

An Exploration of Learning Methods for Manchu Songs Based on the Oral Characteristics of the Altaic Language Family

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Abstract. Amid the wave of globalization, music, as a language without borders, is transcending geographical and cultural boundaries at an unprecedented pace, intimately connecting melodies and emotions from all corners of the world. In this process, folk songs with distinct characteristics have emerged as significant bridges connecting diverse cultures. They not only carry the sentimental attachments and historical recollections of their own ethnic groups, but they also fuel the curiosity of music lovers around the world to discover new sounds. Among these, Manchu songs have captured the interest of many students due to their distinct phonological appeal. But pronunciation discrepancies present a significant obstacle to learning Manchu songs, especially for learners whose native tongue is not Altaic, where the difficulties are numerous. Manchu is an Altaic language family member, and as such, its pronunciation differs greatly from that of many other European or Asian language families. This distinction can be seen in the rules governing syllable combinations, tone fluctuations, and the arrangement of vowels and consonants. Consequently, when learners attempt to mimic Manchu songs using their native language or familiar linguistic habits, they often mispronounce lyrics or fail to achieve accurate pronunciation. For instance, certain consonants in Manchu may be absent in Chinese or other non-Altaic languages, rendering it difficult for learners to grasp their essence during pronunciation, thereby affecting the overall performance of the song.

Keywords: Manchu Language; Manchu Music; Folk Songs; Music Education.

1. Introduction

As music from the Altaic language family gains recognition across Asia, more learners from different linguistic backgrounds are engaging with these songs. This paper aims to explore how the oral characteristics of Altaic languages can expedite the learning of Manchu songs. It provides examples of three types of Manchu songs: the fully literary language-based *Uksalara Maksan*, the mixed literary and colloquial *Jakdan Kai*, and the fully colloquial *Yacin Nun*. The paper is structured as follows: the first part examines whether the target songs use current or classical language; the second part looks at phonetic distinctions between Mandarin Chinese and the target language; and the third part concludes.

2. Differences in the Expressive Forms Used in the Target Songs

Through conversations with native Manchu speakers, it has been observed that Manchu songs exhibit significant differences in literary and colloquial usage. These differences are primarily reflected in two aspects: lexical preferences and phonetic changes. [1]

2.1. Fully Literary Song Performance

These songs are typically composed based on historical documents, epics, or poetry. For instance, the work *Uksalara maksin* by the Karmasisa Chamber Orchestra is based on details of archery techniques and procedures from the Imperial Edition of the Revised Qingwen Jian, specifically from Volume Eight on military skills related to foot and mounted archery. The text was altered in accordance with the Altaic language family's head rhyme feature, producing a poem with a coherent Manchu rhyme scheme. The Manchu lyrics for this piece can be found in the Manchu lyrics and Figure 1 below [2].

Uksalara maksin

akdun beri be gala de jafa,
akta morin be yalu,
sakda okini asihan okini
da jokson de ili,
gabtarangge gabtana, niyamniyarangge niyamniyana,
solbiha manggi fergele,yasa maktame toktobu .
tata tata hvsungga tata,gabta,
tata tata hvsungga tata, gabta,

yoro sirdan be gala de jafa,
wen tebume dara ,
icitai okini hashvtai okini
morin be gajibume ili,
xusihalame morin be sinda, mahala be jorime beri ara,
uksalaha manggi toyon baha, ashvka manggi da tolombi.

hei hei hei

be mafari i songko be songkolohokv,
meni amcadara jorin mafari i emu durun .
be cohotoi mafari be amnamahangge waka ,
aibici ni meni beyede eyemahangge mafari i sengg.

emu bade gabtara hahasa sirdan gemu tuqikebi ,
giru saikan gabtara mangga, gabtaha dari xorgihabi.
emu bade niyamniyara hahasa amasi dushume sindahabi,
giru saikan niyamniyara mangga,hob seme goihakvngga akv.

