

CHUURIN DUU: THE MONGOLIAN BI-PHONIC MUSIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOUND ECOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION: A SOUNDWALK ON THE STEPPE

It was just another night on the steppe. Stars shine silently, and more silent are the surroundings. Sheep are sleeping, and horses do not snore. The only big sound comes from the wind, but it disappears in a quick moment. After the party, all singing and dancing people fall into sleep. As I stand in the middle of the prairie, **rather than the emptiness, it is the audible nothingness that grabs my emotion**. Suddenly I gained a greater amount of patience coming from the listening of my breath, my walk in the grass, and the intimacy of my collars and my face. It was probably the dialogue between me and the steppe—the first time in my life. Here in the middle of the pasture, nothing is industrial, nothing is aurally reflective. Therefore, the tiny sounds that I was used to ignore became extremely amplified through my listening mind.

For the pasture, it is the sounds that she gives to an intruder; for me, it is a beginning to understand the potential relation between myself and the audible world. My grassland experience shapes my perceptive world, and it takes me to the details of each sound. It is also the time that I begin to understand the reason why so many sonic terms exist in the Mongolian dictionary; these terms comprise a huge audible system, interpreting the people's way of listening ... If not this experience, there would be nothing, not to mention the sounds, colors, and shapes, remaining in my mind.

(Field notes by the author)

I dropped this note in 2010, during the time when I did my fieldwork in Silingol, Inner Mongolia. The note became emotional because the “sound impact” from the grassland was so clear. Similarly, I assume, musical ethnographers have the gift of “looking” into and/or sensing sounds. Different from the verbal sketch in the song, *The Night in Ulaanbatur*, I prefer using the term “soundwalking” instead of other musically informed terms. “Soundwalking” is developed through earlier studies of “soundscape” by Murray Schafer in ‘The World Soundscape Project’ during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both “soundscape” and “soundwalking” emphasize the listening act in exploring the relationship between people and environment, and these terms are applied to some fieldwork in ethnomusicology. For me, the terms imply a method to explore the soundscape in a consistent act of walking and listening. In urban or rural places, in a pasture or in a valley, the methodology emphasizes context/environment as the key to the construction of sound. In a specific context/environment, all sounds comprise an auditory field. According to my own listening experience on the pasture, such as an auditory field reminds me not only of an “intruding”, but also of some exchange between the living environment, listeners, and the sounds. The experience also suggests me: the nature nurtures the listener's listening acts.

I conducted my fieldwork on Mongolian people of the Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia from the perspective of listening rather than of visioning. I consider it as necessary to actively and sensitively listen and distinguish the sounds from different cultures.

To understand sounds as expressive forms, people need to look deeply into the whole environment as a system. Then, it takes scholarly efforts to look into ideas, aesthetics, and cosmology of the auditory subjects. In earlier years, Steven Feld (1982) suggests such a methodology in his studies of the Kaluli people. In his book, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds Weeping Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Feld explores the relationships between Kaluli groups and bird sounds. He claims: “for you they are birds for me they are voices in the forest” (p.20). In his later article, *Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology*

of *Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea*, Feld (1996) proposed the issues, “sense of place” and “acoustemology” in order to theorize the way Kaluli people perceive and interpret sounds. In these works, Feld writes about the ideas and forms of sound, and he concludes in terms of local knowledge and of the sense of “being local”. He writes: “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place” (1996, p.1). Feld suggests, to the field of/beyond ethnomusicology, that the way insiders perceive sound should be included as the basis of writing of others’ cultural system.

Some Chinese ethnomusicologists recently have been giving attention to this view of sound. In a special volume of the *Music Research Journal* (2001 [4]), named “The 30th Anniversary of Chinese Traditional Music Research”, there was launched a “Sound Ecology Column”. Through this column sound is examined as culture through the perspectives of aesthetics and ethnography, introduces a number of works from the English academia and reflects on relevant studies written by Chinese scholars (Gao Hejie, 2011; Xu Xin 2011). In the introduction of that volume, the panelist Xiao Mei writes: “as the increasing number of scholars reminds us that the term *music*, which indexes a particular set of cultural meanings, becomes insufficient for the studies of our field, we suggest a new set of terms, such as yinsheng/音声 (musical sound), shengyin/声音 (sound), and yinxiang/音响 (**acoustics**), to be utilized for the studies of our natural and cultural sounds.” (Xiao Mei, 2011). In the meantime, more inclusive thoughts were introduced into research and teaching by those authors.

