

# ARTS

## A STUDY ON INSTRUMENTAL ACCOMPANIMENT IN MONGOLIAN GESER NARRATION

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20691166>

### Abstract

One of the three major heroic epics found within China, the Geser epic has been widely transmitted among ethnic groups such as the Mongols and Tibetans, forming a living oral tradition. Instrumental accompaniment constitutes a core feature of Mongolian Geser narration, contrasting sharply with the Tibetan tradition of unaccompanied acappella singing. This study examines the classification of instruments used in Mongolian Geser performances, the multifaceted functions of instrumental accompaniment within the tradition, and regional variations across different artistic lineages from an interdisciplinary perspective of oral poetics and ethnomusicology. Findings reveal that instruments such as the *chör* and *sihu* (*dörvön utast khuur* in Mongolian) serve not only as accompaniment tools but also as memory-evoking mediators and performative context-builders. Regional variations in instrumental accompaniment illustrate the tradition's adaptation and reconstruction throughout history.

**Keywords:** Geser; epic narration; instrumental accompaniment; oral tradition; Mongolian music

### Introduction

The heroic epic Geser, which has circulated across the vast Mongolian plateau for centuries, continues to be transmitted as an oral folk tradition today. While the Mongolian Geser shares origins with the Tibetan Gesar, the two traditions have since diverged in their developmental paths. Scholars of epic poetry have long observed that Mongolian epic singers predominantly employ instrumental accompaniment: "Epic recitation alternates prose and verse, with vivid descriptive prose sections and melodically rich poetic passages. Unlike Tibetan singers who perform without instruments, Mongolian singers typically use accompaniment from instruments such as the *chör* and *sihu*." This difference is not only a distinction in performance style, as it also relates to the mechanics of oral composition, memory recall methods, and aesthetics of transmission of these epics.

Yet within Geser studies, the research of instrumental accompaniment has long been marginalized. Traditional epic research centers on textual analysis—plot, characterization, and thematic ideas—often reducing the importance of the music. Even within ethnomusicology, research on epic music predominantly emphasizes melodic analysis and its application and rarely explores the structural function and cultural significance of instruments. In *A Study of Epic Music Paradigms*, Yao Hui proposes that "by cross-referencing the audio archives and field research of Tibetan, Mongolian, and Tu epics, "it is possible to "expand the theoretical discourse space of Chinese epic studies from a musical perspective."<sup>1</sup> This study builds upon the ideas of this proposed methodology.

This paper attempts to situate Geser musical accompaniment within the broader context of oral tradition, exploring the following questions: What

instruments are used in Mongolian Geser performances, and what functions do these instruments serve in the performance? How does instrumental accompaniment vary across different regions and performer traditions? By examining these questions, this study seeks to reveal the deeper significance of instrumental accompaniment within the Mongolian Geser tradition.

### I. Instrumental System in Geser Narration

#### 1.1 Core Instruments: Chör and Sihu

Mongolian Geser artists primarily employ bowed string instruments, with the *chör* and *sihu* being the most central. Both field research and historical records demonstrate that these two instruments dominate the Geser narration tradition in Inner Mongolia.

##### 1.1.1 Chör

The *chör* is an ancient bowed string instrument that, in modern times, has primarily been preserved in the Khorchin region of eastern Inner Mongolia. It stands as a significant representative of traditional Mongolian bowed string instruments. In traditional society, the *chör* was mainly used by epic performers to accompany the Khorchin heroic epic "Mangusiin Uliger," which established a profound connection with the heroic epic tradition. The body of the *chör* consists of a neck, soundbox, and strings, typically constructed with a wooden frame, its soundboard covered by cow hide or sheep skin. Strings are usually made from horsehair and tuned in perfect fourths.

When playing, the performer holds the instrument with their left hand to press the strings and their right hand to hold the bow. The outer strings are primarily used for high-pitched melodies, while the inner strings sustain the sustained lower notes. The fingering is distinctive: the left hand primarily uses the second joints of the inside of the index and ring fingers to touch

<sup>1</sup> Yao Hui: Research on the Paradigm of Epic Music: Focusing on the Inter-Ethnic Transmission of the Geser Epic [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, March 2021.

the strings, while the little finger is rarely used and the middle finger almost entirely ignored. When playing in the second position, the thumb is frequently used to play harmonics on the inner strings to emphasize the effect. Bowing techniques which often employ a strong, powerful attack; combinations of long and short bows; as well as legato and staccato bowing, are frequently used to express rich musical imagery.

