

## **Study on the protection of Mongolian Chor music as cultural heritage in Northern China**

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**Abstract:** The Mongolians in northern China have a vast distribution and a long history. Chor music is the cultural heritage of Mongolian in the north. After the rise of "Intangible Cultural Heritage upsurge" in the 21st century, scholars and folk artists rose to protect it and there were successively studies on Chor music theory, Chor music form and Chor historical evolution. However, scholars only focus on the research on the origin, classification, evolution and protection of Chor music, while the research on the relationship between Chor music and modern culture, summarizing that Chor music can be widely spread and recognized in modern society is lacking. This study mainly adopts qualitative methods in empirical research with literature research, field investigation and interview etc. to discuss the modern forms of Chor music, analyze the adaptation techniques in modern Chor works and identifies the musical elements recognized by the public. Therefore, we draw the conclusion of four-dimensional protection methods which includes preservation, innovation, crossover and communication.

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**Keywords:** *Chor music, Heritage protection, Modern form, PICC Methods of protection.*

### **1. Introduction**

Chor music is a kind of polyphonic music with continuous bass in Mongolia, which is usually referred to as Chor by Mongolians. Chor, a unique phenomenon of northern grassland music culture, is an important part of Mongolian music. As a precious relic of national culture, Chor is scattered all over the grassland. It is the embodiment of the northern grassland culture and has the unique musical style and aesthetic concept of Mongolian people.

Chor music can be divided into four types according to the different forms of music sound: vocal Chor, wind Chor, plucking Chor and bowstring Chor. In the vast Inner Mongolia, there are also different distribution areas of various Chor. Chor music mainly distributed in Mongolian areas of Xinjiang is vocal Chor, which is also called Khoomei in Tuva, Russia. Playing Chor, a musical instrument, was also called Hujia in ancient China, and they play Tok Chor and the bowstring Chor Yekele. The popular vocal Choe in central Inner Mongolia is a chorus of many people, which is called Chordo; The bowstring Chor is called Hihil. Chor music popular in East Mongolia is mainly bowstring Chor, which is composed of Chor bowstring and Morin khuur.

In the middle of last century, with the political changes of the country and influence of cultural changes and people's lifestyles, many traditional Mongolian cultures declined or even were banned. In the 1990s, people's self-cultural awareness gradually awakened, and they realized the historical and artistic value of traditional culture, and then gradually scholars began to collect and study Mongolian folk music. After "Intangible Cultural Heritage upsurge " at the beginning of the 21st century, Mongolian regions have made great efforts to explore folk culture, although they have achieved fruitful

results, there are many areas where "artist and art is absolutely lost". Therefore, scholars began to pay attention to the research on the protection of intangible culture and strengthen academic conference exchanges. The academic research on Chor music was concentrated in Inner Mongolia and the National Music and Culture Research Institute such as the Minzu university of China and China Conservatory of Music.

However, with the diverse needs of modern culture, the mutual integration of world cultures, and the close connection between local intangible cultural and market economy, it is limited to focus only on a certain region or a certain kind of Chor music. There is a lack of research on the relationship between Chor music and modern culture and summarizing that Chor music can be widely spread and recognized in modern society. This study discusses the modern forms of Chor's music, analyzes the adaptation techniques in modern Chor's works and identifies the music elements recognized by the public. Therefore, we conclude the four-dimensional integrated protection method of preservation, innovation, crossover and communication.

## 2. Literature Review

As the core concept of Mongolian music culture, it expresses the worship of nature and its patron saint by imitating the sound of nature. Chor's multi-voice music thinking runs through and is reflected in all aspects of the national music culture. The research of Mongolian scholars is mainly reflected in four aspects: the origin, classification, evolution and protection of Chor music.

