

# The Morin Khuur and Mongolian Music Culture in China

**Liu Fulin and Parinya Panyanan**

Bangkokthonburi University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail : nicha.musiced@gmail.com

\*\*\*\*\*

## Abstract

The Morin Khuur is one of the most widely used instruments in Mongolian music and has a history of over 800 years. Its large sound box and thicker strings give it a heavy, melodious tone. In addition, Morin Khuur's unique playing methods, such as overtones, arpeggios and pizzicato, express the connotation of Mongolian music to the fullest, and the unity and diversity of the musical elements are the embodiment of the Chinese national culture and national spirit. Therefore, Morin Khuur is an indispensable vehicle for the spread of Mongolian culture and the promotion of Chinese national culture to the world. For more than fifty years, the masters of Morin Khuur, led by Qibaoligao, have been improving the Morin Khuur, from the production of the Morin Khuur to the playing techniques of the Morin Khuur, and have made in-depth improvements. Through these improvements, the Morin Khuur has further developed and gradually moved out of the grasslands to the international stage. However, due to the relatively short period of time that Morin Khuur's music education system has been in development, a number of potential problems have begun to emerge in the process of teaching and development. Many Morin Khuur experts and scholars have also been improving and developing Morin Khuur teaching over the years. This paper investigates the Morin Khuur and Mongolian Music Culture in China.

**Keywords:** Morin Khuur; Mongolian; Music Culture; China

## Introduction

The Morin Khuur is a stringed instrument of Mongolian origin. The Morin Khuur, with its long history and unique national spirit, has not only enriched the recreational life of the Mongolian people, but also contributed to the progress and development of culture and art on the Mongolian steppe. However, due to the limitation of teaching methods and resources, the education and inheritance of Morin Khuur has faced some problems and challenges. At present, the inheritance of Mongolian traditional music faces the following problems: Firstly, it is difficult to organise and protect Mongolian traditional music in a unified way due to the diversity of its contents and the fact that the artistic characteristics of different regions are not exactly the same. In addition, some forms of music are still being taught orally, which consumes a lot of time and energy and affects students' interest in learning Mongolian traditional music. Secondly, there is a lack of innovation in Mongolian music. As Mongolian music has a long history, many musical arts are difficult to understand correctly in a modern way and need to be explained by professionals in a modern way. However, the governments of different regions have not established a unified protection system, and the protection is different in each region, which does not really present the excellent Mongolian music in a way that modern people need. As a result, students do not really understand the charm of Mongolian music culture. Thirdly, the insufficiency of social force participation. The inheritance of

---

\* Received: October 20, 2023; Revised: November 1, 2023; Accepted: November 2, 2023

Mongolian traditional music culture needs the participation of all social forces. However, it seems that the degree of participation of social forces is low, and some folk artists lack the awareness of inheritance. Although the government of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has increased the protection of traditional Mongolian music culture in recent years, there is no synergy between the government, society and the inheritors, which results in the protection of traditional Mongolian music culture not achieving the expected effect, and this is also one of the problems faced by the inheritance of traditional Mongolian music. This is also one of the problems facing the inheritance of Mongolian traditional music. From the point of view of the protection of Mongolian traditional music inheritors, exploring new teaching methods to carry out teaching effectively is crucial for the inheritance and development of Mongolian traditional music culture (Wu, 2023).

Music education has evolved and enriched as an important part of the cultural heritage and educational field. Among them, the Suzuki Method as a method focusing on auditory perception and natural learning is on par with the Dalcroze Method, the Kodály Method, and the Orff Method, and has achieved great success worldwide. The Suzuki Method has been successfully implemented in 46 countries around the world, and there are now more than 1,350 Suzuki classes in Japan using the Suzuki Method. The Suzuki Method is undoubtedly one of the most important philosophical ideas of music that has achieved successful promotion (Sun, 2017).