Chor repertoire can be categorized into three types based on its origin: heroic epic music, traditional folk music, and folk song tunes. In traditional society, the chor, as a core instrument for heroic epic performers, was primarily used to accompany heroic epics. Therefore, many chor pieces evolved from heroic epic melodies, such as "The Opening," "The Galloping Horse Tune," and "The Demon Tune." These pieces closely correspond to the epic narrative, forming a stylized musical vocabulary.

As the core traditional instrument of epic singers, the *chör* primarily accompanied heroic epics. Consequently, numerous *chör* pieces evolved from epic melodies—such as "The Opening," "Galloping

Horses," and "Demon's Tune"—forming a stylized musical repertoire closely aligned with epic narratives.

Numerous Geser chanters have completed significant performances with *chör* accompaniment. Geser chanter Jinbazhamusu<sup>2</sup> began learning the "Avralt Bogd Geser Khaan Epic" from a *chör* player from his hometown of Noyanzhab. His artistic journey illustrates the master-apprentice lineage of *chör* accompaniment techniques. Geser chanter Badama Renqin<sup>3</sup>, a student of Jinbazhamusu, systematically inherited the performance techniques of the *chör* and *sihu*, along with the Geser recitation tradition. He recorded over 1,800 hours of the Geser epic using both the *chör* and *sihu* as accompaniment instruments. The sheer scale of his recitations and the comprehensive use of instruments demonstrate the significant role of the *chör* in contemporary transmission. Epic artist Bai Qishan<sup>4</sup> completed a 500-hour recording of The Epic of Geser with *chör* accompaniment in 2020. This practice, further confirming the continuation of the *chör* tradition in the contemporary era.

<sup>2</sup> Jinbazhamusu (1934–2025): Mongolian male singer; native of Barin Right Banner, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia; National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Transmitter of the Geser Epic.

<sup>3</sup> Badama Renqin (1961–): Male, Mongolian ethnicity, native of Barin Right Banner, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia. Regional-

level inheritor of the Geser (S) Epic Narration, a national intangible cultural heritage representative project.

<sup>4</sup> Bai Qishan (1981–): Male, Mongolian ethnicity, native of Khorchin Right Middle Banner, Xing'an League, Inner Mongolia; regional-level inheritor of "Mangusiin Uliger"

Figure One<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1.2 Sihu

The *sihu* (also known as the *dörvön utast khuur*) is one of the most important bowed string instruments of the Mongolian people and a common accompaniment in Geser epics. Its four strings are divided into two sets of identical pitch relationships, tuned in perfect fifths. The *sihu* has a bright tone and rich expressiveness, serving both as melodic accompaniment in epic narratives and enhancing the narrative rhythm through rhythmic bowing techniques. Compared to the *chör*, the *sihu* offers greater flexibility in portraying joyful or intense scenes, making it widely adopted in the epic storytelling traditions of eastern Inner Mongolia.

Based on differences in construction and playing techniques, the *sihu* can be divided into three types: the large *sihu*, the medium *sihu*, and the small *sihu*. The large *sihu*, also known as the bass *sihu*, is primarily found in the Khorchin, Kharchin–East Tumed, Zuu Uud, and Uzemchin regions of eastern Inner Mongolia's Shilingol League. It is mainly used for accompanying Khuren Uliger, narrative folk songs, *kholboo*, and heroic epics. The medium *sihu*, or alto *sihu*, is primarily used in folk instrumental ensembles and is popular in Eastern Mongolia. The small *sihu*, or soprano *sihu*, is the most widely found, mainly used for solo performances and folk ensembles. Stylistically,

*sihu* music has developed three distinct regional styles: Eastern Mongolia, Chahar, and Ordos, reflecting the aesthetic differences across these areas.

Numerous Geser masters have made significant recordings accompanied by the *sihu*. The renowned Geser chanter Pajie<sup>6</sup> recorded an 80-hour Geser epic with *sihu* accompaniment in 1958, creating the seminal scholarly resource “Pajie Geser.”<sup>7</sup>

The Geser chanter Luobusang<sup>8</sup> recorded Khur Geser with *sihu* accompaniment in 1988. Badama Renqin also completed a 100-hour recording of The Geser Story using the *sihu* in 2009. These precious recordings are not only carriers of the epic text but also living archives of the *sihu* accompaniment tradition.

### 1.1.3 The Coexistence and Complementarity of Two Core Instruments

Within the Mongolian Geser narrative tradition, scholars and local Geser chanters have long held differing views on whether the *chör* or the *sihu* is older. Scholar U. Xinbaya'er notes, “In Qinghai, Geser narratives are performed without instrumental accompaniment, with Geser chanters reciting stories in a unified rhythm and cadence. The Inner Mongolian style, featuring *chör* or *sihu* accompaniment, emerged under the influence of traditional narrative forms like

<sup>5</sup> Bai Qishan demonstrating *chör* accompaniment to Geser epic singing.