### 2.1. Study on the Origin of Chor Music

Professor (Wu, 2019) from Minzu University of China believes that the Mongolian people in Altay migrated from Lake Baikal to the Ulianghai tribe in Altay. From the perspective of inheritance, the origin of vocal Khoomei art can be traced back to the fishing and hunting life of ancient ancestors. (Ke, 2009) found through his research on the origin of the Khoomei art form that the term "Chor" means resonance with nature, with echoes such as the whistling sound of rushing water through mountain streams, the rustling sound of trees in forests, and the crackling sound of trees being cut down in deep mountains. (Zhou, 2004) proposed in his research on Shamanism that the worship of totems, nature, Shamanism, and other elements by our ancestors contains deep cultural intentions. The Mongolian "Chor" music is related to the religious culture of Shamanism and links the "binary opposition" thinking logic of shamanism with the cultural symbolic meaning of "Chor". Western listeners consider Khoomei as a music with profound spiritual significance, but it is not easy for me to find it in Tuva's data collection. He believes that the association between Khoomei and shamanism is an instinct of Westerners (Howard, 2004, p.73).

As above it can be seen that Chor is a worldview of the Mongolian people that reflects sound. The essence of its sound structure is dual tone, and its aesthetic connotation is harmony. The internal driving force behind the creation of Khoomei by ancient ancestors lies in the word religious belief. The dual tone structure sound emitted by the Chor form can precisely correspond to and express the objective world full of binary logical relationships such as sky and earth, sun and moon, mountains and rivers, day and night, winter and summer.

### 2.2. Research on the Classification of Chor Music

According to the development history of musical instruments and the laws of Chor music, (Bortelutu, 2019) concluded that the development history of Chor music over thousands of years conforms to the laws of human music development. (Qiao, 2005) proposed in his research that there is no limit to Chor music. The intuitive classification of music forms is the most widely accepted among people. (Li, 2014) proposed four categories of choral sounds based on their vocalization methods in his study: vocal, wind, plucked string, and bowstring. (Levin, 1999) proposed in his research that the original Khoomei had a religious color and its form permeated every aspect of the development of Chor music. His viewpoint is that Chor music has consistency in vocal attributes.

In addition to the earlier recognized classification of musical vocalization attributes, it is summarized that the Chor music in the northern grasslands of China is divided into the Altai music circle, the Chahar and Xilingol music circles, and the Horqin music circle according to geographical regions in (Shi, 2022) doctoral thesis on the evolution of Chor music, of whom is from Shanghai Conservatory of Music. More instructive research is the macroscopic study of Mongolian music by Mongolian music theorist (Wu, 2019) in the history of Mongolian music. He divided the entire development of music into three periods: the hunting period in the mountains and forests, the nomadic culture period on the grasslands, and the semi agricultural and semi pastoral music culture period. The above scholars have studied Chor music from multiple dimensions such as sound, region, time and space, making the study of Chor music types more comprehensive.

### 2.3. Study on the Protection and Evolution Chor Music

Scholars' research on the evolution of Chor music usually focuses on the development of a certain musical instrument. The research on vocal Chor focuses on the evolution of Khoomei (one person)-Chordo (multi-people) (Xu, 2011; Dong, 2021; Qiao,2021). Most of the research on Chor musical instruments focuses on the evolution of the bowstring Chor bowstring and Morin khuur. In the last century, most researchers thought that Morin khuur was Chor bowstring, which was the difference between modern and traditional. However, in recent ten years, more and more scholars have realized that both of them carry different musical cultures and have protective significance, it is not just of the general evolution of the former latter replacing (Zhang, 2017; Bortelutu, 2019). These objective studies saved the extinction of Chor bowstring. Compared with the first two kinds of Chor music, there is less research on wind Chor and plucking Chor. In the research, the author found that the reason for the lack is that the technique of playing wind Chor music is more difficult, and there are fewer players, while most of the plucked Chor music appears as accompaniment and cannot constitute a solo instrument. (Baatarnaran, 2007) discussed the protection of the inheritance of chanting and rap unique to Mongolians and summarized the degree of cultural identity. Zhang (2009-2023) from the Inner Mongolia Institute of Intangible Heritage, has been paying close attention to the inheritance of Morin khuur for more than ten years. According to the (Chinese National Academy of Arts, 2024), 11 items of Chor music have been included in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List since the implementation of the intangible cultural protection policy.

