

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF KHUURIIN ÜLGER

-- TALES OF THE FIDDLE

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Abstract: This article examines the historical development, generic typology, and musical characteristics of khuuriin ülger (“tales of the fiddle”; Cl. Mong. *quᠷur-un üliger*), one of the forms of Mongolian traditional oral culture. Khuuriin ülger took shape during the 17th to 19th centuries under the mutual influence of Mongolian–Chinese cultural exchange, and the syncretic character of its oral tradition constitutes the core feature of this art form. The melody and music of the khuur are not merely subsidiary elements; rather, they constitute the principal means by which narrative structure and psychological expression are organized.

Keywords: khuuriin ülger; Oral Tradition; Musical Analysis; Melody; Pentatonic; Syncretic Art.

1. Introduction

The oral culture of the Mongol peoples is inseparably bound up with the conditions of nomadic life, and within it narrative forms have long played a central role in the transmission of historical tradition, social experience, custom, and value. This characteristic of oral tradition has rendered narration not merely a vehicle for transmitting information but a comprehensive form of cultural expression.

The origin of khuuriin ülger is bound up with a process by which, within the tradition of oral narration, the role of music gradually expanded and developed into an independent expressive medium for narrative. Within the oral culture of the Mongol peoples, the form of narration delivered through khuur melody has been preserved to a certain degree. Although researchers have advanced differing accounts of the origin and development of khuuriin ülger, the prevailing position is that this art form took shape in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Mongolian scholar and academician Ts. Damdinsüren, in evaluating the social and cultural function of the storyteller and the khuurchin (the khuur-player), observed: “Storytellers and khuurchin in Mongolia have together fulfilled the threefold function of theatre to be watched, music to be heard, and books to be read” (Damdinsüren 1959, 1694).[3] This assessment makes it plain that khuuriin ülger is not merely an oral narrative but a comprehensive traditional art form that integrates performance, music, and artistic expression.

Considered within the framework of performance theory, khuuriin ülger is not bound to a fixed written text; it bears the distinct hallmark of a cultural form that is re-created — improvised — in the very moment of musical narration. As the American folklorist Bauman has noted, narrative is a cultural phenomenon that varies according to the performance setting, the participants, and the situational context (Bauman 1984).[1]

2. Research Aim and Objectives

The principal aim of this study is to comprehensively

investigate and to characterize the historical development, generic typology, and musical features of khuuriin ülger, a genre of traditional Mongolian oral art.

Within the scope of this aim, the following research objectives are defined:

1. To examine and establish the origin of khuuriin ülger and the stages of its historical development;
2. To classify and characterise the genres and structural features of khuuriin ülger;
3. To analyse the sources, classification, and musical features of the melodies employed in khuuriin ülger;
4. To clarify the performance characteristics of the four-stringed khuur and the role of heterophonic and antiphonal forms.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and applies the following methodological techniques.

3.1. Comparative Analytical Method

The differing positions of researchers concerning the sources and classification of the melodies of khuuriin ülger are compared and conclusions drawn. The classificatory systems of Tsogt, Sambalnorov, and Uul (Bao Jingang) are compared.

3.2. Music Analytical Method

In analyzing, from the standpoint of music theory, the pentatonic system of the melodies of khuuriin ülger, heterophony, and the features of antiphonal form, the music-theoretical terminology of N. Jantsannorov is followed.

4. The Historical Development of Khuuriin Ülger

Tsogt (2002) explains the origin and development of khuuriin ülger in connection with the social and cultural relations of the Manchu Qing period, and holds that the form took shape in the territory of the Josutu League — where Mongolian and Chinese cultural influences interacted

strongly—during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Tsogt 2002, 79–80).

