



**MUSIC HERITAGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY OF GÜR SONGS IN
ORDOS, CHINA**

By

WU RUIPING

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

September 2024

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Chairperson : Chow Ow Wei, PhD
Faculty : Human Ecology

This study examines the transmission and preservation of Gür songs, a traditional form of Mongolian court music in Ordos, China. The research addresses the critical challenge of safeguarding this cultural heritage due to its limited audience, aging performers, and historical policies that have isolated Mongolian culture. Gür songs face potential extinction because of their limited social dissemination and the aging of primary performers. Historical policies, particularly during the Manchu Qing dynasty and the Cultural Revolution, have significantly impacted the transmission of Gür songs. Recent recognition of Gür songs as a national intangible cultural heritage has not sufficiently addressed these challenges due to minimal documentation and the imminent passing of ‘inheritors.’

The transmission of Gür songs faces multiple challenges, including limited social dissemination, an aging population of inheritors, and the impact of historical policies from the Qing dynasty, which led to cultural isolation. The destruction of cultural heritage during the Cultural Revolution further exacerbated the issue, as Gür songs

have since been preserved only through oral transmission, increasing the risk of distortion. Despite being recognized as intangible cultural heritage, the number of inheritors remains limited, and they are mostly elderly, while research and systematic preservation efforts are insufficient. Cultural memory plays a vital role in preserving Gür songs, as it not only concerns the music itself but also the collective identity of the Mongolian community in China. Therefore, the critical challenge is to find a preservation strategy that maintains the authenticity of the music while ensuring its sustainable transmission.

This study aims to explore and describe Gür songs through their performance and transmission within the Mongolian–Chinese cultural context, to investigate the sustainability of Gür songs after being recognized as music heritage of Ordos, and to demonstrate possible ways Gür songs can constitute cultural memory through audio and visual recordings. Using a qualitative research approach, this study conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Ordos, China. Collected data include interviews with four key informants, audio and video recordings of cultural performances, high-resolution photographs, secondary data such as music manuscripts, as well as field notes. Data were analyzed through discourse analysis, metaphorical analysis, taxonomic analysis, and music analysis to uncover themes and patterns related to the subject matter.

The findings of this study reveal that Gür songs are a crucial music genre that encapsulates significant characteristics of Mongolian culture, functioning as both music heritage and cultural memory for the Mongolian ethnic group in Inner Mongolia. Through detailed analysis, it becomes clear that Gür songs possess unique musical structures and employ both explicit and implicit metaphors in their lyrics, further

enriching their cultural significance. Since being recognized as national intangible cultural heritage, Gür songs have experienced rapid development, aiding their preservation and continued practice within the community. Videos produced during the fieldwork were categorized and shared using modern media technologies, demonstrating how Gür songs can be preserved as cultural memory and promoted in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Ethnography, Inner Mongolia, Mongolian Folk Music, Music Heritage.

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Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

WARISAN MUSIK DAN MEMORI BUDAYA LAGU-LAGU GÜR DI ORDOS, CHINA

Oleh

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Kajian ini mengkaji penghantaran dan pemeliharaan lagu Gür, satu bentuk tradisional sebagai muzik istana Mongolia di Ordos, China. Penyelidikan ini menangani cabaran kritikal untuk melindungi warisan budaya ini kerana penontonnya yang terhad, penghibur yang semakin tua dan dasar sejarah yang telah mengasingkan budaya Mongolia. Lagu Gür menghadapi potensi kepupusan kerana penyebaran sosial yang terhad dan penuaan penghibur utama. Dasar sejarah, terutamanya semasa dinasti Manchu Qing dan Revolusi Kebudayaan, telah memberi kesan ketara kepada penghantaran lagu Gür. Pengiktirafan lagu Gür baru-baru ini sebagai warisan budaya tidak ketara di peringkat negara tidak cukup menangani cabaran ini kerana dokumentasi yang minimum dan usia 'waris' yang telah usang.