## 3. Methodology

This study mainly adopts qualitative research in empirical research methods. Through ethnographic research field investigation of Mongolian bowstring Chor music in Horqin and other areas it is found that the protection of Chor music is unbalanced, which is the discovery stage of the problem. Combined with literature reading and expert interviews, the problem is preliminarily reviewed, that is, the music forms of Chor music are different in different areas, and there are differences in recognition in modern society, meanwhile there is a lack of holistic research on the integration of traditional Chor music and modern culture.

In order to further verify the problem, this study investigates the current situation of Chor music protection in Xinjiang and central Inner Mongolia, which reveals the protection of Chor music in all parts of Mongolia is unbalanced with the integration of modern culture. In view of this, we settle the research question as how to make Chor music accepted by modern people in modern society. Through interviews with Intangible Cultural Heritage experts and Mongolian pop bands, this paper analyzes the reasons for the success of popular works, studies the background and creative style of Mongolian band members, reveals the modern and traditional elements that are loved by modern people, and summarizes the characteristics of the elements to find the internal laws. This is the second stage of problem research.

Finally, using the methods of expert review and triangulation, the characteristics of elements are analyzed, and the guidelines for preservation, innovation, crossover and communication (PICC) to

protect Chor music are obtained. This is the summary stage of the problem. Modern life is developing forward, while the traditional way of life is irreversible. The combination of folk tradition and modern life will certainly form a new development. The guidelines summarized in this study can also be used in other Chor music that has yet to be developed.

#### 4. Cultural Identity and Elements of Chor Music

##### 4.1. The Degree of People's Cultural Identity with Chor Music

Chor music is a big concept and a typical style feature of Mongolian music, as is shown in Table 1. With the promotion of policies such as the excavation of traditional culture, the development of modern culture and the protection of intangible cultural heritage, people gradually understand Chor music and offer different degrees of cultural recognition.

**Table 1.**  
Chor music classification.

Singing		Wind-playing	Plucking	Bowstring			
Haolin Chor (One person)	Chordo (Multi-people)	Maoden Chor ( Hujia) (One person)	Tok Chor	Yekel e	Hihil	Chorqi n	Morin khuur

##### 4.1.1. Singing: Haolin Chor (Khoomei), Chordo

Singing includes Khoomei and Chordo. The difference between them is that Khoomei is completed by one person, while Chordo is completed by multiple people. Khoomei is the oldest Chor music that the Mongols can trace back to, and it is a chanting method used in ancient sacrificial chanting. Up to now, Khoomei is also used in Lama chanting and Horqin heroic epic in Chahar area. Almost once or twice a year, Khoomei training courses of this scale are held in Inner Mongolia, which strongly promotes the inheritance and development of Khoomei art in Inner Mongolia. At the same time, it also held several international exchange Khoomei competitions to encourage innovative forms and technological upgrading. The first China International Khoomei Competition held in Manzhouli in 2014 attracted more than 150 contestants from 9 countries including China, Russia, Mongolia, the United States, Japan, Spain and Australia. Among them, there are more than 100 players from China.

Chordo, also known as chorus Chor, has been well inherited and carried forward in Xilin Gol region. There are many inheritors of Chordo intangible cultural heritage, such as Dan Daoriji and Manglai, who all have deep insights and accomplishments on Chordo and have made great contributions to its inheritance and development. They made performance in television, network and other activities in the program many times. Because Chordo has only 10 works, and there are many procedures and requirements when performing, which make the inheritance of Chordo still extremely endangered.

