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Overview of Horqin Mongolian Mangasin Ulger and Its Performance Taboos

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Abstract

Mangasin Ulger is locally known as the Horqin heroic epic in the Horqin region. In Chinese academia, Mangasin Ulger is widely regarded as a form of Mongolian epic poetry and is currently in a post-endangered revival phase. Accompanied by the ancient Mongolian instrument Tsoor khuur,a traditional bowed instrument, its performances feature exclusively sung narration without spoken dialogue. Linguistically, it is distinguished by its use of regional dialects and archaic Mongolian, reflecting its literary and cultural uniqueness. Musically, it features nine distinct melodic frameworks, Mongolian call "aya". a hallmark of its unique artistic identity. Mangasin Ulger is an art form deeply rooted in oral tradition, characterized by its strong reliance on verbal transmission. In the Horqin region, Mangasin Ulger has integrated elements of Buddhist and shamanic cultures, thus acquiring social functions such as invoking blessings and warding off disasters, and giving rise to a series of performance taboos. This paper outlines its characteristics and expressive forms, analyzing its performance functions, narrative taboos, and religious connotations in folk traditions. The research methodology combines documentary analysis with field interviews of Tsoorch, Mongolian epic performers. The study aims to reveal the features and value of this art form—which integrates literature and music—across different stages of societal development.

Keywords

Mangasin Ulger; Mongolian epic; Mongolian music; Mongolian literature

In the Horqin region of Inner Mongolia, the heroic epic is locally referred to as "*Mangasin Ulger*," a regional variant of Mongolian epic traditions. Its narratives primarily depict reincarnated heroes who endure arduous trials to vanquish demons and protect their homeland. Performers of Mangasin Ulger, known locally as *Mangasch* or *Tsoorch*, traditionally deliver their storytelling through sung narration accompanied by the *Tsoor khuur* (a bowed string instrument). In modern times, performances using the *Huuchir* (another traditional fiddle with four strings) as accompaniment have also emerged.

1. Development Overview of Mangasin Ulger

Mangasin Ulger is an ancient art form prevalent in the Horqin Mongolian community of Inner Mongolia, China. Folk traditions in the region reference the "Eighteen Branches of Mangasin Ulger" (*Arvan Naiman Mangasin Ulger*), a cycle of eighteen relatively independent epics. Each epic narrates the story of a *galab* (meaning "kalpa" or "cosmic disaster"). However, based on current archival research, the number of Mangasin Ulger epics exceeds eighteen, with over thirty identified to date.

In its historical development, Mangasin Ulger underwent two major transformations. The first occurred from the mid-Ming to the late Qing dynasty, when Tibetan Buddhism profoundly influenced both the narrative content and

ideological expression of the epic. For instance, Buddhist scriptures and deities were integrated into its stories and characterizations. Functionally, Mangasin Ulger's performance evolved to mirror Buddhist sutra recitations, acquiring religious purposes such as blessing rituals and disaster aversion.

The second transformation emerged after the mid-19th century under the influence of newer oral traditions like *Huurin Ulger* (Mongolian folk art forms). This period saw the rise of Huurch performers (Mongolian storytellers) who accompanied their recitations with the Huuchir, adopting musical motifs and performance styles extensively from *Huurin Ulger*.

Mangasin Ulger not only preserves traces of the ancient shamanic culture of the Mongolian people but has also absorbed elements of Indo-Tibetan cultural traditions, particularly those represented by Buddhism, during its later development. This synthesis has forged its unique temporal style and regional characteristics.

In modern times, notable performers of Mangasin Ulger accompanied by the *tsoor* (a traditional bowed instrument) included: Chuluu (1876-1962, from Jarud Banner), Nasantumur (1880-1945, from Horqin Left Middle Banner), Baljirnyam (1900-1966, from Horqin Left Middle Banner).

Additionally, the renowned *Tsoor* master Seerish (1887-1968, from Horqin Left Middle Banner) was known to perform Mangasin Ulger in his youth. Other distinguished figures include: B. Namjil (1920-1991, from Horqin Left Middle Banner), a celebrated *Tsoorch* (tsoor performer), his nephew M. Burentsuglaa (1947-2008, from Horqin Left Middle Banner).

According to survey findings, the current representative inheritors of *Mangasin Ulger* primarily include three individuals: Burentsuglaa, who can perform all eighteen core *Mangasin Ulger* epics plus five additional branch narratives; Qi Baode, capable of performing two epics; Jalsan, who masters three epics. Among younger-generation representative inheritors, Jin Gang (Figure 1) and Qi Shan are notable figures (Boteletu & Hasibateer. 2012).