<sup>6</sup> Pajie (1902–1962): Male, Mongolian ethnicity, native of Jarud Banner, Tongliao, Inner Mongolia; celebrated culture bearer of the Geser

<sup>7</sup> Preserved in both audio and written formats, the recording of Pajie Geser spanned 1958–1959, totaling 80 hours, 60,000 poetic lines, and approximately 3 million characters. In 1959, the Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House released the book *The Hero Geser Khan*, compiled and edited by Yimude Daorji from Pajie's recitations. In 1989, scholars Daorongga and Na Asarlatu—who had participated in the entire recording, documentation, and compilation process—condensed the original transcripts into a two-volume manuscript written in traditional Mongolian script. This edition comprises over 40,000 lines of poetry (2 million characters) and includes musical scores for 56 melodies in both staff notation and simplified notation. It was published by the Ethnic Publishing House in 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Mangusiin Uliger chanter (1943–): Male, Mongolian ethnicity, native of Ulaanchab League, Inner Mongolia. In 1988, Longmei and Tuoya recorded Luobusang's rendition of “The Story of Khur Geser” on tape over an autumn and winter at the Quyi Hall in downtown Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. The 60-minute tape was recorded on 50 cassettes.

'Mangusin Uliger,' Uliger, and *kholboo*."<sup>9</sup> This perspective reveals the developmental path of the instrumental accompaniment tradition in Inner Mongolia—namely, its integration and mutual influence with local oral art forms. Boteletu and Hasibate'er further elaborate in their work, *Research on the Music of Mongolian Heroic Epics*<sup>10</sup> further elaborates: "As an imported epic, Geser did not develop its own distinct musical melody system. Instead, it integrated its narrative content with the traditional expressive forms of local heroic epics, resulting in regional variations in its presentation." The traditional modes of expression for heroic epics refer to a system combining singing, music, narrative conventions, and social functions. As Geser spread across regions, it inevitably merged with existing local epic traditions, resulting in distinct regional characteristics in the use of musical instruments.

In her study "Research on Geser Artists",<sup>11</sup> Cui Siqin categorizes Geser artists by historical era into ancient, modern, contemporary, and post-modern Geser masters, citing influential performers from each period. This classification provides crucial reference points for examining the historical trajectory of the *chör* and *sihu* within the Mongolian Geser tradition.

According to the book, the *khuur*, a four stringed fiddle relative of the *sihu*, was used in ancient *togetohu* (a type of traditional Chinese opera) to narrate Geser, indicating that the *khuur* was already used as an accompanying instrument in the formative stages of the Geser performance tradition. Dawa Aosi'er, a renowned *khuur* player from Wengniute Banner, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, taught the Geser performer, Jinbazhamusu, *khuur* and Geser narration techniques. This teacher-student lineage clearly demonstrates the continuity of the *sihu* tradition. Gongga (1886–1963), a *khuur* player from Wangwangqinporlai in Ar Khorchin Banner, Chifeng, also frequently performed Geser narratives accompanied by the *khuur*. Babageba (1895–1955) likewise employed the *khuur* as Geser accompaniment. These practitioners demonstrate that

from ancient to modern times, the *khuur* and *sihu* have remained a vital accompaniment instrument in Geser recitations.

From the modern to contemporary periods, the *chör* coexisted and developed alongside the *sihu*. In the contemporary era, Pasunsugaba (1902–) employed the *chör* in his performance practice. Contemporary artist Bate'er (1923–), also performs Geser using the *chör*, indicating the continued application of the instrument in modern Geser recitation. By examining the tradition of the Qinba Zhamusu lineage—through artists such as Erburinqin Chaoerqi—as well as the *sihu* performance practices of artists like Pajie and Luobusang it is clear that throughout the historical evolution of Geser recitation, the *chör* and *sihu* have always coexisted, each maintaining its own representative lineage of artists.

*Chör* accompaniment derives from the traditional performance style of "Mangusiin Uliger," possessing unique strengths in conveying the solemnity, grandeur, and mystique of the epic. Conversely, the *sihu* accompaniment, influenced by traditional forms like Uliger, *kholboo*, and narrative folk songs, offers richer expressive capabilities, such as portraying joyful and vibrant musical imagery. The coexistence of these two instruments offers Geser performers diverse possibilities in artistic expression. These regional variations in instrument usage reflect the adaptation and reconstruction of Geser performance traditions throughout its historical development.