tata tata hvsungga tata, goiha.
feteme niyamniyahabi, tomortai goibuhabi,
mergen haha jui bederehe manggi,morin be bargiyame ilibuhabi,
gabtasi niyamniyasi isandufi,injere jilgan abka i jalu,
uculeme,maksime,muse gemu beyese de baturu ohobi.

hei hei hei.....

be mafari i songko be songkolohokv,
meni amcadara jorin mafari i emu durun,
be cohotoi mafari be amnamahangge waka ,
aibici ni meni beyede eyemahangge mafari i sengg.[2]

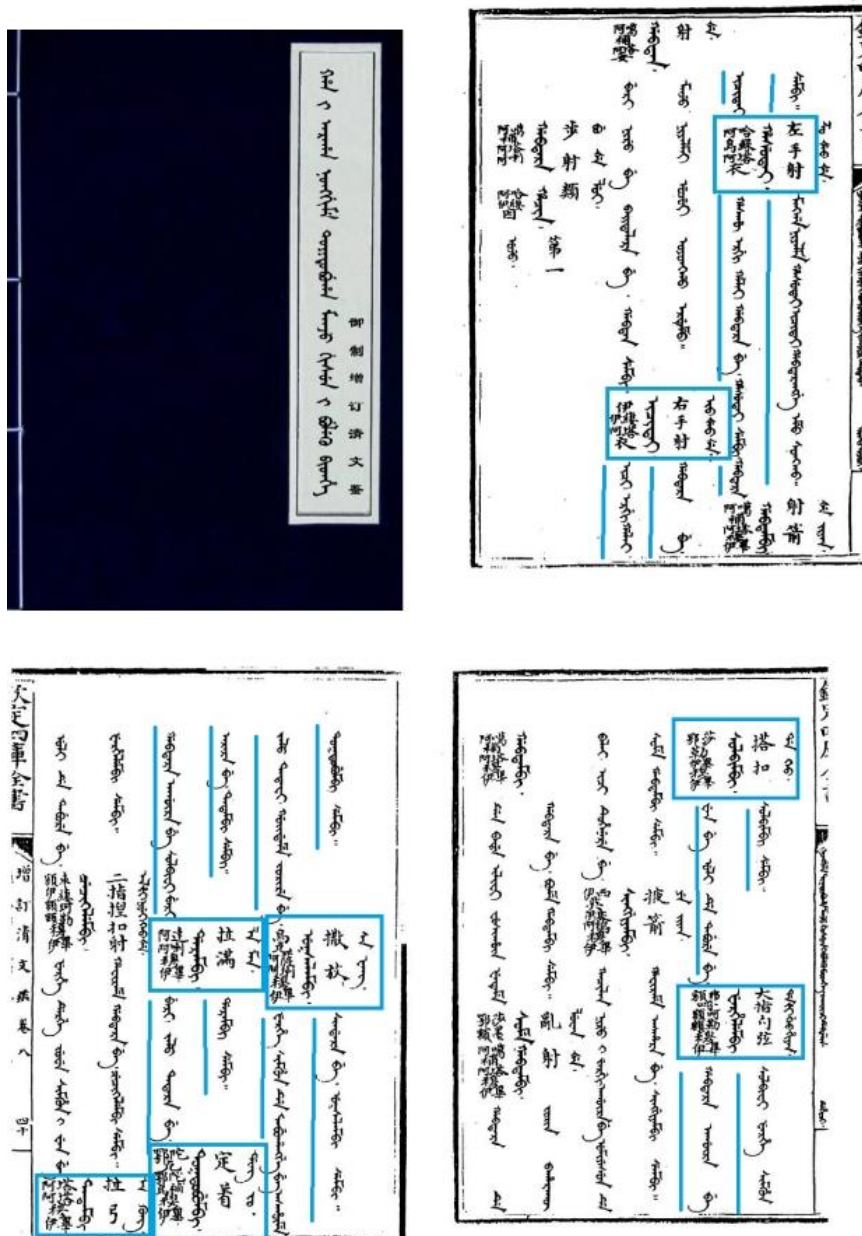


Figure 1. Imperial Edition of the Revised Qingwen Jian, Complete Library of the Four Treasuries (*Qinding Siku Quanshu*), engraved in the 36th year of Qianlong (1771 CE), Wuying Hall (*Wu Ying Dian*) Edition. Beijing Palace Museum.