##### 4.1.2. Wind-playing: Maoden Chor (Hujia)

Maoden Chor is also called Hujia, as is shown in Figure 1. The traditional form is three holes and wood, which is popular in Altay area of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. It can be used for solo, instrumental ensemble or band accompaniment which is a wind instrument with strong national color. A person sings the bass part at the same time and plays the treble part with a reed. This playing technique is very difficult to master. Qing Gele, a Maoden-Chor musician from Anda Union, improved Maoden Chor, and changed the three holes into five holes with equal spacing. The Maoden-Chor of this average hole realized free modulation, and a single Chor can be played in seven keys. The improved Maoden Chor is more suitable for bands to play various works.



**Figure 1.** The left shows the musical instrument *chai* of Manidaer, an old artist in Xinjiang (2012, p.18), and the right one shows the exhibits restored by the National Musical Instrument Museum of Guanghai College in Changchun, Jilin Province according to the musical instrument drawing of the Qing Dynasty.

#### 4.1.3. Plucking: *Tok Chor*

*Tok Chor* has been circulated in Mongolian areas of Xinjiang since ancient times, as an accompaniment instrument of the heroic epic *Jianger* and the dance music *Saberden*. The development and progress of society has not changed the appearance of *Tok Chor*, and its shape has not changed greatly since its development which always been hand-made. Sometimes sheep intestine strings can be replaced by nylon strings meanwhile efforts are made to decorate the appearance to make it look more exquisite. The colors and patterns on the surface of *Tok Chor* are getting richer and richer, which is of great ornamental value, as shown in Figure 2. As the hometown of *Tok Chor*, Tiebukewusan Township in Xinjiang now has more than 90 experts who play *Tok Chor*. Fans actively participate in large-scale cultural activities such as the Spring Festival, Nadam Festival, banquets, and sacrifices to Aobao, showing demeanour of *Tok Chor*'s performance.



**Figure 2.**  
Tok Chor (Picture from He Junyu, the provincial intangible cultural heritage inheritor of Jilin).

#### 4.1.4. Bowstring: Chor and Morin khuur

Bowstring includes Yekele, Hihil, Chor and Morin khuur, which is the most representative musical instrument of Mongolian people. This musical instrument, which consists of two strings and a ponytail as a bow, is spread all over the Mongolian area. They belong to the same origin and different streams of national musical instruments while their playing styles and methods are different. Among all the categories of Chor music, scholars who study Bowstring Chor music and artists who play Bowstring Chor are the most. In the people's cultural identity, Morin khuur is with the most cultural symbol. In Hohhot, Gorlos and other Mongolian areas, the number of people who collectively play Morin khuur often exceeds several thousand. As is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.**  
Morin khuur was performed by thousands of people for the first time in Gorlos county in 2006 (photo provided by Gorlos Morin khuur Orchestra).

#### *4.2. Analysis of Modern Mongolian Bands and Works*

Through the investigation of the current situation of Chor music protection in western, central and eastern Inner Mongolia, it is found that the original folk Chor music communication form has lost its competitive advantage in modern society, what is more they have been broken and disconnected, becoming a heritage and relic; But if the original Chor music is put into the Mongolian modern national band, it will be completely different. However, it is this fracture that provides the motive force for evolution, arouses people's curiosity about ancestral culture, reinterprets the tradition with contemporary values, which uses stage art, adapts the singing form and changes the story form, moves the traditional heritage onto the modern stage, thus completing the integration and continuation. This traditional and modern folk band is particularly popular among the public. We analyze nine modern Mongolian bands and their style characteristics, reveals the extension and connotation of Chor music recognized by the public in modern society.

##### *4.2.1. Band Composition*

Since the year 2000, pop bands have sparked a national trend, and composers have begun to pay attention to the integration of ethnic and modern elements. Various media outlets have also launched music talent shows. At the same time, many Mongolian ethnic music musicians and singers have begun to form groups, using various instruments in Chor music and the unique Chor harmony characteristics they have participated in CCTV competitions such as "The Voice of China" and "Star Avenue" multiple times and achieved excellent results. Table 2 shows the composition of 9 representative bands:

