

# Historical Cultural Interactions Between East and Inner Asia: The Manchurian Tenggeri, Japanese Shamisen, Tuvan Doshpuluur, And Chinese Sanxian

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**Abstract.** During the development of modern East Asian music, existing research on the Manchurian tenggeri has remained superficial, with few studies comparing it with other Asian three-stringed instruments. This paper primarily outlines the similarities and differences between the tenggeri and three other instruments, while also discussing their historical context and geopolitical relations. It first briefly describes the appearance and techniques of the four instruments. It then compares and discusses the relationships between the four instruments. Lastly, the paper outlines the geopolitical context and cultural flow in their historical backgrounds. The paper points out that in the historical development of East Asia and Inner Asia, there are population, linguistic, and cultural links or kinships, with musical instruments and culture being transmitted and inherited across different regimes. Finally, the paper concludes with the connections between the Manchurian tenggeri, the Japanese shamisen, and the Chinese sanxian, bringing the tenggeri back to the public view.

**Keywords:** Manchuria; Japan; Tuva; China; Three-stringed plucked instrument music.

## 1. Introduction

In the development of music in East Asia, many instruments have borrowed from or inherited each other to varying degrees, such as the Manchurian tenggeri, the Japanese shamisen, the Tuvan doshpuluur, and the Chinese sanxian. Currently, the number of surviving tenggeri instruments is extremely scarce. Around 2018, Entehda restored a relatively complete set of Manchurian instruments (including the tenggeri), which was collected and exhibited in the Liaoning Provincial Museum. The shamisen is now widely used in various musical fields in Japan, including accompaniment for theatrical performances like Kabuki, Bunraku, and Joruri, as well as genres like Tokiwazu, Nagauta, Kouta, and ensemble pieces. The Tuvan doshpuluur is widely used in Tuvan Khoomei (throat singing), folk song performances, and solo performances, and is regularly seen on stage. The Chinese sanxian is also active on stage, frequently appearing in both solo and ensemble music concerts of different scales.

This paper is divided into three parts. The following part first describes the appearance and techniques of the four instruments. It then compares and discusses the relationships between the four instruments. The last part outlines the geopolitical context and cultural flow in their historical backgrounds.

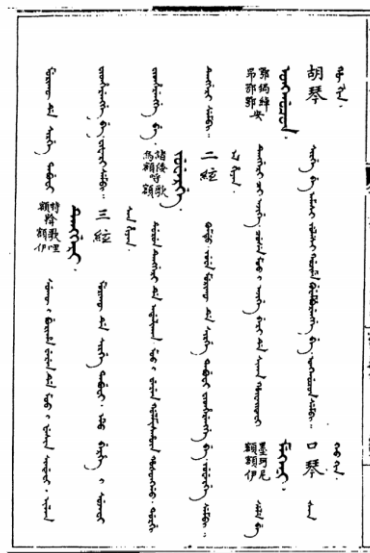
## 2. The Appearance, Performance Techniques, Timbre, and Historical Origins of the Four Instruments

Tenggeri comes from the Manchu word “tenggeri,” translated into Chinese as “three-stringed” (Figure 1). According to Imperial Edition of the Revised Qingwen Jian (Yuzhi Zengding Qinwen jian), it states: “sukv i buriha weren de moo i fesin sindafi, ilan murikv de sirge tabufi, emu berhe i sujafi fitherengge be, tenggeri sembi.” The Chinese translation reads: “A wooden neck is placed on the resonating chamber covered with skin, three strings are fastened to the pegs, and a bridge is placed beneath them to pluck the strings, which is called Tenggeri” [1]. The Manchu annotation of this entry (Figures 2) does not describe the shape of the resonating chamber. There are also records in the Ritual Vessels of the Imperial Court (Figures 3).