Penyebaran lagu Gür menghadapi pelbagai cabaran, termasuk penyebaran sosial yang terhad, populasi pewaris yang semakin tua, dan kesan dasar sejarah dari dinasti Qing, yang membawa kepada pengasingan budaya. Kemusnahan warisan budaya semasa Revolusi Kebudayaan memburukkan lagi isu ini, kerana lagu Gür sejak itu hanya

dipelihara melalui penghantaran lisan, dan ini meningkatkan risiko herotan. Walaupun diiktiraf sebagai suatu warisan budaya tidak ketara, bilangan pewaris masih terhad, dan mereka kebanyakannya warga emas, manakala usaha penyelidikan dan pemeliharaan sistematik tidak mencukupi. Memori budaya memainkan peranan penting dalam mengekalkan lagu Gür, kerana ia bukan sahaja melibatkan muzik itu sendiri tetapi juga identiti kolektif komuniti Mongolia di China. Oleh itu, cabaran kritikal adalah untuk mencari strategi pemeliharaan yang mengekalkan keaslian muzik sambil memastikan penyebarannya yang mampan.

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka dan menerangkan lagu Gür melalui persembahan dan penghantarannya dalam konteks budaya Mongolia–China, untuk menyiasat kelestarian lagu Gür selepas diiktiraf sebagai warisan muzik Ordos, dan untuk menunjukkan cara yang mungkin lagu Gür boleh menjadi memori budaya melalui rakaman audio dan visual. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kajian kualitatif, kajian ini telah menjalankan kerja lapangan etnografi di Ordos, China. Data yang dikumpul termasuk data temu bual dengan empat pemberi maklumat utama, rakaman audio dan video persembahan kebudayaan, gambar beresolusi tinggi, data sekunder seperti manuskrip muzik, serta nota semasa kerja lapangan. Data dianalisis melalui analisis wacana, analisis metafora, analisis taksonomi dan analisis muzik untuk mendedahkan tema dan corak perkara.

Hasil kajian ini ialah lagu Gür adalah genre muzik penting yang menunjukkan ciri-ciri budaya Mongolia, sementara ia dihantar sebagai warisan muzik dan memori budaya dalam kalangan etnik Mongolia di Inner Mongolia. Melalui analisis terperinci, terbukti bahawa lagu-lagu Gür mempunyai struktur muzik yang unik dan menggunakan

metafora tersurat dan tersirat dalam lirik mereka yang memperkayakan kepentingan budaya mereka. Sejak diiktiraf sebagai warisan budaya tidak ketara di peringkat negara, lagu Gür telah mengalami perkembangan pantas yang memastikan pemeliharaan dan kesinambungannya dalam komuniti. Selain itu, video yang dihasilkan semasa kerja lapangan telah dikategorikan dan dikongsi menggunakan teknologi media moden, sementara ini menunjukkan cara lagu Gür boleh dipelihara sebagai memori budaya dan dipromosikan dalam konteks kontemporari. Kesimpulannya, penyelidikan ini bukan sahaja menyerlahkan kepentingan mengkaji lagu Gür tetapi juga menawarkan pendekatan yang komprehensif untuk melindungi warisan budaya tidak ketara yang berharga ini sebagai memori generasi akan datang.

Kata kunci: Etnografi, Memori Budaya, Mongolia Dalam, Muzik Rakyat Mongolia, Warisan Muzik.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, perched at the northernmost boundary of China, extends in a diagonal trajectory from the northeast to the southwest. This region, defined by its narrow and elongated structure, measures approximately 2,400 km longitudinally from the east to the west and spans over 1,700 km latitudinally at its broadest from the north to the south. The region's substantial geographical expanse, around 1,183,000 square kilometers, forms a significant part of China's territorial matrix. Furthermore, its northern border, bordering with Mongolia, bestows its distinctive historical and cultural legacy upon it (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Geological and Mineral Resources Bureau, 1991).