Field research further indicates that instrumental performance skills and epic singing techniques are often taught simultaneously, contributing to holistic the development of a performer's artistic proficiency. The transmission lineages—from the lineage of Jinbazhamusu to Yanzhabu Chaoerqi, through the *sihu* playing of Pajie and Luobusang, to Badama Renqin's mastery of both instruments—prove that both *chör* and *sihu* are grounded in a long, culturally significant oral tradition and continue to act as core instruments in Mongolian Geser performance.

<sup>9</sup> The author interviewed Professor U. Xinbaya'er via WeChat in May 2025 to discuss a series of issues concerning the Tibetan and Mongolian versions of Geser.

<sup>10</sup> Boteletu, Hasibate'er: *Research on the Music of Mongolian Heroic Epics* [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, March 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Cui Siqin: *Research on Geser Artists* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2020

Figure Two<sup>12</sup>

### 1.2. Other Accompanying Instruments

The Mongolian Geser narrative tradition also utilizes a wide variety of accompaniment and performance styles beyond the *chör* and *sihu*. Depending on their own traditions and individual talents, Geser chanters from different regions employ percussion, stringed instruments, or even perform entirely unaccompanied recitations, presenting a rich artistic landscape.

Regarding string instruments, the horsehead fiddle or *morin khuur* has also served as an accompaniment instrument in addition to the *chör* and *sihu*. Bayan Doureng, who lived before the early 20th century, was an early professional epic artist in the Shilingol region of Inner Mongolia. Records indicate that he frequently used the horsehead fiddle to accompany performances of epics such as the Geser and Jangar,<sup>13</sup> illustrating an early example of the horsehead fiddle's role in epic recitation for posterity. Furthermore, the *tovshuur*, a plucked string instrument unique to the Oirat Mongol region, was traditionally used to accompany The Epic of Jangar though it also appeared in some recitations of The Epic of Geser. Geser performer Bayan Douren (1959–) has carried on this tradition, combining *khöömei* singing with *tovshuur* accompaniment to perform chapters of the Geser epic.<sup>14</sup> His performances demonstrate the fusion of Oirat style with Geser tradition.

Regarding the use of percussion and ritual instruments, some Geser performance practices highlight deep connections to religious ceremonies. The mentor of renowned Geser singer Luobusang, Awang (religious name Luobusang Daoerji), often held prayer beads in his hands while performing, or used traditional Mongolian percussion instruments such as bells and cymbals.<sup>15</sup> Mude Su Rong, formerly a scripture master at the Lama Temple in Balin Left Banner, Chifeng, similarly held prayer beads while chanting Geser;<sup>16</sup> his performance was known to carry a strong chanting melody. This usage of prayer beads or small percussion instruments to assist with rhythm reflects the cultural traces of mutual influence between the spread of Geser and Tibetan Buddhist rituals.

Unaccompanied recitation is also occasionally found within the Mongolian Geser tradition. Geser chanter Aogengbaya'er (1933–2004) once performed six Geser epics entirely without instrumental accompaniment, solely relying on recitation.<sup>17</sup> This performance style aligns more closely with the recitation tradition of the Geser epic in Qinghai and confirms that the practice of unaccompanied recitation persists in Inner Mongolia as well.

In summary, the instrumental accompaniment for Geser is not confined to the binary system of *chör* and *sihu* traditions. Instead, in different historical periods and regional traditions, a diverse system has formed, primarily based on stringed instruments, but also

<sup>12</sup> Badama Renqin demonstrating *sihu* accompaniment to Geser narration.

<sup>13</sup> Botelteu, Hasibata'er: *Research on the Music of Mongolian Heroic Epics* [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012, p. 314.

<sup>14</sup> Cui Siqin: *Research on Geser Artists* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2020, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> You Longmei, Zhuona: *The Evolution and Research of the Geser Transmission Version* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2022, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Batu: *Geser Dictionary* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2022, p. 381.

<sup>17</sup> Cui Siqin: *Research on Geser Artists* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2020.

incorporating percussion and unaccompanied forms. Together, the incorporation of instruments like the horsehead fiddle and *tovshuur*, the use of accessories such as prayer beads and pendants, and the integration of unaccompanied recitation and *khöömei* or throat singing techniques collectively form the rich musical landscape of the Geser narrative tradition. These diverse accompaniment forms not only reflect a Geser performer's personal artistic choices but also stand as historical evidence of Geser's deep integration with local musical traditions and religious rituals when it was disseminated across Mongol territories.