Figure 1. Young Tsoorch Jin Gang performing Mangasin Ulger.

Mangasin Ulger originally comprised a large-scale interconnected cycle of dozens of core stories, supplemented by multiple branch narratives. However, over the past century, drastic sociocultural shifts—including political-economic transformations, changes in livelihood and production practices, evolving religious beliefs, and broader historical factors in the Horqin region—led to the near extinction of Mangasin Ulger as a living tradition of Mongolian epic poetry across Inner Mongolia by the latter half of the 20th century. It is widely acknowledged that, for a time, both Mangasin Ulger and its accompanying instrument, the Tsoor khuur, had entirely vanished from daily life.

In recent years, the Mangasin Ulger tradition has experienced a revival and continued transmission through initiatives anchored at the Inner Mongolia Ethnic Music Heritage Station established at Inner Mongolia Arts University. Leveraging Burentsuglaa's archival audio and video recordings, efforts have identified a new generation of talented performers within the Horqin region who exhibit exceptional potential in narrating and performing this epic genre. These endeavors have not only revitalized Mangasin Ulger but also propelled it into becoming a focal point in artistic research across Inner Mongolia.

The Horqin region boasts a rich and distinctive tradition of local culture and arts, with *Mangasin Ulger* standing as a regional variant of the ancient Mongolian heroic epic, whose origins date back at least a millennium. The Tsoor khuur, which accompanies *Mangasin Ulger*, is recognized by contemporary scholars as one of the precursors to the performance style and techniques of the modern *Morin Khuur* (horse-head fiddle). The term "Tsoor khuur" appears in historical records from the Yuan dynasty and is further documented in Ming and Qing dynastic texts, attesting to its antiquity. As such, its preservation and scholarly study hold immense value, offering insights into the evolution and cultural essence of Mongolian artistic traditions from ancient times to the present.

2. The Connection Between Mangasin Ulger and Religious Rituals, and Its Performance Taboos

Mangasin Ulger and the Tsoor khuur stand as the historical memory, cultural symbol, and inseparable companion of daily life for the Horqin people. Within Mangasin Ulger, time is divided into eighteen galab and space into eight *tib* (spatial realms), weaving narratives of cosmic transformation, the rise and fall of worlds, the origins of humanity, the formation of consciousness, and the construction of social order. These stories express humanity's aspirations for truth, justice, peace, and harmonious coexistence.

In folk belief, Mangasin Ulger cannot be performed arbitrarily. Its recitation is traditionally restricted to winter nights, with a strict taboo against performances during June. Performances are reserved for specific communal events—such as traditional festivals, weddings, housewarming ceremonies, birthdays—or during calamities, when a Tsoorch is invited to narrate the epic. Moreover, only one complete Mangasin Ulger epic is permitted to be performed annually under normal circumstances, though up to three may be recited in exceptional situations. These three epics may be repeated multiple times, but only after rituals such as burning incense and praying to Buddha for permission (Tong, 2007).

The late Mangasin Ulger artist M. Burentsuglaa repeatedly emphasized this principle. To Tsoorch and the Horqin community, the performance of Mangasin Ulger is neither casual nor arbitrary—it cannot be performed at will or in unlimited quantities. In earlier times, a household inviting a Tsoorch would first burn incense, Tsoorch should kneel before the performer, then offer prayers to the heroes, gods in the Mangasin Ulger epic to be narrated.

Once a Mangasin Ulger performance begins in the Horqin region, it is taboo to recite errors or halt midway, as such actions are believed to anger deities, awaken demons, and invite greater calamities. Audiences are forbidden from smoking, drinking alcohol, and must keep doors open during the performance. This stems from the folk belief that listening to Mangasin Ulger is itself an act of warding off disasters, and only by showing reverence to all divine beings can one hope to receive their protection.

The Tsoor khuur, used to accompany Mangasin Ulger, is not to be casually touched by the public. A Mongolian knife is traditionally inserted diagonally beneath the instrument's bridge (Figure 2). Burentsuglaa remarked: "Some believed the knife was inserted to intimidate the Mangas (demons). In my view, it primarily adjusts the instrument's acoustics. As for why the tsoor cannot be touched freely—this stems both from respect for the Tsoorch and the need to protect the instrument itself."

Figure 2. A Mongolian knife inserted on the Tsoor khuur.

