

THE HANDS OF TIME

Editor's note:

Traditional arts and crafts are supreme samples of Chinese cultural heritage. China Daily is running this series to show how master artisans are using dedication and innovation to inject new life into heritage. In this installment, we find out the enduring allure of a Mongolian musical instrument.



SOUND OF THE STEPPES

In the vast and wind-swept steppes of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, where nomadic traditions entwine with the pulse of nature, there exists a profound connection between the people and their music. The connection is embodied by the haunting melodies of the *morin khuur*, a traditional two-stringed instrument often referred to as the horse-headed fiddle.

The *morin khuur* occupies a revered position as a key instrument in traditional Mongolian music. Its beautiful tones are often used to accompany *khoomei*, or throat singing, a vocal style characterized by harmonic overtones, which further enhances the depth and emotional resonance of ethnic Mongolian music.

Beyond its musical prowess, the *morin khuur* is also used during ceremonial contexts, such as weddings, festivals and rituals, where it connects participants with their cultural heritage and their ancestors.

Despite modernization and urbanization, the *morin khuur* remains a cherished part of daily life for many families of Mongolian ethnicity. The instrument is also integrated into the educational system, where it is taught in schools as part of the efforts to preserve cultural heritage and promote traditional music education, passing down both musical techniques and cultural values from one generation to the next.

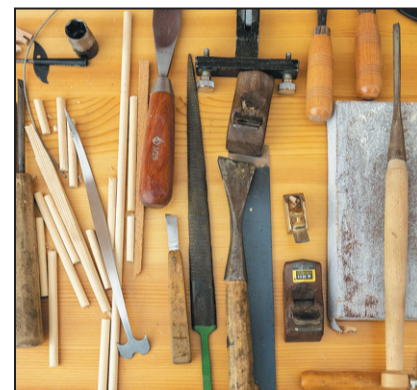
Morin khuur was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (originally proclaimed in 2003).

Its cultural significance has gained international attention. In May, when International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach visited Shanghai, he received a *morin khuur* as a gift. This exchange underscored the instrument's role as a cultural ambassador.

Musical magic

According to a report by the Inner Mongolia Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, the history of the *morin khuur* can be traced back to the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, and it became popular during the time of Genghis Khan (1162-1227).

As the world evolves, and modernity encroaches upon ancient traditions, the *morin khuur* is a steadfast reminder of the enduring



Top: Master artisan Ulji (right) passes on the family's traditional craft to his son, Tuluqur, 40. **Center:** The tuning process requires patience and skill. **Above:** An array of tools is used in the making of the *morin khuur*.



The horse's head is not only a decorative element of the *morin khuur* but also a cultural icon. PHOTOS BY DING GENHOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

spirit and rich cultural tapestry of ethnic Mongolians. Its melodies echo through time, carrying with them the stories, dreams, and aspirations of a people deeply connected to their land, their horses, and to each other.

The instrument's lasting appeal can be attributed to the efforts of dedicated artisans. Ulji, a 65-year-old *morin khuur* maker, whose name means "lucky" in Mongolian, is helping to preserve its rich heritage through his dedication to the craft.

The owner of a *morin khuur* workshop in Hohhot, capital of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, Ulji has about 3,000 orders annually from home and abroad, mostly from professional musicians and music lovers.

He says that the instrument's captivating sound, which resonates with the vastness of Inner Mongolia's landscape, is central to its allure. Played with a bow, it produces haunting melodies that evoke the nomadic spirit and reflect the area's natural beauty.

Ulji was drawn to the instrument as a child, thanks to his father and grandfather, who were both *morin khuur* makers. "They also played instruments, like the

morin khuur and the *sihu*, a bowed instrument with four strings, and I often listened to the songs they performed at home," says Ulji, who was born and brought up in the Ar Horqin Banner in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia.

In 1978, he began to learn how to make the *morin khuur* and seven years later, he completed his inaugural instrument. Fueled by a deep passion for ethnic culture, he has remained unwavering in his dedication to this craft for four decades, never once setting aside his tools.

It takes about two to three years to make one instrument. The process commences with the selection of materials. The *morin khuur*'s body is traditionally hewn from a solitary piece of seasoned wood, selected for its resonance and strength.

Ulji emphasizes the necessity of sun-drying the wood for a period ranging from five to 10 years. Inadequate drying poses the risk of shrinkage or warping, ultimately compromising the instrument's sound quality.

Then, the wood is meticulously shaped by the experienced hands of artisan to reach the desired size and curve. Carving a horse's head into the instrument's

Haunting melodies of *morin khuur* give voice to cultural heritage of Inner Mongolia, Chen Nan and Yuan Hui report.