The Suzuki Method was introduced to China from Japan in the middle of the 20th century, and through the continuous promotion of some music education experts and scholars it has gradually been known and recognised by the public, and the Suzuki Method's educational ideas, concepts, and modes of teaching are worthy of in-depth study and learning by all music educators. The Suzuki Method was first introduced to China when it was applied to instruments other than the violin, such as the piano, cello, and other Western instruments, and then it was developed to Chinese national instruments, such as the guzheng and the erhu. After more than 70 years of promotion and development of the Suzuki Method in China, the Suzuki Method has not only been used for the teaching of violin, but also has begun to become a kind of music education system of thought. Today's music education in China is in a booming stage, the Suzuki Method is worthwhile for all music educators to learn from and study (Li, 2016).

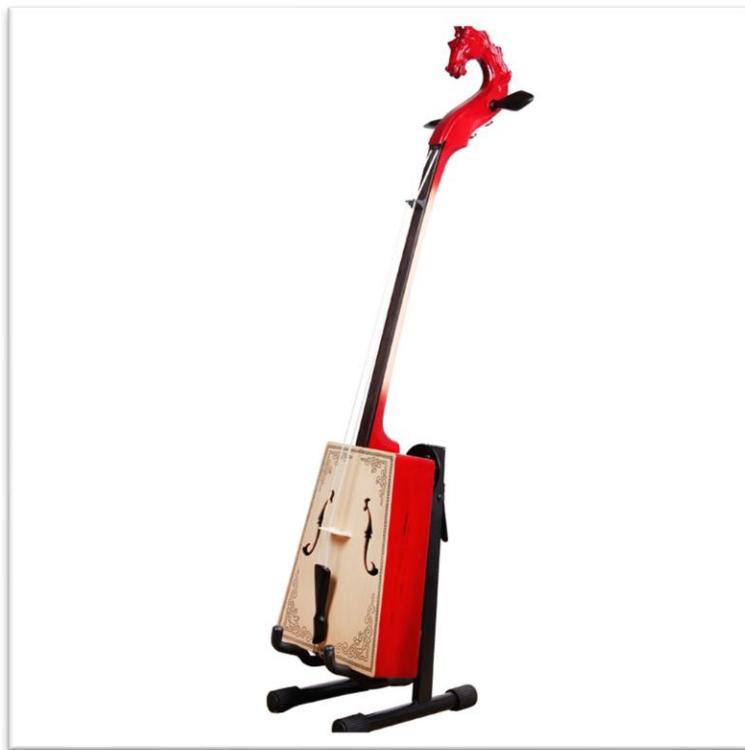
The Suzuki Method focuses on the development of children's interest in learning and their ability to learn. Mr Suzuki's mission is that learning is instinctive and that the development of children's learning ability is related to the way in which they are guided and nurtured by education. One of the principles of the Suzuki Method is the emphasis on "humanism". "Humanism" means that teachers and parents show sufficient care for children and respect their developmental nature. Only by giving children enough encouragement, help and love can they build up their confidence and further develop their interest in learning. The growth and development of children cannot be achieved without a "humane and loving environment". According to Mr Jinichi Suzuki, educators should always have the spirit of love and patience in teaching, and cultivate learners' interest in learning in a natural and loving environment, so that interest can be used as a guide to transform interest into curiosity and effectively improve students' learning autonomy (Zou, 2022).

The Suzuki Method promotes the creation of a favourable learning environment, i.e. a music learning environment similar to that of learning one's mother tongue. Mr Suzuki considers the home music environment to be as important as the school music environment, and believes that learning music is like learning one's mother tongue in that children should be in an environment where they are nurtured by music over a long period of time. The Morin Khuur is a musical instrument with a long history and a unique national spirit. Therefore, the Suzuki Method can, to a certain extent, improve children's understanding and appreciation of the Morin Khuur and the Mongolian cultural background (Tang & Liu, 2002).