Nestled within the southwestern quadrant of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is Ordos, a prefecture-level city under regional jurisdiction. The etymology of Ordos, translating to “palace of many” in Mongolian, underlines the city's rich heritage and diverse cultural framework. Ordos's economy draws its sustenance from the abundant natural resources within its domain. Historically, Ordos is renowned for its deep-seated lineage, and the city's territory houses the tomb of the famed Genghis Khan. The legacy of Genghis Khan deeply permeates the cultural ethos of Ordos, intertwining local identity with Mongolian historical elements (Bai, 2019: 3).

Ordos's administrative structure encompasses two districts and seven banners, among which the Hangin Banner¹ is significant for its dense Mongolian population. The people of this area live a semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral lifestyle, contributing to a rich tapestry of folkloric traditions. The local culture is punctuated by a wealth of folk songs permeating throughout the region, where Hangin Banner takes pride as the birthplace of the ancient Gür songs, also known as “Guri Dao”, earning it the name “hometown of the Gür song”.

The “Guri Dao”, or “Gür songs”, draw their name from the Mongolian *gur* meaning ‘country’ or ‘dynasty’, and *dao* signifying ‘song’ (Shi, 2017: 75). These songs, as key components of Mongolian court music, adhere to rigorous standards regarding the timing, location, and performer positions during performances. They also maintain specific thematic content guidelines. Recognizing the cultural significance of Gür songs, the Hangin Banner government has committed to their protection. Their dedication was recognized nationally in 2008 when the Gür songs were inducted into the second batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list.

Consequently, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, particularly Ordos and Hangin Banner, represents a vibrant amalgamation of historical, cultural, and socio-economic elements. This dynamic confluence has created a fertile ground for the study and exploration of the interactions among these various elements. The “Gür songs,” having transcended their initial cultural context, have evolved into a profound element of the collective memory for the Mongolian people in the Hangin Banner region.

¹ Hangin Banner is known as  in Mongolian or 杭锦旗 in Chinese. It is the name for a wider region.

These songs, deeply embedded in the daily lives and traditions of the local population, serve as a living testament to their shared heritage. Over time, the Gür songs have transitioned from mere folkloric expressions to a significant component of the cultural memory of the Mongolian community in this specific area.

Furthermore, the significance of the Gür songs lies not only in their historical and cultural origins but also in their ability to encapsulate the experiences, values, and identities of the Mongolian people. As these songs are passed down through generations, they foster a sense of continuity and connection to the past, reinforcing the community's identity and cohesion. This transformation from collective memory to cultural memory underscores the songs' integral role in the socio-cultural fabric of Hangin Banner. The government's recognition and efforts to preserve the Gür songs, culminating in their inclusion in the national intangible cultural heritage list, further highlight their importance. This official acknowledgment not only protects the songs from the risk of cultural erosion but also elevates their status as a symbol of regional pride and identity (Liu, 2020:23).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Gür songs epitomize a traditional form of Mongolian ritual music whose social dissemination is notably limited. As of now, the known audience of the music is predominantly confined to the Mongolian community of Hangin Banner within the prefecture-level city of Ordos. The demographic structure of its transmission also poses significant challenges, as the primary inheritors of Gür songs are predominantly elderly. This intersection of factors sparks concerns about the possible extinction of this cultural heritage.

Historical and political contexts also present a key part of the issue. The Manchu Qing dynasty (1636–1911) implemented policies that had profound implications for the preservation of Gür songs. Initially, there were regulations prohibiting Mongolians from assimilating Han Chinese culture and manners. Trade and travel between the Central Plains and Mongolia were also restricted, isolating the Mongolian cultural sphere. Moreover, a policy to control the growth of the Mongolian population was introduced by the imperial court. According to this policy, a Mongolian household was obligated to ordain two to three sons as Buddhist monks if they had a total of five sons (Liang and Cai, 2013:90). These policies have significantly resulted in the segregation and isolation of Mongolian culture, as well as a reduction in the Mongolian population until present day, which might have left an impact toward a setback for the continuity and development of Gür songs.