2.2. Semi-Literal and Semi-Colloquial Song Performance

This type of music is based on folk literature. For instance, the song *Jakdan kai* ("Song of the Pine") was composed by Entehda in 2013 and performed by the Karmasisa Chamber Orchestra, emphasizing themes of environmental destruction and protection. The structure of the song is derived from shamanic incantations. The song is sung informally in certain sections and uses sacred written language reminiscent of shamanic chants in others. The tune was recorded using the intonation of the Manchu words, and it was then developed by drawing on the melodic and rhythmic elements of traditional Manchu shamanic chants. The song's Manchu lyrics are displayed in Manchu lyrics of the song below [3].

Jakdan kai
jakdan kai
jakdan kai
jakdan kai

jakdan kai
julesi karamé jugvn mini saburakv,
jakdan kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao,
jakdan kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao.

xeri kai
xeri kai
xeri kai
xeri kai
uju be tukiyme usiha mini saburakv,
xeri kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao,
xeri kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao.

alin kai
alin kai
alin kai
alin kai
hada sini bujan kai garbahvn oho,
alin kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao,
alin kai enduri mini minde turgun be alarao.

tala kai
tala kai
tala kai
tala kai
orho sini gobi tesebe buliyaha,
edun kai enduri mini ersebe baktambureo,
edun kai enduri mini ersebe baktambureo.[2]

The lyrics of Jakdan Kai are structured in four stanzas, where the second line of each stanza employs a colloquial narrative style. This colloquialism is reflected mainly in the word choice. For example, in the second line of the third stanza, the phrase *garbahvn oho* is used. Originally meaning "baldness" or "losing hair," it is employed here metaphorically to describe the deforestation of mountains, with an implied imagery of trees being cut down. The formal or written expression would have used *sacibuha*, meaning "felled" or "cut down."

Similarly, in the fourth stanza, the second line uses the colloquial term *buliyaha*, meaning "to swallow," which typically refers to eating. In this context, it represents the way that over-farming has turned grasslands into deserts, with the meadows being "swallowed" by the expanding desert on a symbolic level. The written equivalent, *ejelebuha*, would mean "occupied" or "taken over." Every stanza's third and fourth lines are composed in a formal, shamanic question-and-answer format that is common in sacred writings.

2.3. Fully Colloquial Song Performance

Songs that incorporate everyday colloquial language into pre-existing melodies, such as the Manchu classical song *Yacin Nun* ("The Dark-Skinned Sister"), reflect a unique form of musical creativity. It was found that improvised lyricism in folk songs has a lengthy history through fieldwork and conversations with native Manchu speakers. These songs are distinguished by their timeless melodies that have been passed down through the ages, but their lyrics are typically evocative and convey the singer's feelings or ideas at the moment they are performed.

Unlike the previous types of songs where the lyrics dictate the melody, in these compositions, the pre-existing tune takes precedence, and the lyrics must be adapted to fit its rhythmic and melodic

structure. This requires singers to apply various linguistic techniques, including: Mirroring derivations, vowel weakening or elision, syllable compression or expansion, liaison, word contraction, and word substitution.