## **Morin Khuur and Mongolian Music Culture**

### **Cultural Context of the Morin Khuur and Mongolian Musical Culture**

Morin Khuur, as the most characteristic and colourful traditional instrument of the steppe, has a long history; Morin Khuur is known as the product of the gods, and the creation and development of Morin Khuur marks the leap of Mongolian steppe culture, and it is a concentration of the wisdom of the Mongolian people. The name Morin Khuur is derived from the horse's head on the head of the instrument. In Mongolian, it is called "Mollincourt", and the earliest version of Morin Khuur can be traced back to the Huo Busi of the northern ethnic minorities in the period of hunting culture, and the origin of Morin Khuur marks the origin of the music culture of the nomadic people in the northern part of the country. As it evolved into the bowed and plucked forms, the plucked instrument was replaced by the stringed instrument during the Tang and Song dynasties, and the Chao er, the predecessor of the Morin Khuur, was first used in Mongolian festivals and rituals. With the development of the Chao er, the head of the instrument was gradually unified into a horse head, which eventually became the Morin Khuur. There is no clear historical record of the exact date of the Morin Khuur's creation. The Morin Khuur is not only the main character of Mongolian daily life, but also plays an important role in life and labour. There are many legends about the origin of Morin Khuur. For example, it is said that the first Morin Khuur was made by Suhe, a herdsman of the Chahar Steppe, from his own white horse. There is also a legend that the Morin Khuur was named after a Japanese archaeologist who came to Inner Mongolia and found an instrument with a horse's head in a herdsman's house, and named it after the shape of the instrument, of which "Suhe's White Horse" is the most popular one. A long time ago, there was a herdsman named Suhe in the Chahar grassland. One day he was given a small white horse, which, under Suhe's careful care, was snow-white, beautiful and strong. One spring, the king of the grassland held a horse race, Suhe and his white horse participated in the race and won the first place. The king liked the white horses so much that he had them taken away from him. When the king got the white horse, the white horse broke the reins and ran away. The king had the white horse shot with a bow and arrow. The white horse ran back to Su He's house and died. Suhe was very sad, in order to commemorate the White Horse, Suhe made the body of Morin Khuur from the bones of the White Horse, the head of the instrument from the horse's head, and the strings from the horse's tail, and made the first Morin Khuur in the world. The transmission of Morin Khuur illustrates the relationship between Morin Khuur and the nature, ethnicity, and society (Tang, 2012).



**Figure 1.** Morin Khuur

The Mongolian word "mongol" comes from the Mongolian word "mongol" meaning "eternal fire", and the Mongols have been called the "people on horseback". Historians believe that the Mongols are the ancestors of the Mongols of the Tang Dynasty in China, and that Hulunbeier in present-day Inner Mongolia is the birthplace of the Mongols. Around the 8th century A.D., the ancestors of the Mongols began to leave Hulunbeier and came to the fertile natural pastures of the Goodman River, the Tula River, and the Kluren River, known as the "Source of the Three Rivers", centred on the Kent Mountains, and gradually transitioned from a hunting-based lifestyle to a nomadic lifestyle, which is also the birthplace of the Mongols. This is also the reason why the Mongols are called "the nation on horseback". The change in lifestyle has not only created the Mongolian people's character of being bold and capable of singing and dancing, but also a series of customs and beliefs related to their lifestyle. For example, Mongolian elders or respected people must sit on the west side of the yurt because the west is the most important place for Mongolians; Mongolians take the Hada as a symbol of good luck, and when they offer the Hada to others, they must fold the Hada and raise both hands above their heads, and other etiquettes. There are also rituals and customs in normal life, such as baby's full moon, marriage, birthday celebration and other important rituals have relative rituals and customs regulations. Mongolian people also have many taboos, which are related to many aspects of human and nature. For example, Mongolians are forbidden to bake their feet, shoes and socks on the fireplace, and they can't cross the cooker or step on the threshold of the yurt when entering the door. Mongolians also have their own festivals and rituals. The most important festival of the year in Mongolian culture is the White Festival, which is similar to the Spring Festival of the Han Chinese, and is held at the same time, and the Mongolians believe that the colour white is a symbol of purity and good luck. In terms of