Considering the state of scholarship on the development of khuuriin ülger: the Mongolian scholar B. Rinchen, around 1929, recorded the tale *Bod' Mergen Khan, Conqueror of the Western Continent* from the khuur-player Luvsan and submitted it for analysis, while in 1931 the Russian scholars A. Rudnev and N. Poppe published portions of khuuriin ülger. Subsequently, considerable research was undertaken in the People's Republic of China into the biographies and creative output of the khuurchin, and major works appeared, including Sambalnorov and Zhang Hong's *Three Hundred Mongolian Khuurchin* (1989) [8] and Sambalnorov and Wang Xin's *Brief Biographies of Mongolian National Khuurchin* (1990).[9]

5. Genres and Classification of Khuuriin Ülger

Khuuriin ülger may be broadly divided, by content and theme, into two classes: “traditional khuuriin ülger” and “new khuuriin ülger”. Traditional khuuriin ülger draws principally on the content of ancient Chinese historical events and heroic epics, while also encompassing traditional narrative compositions composed by the Mongols themselves (Hai Chuan 2015, 16).

With respect to structural type, Tsogt defines khuuriin ülger as a form of oral art performed in conjunction with the four-stringed khuur, alternating between continuous prose narration and chained versified passages (Tsogt 2002, 52). Sambalnorov defines khuuriin ülger as a comprehensive art form grounded in narrative storytelling and incorporating multiple modes—speech, song, instrumental accompaniment, and dramatic performance (Sambalnorov 2005, 12).

Hai Chuan divides the narrative structure of khuuriin ülger into six principal components: the “preparatory section”, the “introductory section”, the “opening section”, the “main section”, the “concluding section”, and the “dispersing section” (Hai Chuan 2015, 32).[4] In the opening “recounting of the tale” segment, the khuurchin begins by setting out the origin, the historical period, and the source of the tale being told. The main section is constructed through the inclusion of specialized melodies and musical elements, including “arrival at the royal court”, “the general engages in battle”, “the army sets forth”, “praise of mountains and waters”, and “praise of beauty”.

With regard to the creative orientation of the khuurchin, Sambalnorov classifies the tradition into three principal currents: khuurchin who pursue innovation (the school of Paajee and Muu-Okhin), khuurchin who uphold tradition (the school of Zaanaa, Erdenezürkh, and Bai Suo), and khuurchin who pursue dramatic performance (the school of Ü Chian Bao, Altaa, and Bürenbayar) (Sambalnorov 2005, 26–27).[7] According to the feature of artistic expression, Tsogt classifies the tradition into four orientations: a current emphasizing vivid description, a current privileging philosophical thought, a current devoted to lyrical expression, and a current devoted to comic-dramatic performance (Tsogt 2002, 301–303).

6. Musical Features of Khuuriin Ülger

The most prominent feature of khuuriin ülger is its musical expression. In khuuriin ülger, music is not merely an ancillary element accompanying narration; rather, it functions as the principal means by which the narrative structure is organized and psychological mood is articulated. The narration of the

storyteller-khuurchin unfolds in close coordination with the rhythm, timbre, and form of the khuur melody, and this is the chief feature distinguishing khuuriin ülger from ordinary oral narration. As the eminent composer, scholar, and Doctor N. Jantsannorov has defined it, melody is a musical idea expressed through a single voice, and beyond the melodic line itself — which is its most essential element — melody also encompasses the concepts of musical mode, rhythm, and structural form (Jantsannorov 1996, 49).

The melodies of khuuriin ülger are flexible and free in character, and differ from musical works built on a fixed notated structure. The melody varies continually in the course of performance, manifesting itself in direct correlation with the technique of the storyteller-khuurchin, the content of the narrative, and the psychological mood of the moment. The pentatonic scale predominates in the melodies of khuuriin ülger. The fundamental modal basis of Mongolian folk-musical thought is the pentatonic scale, and the pentatonic scale without semitones is termed the root form (*yazguury*n) (Jantsannorov 1996, 69). The forms of pentatonic scale of types I, II, and III are employed in the melodies of khuuriin ülger: melodies with a major-mode tendency (types I and III) are more suited to expressing heroic and joyous events, whereas those with a minor-mode tendency (type II) are better suited to conveying sorrowful and grievous sentiments.

7. Sources and Classification of the Melodies

The scholar Uul (Bao Jingang 2019, 287) holds that the melodies of khuuriin ülger derive from heroic epic, folk song, kholboo (chained verse), and the ritual melodies of shamanism. Tsogt (2002, 218) likewise notes that the melodies of khuuriin ülger derive from the melodies of the mangas (monster) tales, shamanic invocation chants, Buddhist religious melodies, folk songs, and kholboo, and that they have additionally absorbed the influence of the narrative-singing traditions of other peoples.