Khetsuumanlai, 34, offers online training for the *morin khuur* to a wider audience. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Ulji, 65, works on the making of the instrument's trapezoid-shaped body. The crafting of the instrument is still done by hand.

neck imbues it with the spirit of the majestic animal, which symbolizes the rhythm of life. Created with precision and attention to detail, the horse's head serves as not only a decorative element, but also a testament to the deep bond between the Mongolian people and their horses.

"I love horses. When I was a child, I enjoyed riding my horse on the grasslands. One of my favorite Mongolian songs is about a horse winning a competition. The lyrics convey the beauty and strength of the horse," says Ulji.

"So, when I carve the horse's head on the *morin khuur*, I want to make it vivid and elegant, with a refined head, almond-shaped eyes and long ears."

Once the body and horse's head have been finished, the instrument is fitted with strings. Traditionally made from horsehair, they are now often made from nylon thread.

Finally, the *morin khuur* is carefully tuned, and each string is adjusted to make the perfect sound, a delicate process that requires patience and skill.

In 2003, Ulji devised a new type of *morin khuur*, which has been warmly received by

buyers, by introducing a curve to the normally flat front and back of the instrument's trapezoid-shaped body.

"The slight change to the resonance box has impact on the air flow, reinforcing the sound," he explains.

The air flow inside the body of the instrument, like breathing, is crucial for it to produce sound, he adds.

Tradition goes global

A significant moment in Ulji's career occurred in 2008 during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, where the renowned musician Chi Bulag performed on one of Ulji's instruments.

Accompanied by a band of 120 musicians, which included Naren Mandal, Ulji's elder son, playing another of his instruments, Chi Bulag captivated the global audience with his passionate performance.

Ulji first encountered Chi Bulag in 2005 and was struck by his dual mastery as both a virtuoso performer and a skilled craftsman of the *morin khuur*, boasting an extensive collection of instruments.



Ulji's workshop in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, hosts a variety of activities to help people better understand the *morin khuur* and other traditional instruments, as well as to train young enthusiasts.

About 50 days before the Olympic Games opening ceremony, Chi Bulag called Ulji, inviting him to make a *morin khuur* for his performance.

"I was very excited. We had lots of discussions about the instrument. I worked in my workshop day and night for a month. I forgot to eat and sleep, but I didn't feel tired until I finished making it," Ulji recalls.

For him, each of the instruments he has made is like a child.

Despite the dozens of meticulous steps involved in the process, he never grows weary. "When I'm in my workshop crafting an instrument, my sole focus is on executing each step flawlessly," he says.

His dedication has had a great impact on his children.

Tuluqur, Ulji's younger son, reminisces about his childhood spent observing his father craft instruments in his workshop.

"His hands bear the marks of dedication. He imparted to me the art of making the *morin khuur* and taught me how to play it. It's a family tradition that runs deep within me," says Tuluqur, 40, whose name means "pillar of the family" in Mongolian.

"Despite the ease that technology brings to the crafting process, my father remains committed to handcrafting. He always emphasizes that only through the hand can we truly sense the instrument and produce the desired sound."

The elder son, Naren Mandal, also learned to play the *morin khuur* as a child. "Its melody evokes memories of home, akin to a cherished family member," says the 42-year-old.

Now, Naren Mandal focuses on overseeing the workshop's management. Alongside the *morin khuur*, the workshop is dedicated to revitalizing various traditional instruments of the Mongolian ethnic group and advocating for its folk music.

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Online Watch the video by scanning the code.



A *morin khuur* created by Ulji features traditional patterns. DING GENHOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

By CHEN NAN and YUAN HUI

Nestled in the southwestern expanse of Ordos city in North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region lies the Uxin Banner — a vast territory spanning approximately 11,600 square kilometers with a modest population of 160,000 people.

Despite its remote setting, this region has garnered widespread acclaim, owing to a remarkable cultural phenomenon — the Uxin Banner Morin Khuur Symphony Orchestra of China. This ensemble stands as the nation's pioneering and sole professional symphony orchestra predominantly featuring the traditional musical emblem of the Mongolian ethnic group — the *morin khuur*, or horse-headed fiddle.

Comprising over 40 musicians adeptly wielding the *morin khuur* across its three distinct parts — high, middle and bass — the symphony orchestra boasts a repertoire exceeding 100 musical compositions, captivating audiences both domestically and abroad.

"When we showcase our craft beyond Inner Mongolia, particularly in locales where the symphony orchestra and *morin khuur* are novel experiences, audiences often describe the encounter as nothing short of jaw-dropping," reveals Jin Hai, 49, the director of the Uxin Banner Morin Khuur Symphony Orchestra of China, which was established in 2013.

He continues: "The innovative fusion of the *morin khuur* with Western brass, woodwind and percussion instruments enraptures audiences, inviting them to delve deeper into the ancient instrument and the rich culture of the Mongolian ethnic group."