language, Mongolians have their own language and script. The Mongolian language belongs to the Altaic language family, which was created and formed as early as the beginning of the 13th century A.D. With the continuous reform and development, the Mongolian script we see today was formed. The religious beliefs of the Mongolian people are more complex, nowadays in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, Tongliao and Hulunbeier and other places believe in "shamanism", and there are some other areas of the envelope "Changshengtian", all of which shows that the Mongolian people have a glorious national culture. Regarding the relationship between music and culture, Luo Tai, a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, once said: "There is no difference in value between human cultures, societies and nations, but only a difference in concepts, behaviours and the concrete objects produced by them. Therefore, music must reflect culture, and culture naturally contains music." Any form of music reflects the living environment and cultural soil of the nation. Music, for the Mongolian people, carries the history of the Mongolian people, their sense of life and wisdom of life. The nomadic way of production and life has integrated all aspects of the Mongolian people into nature, creating the Mongolian distinctive steppe culture. Mongolian music expresses the Mongolian way of life, cultural characteristics and spiritual qualities. For example, the folk song "Gadamerin" celebrates the deeds of a steppe hero: "Gadamerin" takes the Gadamerin Uprising that took place in Horqin Left-Wing Banner in the 30s of the 20th century as a material, and comprehensively recounts the righteousness of Gadamerin's struggle against the land grabbing by the feudal princes and the warlord government by leading the poor herders, and vividly shapes the hero image of Gadamerin's presiding over justice, pleading for his people's lives, and defying the strong and violent forces, and eulogises the Mongolian people for their unyielding resistance to violence and violence. It eulogises the indomitable spirit of struggle of the Mongolian people. In the spiritual life of Mongols, music is not only used for entertainment and rituals, but also a symbol of history and spirit. Mongolian music is the carrier of Mongolian emotions, beliefs, history and history, and expresses Mongolian people's outlook on life, values, worldview and ideological beliefs. The long-term nomadic life of the Mongols has led them to develop the philosophical concept of "the unity of heaven and mankind". This concept is fully reflected in Mongolian folk songs. Mongolian folk songs are usually divided into two parts. The first part mainly depicts natural scenery, blue sky, white clouds, grassland, mountains, rivers, cattle and sheep, etc.; the second part mainly expresses emotions, describes affection, friendship, love, etc. The two parts form a complete Mongolian long tune. For example, the lyrics of Mongolian long tune "Vast Grassland" are: "Though there is a vast grassland, I don't know there is a muddy swamp. Though there is that beautiful, good girl, I don't know what she thinks of me." In "The Brown Eagle", "The brown eagle flies high in the sky, relying on two strong wings. Youthful and spirited don't waste your precious youth." This is a perfect way to express the Mongolian people's inner feelings through the depiction of natural scenery. The music is full of Mongolian people's simple and sincere feelings and deep insights and thoughts about life. As Lotai said, "Music is only a form of cultural expression, and any form of expression of music is determined by its cultural factors" (Alima, 2014).

### **Challenges and opportunities for education in Morin Khuur**

By reviewing a large number of references to study the status quo of Morin Khuur development, the analysis concluded the following points: first of all, the lack of attention and insufficient knowledge of local governments and schools to Morin Khuur education. Since 2012, music education in ethnic minority areas has attracted the attention of various experts and scholars, but most of them generally believe that the educational purpose of music education is mainly to improve students' professional skills, ignoring the impact of music education on the overall development of human beings. Morin Khuur music education in the learning of musical skills, but also focus on students' musical cultural heritage and aesthetic qualities, to promote the overall development of students' moral, intellectual and aesthetic qualities. Moral, intellectual and aesthetic comprehensive development. However, most schools only pay attention to the cultivation of students' cultural knowledge and neglect the traditional Chinese art and culture education, and students only pay attention to improving their cultural knowledge and ability in the learning process, neglecting the learning of art and culture. This makes students not understand traditional Chinese art and culture, which leads to loss of interest in learning. In addition, most teachers and parents believe that the purpose of music education is only to improve students' skills and techniques, which can also cause students not to understand the historical and cultural background of music well, resulting in a bias in understanding and an inability to truly master the music and music culture they are learning; the second is the lack of a proper understanding of and importance attached to Morin Khuur education by parents. At present, most parents in China only pay attention to the study of Chinese language, mathematics, English and other subjects, thinking that learning these subjects can guarantee the rate of further education, thus neglecting the study of art subjects, and some parents even interfere with the students' study of art subjects, discouraging the students' initiative and enthusiasm in the study of art subjects. Morin Khuur is a minority musical instrument, and most parents tend to choose popular musical instruments for their students, such as piano, erhu, guzheng, etc. This has also caused the Morin Khuur to become a popular musical instrument. This has also caused the slow development of Morin Khuur education; the lack of teachers is also an important reason, because Morin Khuur originated from the folk, teachers can use and refer to fewer professional materials in the teaching process, there is no professional teaching methodology guidance, resulting in the majority of teachers in the process of teaching only by experience and teaching, not able to form a systematic standardised teaching. This kind of teaching method leads to generally low quality of teaching, unable to cultivate professionals on a large scale. Teachers' low professionalism is also the reason for the overall low quality of Morin Khuur teaching; the last point is the lack of appropriate educational practice opportunities, in the traditional Morin Khuur teaching process, the teaching method of a single student can only passively accept the knowledge imparted by the teacher, do not give full play to the status of the student and the student's creativity of the aesthetic of music. The lack of appropriate music practice activities leads to boring Morin Khuur teaching and students lose interest in Morin Khuur learning (Zhang, 2017).

