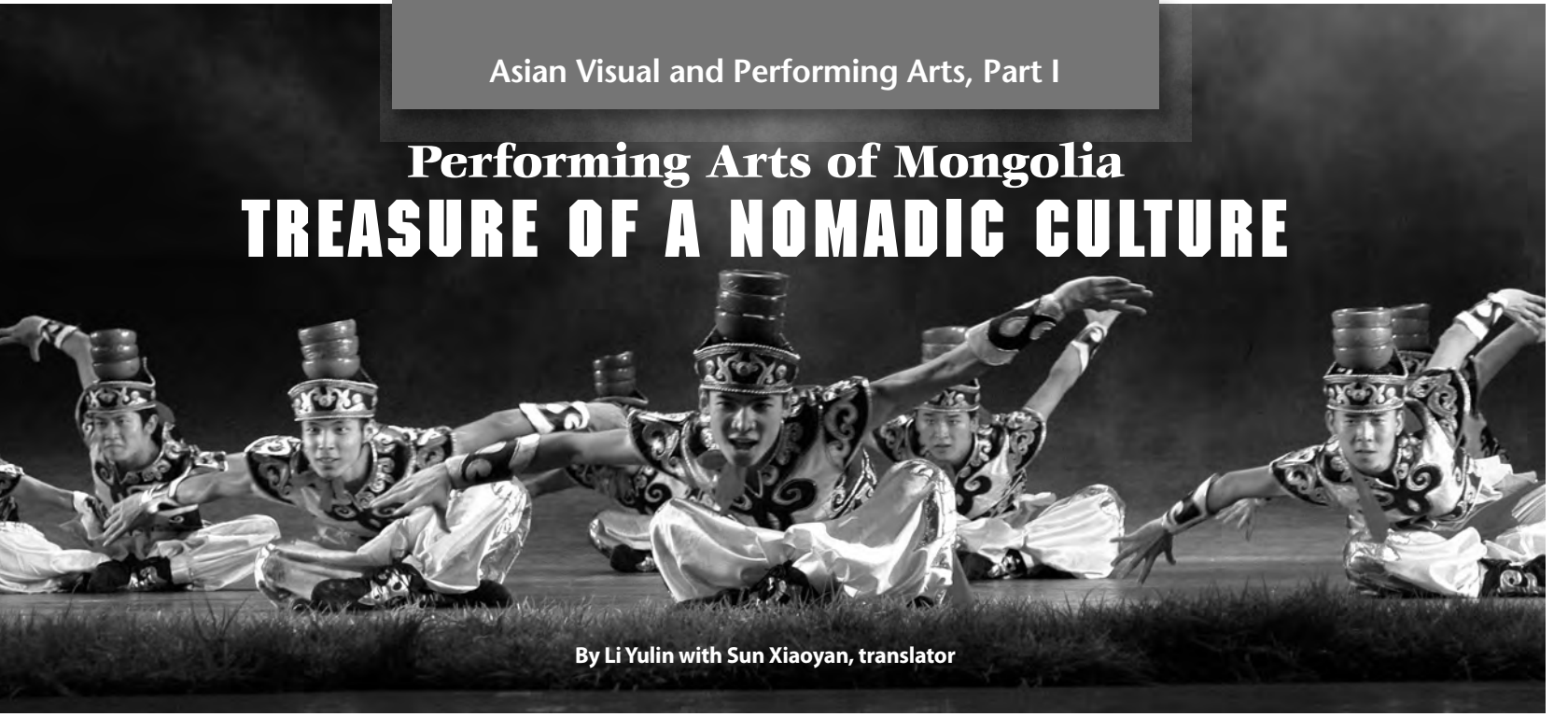
Performing Arts of Mongolia
TREASURE OF A NOMADIC CULTURE



By Li Yulin with Sun Xiaoyan, translator

Figure 1. "Song for Wine Presentation," a Mongolian dance, won the Gold Prize at the Sixth Lotus Cup Dance Competition in 2007. (Photo by Bayin)

The vast steppe of northern China has nurtured a brilliant and unsophisticated grassland culture, including the arts of the nomadic "horseback people" who reside on the steppe. A new form of arts came into being in order to adapt itself to the region's natural environment and ecological system. Mongolian herdsmen have lived on the grasslands of northern China for many generations (Figure 3). They left a cultural legacy of romantic simplicity that is still revered today. However, real nomadic life in the grassland means living with the extremes of heat and cold, the solitude of the Gobi Desert, the annoyances of mosquitoes and other insects, and often a humdrum daily routine. These elements of life also nourished the magnificence of Mongolian long song, sentimental and melodious horse-head fiddle music, and valiant and graceful Mongolian dance. This essay is a short introduction to these seminal Mongolian traditional performing arts (Figures 1 and 2).