CHUURIA : THE NATURE OF CHUURIN DUU OR “THIS IS OUR SOUND OF CHUUR”

The meaning of Chuur, according to most Mongolian natives, is overtones and echo. In the musicological context, the term Chuur refers to the concept of harmony or harmonic relations. The word does not exist in any modern Mongolian vernacular language but only means a particular musical form and its features. In a more general sense, it refers to a musical form of a melodic line upon a constant drone, which to be considered a type of bi-phonic music that consists two parts of sound with similar “melody and drone” structure, for example, the Chuur Huur in Horqin, Hoorin Chuur, and Modon Chuur in the Altay area of Xinjiang. In a more particular sense, in my research, Chuur particularly refers to the bass part of Chuurin Duu (the song of Chuur) popular in Abga and Abhanar hoshuur of Silingol Leade in eastern Inner Mongolia. In a Chuurin Duu, the “upper” part is the long-song melody sung by a Duuchin (the leading singer), and the “lower” part is Chuur sung by Chuurchin (the bass singer).

The Mongolia term Chuur, I believe, has its origin from *Chuuria*, which describes all the sounds lingering over a valley or on a steppe, most likely meaning “echo”. In any context, it emphasizes multiple layers of sound. The nomads use *Chuuria* to elaborate their inner feelings of steppe sounds, such as those naturally created by herds and weathers. For example, according there is a Mongolian folksaying about a plant in the Silingol steppe that has leaves cracking in every autumn. It is the plant in the Xilingol steppe that whispers cracking in autumn with their leaves blown by the wind. People can hear this sounds from any distance. Putting a leave closely to the ear, one can hear a rough and also a low sound. People may then call the plant “Chuur grass”. *Chuuria* means then “this is our sound of Chuur”.

WINDS FROM BIG AND LITTLE ROCKS: THE BI-PHONIC STRUCTURE OF NATURE

In performing Chuurin Duu, the upper part is wide, ornamented, and long, while the lower part is powerful, constant, and crispy, similar to *hargaraa* in koomei. If one approaches the singer closely when performing his Chuurin Duu, it is easier for the lower frequencies to resonate within the listeners. Standing beside the singers, one can easily feel the lower frequencies produced by the singers. These two parts are quite distinctive for their tone and timbre. Such features are unique and distinguishable in performing a Chuurin Duu (Figure 1).

Stars and Moon

(Chuurin Duu)

Long-song melody: Lhajab

Chuur: Mashibatu

Transcribed by Xu Xin

Sound Archives from *Collections of Folk Music in China, Inner Mongolia*, 1981.

长调

潮尔

zai a odo hui-ai yi ya-a wojia ai

ai

6

-----o sen gui dewa---hei doda ni o-ai sennia---ai ai---hui

a ai

11

olai wo-o-lai nihonihai- ai- i-----ya-a zo ni a ai o-----ai bosenjia-hei-jisa

ai a ai

16

nia qama-----hei yi-- gui

Manglai explicitly told me: “If you are looking for an explanation of Chuurin Duu, I would tell you this: it comes from the mountain!” (Manlai, 2010). Manglai, the primary informant in my fieldwork in Xilingol, moved from the countryside to Xilinhote city. Yet, his recollection of the sounds on the grassland is still vivid. As a long-song singer who frequently collaborates with Chuurin Duu singers, Manglai analogizes the Chuurin Duu with the low and high sounds heard from the mountains.