**Table 2.**  
Statistical table of nine Mongolian bands.

Band name	Establishment time	Member	Honor or achievement	Representative work
Khuh kheer	1998	Bayin, Baishiguleng, Baoyin, Chaogejiletu, Ulan Manda, Chaolumeng	1999 inner Mongolia spring festival evening	<i>Honoring Genghis Khan</i>
Subverting the M	2000	Aheicha, Sunbori, WangYang, Chaoluomeng, Zhang Wenbo	Asia and Europe tour	<i>Mongolian Spirit</i> and <i>Echoes of the Abyss</i>
Erguna	2001	Narisu, Mahibatu, Bao Yumin, Wang Meng, Huhetulaga	Champion of the First Campus Song of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 2001 2005 Star Avenue 3rd place winner	<i>The Wild Geese</i> and <i>Erguna</i>
Anda	2003	Narisu, Qiqigema, Biligebater, Uligen, Uni, Qinggele, Saihanya, A. Uligen, Qinggeletu	2006 CCTV Young Singer Grand Prix Champion	<i>Night in Ulaanbaatar</i> , <i>Wild Geese</i>
Black Horse	2003	Alatenburigude (Lao Bu), Uzige Xilatu (Uzige), Xilin Baoliji (Baole), Aorigele (Aori), Shuriga (Gaga)	2004 CCTV Western Folk Song Competition Gold Award	Adapted from <i>Gadamelin</i>
Hanggai	2004	Iliqi, Yilarata, Huricha, Mengda, Allen, Niuxin, Batubagen	Champion of "The Voice of China" in 2015	<i>Hanggai Reincarnation</i>
HAYA	2006	Daiqingtana, Zhang Quansheng, Chen Xibo, Baoyin	National champion of Let the World Hear in 2014	<i>Wolf Totem</i> and <i>Cangyang Jiacao</i>
ZUUL	2007	Li Wenbin, Batu Ba gen, Xiao Mai, Wang Kaibin	Special performance of Hohhot Radio in 2019	<i>Little Yellow Horse</i>
Nine Treasures	2011	Ashan, Ba Narisu, Aoruifeng, Saina	German Wacken Open Air Music Festival champion in china	<i>Copper mouths of ten feet long</i>



#### 4.2.2. Analysis of Works

Analyzing the above bands and works, all nine band names are derived from Mongolian or related to grasslands. Before 2006, the band members were mostly composed of Mongolian musicians, and later bands gradually incorporated Han and European musicians. The creators of representative works are all band members. Early established bands, such as Khuh kheer Erguna and Black Horse whose works mainly focus on changing traditional folk songs. For example, *Gadamelin* and *Wild Geese* are both traditional Mongolian folk songs. The bands established in the later stage pay more attention to original works with their own characteristics.

The Khuh kheer band's song *Honoring Genghis Khan* is performed in Mongolian language, with a rock and rap style. The content praises Genghis Khan and uses Khoomei singing technique. The instrumentation includes Morin khurr, horizontal flute, electric guitar and other electric popular musical instrument. Their innovation has opened up the development path of local new music in Inner Mongolia.

Subverting M claims themselves as nomadic metal band. Their songs *Mongolian Spirit* and *Echoes of the Abyss* are sung in Mongolian, combining musicality and humanity. In terms of musical form, Mongolian primitive music blends seamlessly with heavy metal music. Using long tune singing, Morin khurr, Khoomei, and metal music, seemingly opposing elements are harmoniously unified in the musical work with lyrics telling the ancient legendary stories of the Mongolian ethnic group.

The works of Anda and Hanggai are currently the most popular, among which Anda's works perfectly integrate all forms of hip-hop music. Although the song *Lone Hero* is adapted from the popular song "Lone Hero" sung by Eason Chan, the style and artistic rendering are completely different. The music is sung in Mongolian, using various forms such as Morin khurr, oral string fiddle, Tok Chor, Mongolian drum, Khoomei, etc. Their seven-person choir creates a majestic voice for the audience. They improve the traditional instrument of Morin khurr and use distinct rhythms. From their works, we can see the cross-border and innovative adherence to national characteristics.