## II. The Multiple Functions of Instruments in Narrative Performance

The phenomenon of Tibetan Gesar performers requiring no instruments offers an instructive reference for understanding the instrumental tradition of the Mongolian Geser. Mongolian Geser chanters rely significantly on musical instruments: instrumental preludes set the atmosphere, interludes connect segments, and accompaniment runs throughout the narrative, collectively forming the performance's overall framework.

### 2.1 Accompaniment as a Memory Device

The performance of oral epics relies on complex memory mechanisms. Epic artists typically do not recite fixed texts word for word but improvise on the spot based on established formulas and themes. From an oral poetics perspective, this performance style shares similarities with the "oral-formulaic theory" proposed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord—namely, that epic narration is an ongoing performance process continuously generated within established formulas and thematic frameworks. Within this process, stable musical rhythms and melodic structures provide crucial memory anchors for performers, enabling them to maintain narrative coherence during lengthy performances.

The academic history of Qishan (formerly known as Bai Qishan) provides a vivid case for us to understand this function. Born in 1981 in Aili, Shijiazhi, Xinjiamu Sum, Beizi Prefecture, Khorchin Right Wing Middle Banner, Xing'an League, Inner Mongolia, he developed an early fondness for Khuren Uliger. In his village lived an elderly man known as "Vala Lama"—tall, with limited mobility, and a solitary disposition. In his later years, he lived with Qishan's great-aunt. According to local legends, he had been a novice lama in the Zhen area of Mongolia (present-day Fuxin, Liaoning) during his childhood. Learning of Qishan's love for stories, the old man shared ancient legends and *Khöllöbö* with him, and the two gradually formed a close bond despite their age difference. Qishan often recorded the stories he heard the night before the next

day, hoping to compile them into a book. The two epic series he currently possesses were learned from the old man's oral traditions: the first comprises eight works, including "Dokhiuryin Doloon Övgön Shüteen (Seven Old Gods of the Signs)," *Zarlagyn Zurgan Tengeriin Elch*, (Six Angels of the Annunciation)", and "Gaisakhamshigt Gurvan Agt (Three Miraculous Angels)".

However, at that time, Qishan possessed only the basic outlines of these epics. He could not play musical instruments and had never delivered a complete performance. A transformation began in 2013. Starting in December of that year, with the support of Professor Yang Yucheng and his academic team, Qishan visited the Inner Mongolia Ethnic Music Heritage Station<sup>18</sup> multiple times. Between 2013 and 2019, he received systematic guidance on seven occasions, focusing on mastering the performance style of Buren Chugula and the recitation techniques of Khorchin epics, with the most crucial element being *chör* techniques.

To date, Qishan has fully recorded five epic poems, having mastered the ability to perform self-accompanied singing with *chör* accompaniment. He employs Buren Chugula's five epic melodies along with their associated conventions, themes, and archetypal scenes to improvise the epic series "The Seven Stars of the Big Dipper." Through practice, he has gradually grasped the intrinsic mechanism of *chör* epic narration—a delicate equilibrium between "fixed" and "free"; "flexibility" and "random modulation." In 2021, Qishan was recognized as an inheritor of "Manggus Uligel", a representative project of the seventh batch of intangible cultural heritage at the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region level.

Although I started learning the instrument relatively late, the performance of Geser absolutely required the accompaniment of the *chör*; otherwise, I simply couldn't continue." Building on this foundation, starting in 2020, he systematically recorded 13 volumes of The Epic of Geser, totaling over 500 hours, based on Geser chanter Pa Jie's 1958 audio recordings of The Epic of Geser. This work was carried out with the continuous support of Professor Yang Yucheng and his academic team. In an interview, he stated, "Before performing Geser, I carefully read The Biography of Geser Khan, the Holy Ruler of the Ten Directions twice.<sup>19</sup> I employed melodies entirely learned from my teacher Buren Chaogula, improvising them as needed and integrating them with the *chör* accompaniment to complete the recording. Although I began learning the instrument relatively late, the narration of Geser absolutely requires *chör* accompaniment—otherwise, I simply couldn't continue."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Established on July 17, 2011, the Inner Mongolia Ethnic Music Heritage. The station is affiliated with the Music College of Inner Mongolia University of Arts. It comprises six interconnected platforms and projects: "Heritage Station—Specialized Station—Audio-Visual Resource Library—Inheritance Class—Typical Series CDs—Oral History Database."