Jin initially honed his skills with the *morin khuur* during middle school before pursuing further studies in music education and *morin khuur* performances at Inner Mongolia Normal University. He still remembers the orchestra's humble beginnings. Initiated by local

Instrument steeped in history stirs modern audiences



The Uxin Banner Morin Khuur Symphony Orchestra of China is devoted to keeping the Mongolian music legacy alive and thriving in the modern era. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

authorities, the ensemble initially comprised nearly 30 *morin khuur* virtuosos.

Driven by a mission to transcend conventional perceptions and breathe new life into this cherished instrument, the symphony orchestra emerged with support from Chagan, a distinguished conductor, composer and the orchestra's current artistic director.

"For individuals of the Mongolian ethnic group such as myself, the *morin khuur* embodies our people's essence. It's a mystical instrument steeped in history, deserving of wider recognition. Despite its mere two strings, it possesses an astounding range of tones," says Chagan.

Leaving an indelible mark

Challenges abounded in integrating Western classical music with the *morin khuur*. Jin recollects the initial skepticism and the arduous task

of recruiting musicians, exacerbated by the remote location of Uxin Banner. Yet, the Inner Mongolia Arts University's symphony orchestra offered invaluable support, allowing its musicians to collaborate with the *morin khuur* orchestra.

"With the widespread reputation of our orchestra, more young musicians who trained to become Western classical musicians have become interested in us. We also want to provide them with more opportunities that they can't get from other orchestras, musically and creatively," Jin adds.

The orchestra's inaugural performances in its hometown left an indelible mark on the locals, despite their unfamiliarity with Western classical music. To diversify their repertoire and broaden their appeal, the ensemble invited renowned musicians, including artistic director Chagan, to adapt Inner Mongolian



The *morin khuur* is an indelible part of traditional Mongolian music. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Young performers show their talent on the *morin khuur*, after receiving training at a school founded by Khetsuumanlai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

folk melodies while incorporating traditional instruments, such as bamboo flutes, *sanzhian* (three-stringed Chinese lute) and *yangqin* (Chinese hammered dulcimer).

Chagan, with over 40 film and TV composition credits to his name, also undertook the task of reinterpreting Western classical pieces, alongside crafting original compositions inspired by Mongolian culture and its people.

"Our aim extends beyond mere international exposure — it's about preserving our cultural roots and showcasing the instrument's inherent beauty," says Chagan.

In 2014, the orchestra embarked on its inaugural nationwide tour, gracing esteemed venues like the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing and prestigious music schools, such as the China Conservatory of Music.

In 2018, the orchestra ventured abroad, enchanting audiences in Nice, France, where

the soul-stirring resonance of the *morin khuur* left an indelible impression. Jin recalls a moment when a music school director in Nice, moved by the performance, pledged to add a *morin khuur* to his institution's instrument collection.

Ensuring a legacy

Beyond enrapturing audiences, the orchestra remains steadfast in its mission to promote and popularize the instrument.

Altang Huyage, a *morin khuur* player and orchestra member, highlights the efforts to popularize the instrument among the locals, which began even before the orchestra's official inception, involving training programs for farmers and herdsmen in Uxin Banner.

Before joining the orchestra, Altang Huyage dedicated himself to teaching *morin khuur* to locals in Ordos city's Dongsheng district,

imbuing the instrument with newfound vitality within the region, particularly among the youth.

Similarly driven by a passion for preserving Mongolian musical heritage, Khetsuumanlai, a 34-year-old native of Hailaer, Hulunbuir, ventured to Beijing in 2014 to initiate a *morin khuur* training program. Expanding the program to online platforms in 2018, Khetsuumanlai now boasts over 6,000 students worldwide, spanning diverse age groups.

"People are drawn not only to the melodic allure of the *morin khuur* but also to its expressive capacity, capable of evoking the vast expanses of the grasslands and the solitary existence of herdsmen," remarks Khetsuomanlai.

He says the instrument's burgeoning appeal, particularly among the younger generation, spurred by the influence of Inner Mongolian rock bands like Hanggai, which prominently feature the *morin khuur* in their compositions.

Last year, the establishment of a *morin khuur* inheritance base in Hohhot, spearheaded by the Inner Mongolia Academy of National Culture and Art, saw Khetsuomanlai assuming the role of director.

With an array of programs planned, including youth bands, performance competitions and livestreaming events, the base aims to cultivate a new generation of *morin khuur* enthusiasts. "With this base, we will focus on training young people of the Mongolian ethnic group to play the *morin khuur*," says the director.

"For them, it is not simply about mastering a musical instrument but a way of honoring their heritage and preserving a tradition that has been passed down through generations. Through their dedication and passion, these young musicians are ensuring that the spirit of Mongolia's nomadic ancestors lives on in the music they create."



A *morin khuur* created by Ulji features a vividly carved horse head. DING GENHOU / FOR CHINA DAILY