The heroic-epic tradition is clearly visible in the melodies of khuuriin ülger. The tradition of the khuurchin is held to derive from the tsurch tradition (the player of the tsuur, the Uriankhai end-blown wooden flute associated with epic singing); as Uul has noted, melodies in khuuriin ülger such as “the army encamps”, “the proclamation of judgement”, “setting forth to war”, and “praise of beauty” resemble the melodies of heroic epic (Bao Jingang 2019, 289).[2]

Folk songs and kholboo melodies likewise constitute principal sources enriching the musical system of khuuriin ülger. By Tsogt's classification, the melodies of khuuriin ülger fall into three principal categories: fixed melodies (*togtool aya*), main melodies (*gol aya*), and free melodies (*sul aya*) (Tsogt 2002, 197–201).[10] The fixed-melody category includes melodies of specific function such as “arrival at the royal court”, “the army formed in ranks”, “praise of beauty”, “the army setting forth”, “the general engages in battle”, “the opening of the tale”, and “the closing of the tale”. The main melody is characterized by clear metre and good organization, and is well-ordered with respect to musical phrasing, whereas the free melody is dominated by a narrative-declamatory character and possesses a free structure.

8. The Four-Stringed Khuur and Its Performance Characteristics

The four-stringed khuur is an instrument closely bound up

in Mongolian traditional musical culture with narrative and song-musical expression, and the terms *khuur* and *khuurchin* are attested in historical sources from the thirteenth century onward. From the Ming period, the four-stringed *khuur* acquired a more clearly defined form and spread widely, subsequently becoming the principal instrument used in the performance of *khuuriin ülger*.

In the performance of *khuuriin ülger*, the principle of heterophony plays a particular role. Heterophony is a polyphonic form in which, when a single fundamental melody is being sung or played simultaneously, the individual performers diverge slightly from the principal line and create freely varied versions of it (Jantsannorov 1996, 23).[5] Within the tradition of Mongolian folk music, heterophony is clearly manifested in folk-instrumental ensemble playing and in the *türleg* refrains of the long song (*urtyн duu*), and serves as an important means of rendering the relationship between *khuur* and voice in *khuuriin ülger* lively and flexible.

The antiphonal form is also employed in the melodies of *khuuriin ülger*. In tales such as those employing the “free melody”, the *khuur* and the storyteller’s voice resound alternately, in the manner of question and answer, and the piece concludes without them ever sounding simultaneously. The term itself is of Greek derivation, signifying an early form of multi-voiced sounding. The integrated artistic character of *khuuriin ülger* is constituted by the unity of narrative and melody, and if either of these were absent, the art form could not exist in its full sense.

9. Conclusion

The nomadic life of the Mongolian peoples has constituted the cultural foundation that has given rise to the multiplicity of forms of oral art. The *khuur* melody, originally a supplementary means of accompanying the narrative, gradually evolved into the principal means by which the structure of narration is organized and psychological mood is articulated.

Comparison of the positions of researchers concerning the origin and development of *khuuriin ülger* makes it plain that this art form did not arise suddenly at a single point in time, but rather took shape stage by stage during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries within the active environment of Mongolian–Chinese cultural interaction. It is evident from the research that, with the translation and introduction into Mongolian of Chinese historical novels in the territory of the

Josutu League, the thematic range of *khuuriin ülger* was extended, and the form spread through the regions of Kharchin, Khorchin, and Jirem.[6]

The study of the musical features of *khuuriin ülger* demonstrates that a free conception of melody and rhythm—one not bound to fixed metre or to the rigid framework of notation—serves as the chief means by which the unfolding of the narrative and its subtle psychological dimensions are conveyed in conjunction with music. *Khuuriin ülger* is therefore a comprehensive cultural phenomenon resting on the following three pillars:

(1) a socio-cultural origin formed at the intersection of Mongolian oral narrative and Chinese written literature;

(2) a creative essence of oral art whereby the work is re-created in the very act of the *khuurchin*’s telling;

(3) an autonomous artistic form arising from the close unity of musical instrument and narrative expression.

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