<sup>19</sup> In 1955, Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House combined the Beijing woodblock edition of Geser with the Longfu Temple edition of Geser, publishing them as The Biography

of Geser Khan, the Holy Ruler of the Ten Directions (Volumes 1 and 2); In 1997, the same publisher combined the two volumes into a single edition and republished it under the same title. The edition Bai Qishan read twice was the 1997 version.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewee: Bai Qishan; Interviewer: Qilgeri. Date: February 23, 2026; Location: Bai Qishan's residence, Shijiazhi Aili, Xinjia Mu Sum, Beizi Prefecture, Khorchin Right Middle Banner, Xing'an League, Inner Mongolia.

This statement reveals the profound function of musical instruments in oral epic recitation—they are not merely vehicles for musical expression but the very framework supporting the narrative. When the artist's fingers touch the strings, when the bow creates rhythmic vibrations, the instrument becomes an anchor for memory, weaving scattered motifs and themes into a continuous narrative. The rhythmic patterns of accompaniment interlock with the lyrical cadences of the verses, gradually crystallizing into a form of "muscle memory." In this state, the performer no longer consciously recalls the story; instead, the narrative flows naturally, guided by the instrument's melody.

## 2.2 The Construction of Instruments and Performance Contexts

Epic recitation is not merely textual transmission but a specific communicative event—a sociocultural practice unfolding within particular spatiotemporal contexts that connects performers and audiences. Within this practice, musical instruments play an integral role in constructing the performance context. When the artist picks up the instrument and tunes it, this seemingly simple action itself marks the demarcation between the mundane and the sacred, signaling that the recitation is about to begin. The physical presence of the instrument and the spatial diffusion of its sound imbue the recitation with a ritualistic solemnity.

In the Mongolian epic recitation tradition, this function of constructing the performance context is particularly evident in the opening procedures. Before completing his 500-hour thematic performance of the Geser stories, Bai Qishan strictly followed traditional protocol. He first performed three opening chants—"Uqiledagatagala," "Wunimuxilemagedala," and "Galabatao Galala"—accompanied by the *chör*, before proceeding to the main content of the first Geser epic. Bai Qishan explained: "According to the recitation tradition of Mangusiin Ulger, the 'Uqile' sound is used to summon spirits. A prayer is made to all the gods through the sound, to deities in all directions, to inform them that one is about to tell their stories, and to ask for their permission and approval. Especially when there are flaws or errors in the epic recitation, 'Uqile' is sung to apologize to the gods and express repentance. Therefore, before reciting the Geser Epic, I sing 'Uqiledagatagala,' 'Wunimuxilemagedala,' and 'Galabatao Galala' to pray to Geser and the Mangsu's spirit."<sup>21</sup> This procedural opening ceremony, using music as medium, offers multiple functions before the formal narration begins: First, it informs the divine realm of the narration event, seeking permission and protection; second, it purifies the narrator's mind and establishes a ritual mindset.

When recording the 100-hour "Geser Stories" accompanied by the *sihu* and the 1,800-hour Geser accompanied by the *chör*, Geser performer Badama Renqin similarly followed a rigorous opening protocol. He first performed the "Chör Praise," extolling the instrument itself through its sound as it prepared to undertake the narrative mission. Then, he performed

the "Geser Song," offering lyrics to the epic's protagonist and associated deities. Only after the opening procedures did he proceed to the main narrative of "Geser." Though differing in specific content from the Seven Mountains practice, this sequence shares the same logic of situational construction—using musical sound as a medium to delineate boundaries between secular and epic time-space, thereby creating an appropriate ritual atmosphere.

From the perspective of oral poetics, these opening rituals are by no means optional, but rather an organic component of the epic performance tradition. These instruments fulfill multiple functions: on a religious level, they communicate with deities, pray for protection, and ensure the smooth progress of the performance; on a psychological level, they help performers focus their minds and enter a state of readiness, preparing them physically and mentally for long, impromptu performances. Furthermore, the instruments act as a musical bond, connecting the performer and the audience.

While opening rituals vary across different regions and performers, their function remains consistent: using music as a medium to construct the performance context. The physical presence of the instruments provides the visual markers of the context; the spatial permeation of the music creates the auditory atmosphere of the context; and the ritual content of the lyrics imbues the context with sacred meaning. These three elements intertwine, jointly completing the transformation from the secular to the sacred, from the mundane to the epic. In this transformation, Geser's heroic world is repeatedly reborn on the performance stage, the spiritual bloodline of the epic continued through instruments.