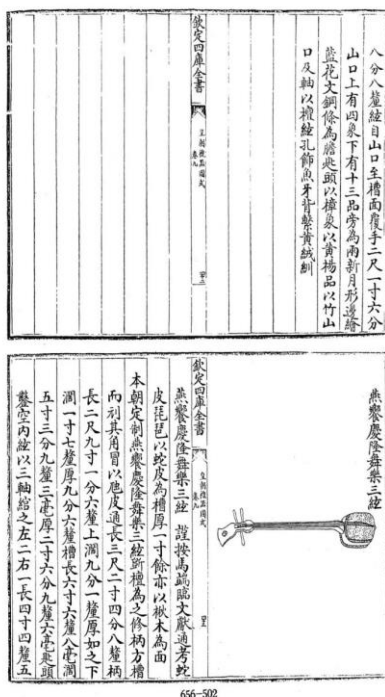
In contrast, the following entry for “Juwerge” (two-stringed) does provide a description [2]. The Manchu annotation describes the two-stringed instrument as “durun tenggeri de adalikan, moo i weren golmishvn hoxonggo,” translated into Chinese as “The shape is generally similar to the tenggeri, with a slightly elongated square wooden frame.” From this, it can indicate that the tenggeri described in Imperial Edition of the Revised Qingwen Jian (Yuzhi Zengding Qinwen Jian) also has an “elongated square” shape [3].



**Fig. 1** A musician playing the Bohai tenggeri - Liao Dynasty mural, Liaoning Provincial Museum



**Fig. 2** Imperial Edition of the Revised Qingwen Jian, Complete Library of the Four Treasuries



**Fig. 3** Ritual Vessels of the Imperial Court



**Fig. 4** Manchuria Tenggeri

Until now, there has been no systematic or theoretical method for playing the Manchurian tenggeri (Figure 4). However, pieces composed for this instrument have been preserved and are performed by some Manchurians who play the Chinese sanxian (including native speakers from the Chabucha'er Xibe Autonomous County in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang, China). The author has personally played both the Manchurian tenggeri and the doshpuluur and found that the same left- and right-hand techniques can be applied to both instruments, allowing for easy performance whether seated or standing. The right-hand technique is called the “bean-rubbing technique” by Mr Entehda.

This method involves the right hand naturally resting near the bridge, with the index finger brushing the third string, then swiftly sweeping toward the first string, followed by the thumb plucking the third string, and repeating this sequence. A plectrum can also be used to perform techniques such as plucking, picking, sweeping, brushing, and rolling. These techniques are often used to accompany Qing Dynasty Zidishu, Ulabun (Wulaben), and other Manchu sung poetry and recitation arts. The left-hand technique is the same as with the doshpuluur, often utilizing the purlicue support technique to hold the instrument.



**Fig. 5** Japan Shamisen

The Japanese shamisen (Figure 5) is a traditional vertical plucked instrument with a rich, deep sound. Based on its shape and size, it can be classified into three types: “thin-neck” shamisen, “medium-neck” shamisen, and “thick-neck” shamisen. According to different genres of music, it can be further divided into: Naga-uta shamisen (thin-neck, uses an ivory plectrum, used in Kabuki music); Gidayu shamisen (thick neck, uses a large and thick plectrum, used in Joruri puppet theater); Tokiwazu shamisen (medium neck); Kiyomoto shamisen (medium neck); and last, Jiuta shamisen (medium neck, with a different connection between the neck and body due to its higher pitch. Tsugaru shamisen (originated in the Tsugaru region of northern Japan, thick neck, used in Tsugaru folk songs) [4].

The shamisen is typically played in a kneeling position. The right hand uses a large plectrum to pluck the strings from top to bottom, while the left hand employs a technique where the instrument is supported by the purlique.



**Fig. 6** Tuva doshpuluur

The Doshpuluur is a traditional three-stringed plucked instrument from Tuva, with its most classic form shown in Figure 6. It generally consists of a soundbox, neck, and headstock. The soundbox is trapezoidal in shape, with the front and back covered with sheep or python skin. The playing technique involves the “bean-rubbing method” mentioned earlier. The Tuvan three-stringed instrument is often used to accompany throat singing and folk songs or for solo performances.