The Epic

Virtually every nation has its own heroic epic, and Mongolians are no exception. The well-known Mongolian epic, "Janggar," is regarded as one of the top three major minority epics of China. "Janggar" was first created in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) by the Oyrat Mongolians and extensively spread among areas on the Mongolian Plateau in the eastern Eurasian Steppes and Altai Mountains in the middle of the steppe. The folk artists who sing the Mongolian heroic epic are called *Jianggerch*.

"Janggar" is the title of the heroic epic as well as the hero's name in the story. According to the legend, Janggar was the son of the headman Uzun Aladaerhan. When he was very young, devils carried his parents away and killed them. Little Janggar, hiding in a mountain cave, fortunately escaped the disaster and was found and raised by kind-hearted people. From childhood, Janggar had exceptional wisdom, noble character, amazing strength,

Figure 2. "Sarina in the Moonlight," directed by Li Xin and Tian Yuan and performed by Duguer Oudenggaowa, won the Bronze medal at the Eighth Lotus Cup Dance Competition in 2011. (Photo by Bayin)

and excellent training in martial arts, and from the tender age of seven, Janggar made remarkable achievements. His people later held him up as khan, or leader. Janggar led warriors on the grasslands and repelled the attack from wicked forces led by Manggusi that caused jealous hatred from his foes, who targeted the skillful craftsmen under Janggar. His fine horse and virtuous wives became Janggar's enemies' prey. Focusing on the enemies' bride-seizing, robbing, and occupying pasturelands, the epic includes one breathtaking battle scene after another with insights into the economy, culture, customs, and politics of ancient Mongolian society.

During the first half of the twelfth century, when the Turehot Tribe migrated from China's northwest Xinjiang region, they carried "Janggar" westward with them beyond the Eurasian Steppes to the South Russian Steppe in the Volga Valley. There, a Mongolian folk artist, Janggarch, practiced the art of storytelling, accompanied by a fiddle shaped like a horse-head. From then on, epic tales were handed down from one generation of storytellers to another. The stories served to encourage and entertain the horseback riders in spite of often-adverse circumstances. In one episode, when Janggar led his warriors and defeated the savage Mangnaihan Tribe, he and his followers pledged an oath that they would "rather shed blood by the pure fountain, rather laid down life in the wildness, than to be a slave." The soul-stirring heroic movement inspired the horseback people to overcome difficulties and hardships and to keep visualizing a beautiful future for the Mongolians. Today, you can still hear Mongolian folk artists perform this ancient epic on the grasslands, in the Altai Region on the borders between Xinjiang and Mongolia, and in the Central Asian and Russian Steppes.

Figure 3. The Heavenly Mongolian Plateau. (Photo by He Ping)

The Folk Long Song

When contemplating the inward grassland and gazing at the distant place, jade green and fragrant grass joining the sky with clouds rolling by, cattle grazing leisurely, and scattered Mongolian yurts, the whole world seems to be frozen, and you can feel your soul and body wandering along the confluence of history and reality. Amidst the stillness, you cannot help but cry from the very bottom of your heart in the solitude; this outburst of the soul is probably one of the origins of *Urtiin Duu*, the Mongolian long song (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Hazhabu, master of Mongolian folk long song. Source: www.nmgnews.com.cn. (Photo by He Ping)

Long songs require the singer to have a marvelous voice with an extraordinarily long range because their melodies reflect the spirit of Mongolia's vast grasslands. The vibrating or decorative note, *nuogula* in Mongolian, or translated into English as "overflowing with freedom and enthusiasm," is featured in long song. Today, unlike in the past when it was an oral tradition, long song as a vocal form has been systematized. Lyrical themes vary depending on context; they can be pastoral songs, hymns, songs of nostalgia, and wedding songs.

The late Mongolian long song singer Hazhabu was acknowledged as the king master. Baoyindeligeer, another long song artist, was praised as "a lark on grassland" by Mongolian herdsmen. She won the Gold Prize in the Fifth International Youth Festival in Warsaw in 1955 for her long song piece, "The Vast Grassland," when she was twenty-three years old.