ZUUL, whose name means *Eternal Lamp*, comes from Buddhism with religious connotations. In *Little Yellow Horse*, Morin khurr, Tok Chor, Maoden Chor, Mongolian drum, and Xinjiang Dongbula are used. Incorporate music elements such as flamenco, Africa, Buddhism, rock, psychedelic, and improvisation into the song.

The works of HAYA and Nine Treasures are also created in a fusion of ethnic and popular form. In *Wolf Totem* and *Bronze Mouth of Ten Meterts*, Mongolian instruments are extensively used, and ethnic melodies are chosen to create a heavy metal style of Chinese ethnic music.

#### 4.2.3. Summary of Characteristics

Based on the analysis of the works and expert's review, the elements used in the music works are sorted according to the orchestration, melody, rhythm, lyrics and stage style, as is shown in Table 3

**Table 3.**  
Classification of music elements.

Orchestrated	Tune	Rhythm	Lyrics	Stage performance form
Morin khurr Chor	Yu mode Zheng mode Jiao mode	Nogula (Free rhythm) triplex	Grassland sky and heaven	Mongol Mongolia clothing
Tok Chor	Shang mode	2/4 beat	horse	Mongolian cultural scenery
HaoLinChor Yekele	Gong mode	4/4 beat	Camel wolf	Chinese English
Hihil	Homotonic tone sandhi Parallel mode	Triple horseshoe rhythm Syntactic rhythm	Swallow	Modern rock set
Mongolian drum Oral string	Muqam mode	The first sixteenth rhythm	Mother river Religion	Modern stage lighting Modern stage special effects
Mongolian flute Toyaga	Big mode	Post-sixteenth rhythm	Hero	Multimedia interaction Rock/metal atmosphere
Mongolia dulcimer Yangguai Hammer Anda drum Dongbula Electronic keyboard drum kit bass guitar	Minor form  Ancient chinese mode	Narrative dotted rhythm Staggered beat rhythm LATIN rhythm	Khan  Brother (Anda) Rotate Mother  Hometown love	Modern band structure World tour
Electronic drum vocoder cello double bass				

The data in the above table are obtained through expert review.

- There are 12 traditional Mongolian musical instruments, 2 innovative musical instruments, 1 Kazak musical instrument, 6 modern electro-acoustic musical instruments and 2 western classical musical instruments in the orchestration elements.
- Among the tune elements, there are 7 Mongolian tunes, 1 Xinjiang tune and 2 Western tunes.
- In the rhythm elements, 7 Mongolian rhythms, 1 modern rhythm and 2 rock rap rhythms are included. There are 15 elements in the lyrics, all of which are Mongolian culture.
- As for the stage performance elements, it consists of 3 Mongolian elements, 2 cross-cultural elements and seven modern stage elements.

The fusion of Chor music and modern culture presents four characteristics, namely, retaining national images in content, pursuing innovation in orchestration methods, showing cross-border music forms and maintaining cultural exchanges. To protect Chor music, we should pay attention to the directivity of protection, innovation, cross-border and communication.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on extensive reading of literature, combined with the current situation of Chor music protection in Inner Mongolia, China, this paper analyzes the representative works of several modern Mongolian bands and finds the development trend of Chor music in modern culture. Through expert's review, the results of element identification are obtained, and the characteristics of elements are summarized, and the guiding principles of Chor music, which are suitable for the protection, innovation, cross-border and communication of modern culture, are proposed.

Adhering to the tradition and innovative form is a main line of Chor music, and the protection of Chor music needs such a foundation and context, which is the protection connotation of it. On this basis, combining with the extension of cross-border and communication forms, it constitutes a four-in-one protection guide for Chor music. At present, the research on the creation of Chor music is not enough, especially in the field of modern professional creation. Chor music only appears as a secondary element or accompaniment part. I hope more experts and scholars will devote themselves to the research, draw attention to the modern creation of Chor music and help the development of Chor music in modern culture.

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