On this topic, Chen Ganglong discusses in his work "*On the Stories of Mangas"*: *"Folklore holds that inserting the knife enhances the Tsoor's mystical power and amplifies its sound. However, according to Mr. Ulaanjee (Wulanjie), a scholar of Mongolian music, the Tsoor's two horsehair strings, composed of dozens of strands, generate unwanted noise during play. The knife serves to suppress such noise, thereby improving tonal quality."* (Chen, 2003) Yet Ulaanjee later clarified that the knife *"cannot be simplistically viewed as merely improving tonal quality; it likely carries deeper religious symbolism and meaning"* (Ulaanjee, 2017).

At present, the performance traditions of *Mangasin Ulger* in the Horqin region have nearly vanished due to agricultural modernization and the encroachment of contemporary culture. Beyond the folk customs previously mentioned, fragmentary details of these practices survive through recollections of artists like Burenchogla and Jalsan.

Rituals such as kneeling have been simplified, now reduced to burning incense and praying to Buddha. To initiate a *Mangasin Ulger* performance, the requester must first visit the artist's home bearing a *khadag* (ceremonial scarf) and gifts to state their purpose. If the artist agrees, an auspicious date is selected for the performance at the inviter's residence. The artist then purifies their mouth and hands, burns incense, chants invocations, and begins the epic narration.

Behind these practices lie strict performative rules observed by *Tsoorch*. For instance, only eight of the nine *"Aya"* (melodic frameworks) may be used in a single *Mangasin Ulger* epic.

For example, in one Manggasin Ulger, a maximum of 8 sets of "aya" can be used (there are 9 sets of "aya" in total). The tunes at the beginning and end of the story cannot be used in other scenes, and the three tunes at the end of the story must be used in order. The opening and closing musical motifs are reserved exclusively for their respective contexts, and the three concluding melodies must be performed in strict sequence.

As Burentsuglaa noted: *"In the Horqin region, the spiritual fabric is anchored in 'Bo' (shamanism), while the artistic realm is shaped by the Tsoor khuur and Mangasin Ulger"* (Tong, 2007). Scholarly research further underscores that the character names and archetypes within *Mangasin Ulger* are deeply intertwined with Buddhist and shamanic traditions.

Jin Gang, a young representative artist of Mangasin Ulger, also highlights that today, he must perform a ritual before preparing to narrate the entire epic. This ritual involves burning incense, lighting lamps, and making obeisance—not to a specific deity, but to a broader array of natural and supernatural entities. Such practices align with the polytheistic nature of Mongolian spirituality and are closely tied to "Bo".

At the outset of the performance, there is also a prayer ritual termed Uchir (The reason), which includes two types: *Ikh Uchir* (The big reason) for the epic's full opening and Baga Uchir (The small reason) for segmented openings on subsequent days (e.g., the second or third day). During this ritual, the artist refrains from singing or speaking, instead playing the Tsoor khuur while silently invoking reverence for deities, particularly those within the epic's narrative.

Jin Gang further adds: When a Mangasch accepts a disciple, a ritual must be conducted. Both master and apprentice recite invocations to honor the gods. For the ritual setup, a wooden table is prepared with red and yellow silk fabrics—red placed beneath yellow—followed by incense burning and offerings.

Jingang also notes: In Horqin communities, households seeking to ward off misfortunes or invoke blessings may invite *Huurch* (fiddle performers), Tsoorch, or Bo to conduct rituals. Due to the *tsoorch*'s perceived spiritual potency, they are often summoned for large-scale ceremonies or complex scenarios requiring epic recitations (Jin, 2025).

Mangasin Ulger and Tsoor khuur performances are imbued with sacred religious symbolism, serving to ward off illnesses, avert disasters, and invoke blessings. These taboos and folk beliefs represent the transcendent significance bestowed upon the epic text, its performers, and their art within the traditional cultural framework. (Li, 2021) The origins of these practices trace back to ancient times, reflecting the legacy of generations of epic artists. For traditional performers and audiences alike, these beliefs predate their existence, fostering an innate reluctance to violate the rules. While no further explanation is deemed necessary, adherence to these taboos and traditions remains imperative.

Conclusion

Mangasin Ulger stands as an ancient Mongolian art form imbued with profound cultural connotations and distinctive religious characteristics (Wu, 1998). Prior to undertaking a case study, it is essential to analyze its historical context, religious symbolism, and social functions. Only through this foundational understanding can one delve into the rules and methodologies governing its literary expressions and musical practices, thereby enabling a nuanced evaluation of its value within specific historical periods and sociocultural frameworks.

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