

Contemporary trends in the Mongolian folksong tradition of *urtyn duu*

In 2009, three young singers, who had met at the conservatory and had studied a traditional folksong genre called *urtyn duu* (long-song), created a folk pop-group. Like the pictures provided in the liner notes, which were unusually commercialized for a traditional folk genre music, their music was unexpected and provocative for the majority of the Mongolian folk music audience. This new direction was unusual not so much because of the melding of Western instruments such as piano and synthesizer with a traditional vocal genre, but rather because of their unique acoustic ‘harmonizing’ of independent, ornamented and melismatic vocal solos, while retaining the traditional singing style and improvisation, and using mostly traditional songs.

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THEY NAMED THE GROUP SHURANKHAI. This is a Mongolian word that defines a vocal technique used in the traditional *urtyn duu* genre, and whose characteristic articulation is achieved through the elongation and ornamentation of vowels. *Shurankhai* generally appears in the middle of a song and also often expresses the climax of the song. The technique is similar to Western falsetto, but aims to create more of an abrupt, shorter, sharper and higher vocal sound. *Shurankhai* is not simply a vocal technique, however; it has become a standard by which the ability of singers may be judged, and so is a constant source of discussion among *urtyn duu* singers – from old to young, and from countryside to city.

Long-song on the move

Urtyn duu, often translated into ‘long-song’, is one of Mongolia’s solo folksong genres. Mongolians believe it originated from the period of Chinggis Khan (13th century), and according to Mongolian understanding, it has been around for ‘a long-time’. *Urtyn duu* is traditionally practiced among Mongolian shepherds while herding, and at feasts. Mongolians traditionally roam the open steppes as nomads, moving around with the seasons. Music in Mongolia, especially long-song, was thus not practiced as an art form, but as a part of life.

The songs are based on Mongolian poetry or on Mongolian legends and stories reflecting the natural world. Most of the vocal techniques imitate animal sounds; the melodic contours follow the topology of the land and the vocal acoustics come from practicing out in the expanse of the steppes. For this reason, this genre of song is often considered to be and presented as the genuine article, which can rightfully represent the Mongolian people’s national and especially nomadic identity, particularly in post-socialist contemporary Mongolia.

In the 1990s, Mongolia underwent the transition from a socialist to a democratic and free-market system. The country moved into new socio-economic and political directions, but also towards a redefined or reconsidered cultural identity. Traditional music and arts were promoted as the ‘real’ identity; all cultural activity imported from the Soviet Union, such as ballet and opera, was less encouraged, as a counter reaction.

Chinggis Khan was, and is, admired and believed to have been the unifier of Mongolia. He didn’t originate from the socialist past, but from a more historical era, the ‘deep past’ as Caroline Humphrey puts it. Long-song originates from the ‘deep past’ as well. In 2006, during Naadam (national holiday), 800 long-song singers were invited to sing together to celebrate the 800 year anniversary of Chinggis Khan’s unification of Mongolia into an independent nation. Long-song is not designed to be performed by a choir of 800 singers, and, while this way of performance indeed did not produce the best musical outcome, the show was definitely visually spectacular. And it most certainly presented the long-song as a national pride.

New tradition, new identity

It seems now that the new Mongolia requires, in terms of culture, not only the ‘old’ tradition, but also a ‘new’ tradition, which can attract audiences both inside and outside Mongolia. In response, fusion groups such as the long-song group Shurankhai have experimented with introducing new elements into the traditional music. Altan Urag, most likely the first folk-pop group in Mongolia, and later groups such as Domog, Borte, Hunnu, and Khusugtun, came from a younger generation of folk musicians, and were academically trained in Mongolian traditional music as well as in Western musical theory and history, by either Russian teachers or Mongolian teachers who had studied in the Soviet Union. They therefore easily cross the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional music.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when traditional musicians started to train professionally, there was clearly a cosmopolitan and transnational movement among cultural groups in Mongolia. Mongolian intellectuals and artists, through study and performance travels, enjoyed frequent contact with ‘outside’ cultures from the rest of the Soviet bloc. Mongolians had begun, even then, to position themselves on the international world map through their music and culture. In post-socialist Mongolia, such cultural movements continue either through the promotion of traditional, and ever more ancient music, or through a constant negotiation between traditional and non-traditional, as well as through the invention of non-traditional sound from traditional sound.