Following the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee, the Red Guard Movement during the Cultural Revolution in 1966–1976, with its political focus on eradicating the “Four Olds” —literally ‘old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits’—resulted in large-scale destruction of cultural artifacts (Yu, 2014: 4), causing another substantial blow to the praxis of Gür songs. During this period, any manifestation of Mongolian rituals, including the Gür songs, was prohibited. Numerous textual materials of Gür songs were lost since this period with a possible cause that they were allegedly linked to the “Four Olds”. This explains why Gür songs can be traced only through the oral transmission today. This method of preservation inevitably exposes the tradition to the possibility of distortion or alteration in the music knowledge, potentially compromising the authenticity of the music.

The relatively recent recognition as a component of intangible cultural heritage in China further worsens the problems associated with the preservation of Gür songs. Although an “inheritance system²” (Yang and Xu, 2004) for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage has been introduced in China, the number of national and provincial “inheritors³” (Qiao, 2019: 8) for this tradition is minimal, all of whom are aging and over 75 years old. From a research perspective, geographical and linguistic barriers have limited the number of researchers studying Gür songs, resulting in a need for more comprehensive documentation and research for this traditional music genre. Additionally, as a remote local county, Hangin Banner has limited means to preserve this cultural heritage systematically and in an orderly manner.

While the historical and demographic challenges to the preservation of Gür songs are undeniably significant, the discussion of cultural memory in the problem statement section warrants further elaboration. Cultural memory plays a vital role in safeguarding these songs by shaping how they are remembered, transmitted, and adapted across generations within the community. It is not solely about preserving the music itself but also about maintaining the collective identity of the Mongolian people, which is deeply intertwined with these traditions. The interaction between cultural memory and identity, particularly under the influence of historical policies and demographic shifts, demands a more in-depth analysis. This perspective is essential to fully understand the

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- 2 In the cultural domain, the term "inheritance system" refers to the mechanisms and practices through which cultural values, traditions, knowledge, and social norms are passed down from one generation to the next. This encompasses a wide array of elements, including language, rituals, customs, moral values, art, craftsmanship, and religious beliefs (Yang and Xu, 2004).
 - 3 In the cultural and musical domains, “inheritors” [传承人] refers to individuals or groups who receive, preserve, and transmit cultural traditions, artistic styles, or musical genres from previous generations to the next. These inheritors are not just passive recipients of cultural heritage; they play an active role in keeping traditions alive, often adding their own interpretations and innovations while maintaining the core essence of the cultural or musical legacy (Qiao, 2019: 8).

stakes involved in preserving Gür songs, as cultural memory acts as a protective force that ensures the survival and authenticity of this musical heritage, even as it evolves in response to external pressures.

Therefore, the critical challenge is determining the most effective preservation strategy for Gür songs. This approach must maintain the authenticity of the music while facilitating its sustainability within the framework of the ethnomusicological context in which it has traditionally been performed and transmitted. Furthermore, an emphasis must also address the pressing issue of expanding its demographic of “inheritors” and fostering greater interest in the research of Gür songs.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How can Gür songs be explored and described through their performance and transmission within the Mongolian–Chinese cultural context?
2. How does Gür songs sustain after being recognized as the music heritage of Ordos, China?
3. What are the possible ways to demonstrate how Gür songs can constitute cultural memory through audio and visual recordings?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To study and describe Gür songs through their performance and transmission within the Mongolian–Chinese cultural context.
2. To observe and investigate how Gür songs sustain after being recognized as the music heritage of Ordos, China.
3. To explore possible ways of demonstrating how Gür songs can constitute cultural memory through audio and visual recordings.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant potential to enrich our understanding of Mongolian ritual music, particularly focusing on Gür songs. The study's goal and objectives could have a profound impact on our knowledge and practical strategies for preserving this unique intangible cultural heritage.