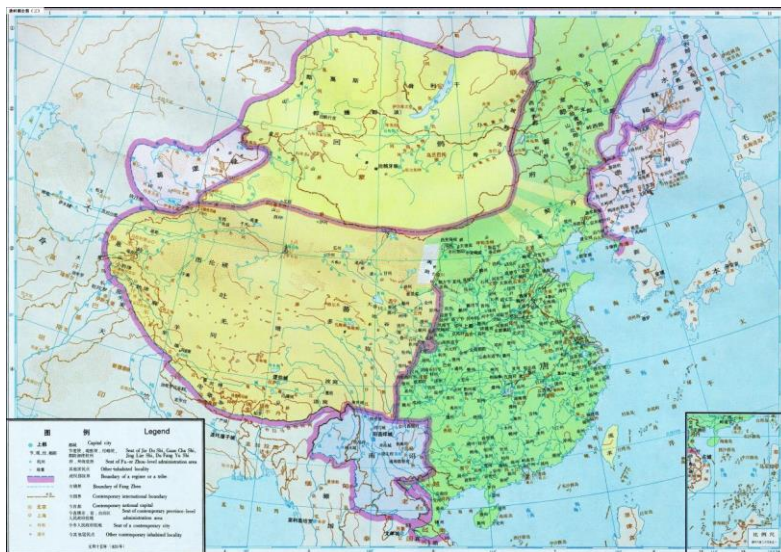
**Fig. 7** Chinese Sanxian

The Chinese sanxian (Figure 7) is a traditional plucked instrument consisting of a soundbox, neck, and headstock. It is played in a seated position, using fingernails, a plectrum, or finger picks to produce sound. The playing techniques include plucking, picking, tapping, double plucking, sweeping, light sweeping, double sweeping, brushing, light brushing, pinching, five-finger rolling, four-finger rolling, three-finger rolling, shaking, pinching-off, flicking, hooking, “swallow,” splitting, striking, muted plucking, split plucking, and upward plucking. The right hand primarily presses down the strings for solid notes, while also incorporating techniques such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, mordents, vibrato, harmonics, slides, ghost slides, descending slides, ascending slides, string muting, and string twisting [5].

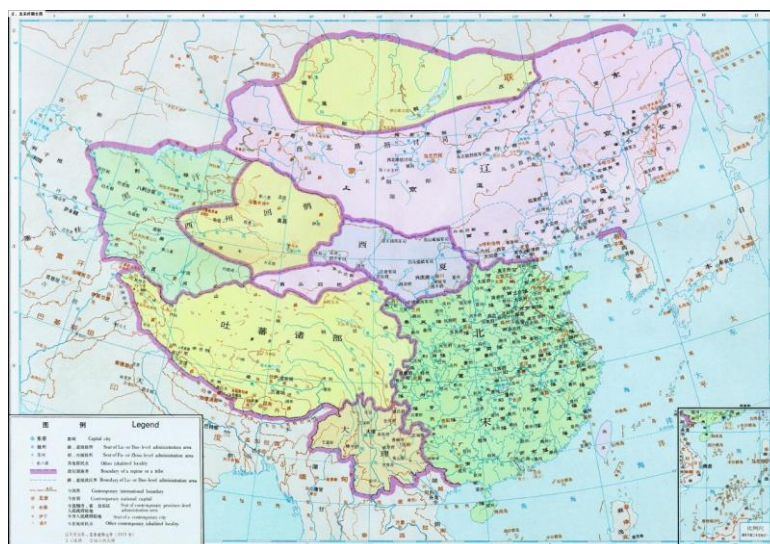
**In summary**, the Manchu tenggeri, Japanese shamisen, Tuvan doshpuluur, and Chinese sanxian share similar methods of playing and performance contexts. The shamisen and sanxian are more diverse in form, having developed into family-like instrument groups with a wider range of applications. However, all four instruments consist of a headstock, neck, and soundbox. Among them, the tenggeri has the lowest range and produces the richest tone, while the shamisen and sanxian have a similar sound—somewhat dry but crisp. The doshpuluur is somewhere in between. Despite their differences in appearance and details, much like comparing pianos from different manufacturers or straight-head and curved-head ruans, as well as bone fretted ruans versus nylon fretted ones, these four instruments can share basic performance techniques for performing some pieces.