Thus, learning this type of song involves language analysis to help the learner master the pronunciation and rhythm [4-6]. This examination of the lyrics to Yacin Nun demonstrates how the use of colloquial methods can facilitate the acquisition of foreign songs, especially for native Mandarin speakers studying Manchu classical music. The song's lyrics are located below:

yacin nun

yacin nun yanjire de
mafa mama juwe nane banjire de.
yacin nun , yang dalin de?
mafa mama juwe nan jiyang dalin de.

yacin nun, yobo akū?
mafa mama juwe nan de tobo akv.
yacin nun, tobo gidaha
emdan gidahangge ajige tobo

yacin nun , yoha haduki
mafa mama juwe nan suiha haduki!
yacin nun yobo gidaki
mafa mama juwe nan tobo gidaki

yacin nun, yusiyang tariki
mafa mama usin tariki
yacin nun, yoko baiki
mafa mama juwe koko baiki .

yacin nun, yulgiyan ujiki
mafa mama juwe nan ulgiyan ujiki!
yacin nun, yosu jodoki
mafa mama juwe nan asu jodoki!

yacin nun, nimaha ireki
mafa mama juwe nan nimaha hereki!
yacin nun yotan obuki
mafa mama juwe butan obuki

yacin nun, inde dari
mafa mama juwe nan inenggi dari
yacin nun irgerakv
mafa mama juwe nan ergerakv

yacin nun yendebuki
mafa mama juwe nan bana be yendebume
yacin nun yamga jalan de
mafa mama juwe nan amga jalan de

yacin nun yolaki
mafa mama juwe nan ulaki

yacin nun yalame wajiha
yacin nun be alame wajiha[1].

Nun's lyrics are divided into nine portions, each of which is expressed exclusively in vernacular. These are the several categories of slang terms.

2.3.1. Mirror Derivation

In Altaic languages, there is a colloquial phenomenon called "mirror derivation." This mechanism involves creating one or more new meaningless words based on a real word by retaining the syllable structure and altering specific consonants or vowels without breaking the vowel harmony. When the newly derived word is used in context, speakers of the language can still correctly guess the original word based only on its sound. It is comparable to viewing a warped image in a funhouse mirror, where the original shape is still identifiable despite certain elements being altered, but the warped version is not separate from the original. For example, in the Manchu language, pairs like gija-mija and eikule-yekule demonstrate this phenomenon. These "mirror-derived" words depend on the original term and are never used on their own. In the song Yacin Nun, similar word pairs include banjire-yanjire, jiang-yang, tobo-yobo, and suiha-yoha. In these cases, the "mirror" word appears before the original word in the lyrics, creating an interesting poetic parallelism. This technique adds a layer of mystery to the oral storytelling, yet does not obscure the listener's understanding of the song's meaning [7-10].

2.3.2. Vowel Weakening

Vowel weakening is one of the most common changes in the oral speech of Altaic languages. This phenomenon typically occurs in polysyllabic words where masculine vowels (a, o, ū) and neutral vowels (i) in non-initial syllables often shift to feminine vowels (e, u). For instance, in Uyghur, barsam becomes barsem, and balasi becomes balase. Manchu and Mongolian also undergo similar changes, such as saikan becoming saikhen. Yacin Nun is a song that frequently uses weaker vowels. For instance, extreme examples of vowel weakening, such as baturu becoming bater or even batr in many Altaic languages, also exhibit mafa becoming. In Yacin Nun, mafa to maf represents a typical case of vowel deletion, while alame becoming alem and yalame becoming yalem illustrate both weakening and deletion.

2.3.3. Syllable Compression or Expansion

In order to make the lyrics sound as natural as possible when spoken, certain words have shorter syllables than others, and sometimes there are even less syllables than others. For example, nimaha (three syllables) is compressed to nimha (two syllables), illustrating syllable compression. On the other hand, nan (one syllable) expands to nane (two syllables), and the imperative verb suffix ki expands to kiyei (from one syllable to two), both serving as examples of syllable expansion.

2.3.4. Liaison

Some words are performed utilizing a liaison technique to make sure the number of words in the lyrics matches the beats of each line. For example, in the song's title and the first line of each stanza, yacin (pronounced as yecin) and nun are actually pronounced as yecinun. Similarly, mafa and mama are pronounced as mafname.