The study explored the methods of performance, transmission, and inheritance of Gür songs, which will illuminate the intricate mechanisms and practices intrinsic to the survival and continuity of this tradition. While this inquiry is of notable academic interest, it also bore practical implications in formulating robust strategies for the preservation of Gür songs. These strategies can then be aligned with the community's existing practices and cultural values, thus facilitating the sustainable continuity of this traditional music form.

Furthermore, the research on the concept of Gür songs as a form of cultural memory can provide valuable insights into how shared memories shape cultural identities, foster social cohesion, and enable the continuity of traditions across generations. This exploration aimed to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between intangible cultural heritage and societal dynamics, thereby making significant contributions to disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology.

Aiming to construct a cultural memory of Gür songs through audio and video recordings, the study introduced a tangible aspect to the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage. These tangible resources could serve as essential tools for

safeguarding the tradition, promoting its transmission, and facilitating education about it. Future generations could use these resources to connect with Gür songs, enhance public appreciation for this tradition, and provide valuable reference material for scholars, policymakers, and cultural practitioners.

Also, the findings from this study have the potential to influence policymaking in the realm of cultural preservation, offering a template for protecting similar forms of intangible cultural heritage. The study underscored the crucial role that cultural diversity plays in cultivating inclusive societies, thereby contributing to broader sociocultural discourses at a time when many traditional practices are threatened. Thus, this study promised to make a significant contribution to our understanding and preservation of cultural heritage, promoting an appreciation for cultural diversity and underscoring the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural traditions.

1.6 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study is geographically confined to Ordos City within the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, with a particular emphasis on the Hangin Banner. This area was chosen because Gür songs are currently preserved and transmitted exclusively among the Mongolian population in this region, and it remains the only place where Gür songs are found today. The sampling of Gür songs is limited to those available in the collective memory of the cultural “inheritors.” The revival of these cultural memories commenced in 1989, and this study specifically concentrates on the versions of the Gür songs that were documented during the initial phase of this oral revival.

Accessibility posed a significant limitation, given the researcher's status as an outsider who is a native Han Chinese. Access to Ordos City was predominantly facilitated through Mandarin-speaking contacts, which may have influenced the scope and depth of the data collected. This reliance on Mandarin-speaking intermediaries could have restricted interactions with native Mongolian speakers and potentially limited the richness and authenticity of the cultural insights obtained.

The resources utilized in this study are primarily limited to the Mongolian–Chinese context, which provides rather plenty of Sinicized versions of the cultural materials. The Sinicization of Mongolian culture in Inner Mongolia is an unavoidable political factor that significantly affects the availability and nature of the sources.

Additionally, the language of the sources of music and literature analyzed in this study is not exclusive to Mongolian but also delimits to the Chinese language. Chinese, being a more predominant language in Inner Mongolia, represents a significant portion of the available resources. This bilingual approach reflects the linguistic dynamics of the region and may influence the interpretation and understanding of the cultural materials.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Mongolia, Mongolian and Mongol

Mongolia, or **Outer Mongolia** in the Chinese context, can be referred to the modern nation-state or a broader cultural and historical region encompassing parts of China and Russia. It is a landlocked country in East and Central Asia, bordered by Russia to the north and China to the south. The capital city is Ulaanbaatar. It is known for its

vast, rugged landscapes including the Gobi Desert and expansive steppes. Mongolia has a population of about 3.3 million people and is characterized by its nomadic culture, with many people still following traditional herding lifestyles. The official language is Mongolian, and the dominant religion is Tibetan Buddhism. Historically, it was a part of the Qing Dynasty until it declared independence in 1911. It achieved full sovereignty in 1921 with the support of the Soviet Union and was established as the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924, becoming a democratic republic after the end of socialist rule in the early 1990s (Li, 2014:40).