Born into a long song music family in the 1940s, long song artist Badema was given the title of "*Darhandaoqin*," Long Song King Singer, by the Long Song Art Research Association of Inner Mongolia. She is now in her seventies and still teaching long songs to young learners. These tireless efforts by well-known Mongolian long song masters keep the art of Mongolian long song a vibrant art form. When these classics of long song, such as "The Pacing Horse" and "Vast Grassland" are performed, all Mongolian people sing along with the music. Long song justly deserves the title "Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" that UNESCO bestowed upon this enduring folk performing art tradition. Even today, where there is the music of long song, there are Mongolian people, and momentarily, the power of imagination will bring listeners back to their grasslands.

Hoomii, or Throat Singing

Among all vocal techniques, Mongolia's throat singing tradition, or hoomii, is one of the world's most amazing art forms because of its overtone singing, where the vocalist utters two simultaneous voice parts by tightening the larynx. *Haolin chor*, the oldest form of throat singing, is popular on the grasslands of Inner Mongolia and areas of the Altai Mountains. A throat singer produces two simultaneous vocal tones. With the mixture of low and high pitches that imitate natural sounds such as earth quivering (or vibrating), with low notes extended for a long duration, and the sound of the sea with resonant metallic sound, hoomii produces astonishing sound effects. When some well-known pieces, such as "Ode to Altai Mountains," "Erbuhe River," and cuckoos are performed, people—especially first-time listeners—often gasp with admiration.

Narrative Folk Songs

Besides long song and hoomii, Mongolian people created other unique forms of art, such as the short song and long narrative folk songs. A Mongolian short song commonly consists of two or four lyrical lines in each of its parts in a set rhythm, reduplication (morphological repetition) in its lyrics, and a gentle rising and falling melody and fixed tempo. "Senjidema," "Wuyunshandan," "Gada Meilin," and "Danabala" are the most popular folk short songs among Mongolian herdsmen. Mongolian long narrative folk songs mainly tell of significant events that happened in Mongolian history. Tales

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preceded the related long narrative folk songs, with well-known pieces such as "White Deer," "Danabala," and "Gada Meilin" that were first sung by Mongolian singers and then became popular among shepherds on the vast Mongolian grassland. The long narrative folk song "Gada Meilin" narrates a tale of a Mongolian armed uprising and struggle for defending their homeland. Mongolian people seldom give moral lectures in their artworks but express or represent their knowledge of society and culture, life and work skills, and feeling and emotions through various artistic forms.

The Horse-head Fiddle

A beautiful melody depends on musical instruments for accompaniment. Mongolian herdsmen created various instruments, including the beloved horse-head fiddle. Horses play a vital role in Mongolian people's lives and are viewed as creatures with honest and noble temperaments. The widely known legend of the horse-head fiddle has constantly inspired the herdsmen's passion for this folk musical instrument and its deep, broad, and melodious music.

One legend about the origin of the horse-head fiddle is that a young shepherd named Suhe and his beloved little white horse had only each other for company, and they shared hardships together. In a horse-racing competition, the little white horse threw off the lord when it discovered that the man riding was not its owner; the lord was very angry and mortally wounded the horse, who then ran back to Suhe and died. Suhe was filled with sorrow and missed his beloved horse day and night. Once, the horse came to him in a dream and said, "Make an instrument with my body. Then, I can accompany you forever, and you will not feel lonely." Waking up from the dream, Suhe made a horse-head fiddle with the bones, skin, and tail of the little horse.

Mongolian Cultural Preservation: Audio and Visual Examples

Horse -head fiddle from the collection of the The National Museum of Mongolia.
Source: http://tiny.cc/hbdjo.

Mongolian Throat Singing:
Hoomii (also transliterated as *hoomei*, *khoomii*, and *khöömei)*
Khöömei in Mongolian means "pharynx," referring to the part of the throat used in khöömei. UNESCO describes khöömei as "the whole practice of a single person who voluntarily and simultaneously overlays several sounds, but mainly two sounds, with his voice." Khöömei is grouped into two primary types: *kharkhiraa* ("deep khöömei") and *isgeree* ("whistled") khöömei. This type of singing is performed at social occasions from grand ceremonies to herding in the fields and is traditionally transferred through apprenticeship. Khöömei is practiced in Mongolia and in the Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang regions of China, as well as in neighboring counties in Russia. These respective governments seek to preserve the khöömei tradition by hosting workshops and performances of khöömei, as well as promoting international meetings of khöömei masters. Courses in khöömei exist at several universities, including the Mongolian University of Culture and Arts and National University of Mongolia. Several nongovernmental organizations have also formed to continue the khöömei tradition, such as the Association of Mongol khöömei.