In my two-month-stay at Xilingol, I also spoke with Chuur chin (Chuur singer) Batugerel. Similar to Manglai, When I mentioned the bi-phonic structure of Chuurin Duu, he says: “the wind blowing from bigger rocks sounds like *shu....shu...*, and the wind from the smaller rocks sounds like *chi...chi...*. Therefore, it comes to the two kinds of sound” (Batugerel, Interview, 2010). Conducting the interview, I became quite thrilled by the nomads’ approach to linking of the two ends—one is the highly artistic musical expression, and the other is seemingly a collection of natural sounds. This approach does help understand the consciousness of sound mimesis inhibiting the nomads living on the Xilingol grassland, in their interpretation of natural sounds as linked to various humanly produced musical sounds.

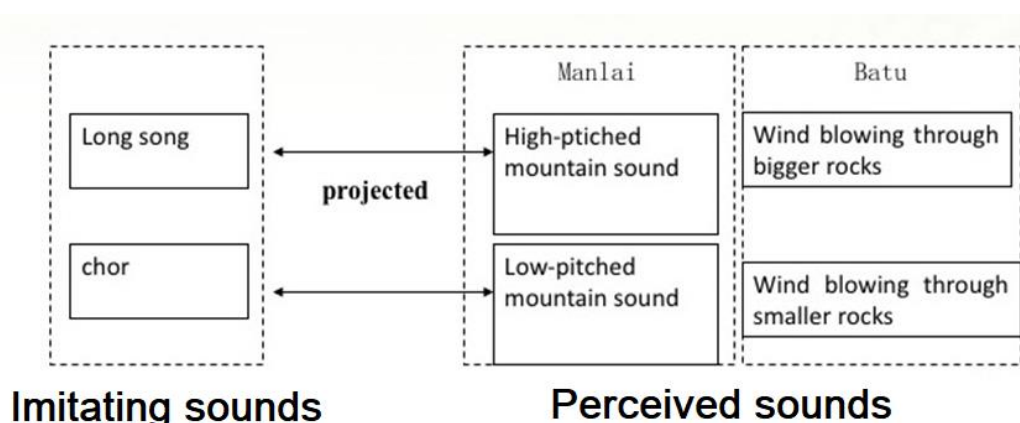


FIGURE 2: Chuurin Duu explained by Maillai and Batugerel.

People on the grassland, I assume, have always been sensitive to Chuuria, that is, for example, distinguishing variations of Chuuria during different seasons, weathers, and times. Manglai claims: “in a day, they made a difference in mornings and evenings, in cloudy and sunny weathers. When winds blow stronger, it gets different every time, though it may be the differently perceived by various listeners. Even, when our sheep get lost, we yell ‘come back!’, and even that will make a the Chuuria sounds differently” (Manlai, 2010).

Burin, a performer from the Inner Mongolian Broadcast troupe, traveled through Inner Mongolia in the 50’s and 60’s. Referring to his experience, he commented that standing alone on a piece of grassland, it is an extremely single-man-world accompanied only by various sounds. He says:

“It was a very fine day. We were sitting or lying on the ground by our flock. And in our ears, various birds’ singings and crows of endless tiny buzzing are resounding, attracting us to imitate them with our singing. Sometimes when storms come, we run to hide ourselves and hear the wind roaring in a different sonority from what we can normally hear” (Burin, 2010).

Mongolians who are living on the steppe, I assume, are used to feel the world through listening, then they may utilize a structured musical form to acknowledge their recognition of it. In the long history of their nomadic life on the grassland, the Mongolian nomads adapted themselves to the environments as being alone with the rough nature and the herds. The only accompanying friends are seemingly the sounds in the vast space. Through this approach, they developed a form to show their existence being in the world, and as well to communicate the world. The nomads reside in a world consisting of countless miniature sounds that are being transformed at all times. Therefore, nomads might be sensitive in capturing, feeling, understanding, and interpreting these sounds, which have become the sources of their own “sense of place”.

THE LAMB CHUUR: METAPHOR OF ANIMALS

I'd like to demonstrate in this part that debating the relationship between animals and human being is a theme of common discourse on the steppe. Under the *tengri*¹ belief system, nomads and their livestock have multiple types of interaction and relationships, which lead to some unique musical appearances. Some Mongolian oral literatures strengthen such expressions, for example, in the Mongolian legend *Suh's White Horse*², the morin huur (horse head fiddle) symbolizes the horse, and its sounds symbolize the horse's cry.