2.3.5. Word Contraction

In Manchu oral language, there exists a phenomenon known as word contraction, which differs from connected speech in that contraction can create new meanings or alter the emotional nuances expressed. Liaison speech, on the other hand, maintains the original meaning. For example, the polite word "once," emu mudan, is frequently used before verbs in the command form. Emu mudan, however, can shorten to the new word emdan in some situations, expressing a more intense emotional state without changing its original meaning. An example from the lyrics is emdan gidahengge ajige tobo.

2.3.6. Word Substitution

In the Shenyang dialect of Manchu and in Sibe oral language, *niyalma*, meaning "person," is often replaced by *nan* in colloquial speech. At the same time, *nan* is also the written term for "person" in Hezhen and Nanai oral languages. In the song, *nan* is used as a colloquial form of *niyalma*.

2.4. Significant Pronunciation differences between the language of the song and Mandarin Chinese

2.4.1. Vowel Differences

In Mandarin Chinese, the vowels *e* and *o* are often pronounced as diphthongs. For instance, the sound *e* is closer to [ea], and *o* is pronounced as [uo]. However, in Manchu, these are pure monophthongs, where the shape of the lips and the position of the tongue remain unchanged throughout the pronunciation.

Additionally, Mandarin lacks the *ū* sound found in Manchu. In Manchu, *ū* is articulated by lowering the root of the tongue while keeping the lips unchanged, creating a broad, open-throat sound. With the consonant *k*, this vowel is especially crucial for differentiating between velarization and palatalization: *k* produces a velar closure when it comes after *ū*, while it stays a conventional palatal sound before *u*.

Manchu also has long vowels such as *oo*, which is essentially a doubled version of the monophthong *o*. Furthermore, Manchu contains complex vowels such as *Ö* and *Ü*, which do not exist in Mandarin. *Ö* is produced with the lip shape of *o* and the tongue position of *e*, while *Ü* combines the lip shape of *u* with the tongue position of *e*, as in words like *morin* [mÖrin] and *suiha* [sÜha].

2.4.2. Consonant Differences

In the Altaic language family, specific consonants such as *ka*, *ga*, *ha*, *ko*, *go*, *ho*, *kū*, *gū*, and *hū* are characterized by velar closure. These consonants are influenced by the backness and openness of the vowels *a*, *o*, and *ū*, which create a wider opening in the throat. As a result, the tongue cannot close against the hard palate as it typically would, leading to a unique velar (throat-based) closure.

Additionally, the *r* sound in the Altaic languages is a voiced alveolar trill (a "big tongue" trill), which does not exist in Mandarin Chinese. This sound can be difficult for native Mandarin speakers to pronounce, and they may accidentally substitute it with *l*. Mandarin uses the bilabial sound for the consonant *w*, but Manchu uses the labiodental sound, which is made with the lips and teeth.

2.4.3. Syllable Differences: *ar*, *ak*, *as*, *at*, *ab*, *al*, *am*

In the Altaic language family, syllables such as *ar*, *ak*, *as*, *at*, *ab*, *al*, *am* are not found in Mandarin. There is a consonant at the end of these syllables, and no other sound follows. Mandarin speakers frequently have trouble pronouncing these syllables because they frequently pronounce the final consonant after adding an extra vowel. For example, they may sound *ak* as "ake," *asi* as "asi," or *am* as "amu." Those who speak Mandarin should be very careful to avoid making these mistakes when practicing their pronunciation.

3. Conclusion

Chinese and Manchu belong to different language families. The linguistic classification of Mandarin Chinese is Sino-Tibetan language family, Han Chinese group, Northern dialects, and Mandarin. In contrast, Manchu is classified under the Altaic language family, Manchu-Tungus group, and Manchu branch. Mandarin Chinese is a prominent example of an isolating language, whereas Manchu is a typical agglutinative language. These two language families represent isolating and agglutinative languages, respectively. There are several difficulties for students as a result of this notable disparity. These difficulties, which are typical for native Mandarin speakers learning Manchu music, are described in this article. By focusing on and addressing these issues, the learning difficulties for Mandarin speakers can be greatly reduced, significantly improving the accuracy of their learning outcomes.

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