ONLINE RESOURCES
"Mongolia—Information Related to Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO, accessed February 1, 2012, http://bit.ly/t9tpsS.
UNESCO, *Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: Nomination File No. 00396,* Kenya, 2010, accessed February 1, 2012, http://bit.ly/wNlWNn.

VIDEOS
"The Mongolian Traditional Art of *Khöömei,*" posted by UNESCO, http://tiny.cc/fm3pj.
"Mongolian Art of Singing: *Khöömei,*" posted by UNESCO, http://tiny.cc/p0l9c.

Mongolian Long Song
Long song, or *urtiin duu*, is believed to have originated 2,000 years ago. This style of singing is marked by heavy ornamentation, wide vocal range, and free compositional form. It is performed at important celebrations, such as the birth of a child, a wedding, and at festivals. In 2008, the Traditional Folk Long Song was added to UNESCO's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

ONLINE RESOURCES
"Mongolia—Information Related to Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO, accessed February 1, 2012, http://bit.ly/z6Pr1H.
"Urtiin Duu—Traditional Folk Long Song," UNESCO, accessed February 1, 2012, http://bit.ly/y9HnYQ.

VIDEO
"Urtiin Duu—Traditional Folk Long Song," posted by UNESCO, http://tiny.cc/9mdt8.

Horse-head Fiddle
The horse-head fiddle, named for the elaborately carved horse-head on the top of the instrument's neck, is a two-stringed instrument commonly used in Mongolian folk songs. The strings of the horse-head fiddle are made of braided horsehair, as are the fibers of the bow. The player kneels behind the fiddle, resting the body of the instrument on the ground, and plays using light pressure against the sides of the strings (as opposed to applying direct pressure to the tops of the strings like when playing guitar or violin). The horse-head fiddle is usually played to accompany singing or other instruments and is rarely played as a solo instrument.

ONLINE RESOURCES
Jenkins, Jean L. "The Morienhur: A Mongolian Fiddle." *Man* 60 (1960): 129-130, accessed February 1, 2012, http://tiny.cc/1d4ri.

VIDEO
"Video: Music on Mongolian Prairie," posted by Chinese Network Television, http://bit.ly/AlfkIK.
Horse-head Fiddle Ensemble Performance at the UN Day 2011 Concert, http://bit.ly/sy5lHr, performance starts at 21:00 marker. ■

From then on, the horse-head fiddle became a comfort for the souls of all shepherds. The instrument's sounds seemingly praise loyalty and fidelity and criticize greed.

On the Mongolian grasslands, horse-head fiddles enjoy an extraordinary social status and reputation among ordinary people. The folk belief is that whenever horse-head fiddle music is played on the vast grasslands, the sound of nature, furnished with wings, flies to every corner of the land and attracts herdsmen riding their galloping horses from afar to gather around the instrument, an experience something similar to baptism of the soul.

In Mongolian communities, every newly produced horse-head fiddle receives a mystic rite or ceremony for welcoming the birth of the fairy. Seemingly, a respected horse spirit communicates with humans through the instrument. Once a horse-head fiddle comes to this world, it is guided by a divine being. Either in Mongolia or in China's Inner Mongolia, this ancient custom continues and constitutes an inseparable tie between the Mongolian people and their own history.

The horse-head fiddle has a rectangular sound box with a horsehair bow, and the top of its neck is carved in the shape of a horse's head. It remains the Mongolian herdsmen's favorite instrument and has become the outstanding representative of Mongolian traditional musical instruments (Figures 5 and 6). Other traditional musical instruments include the mongolian *sihu,* a bowed string instrument with four strings; the *yatag*, a traditional Mongolian plucked zither; and the *huobusi*, a four-stringed Mongolian instrument.

Horse-head fiddle music has a strong flavor of grassland life, characterized by its pure and mellow music with rich overtones. The great masters Selaxi, Sangduren, and Qi Baoligao, who are still actively involved with performing the instrument, are considered true icons among Mongolian people. "Zhuselie," "Four Seasons," and "Galloping Horses" are the most popular horse-head classical repertoires.

Melodious horse-head fiddle music is more expressive and appropriate in depicting and recalling life on the grassland than a painting or a poem. Horse-head fiddle music will sublimate the listeners' emotions by opening their mind's eye toward the world and strengthening the power of imagination, creating a meditative state among listeners.