## III. Diversity of Regional Traditions and Artist Styles

### 3.1 Differences Among Three Stylistic Regions

According to historical records, beginning in the 16th century, the large-scale introduction of Buddhist culture into Mongolia led to an increase in exchanges between devout Buddhist followers and lamas traveling between Tibetan and Mongolian regions. This cultural interaction manifested in the introduction of numerous translated Buddhist scriptures. Simultaneously, Tibetan literary works were widely translated and introduced into the Mongolian psyche. It was during this period of extensive Tibetan cultural interaction that the Epic of Geser was introduced to the Mongolian Plateau and gradually integrated into the local oral epic tradition. Scholars widely acknowledge that the peak period of Geser's transmission and dissemination in Mongolia coincided with the era of Buddhism's widespread dissemination and influence throughout the region.

The renowned scholar Querilezhabu offers insights regarding why Geser gained such widespread popularity and deep affection among the Mongolian people. He points out that the spread of Geser in Mongolia was closely intertwined with the political

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee: Bai Qishan; Interviewer: Qilegeri. Interview Date: February 23, 2026; Interview Location: Bai Qishan's residence, Shijiazai Aili, Xinjia Mu Sum, Beizi Prefecture,

Khorchin Right Middle Banner, Xing'an League, Inner Mongolia.

landscape, historical context, and cultural transmission of the time. From a political perspective, as the Yuan Dynasty's rule weakened, Mongolia descended into feudal fragmentation. Compounded by the prolonged warfare between Mongolia and the Ming Dynasty, Mongolian society suffered severe blows to its social productivity. The populace endured turbulent living conditions and the hardships of constant warfare. Thus, against this historical backdrop, the narrative depicted in the Geser epic—of heroes battling enemies and ultimately ushering in peace and prosperity—resonated profoundly with the Mongolian people's yearning for stability. It became a spiritual anchor for hope amidst their suffering.<sup>22</sup>

Simultaneously, while Mongolian communities adapted the Geser tales introduced from Tibetan regions, they did not merely passively receive and recite them. Instead, they actively reimagined the narratives by integrating local cultural characteristics, lived experiences, and aesthetic preferences. Drawing upon regional customs and traditions, they blended indigenous heroic epic traditions with oral performance practices, creating numerous Geser stories imbued with distinct local characteristics. This process not only demonstrated the creativity of Mongolian oral literature but also gradually transformed Geser from an imported epic into a living tradition rooted in Mongolian culture. It was within this complex interplay of political, cultural, and popular psychological factors that Geser achieved widespread dissemination and deep resonance across Mongolian regions, ultimately becoming an important piece of heritage, transcending boundaries between the Tibetan and Mongolian cultural spheres.

In their book *A Study of Mongolian Heroic Epic Music*, Boteletu and Hasibate'er, when exploring the regional styles of Mongolian heroic epic music, divided Mongolian epics within China into three stylistic regions—Oirat, Inner Mongolia, and Khorchin—based on the differences in epic performance styles across different regions. This paper uses this classification as a framework to conduct a regional analysis and comparison of the use of musical instruments in the performance of Geser.

In the book *Research on the Music of Mongolian Heroic Epics*, Boteletu and Hasibate'er, divide Mongolian epics within China into three styles based on differences in regional performance practices: Oirat, Inner Mongolia, and Khorchin.<sup>23</sup> This paper adopts this classification framework to conduct a regional analysis and comparison of musical instrument usage in Mongolian Geser performances.

The performance of the Mongolian Geser epic is not a single, homogeneous tradition; significant differences in instrument usage exist across regions. In the Oirat style (primarily covering Qinghai, Northern Suibei, and other areas), performers "no longer use instruments when singing the epic, focusing instead on narration, occasionally supplemented by a cappella singing." This characteristic is closely tied to the local cultural environment—Mongols in Qinghai have long

coexisted with Tibetans and are deeply influenced by Tibetan religious beliefs and oral traditions. The "withdrawal" of musical instruments may be seen as a result of cultural integration, where performers gradually adopted unaccompanied recitation through prolonged interaction with Tibetan Gesar artists.

In the Inner Mongolia style, most performers use the *sihu* for accompaniment, followed by the *chör*. A minority employ the horsehead fiddle, while some recite entirely without instruments—the latter category of Geser chanters often originate from lama backgrounds, their delivery bearing distinct chanting intonations that reflect the fusion of Tibetan Buddhism with epic traditions. It is noteworthy that while other types of traditional Mongolian music in Inner Mongolia (such as long songs or *urtyn duu*, short songs or *bogino duu*, and *morin khuur* music) remains popular, the living transmission of the Geser epic has declined in some areas, even experiencing transmission gaps. Since the 1950s, with the advancement of efforts to rescue and revive Geser culture, certain regions such as Barin Right Banner, have revitalized Geser storytelling by leveraging their local traditional resources.

