Mongol-Han intermarriage weddings in Ordos, tracing ritual music culture development

from a cultural integration perspective, and through analyzing actual forms and cultural values, provides new references for micro-studies of regional ethnic music.

2 The cultural foundations of musical performances at Mongol-Han intermarriage wedding rituals in Ordos

2.1 The historical and social context of coexistence between Mongols and Han Chinese

The integration of Mongolian and Han cultures in Ordos dates back to the Ming Dynasty, with large-scale exchange beginning in the mid-to-late Qing due to migration and land policies. As frontier policies loosened, Han farmers from Shanxi and Shaanxi moved to eastern Ordos, forming a coexisting pattern of "Mongolian nomads and Han farmers". Over time, close interaction led to mutual cultural assimilation in language, food, and customs, blurring traditional cultural boundaries between the two ethnic groups [1].

Marriage relationships embody profound ethnic integration, evolving alongside the development of interethnic unions. Research shows Mongol-Han intermarriage in Ordos shifted from prohibition to tolerance, becoming common in areas like Zhungeer Banner. Widespread bilingual competence and dual cultural identities have become commonplace, fostering musical interaction within wedding rituals. The Manhan tune, an artistic product of cultural integration, integrates bilingual linguistic elements and dual musical idioms, serving as a shared musical language for cross-ethnic marriages [2].

2.2 Differences in the original forms of musical instruments used in traditional Mongolian and Han weddings

The traditional Mongolian wedding ceremony in Ordos has a complete system of rituals and was listed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China in 2006. Its instrumental music and vocal singing bear strong ties to nomadic culture and accompany the entire wedding ceremony. Centered around folk singing, these wedding rituals feature musical instruments including the Morin Khuur, four-stringed Huqin, Sanxian and flute, shaping a unique comprehensive performance genre called "Nair". Wedding music is divided into two types: ceremonial songs and banquet songs. Ceremonial songs are linked to specific procedures of the wedding. For instance, chanting "Ode to the Bow and Arrow" and "Ode to the Steed" at the bride's departure, performing "The Farewell Song" before saying goodbye to the bride, and singing "The Wine Offering Song" during the sheep presentation and wine-drinking ceremony all have fixed ritual conventions. Feast songs are improvised during wedding banquet and cover a wide range of themes, including praise, affection, playful comic tunes. According to the old custom, solo public singing is forbidden throughout formal rituals; by contrast, music accompanies drinking for the entire duration of the feast [3].

3 The interdisciplinary representation and evolutionary logic of musical elements used in Mongol-Han wedding ceremonies

3.1 The practice of musical integration in ritual procedures

The Mongol-Han intermarriage ceremony is not just a traditional ethnic wedding ceremony; it has evolved to incorporate various types of music in a new way.

The wedding door-blocking ritual represents an integration of the Mongolian custom of welcoming the groom behind closed doors and the Han Chinese custom of stopping at a gate for good luck, thus forming a unique form of duet singing. The lyrics are in both Mongolian and Chinese, while its melody integrates Mongolian short-tune melodies with mountain folk tunes from Shanxi and Shaanxi.

The performing ensemble is a mixed instrumental group featuring both Mongolian and Han folk instruments, including the morin khuur and suona. The repertoire carries forward the cultural essence of both Mongolian and Han peoples, and there are various traditional pieces and festive tunes; through long-term collaborative instrumental performances, a new style of music has also been formed.

One prominent feature is mutual respect between the two ethnic cultures. According to the ethnic background of the bride and groom, their respective ritual music traditions are fully preserved, such as the musical accompaniment for Mongolian sheep-offering and wine-toasting rituals as well as Han wind and percussion music, and they work together to carry out the wedding ceremony.

3.2 The evolution of musical function and aesthetic orientation

The normalization of Mongolian-Han intermarriage has changed wedding music functions: from representing ethnic culture to expressing shared emotions and promoting social integration. Music serves as a symbol of cultural identity in intra-ethnic weddings and as a cultural bridge in intermarriage ceremonies, fostering interpersonal affinity and familial harmony. The ritual functions of Mongolian wedding songs have gradually diminished, and Han suona melodies have blended into folk popular music.

Aesthetically, the traditions influence each other: Mongolian long melodies were shortened to fit Han short-form rhythms, while Errentai incorporated the lyrical melodic features of Mongolian music. The Manhan tune embodies such cultural integration: it carries the grandeur of grassland style and the simplicity of local folk music, features bilingual Mongolian-Chinese lyrics, and is prevalent at cross-ethnic wedding ceremonies.

Driving factors behind this transformation are as follows. Daily interactions among ethnic groups increases cultural familiarity; families adjust music arrangements; simplified modern weddings adopt integrated musical styles. These developments lead to new forms of cultural dissemination for wedding music.

4 Conclusion

The coordinated application and evolution of music in the marriage rituals for Mongol and Han ethnic groups in Ordos represent a typical case of cross-cultural collaboration, exchange and integration among different ethnic groups in the agro-pastoral frontier area. In essence, this is the result of long-term cultural evolution and mutual integration within the daily lives of the Mongolian and Han peoples. This is not cultural assimilation, but the formation of a new type of folk musical culture; it preserves the original core cultural genes and evolves through the integration of ritual activities, the combination of musical instruments and repertoire, and shifts in cultural functions and aesthetic orientations.

This genre of music is deeply integrated into the daily lives of Ordos residents and has provided rich material to the research on folk music in this area so far. The harmony of the wedding music shows that the emotional ties among the Mongolian and Han peoples are growing steadily and their respective cultural identities are gradually intermingling; it is a beautiful scene that reinforces the sense of belonging for the Chinese nation at the grassroots. Therefore, by studying the cultural interactions at the micro level in areas of ethnic cohabitation, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the multi-ethnic unity pattern of the Chinese nation has been formed, and at the same time provide practical references for the dynamic inheritance and innovation of intangible cultural heritage in ethnic areas.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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