In recordings and interviews with numerous long-song singers, both in Ulaanbaatar and in the countryside, made between 2006 to 2012, I found that these traditional long-song singers were constantly looking for a “real and authentic (*jinkhene*) tradition”, such as those rare songs that survived in the remote countryside. The stories reveal how the culture that thrived between 1920 and 1990 is no longer considered part of ‘authentic’ tradition. Notwithstanding the variation of folk influence, which exists in every kind of Mongolian music, folksong has now assumed two forms. First, there are songs that conjure powerful images of the countryside as homeland (*nutag*) and life as a nomadic herder, yet which have been, since the socialist period, sung only in the remote countryside. Second, there is the non-traditional folk music, with the inclusion of modern elements, which can easily be presented to contemporary audiences in Ulaanbaatar.

Shurankhai released their second and third albums simultaneously, in 2011. One is a collection of traditional long-songs, including rare versions and old songs, such as lullabies. The other contains exclusively fusion/non-traditional songs, which maximize the Mongolian ‘folk’ sound in pop and electronic arrangements. These two quite different albums reveal the polarization of current traditional music. On the one hand, the traditional folk music, including long-song, is used as a transnational feature, with the folk musical sound

Above: Mongolian summer.

Inset: Dad'süren, a singer from Dundgov' aimag.

simply a medium for the creation of new music. On the other hand, tradition becomes a reinforcement of the ‘ancient’, yet ‘authentic’ traditional world, as part of a new Mongolian identity.

Continuity as cultural heritage

Back in 2006, I met a singer named Dadsüren, who lived in the remote countryside of Dundgovi province. He was a nomad, and I had to track him down, with the help of other herders I encountered on the way. He was one of those singers who had been left behind, yet who carried an immense amount of knowledge of the long-song and who sang these songs so beautifully in his *ger* (yurt). At that time, Dadsüren and other ‘old’ countryside singers maintained their nomadic ways and still lived as herders; as a result, they were not regarded in the same light as urban singers and received neither respect nor recognition as skilled and professional musicians. However, when I returned to Mongolia in 2012, Dadsüren had been designated, ahead of the urban singers, as a cultural intangible heritage asset. Not all the countryside singers will be promoted in this way, but it certainly shows Mongolia’s change of heart toward what remains and how Mongolians now understand their own tradition.

When I was out following singers on the open steppe, I learned that Mongolians have a great sense of distance and direction. There is no compass, there are no signposts on the steppe, but Mongolian drivers always know where the road is and in which direction they must drive. Mongolians have had unpredictable lives; a nomadic history, a socialist experience, a transition into a democratic free market, bordering Russia and China, in the heart of Inner Asia. They have always been on the move, and have continuously defined and redefined who they are and where they are going. As their most recent transformation shows, Mongols are extremely adaptable to the circumstances, yet entirely focused on identity. They negotiate so as to survive, and thrive by holding on firmly to this sense of identity. Such has also been the case for the long-song tradition. One simple long-song often taught to beginning singers is *Khöörkhön Khaliyn* (A beautiful bay horse). In the two verses of this song, the lyrics talk of how Mongols deal with change.

*The beautiful bay horse is timid
In order to catch it, you should kneel by its legs.
A foreign [new] land [environment] is difficult
In order to adjust to it, you should wait
and patiently bide your time.*

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Notes

1 Humphrey, Caroline. 1992. “The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia”, *Religion, State and Society*, 20(3&4).