### **3. The Geopolitical Relations and the Direction of Cultural Flow and Contact in the Historical Context**

The Manchu tenggeri developed in accordance with the historical background sequence of the Bohai Kingdom – Liao Dynasty – Jin Dynasty – Mongol Empire – Northern Yuan Empire – Qing Dynasty – Manchukuo – Republic of China – People’s Republic of China. The Japanese shamisen developed based on the historical background sequence from the Bohai Kingdom to Japan. The Tuvan doshpuluur developed in accordance with the historical background sequence of the Bohai Kingdom – Liao Dynasty – Jin Dynasty – Mongol Empire (Yuan) – Northern Yuan Empire – Qing Dynasty (Tannu Uriankhai) – Russian Federation Tuva Republic. The Chinese sanxian developed following the historical background sequence of the Bohai Kingdom – Liao Dynasty – Jin Dynasty – Mongol Empire (Yuan) – Ming Empire – Qing Dynasty – Republic of China – People’s Republic of China.



**Fig. 8** Territorial extent and relative positions of the Bohai Kingdom, Tang Empire, Japan, and Uyghur Khaganate



**Fig. 9** Territorial extent and relative positions of the Liao Dynasty, Song Dynasty, and Japan



**Fig. 10** Territorial extent and relative positions of the Qing Dynasty and Japan

From the above maps (Figures 8, 9, 10), the territories and historical periods of the countries where these instruments are found overlap. During the changes in political regimes, there was a transmission or kinship in population, language, and culture. After the Khitan-Liao Empire annexed the Bohai Kingdom, it fully adopted the Bohai instruments and ensembles, developing them into the court music of the Liao Dynasty. This music spread widely throughout the Liao Empire's capitals and the regions under Khitan rule, covering almost all areas where today's Asian three-stringed plucked instruments are found, including present-day northern China, Mongolia, and Tuva. Subsequently, the Jurchen-Jin Dynasty not only inherited much of the Liao's culture and music but also directly inherited the music of the Bohai Kingdom, actively promoting it in the Jin Dynasty's capital. Since the Jin rulers and the Jurchen people regarded themselves as descendants of the Black Water Mohe and viewed the Bohai Mohe as their ancestral kin, the Jin Dynasty elevated Bohai music to the status of national music.

After the Mongol Empire annexed the Western Liao and Jin Dynasty, it further absorbed the culture and instruments of the Liao and Jin, treating the artisans and performers from these dynasties well. This allowed the musical culture originating from Bohai to strongly persist in Inner Asia. Later, with the rise of the Manchu, the Jurchen-Manchu people residing in the former territories of the Liao and Jin joined forces with Han Chinese from Liaodong, descendants of the Chagatai Khanate, some descendants of the Golden Horde, various Mongol leaders from the northern steppe, and Han Chinese scholars from the Central Plains to establish the Qing Dynasty and the Eight Banners system. After defeating the Dzungar Khanate, the Qing Dynasty gradually established the geopolitical structure of East Asia and Inner Asia as seen today, with northern and southern Mongol regions and the Tangnu Uryankhai (now Tuva) being incorporated into the Eight Banners system as "banner people," serving as military and administrative personnel of the Qing Dynasty.

On this basis, the present-day People's Republic of China, Mongolia, and the Tuva Republic of the Russian Federation were directly formed. Throughout the historical development of Northeast Asia and Inner Asia, there were extensive and long-distance population movements, military deployments, as well as cultural exchanges, trade interactions, and wars between contemporary regimes.

#### 4. Conclusion

The cultures represented by the four instruments discussed in this paper have interacted with each other. However, their origins can all be traced back to the Bohai Kingdom's *tenggeri*, rather than the Chinese *saxian* as is commonly believed in academic circles today. Some scholars argue that Japan's *shamisen* evolved after the Chinese *saxian* was introduced to Japan and modified. Contemporary Japanese *shamisen* and Chinese *saxian* do not share a lineage but rather have a common ancestor. Furthermore, the modern Manchu *tenggeri*, Tuvan *doshpuluur*, and Japanese *shamisen* have undergone fewer changes compared to their ancient forms, with fewer iterations, making their designs more ancient.

The modern Chinese *saxian* is the most recent in form. Based on instrument data from historical documents and existing archaeological findings, it first appeared during the Qing Dynasty, and its design has undergone significant changes compared to ancient forms. Therefore, it can be inferred that the modern Manchu *tenggeri*, Tuvan *doshpuluur*, and Japanese *shamisen* are the instruments in the world today that are closest to the Bohai *tenggeri*, while the Chinese *saxian* is a newer instrument that maintains an ancestral relationship with the Bohai *tenggeri*.

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