Although the development of education in Morin Khuur has faced many challenges, they have gone hand in hand. The globalisation of culture is a direct result of the globalisation of the world. This has led to more and more frequent cultural exchanges between the peoples of the world, with mutual absorption and exchange. This brings opportunities for the development of Chinese traditional folk music. Firstly, it is conducive for Chinese traditional folk music to absorb excellent cultures globally and create a new music culture with Chinese

national characteristics; secondly, Chinese traditional folk music has its own humanistic spirit as well as irreplaceability, and has potential economic value. This also provides good opportunities for the development of Chinese traditional folk music. The third point is that by learning and borrowing the world famous music teaching method is also favourable to the promotion and development of Chinese traditional folk music (Gan, 2021).

## Conclusion

The Morin Khuur, also known as the horsehead fiddle, is a traditional two-stringed instrument from Mongolia. It is an integral part of Mongolian music culture, with a history dating back centuries. The instrument is often associated with the nomadic way of life in Mongolia and is a symbol of the country's rich cultural heritage. The Morin Khuur produces a unique and haunting sound, which is evocative of the vast Mongolian landscapes and the nomadic traditions of the people. It is used in various traditional Mongolian music genres, including throat singing, folk songs, and instrumental compositions. The instrument is played with a bow and is known for its distinctive horsehead-shaped scroll, which is intricately carved and holds cultural and spiritual significance. In China, particularly in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Morin Khuur is an essential component of Mongolian music culture. Inner Mongolia has a substantial Mongolian population, and their cultural traditions, including music, are preserved and celebrated.

## References

- Alima. (2014). *Research on the Inheritance and Development of Mongolian Music*, [Master's thesis]. Inner Mongolia Normal University.
- Gan, J. (2021). Opportunities and Innovative Development in the Dissemination of Ethnic Music in the New Era. *Sichuan Theatre*, (06), 104-106.
- Li, Y. (2016). Insights of the Suzuki Teaching Method on Music Education in Chinese Society. *Art and Technology*, (11), 397.
- Sun, J. (2017). A Brief Analysis of the Philosophical Foundation of the Suzuki Music Teaching Method: "Mother Tongue Approach." *Northern Music*, (21), 118-119.
- Tang, G. (2012). *The Inheritance of Morin Khuur Performance in School Teaching in Horqin Area*, [Master's thesis]. Minzu University of China.
- Tang, J., & Liu, D. (2002). On the Aesthetic Educational Value of the Suzuki Teaching Method. *Chinese Music Education*, (08), 8-9.
- Wu, W. (2023). *A Study on the Application of Suzuki Teaching Method in Primary School Instrumental Music Education*, [Master's thesis]. Xi'an Conservatory of Music.
- Zhang, L. (2017). A Brief Discussion on the Inheritance of Morin Khuur Performance in Teaching. *Chinese Ethnic Expo*, (05), 41-42.
- Zou, A. (2022). *The Practical Application and Investigative Research of the Suzuki Teaching Method in Piano Instruction*, [Master's thesis]. China Conservatory of Music.