

A Study of Mongolian Regional Music Culture from the Dual Perspective of Epic and Instrument — A Comparative Analysis Centered on Mangasin Ulger and Khan Harangui

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the epic music of the eastern and western regions of the Mongolian ethnic group, selecting the Mangasin Ulger from the eastern Horqin region and the Khan Harangui from the western Oirat region as case studies. It analyzes the use, artistic characteristics, and cultural connotations of the Tsoor Khuur and the Tovshur in epic performances. By comparing the two instruments in terms of their accompaniment functions, performance techniques, and symbolic meanings, the paper reveals how regional and cultural differences influence the musical style of Mongolian epics.

Keywords: Mongolian epic; musical characteristics; cultural connotations

1. Introduction

The use of musical instruments holds significant importance in Mongolian epics such as Mangasin Ulger and Khan Harangui. If an epic can be seen as a painting, then the sound of instruments provides its background tone. Beyond serving as mere accompaniment in epic narration, instruments also carry symbolic meaning. This paper discusses the use and cultural implications of instruments in the two epics, highlighting their unique characteristics.

2. The Use and Cultural Connotations of the Tsoor Khuur in Mangasin Ulger

In the Horqin region of Inner Mongolia, the local people refer to heroic epics as Mangasin Ulger, a regional form of Mongolian epic poetry. These narratives primarily tell the story of reincarnated heroes who endure countless trials and hardships, vanquish demons, and defend their homeland. The performers of Mangasin Ulger, known in folk tradition as Mangasch, are also referred to as Tsoorchi, as they accompany their recitative storytelling with the Tsoor Khuur.

The Tsoor Khuur is an ancient instrument. Records from the Yuan dynasty, such as Zhongtang Jishi, mention a performer surnamed Zhang who played the Tsoor (referred to as “Zhang Tsoorchi”). Other ancient works, including the 14th-century Precepts of Genghis Khan, also contain references to the Tsoor Khuur. [1]

In traditional Mongolian cultural life, the Tsoor Khuur was primarily used to accompany heroic epics, especially suited for humming and narrative styles. It has endured the cultural transformation of the Horqin Mongols from nomadic grassland life to settled village agriculture, surviving within a context where Mongolian and Han cultures intermingle.

Most Tsoor Khuurs follow the traditional Horqin tuning method, with the outer string tuned as the higher string and the inner string as the lower one, typically in perfect fourths (A–d). There are two primary forms of Tsoor accompaniment in Mangasin Ulger:

Synchronous style, where the accompaniment and singing voices align. This style includes two methods: unison and harmonic accompaniment.

Alternating style, where instrumental passages alternate with singing.[2] These structures represent important artistic features of Mangghusin Uliger.

The performance techniques of the Tsoor Khuur present many characteristics worthy of further study and discussion. It is not only a beloved instrument among the Mongolian people, but also a bearer of rich cultural meaning and ethnic spirit. [3] Its unique tone and playing techniques fully reflect the traditional way of life and the spiritual characteristics of the Mongolian people.

3. The Use and Cultural Connotations of the Tovshuur in Khan Kharangui

Khan Kharangui is an Oirat Mongol epic popular in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, narrating the hero Khan Kharangui’s struggles, marriage to Lady Altantoli, and homeland defense. Performances typically feature the Tovshuur, a traditional plucked instrument made from poplar or pine, with goatskin soundboards and horsehair or gut strings. Its bright, nasal tone

complements epic narration perfectly.

The Tovshuur mainly uses synchronous accompaniment, where the accompaniment melody overlaps with the singer's voice, typically adopting unison relationships. The melodies are simple and highly repetitive to avoid interfering with the narration. In some scenes, the Tovshuur may employ alternating accompaniment, inserting short melodic fragments between the singer's lines to convey particular emotions or scenes, such as Khan Harangui's journey or the tension before battle.

The use of the Tovshuur in Khan Harangui extends beyond accompaniment, bearing rich cultural meanings. Firstly, as a significant instrument of the Oirat Mongols, the Tovshuur symbolizes cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Its handmade craftsmanship reflects nomadic wisdom, such as the use of horsehair strings and goatskin, highlighting the close relationship between the Mongols and nature.[4] In epic performances, the Tovshuur's timbre evokes images of steppe life. For example, Tsokhilt melodies can imitate wind or hoofbeats, immersing the audience in the adventures of Khan Harangui and reinforcing the epic's historical memory function.

Secondly, the Tovshuur holds ritualistic and mystical significance in Oirat epic performances. Studies show that it may be regarded as a medium for communication between humans and spirits, especially in shamanic contexts, where its music is endowed with sacred symbolism. [5] In Khan Harangui, the Tovshuur's melodies may depict scenes of divine guidance, such as the hero receiving revelations of destiny ("covenant" motif), thus enhancing the mystical atmosphere of the performance.

4. Artistic Features and Comparative Analysis of Epic Music in Eastern and Western Mongol Regions

Artistic Features about Eastern Horchin Region. The use of the Tsoor in Mangghus Uliger reflects the musical characteristics of the Horchin region. The Tsoor typically uses fourth tuning and double strings, creating a polyphonic sound. Its tone is ancient and rich, with abundant overtones, suitable for expressing deep emotional undertones in epics.

Tovshuur is primarily a plucked string instrument with a bright and slightly nasal tone. The melodies are mostly monophonic, emphasizing repetition and cyclic rhythms (Tsokhilt pattern), as shown in the score. [6] This rhythmic model suits the narrative style of epics and allows for improvisational singing. Additionally, the Tovshuur often mimics natural sounds like wind or hoofbeats to enhance the epic's setting, resonating with the vast steppe environment of the Oirat region. The accompaniment is mainly synchronous, with simple melodies that avoid disrupting the narration, highlighting the Tüülchi's storytelling.[7]

Musical differences between eastern (Horchin) and western (Oirat) Mongolian epic traditions arise mainly from environmental, cultural, and historical factors. Eastern Mongols, influenced by agricultural lifestyles and Han cultural integration, developed the Tsoor's polyphonic and emotionally expressive style, blending Buddhist symbolism. Western Mongols maintained nomadic practices and stronger shamanistic traditions; thus, the Tovshuur emphasizes nature-oriented, rhythmic melodies mimicking steppe sounds, serving practical storytelling purposes. Political divisions since the Yuan Dynasty have reinforced these distinct regional musical identities.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the Tsoor in Mangasin Ulger and the Tovshuur in Khan Harangui, it is evident that musical instruments in Mongolian epic performances are not merely tools for accompaniment, but also carriers of cultural heritage and ethnic identity. The Tsoor and Tovshuur each possess distinctive musical features that reflect the artistic styles and cultural contexts of the Eastern Horchin and Western Oirat regions, respectively. Their similarities and differences mirror the diversity in natural environments, lifestyles, and cultural exchanges across Eastern and Western Mongolian areas, offering rich perspectives for the study of Mongolian epic music. In the future, further exploration of the details of these instruments in epic performances—through fieldwork and digital preservation—can promote the inheritance and development of Mongolian musical culture.

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