Gombu, a singer from Abaga hoshur, Xilingol, indicates that the learning stages of morin huur are as following: a "two-year-old cow's call" at the beginning, a "camel's call" at the intermediate level, and a "yak's call" at the advanced level. (Gombu, Interview, 2010) Similarly, in August 8th, 2010, I heard a Mongolian wrestler³ critically speaking of the modern morin huur playing style in a *nair* (party) who said that compared with past times, the modern-day morin huur playing is fake... When listening really carefully to the morin huur playing in the past, there can be found everything including the horse and sheep callings. Now it seems being totally irrelevant compared to what was understood of the past morin huur playing. It is more like a violin, not a real huur anymore.

In Xilingol, there are various terms classifying the Chuur of Chuurin Duu singing. These particular terms include two sets, firstly the interpretation of terms (*uran*, *uha*, and *hambu*), and secondly the commonly used terms (*cagan*, *bor*, and *siar*). All of the two sets classify Chuur according to their timbre. For example, the commonly used terms relate different timbres to colors (*cagan*/white, *bor*/brown, and *siar*/yellow), each of which describes the timbre on a spectrum from light to dark. In present day, *bor* Chuur is the most popular Chuur that is used by singers.

Interpretation of term	Commonly used term
<i>Uran</i> /Flexible and Skilled	<i>Cagan</i> /White
<i>Uhaa</i> /Wisdom	<i>Bor</i> / Brown
<i>Hambu</i> /Tibetan Buddhist Monks	<i>Siar</i> /Yellow

FIGURE 3: Classifying System of Chuur Parts according to the informants.

Besides the two sets of describing terms for the Chuur parts, there are also playing or joking terms that are often used for naming Chuurs. Different from the Chuur of a bowed instrument, the aesthetical terms of a vocal Chuur are set against the sounds of animals. The sound of a Chuur is usually low, rough, and roaring, which opposes any sound quality of animals. Therefore, for some not-quite-qualified singers who may not achieve the desired Chuur quality, people jokingly say "Huragan" Chuur, meaning the lamb Chuur, which is sharp and thin. Or, people may say "Inggen" Chuur (female camel Chuur), which is high and bright. Both kinds of singing qualities are the opposite of good Chuur sounds. For example, the Chuur sung by Lhajab, used to be called a Huragan Chuur indicating that Lhajab is not a good Chuur singer, although he is commonly considered to be the most famous long song singer for his beautiful voices and outstanding singing techniques not even in Xilingol but also the whole Inner Mongolia region.

Camel calls are called *isgere*, meaning "whistling by mouth or by the winds. In other words, *isgere* is in fact a collection of timbres similar in quality, which people consider as high, sharp, transparent, and bright. The Chuur played on some Mongolian bowed instruments, e.g morin huur, are applying the technique of overtones or partial tone similarities to represent the horse roaring or camels yelling, both of which are considered to be at the highest pitch level in the Mongolian lives. The nomads in Xilingol use the term *isgere* to talk of a Chuur, which is under a circumstance lacking of sound volume and

¹ *Tengri* means "sky" or "heaven" in Mongolian language. It names a general belief of Mongols and Turks throughout Central Asia. For more information: Bonnefoy, Yves. 1993. *Asian mythologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Yuzo Otsuka, ed. 1981. *Suho's White Horse: A Mongolian Legend*. Balcatta: RIC Publications.

³ Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to ask for his name.

overtones. This may serve as an example of a linguistic metaphor used through the Mongolian ideas of their sound ecology.

CONCLUSION

Through the cases, including sound mimesis of the nature and the audible metaphor of animal, this paper aims to discuss how the natural soundscape reflects on the musical expressions of Xilingol Mongols. Such phenomena is not only exists in Chuurin Duu as the vocal music, but also in instrumental musics of other regions throughout Inner Mongolia. By hearing about (rather than looking at) Mongolia music sounding over the grassland from the ecological perspective, it may provide a new understanding of the meaning that the music contains.

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