Mongolian Dance

Mongolian herdsmen are seemingly constantly moving about in search of new pastures. Moving is the essence of nomadic culture, which finds expression in the people's souls and in their body movements. The art of Mongolian dance is the best interpretation of the rhythm of life. Mongolian folk dance is closely related to their nomadic lifestyle of hunting and religious belief in sacrifices and rituals.

Mongolian people value the color white, and the eagle is regarded with reverence, which explains the origins of the white eagle dance. Bear dance and deer dance, as well as eagle dances, are true portrayals of hunting life in early Mongolia. Shamanism is a traditional religion many Mongolians have long practiced, and it preceded Tibetan Buddhism and other religions. Likewise, Mongolian traditional folk dances, like the bowl dance, chopstick dance, horse and knife dance, and ordos dance clearly show the Mongolian people's passion for life and their pursuit of happiness. When performing the dance, the dancers' movements evoke valiant, romantic, and peaceful sensations from audiences.

With forceful, vigorous, and elastic movements, the dancer bends forward or backward, leaning with the axis of his/her waist. Mongolian dances also feature repeatedly shrugging shoulders and briskly moving wrists. Observers of the dance often spontaneously began shouting, jumping, screaming, and clapping, lost in the world that the dancers build through their full self-confidence, stemming from internal force and overwhelming passion. Mongolian folk dance has no limitation in terms of time, venue, and the number of people who participate. Ordinary people, wherever they are, in yurts, in fields, or by the bonfire, are always ready to use improvisation in

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Figure 5. A Mongolian musician performs on the horse-head fiddle for children. (Photo by Wen Kai)

Figure 6. Members of the Training Base of the Mongolian Youth Choir at the Inner Mongolia University Art College perform music with horse-head fiddles. (Photo by Xu Xi)

Figure 7. Passionate and graceful Mongolian dance. (Photo by Xu Ying)

singing and dancing. A solo performance will often attract everyone in the immediate area.

With overflowing enthusiasm and brisk steps, Mongolians emancipate their bodies by dancing and push it to the extreme by expressing distinctive Mongolian temperaments in artistic ways. Touching artistic charm comes from, at times, a perfect combination of emotion and graceful dance. Whatever the dance form—fast or slow, strong or weak, open or closed, light or heavy, high or low—the dance can come alive through human feeling and resulting action (Figure 7).

The splendid history of nomadic people is gradually fading out of sight, dimmed in our memory, but it is hoped that the artistic heritage of the people on horseback will live forever. This rich history recalls the beautiful memories of our childhood and arouses our longing for a bright future. Mongolian performance music and dance constitute two of the most beautiful folk genres in human civilization. ■

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A History of Two Mongolias

Figure 8. Female costume of modern Buryat Mongolian. (Photo by Wu Junping)

The Mongolian Empire began when Chinggis Khan united nomadic tribes in CE 1206, but the empire's strength waned after the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty rulers of China in 1368. The present-day border between Inner (Chinese) Mongolia and Outer (independent) Mongolia was drawn in 1727, when Russia and China signed the Treaty of Khiakta, the separation of Mongolia occurred in stages. As the Manchu began conquering China, they also invaded Mongolia, resulting in the initial division of Inner and Outer Mongolia. As the Manchu Qing dynasty grew weaker in China, Russia began to encourage Mongolian nationalism. Mongolia declared its independence from China in 1911, when the Qing dynasty fell.

In 1921, Mongols joined forces with Russian forces to expel the Chinese and establish the Mongolian People's Republic, which remained a client state of the Soviet Union until its collapse in the early 1990s. Mongolia established itself as a parliamentary republic with the adoption of a new constitution in 1992. Inner Mongolia remains an autonomous region of China.

Today, there are two Mongolias—the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (formerly Inner Mongolia) that is part of the People's Republic of China and the independent state of Mongolia (Outer Mongolia), formerly part of the Soviet Union. Both are roughly the size of Alaska.

The independent state of Mongolia sits on a plateau of mostly fertile grasslands, with the Gobi Desert lying in the southeastern region between China and Russia in Central Asia. Three million people, almost entirely of Mongol descent, live in Mongolia—one of the lowest population densities in the world.

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region rests in northeastern China and is slightly smaller than Mongolia. It lies mostly on an inland plateau, with mountains in the eastern region and the Gobi Desert in the northwest. Inner Mongolia has 24.7 million people, most of Han (Chinese) descent. Inner Mongolia was given administrative autonomy in 1932 by the Republic of China, and the Chinese Communists established the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947 before the party gained national authority over China and established the People's Republic of China in 1949. ■

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