Inner Mongolia is an autonomous region within the People's Republic of China. It is located to the south of Mongolia and is home to a significant population of ethnic Mongols. Inner Mongolia preserves many aspects of traditional Mongolian culture, including language and customs, but has also been influenced by Chinese culture and governance (Fang 2012: 9). This thesis mainly explores the music heritage and cultural memory of Gūr songs within this Mongolian–Chinese cultural context.

Mongolians refer to the people who live in the modern nation-state of Mongolia. They are predominantly of Mongol ethnicity and speak the Mongolian language. On another hand, **Mongols** refer to the ethnic group that originated in the Central Asian steppes. This group includes people in both the modern country of Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia region of China, as well as Mongolic-speaking populations in Russia and other parts of Central Asia. The Mongols are known for their nomadic lifestyle, traditional herding practices, and historical achievements, particularly during the time of the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire was a vast empire founded by Genghis Khan in the early 13th century. At its peak, it was the largest contiguous empire in

history, stretching from Eastern Europe to East Asia. The Mongol Empire is renowned for its military prowess, efficient governance, and the facilitation of trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road (Li, 2014:99).

1.7.2 Gür Songs

“Gür songs” or “Guri Du,” transliterated from the Mongolian language, signifies “nation,” “dynastic governance,” or “the populace” in Mongolian, and conveys the meaning of “spiritual mentor” or “preceptor” in Sanskrit. The term “Du” is also a transliteration from Mongolian, meaning “song”.⁴ Originating during the Mongol Empire era, Gür songs represents a grand vocal suite performed by the Mongolian royal and noble families during significant court ceremonies. This ceremonial song suite embodies the cultural and political ethos of the Mongol elite, blending elements of governance, spirituality, and art into a unified expression of state and societal ideals. Gür songs, as a historical and cultural artifact, offers insight into the ceremonial practices and the aesthetic values of the Mongol court, highlighting the intricate interplay between music, politics, and spirituality within the Mongol Empire (Chu, 2018: 67).

1.8 Orthography

The study utilizes the traditional Mongolian script, Cyrillic script, and Romanized Mongolian script for the transliteration of special Mongolian names. The choice of

4 This term has been transliterated as “gidi” from Sanskrit, “gur” from Tibetan, and “duulal” from Mongolian (Le Khürelbaatar 1998; Chu, 2018).

Romanized Mongolian script is preferred to ensure accuracy and consistency in representing Mongolian phonetics.

However, when the Romanized Mongolian script is unavailable, the Romanized Chinese script, or pinyin, is used as a supporting script. This approach ensures that the names and terms remain accessible and comprehensible to those familiar with pinyin, facilitating a broader understanding of the study's content. For example, the use of letter 'v' as found in the transliteration of collected manuscripts is an alternative way of writing the letter 'ü' due to convenience of keyboard entries.

Translations into English are provided where necessary to support the comprehension of non-Mongolian and non-Chinese speaking audiences. This ensures that the study's findings and discussions are accessible to an international readership, promoting wider dissemination and engagement with the research. The inclusion of English translations also aids in maintaining clarity and precision in the presentation of the cultural and linguistic elements studied.

1.9 Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into six main chapters that explore the musical heritage and cultural memory of Gür songs in Ordos, China. Chapter 2 delves into a comprehensive literature review, examining geographical aspects, the history of Inner Mongolia, studies on Mongolian music culture and heritage, and the concept of cultural memory. The methodology used in the research is detailed in Chapter 3, mainly covering research design, data collection, and data analytical techniques. Chapter 4 primarily

analyses the essence of Gür songs, utilizing thirty Gür songs for music analysis. It also examines the performance and transmission methods of Gür songs, as well as their development after being recognized as intangible cultural heritage. Chapter 5 explores the intersection of Gür songs and cultural memory, investigating how Gür songs serve as a medium for cultural memory through existing channels. It also offers the researcher's recommendations for the future development of Gür songs based on fieldwork observations. Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive summary of the entire study and presents recommendations for further research.

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