The Khorchin style has developed a distinctive instrumental arrangement. Performers in this area primarily use the *chör* and *sihu* as accompaniment instruments for their Geser recitations, a tradition deeply influenced by local oral narrative traditions such as "Mangusiin Uliger," Uliger, and *kholboo*. In the Khorchin region, the *chör* is deeply intertwined with the epic tradition of demon-subduing themes, while the *sihu* is closely associated with narrative folk songs and *khöömei*. The coexistence of both instruments in Geser performances reflects the diverse fusion of Khorchin's oral traditions.

The aforementioned regional variations are closely related to the migration history of various Mongol tribes. The cultural contact between the Oirat Mongols and Tibetan culture led to the "withdrawal" of musical instruments. Central Inner Mongolia exhibits both rich traditional musical resources and a weakening of living transmission, revealing the complexity of its inheritance patterns. The Khorchin region developed a performance style emphasizing both the *chör* and *sihu* due to the strong continuity of its indigenous epic traditions. These regional differences in instrument use reflect the dynamic process of the Geser performance tradition constantly adapting and reconstructing itself amidst historical changes.

Yin Hubin notes, "Geographically speaking, the Qinghai Plateau, Khalkha Mongolia, the Lake Baikal region, and the Barin and Zhalute grasslands of eastern Inner Mongolia are separated by thousands of miles, with distinct historical and cultural differences. Yet the Geser epic transmitted across this vast Mongolian cultural sphere exhibits little variation in its main plotlines." This observation reveals that the plot structure of Geser possesses a high degree of stability, enabling it to maintain a unified core narrative across vast geographical distances. Yet simultaneously, its

<sup>22</sup> Querilezhabu: *Research on Mongolian Geser* [M]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2017, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Boteletu, Hasibate'er: *Research on the Music of Mongolian Heroic Epics* [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012, p. 46.

varying performance practices demonstrates remarkable flexibility in how the epic has become deeply integrated with local musical traditions, presenting a richly diverse regional landscape. The consistency of the plot and the variability of form together constitute the vitality of Geser as a living epic.

### 3.2 Personal Style and Master-Disciple Traditions

Beyond regional variations, the personal styles of performers play a large role in how instruments are utilized. In Geser performance practices, different artists have distinctive attitudes and techniques toward their instruments: some excel at simulating natural and supernatural sounds through their instruments, treating them as a core narrative medium, with instrumental sections occupying a significant portion of their performances. Others prioritize lyrical expression, using instruments for simple rhythmic accompaniment in a subordinate role. These differences often stem from the artist's lineage—a master's playing style, performance habits, and even understanding of an instrument's function shape their student's practice, forming stylistic continuity across generations.

The renowned Geser artist Pajie is celebrated for his masterful *sihu* playing. In his performances, the instrumental sections possess independent expressive power; the *sihu*'s melody not only accompanies the vocals but also serves as a crucial means of advancing the narrative. In contrast, the distinguished Geser chanter Qimabazamusu is celebrated for the rich variations in his vocal delivery. The instrumental function in his performances is relatively focused on providing rhythmic support and maintaining the modal framework, while the lyrics and vocal style are the core of his performance. The divergence between their styles stems from the interplay of personal artistic expression and lineage traditions—in Pajie's tradition, instrumental music holds significant importance, while Jinbazhamusu's lineage places greater emphasis on vocal ornamentation and emotional expression.

Geser chanter Badama Renqin's performance practice offers another rich case study for understanding this diversity. Reflecting on his two recording experiences, he notes, "The Geser Stories accompanied by the *sihu* strictly follows the form of Khuren Uliger, employing a narrative structure blending prose and verse. The *sihu* primarily serves a supporting role, advancing the storytelling. In contrast, the *chör* accompanied recording of Geser employs the epic's seven-song framework, combined with rhymed verses structured in four-line stanzas. Here, the *chör* performance assumes a more structurally defining role."<sup>24</sup> The differing approaches adopted by the same artist when encountering different instruments and performance traditions not only demonstrate their mastery of multiple styles but also reflect the flexibility and inclusivity inherent within the Geser tradition itself.

This diversity is precisely the essence of a living tradition. Tradition is not a rigid template but one that

continually revitalizes itself through the creative practice of each individual artist. Boteletu states, "The oral nature of a melody manifests in variations based on the framework of a tune and is influenced by the rhythmic patterns of the lyrics, changes in tempo, and the rise and fall of tones. Moreover, it is significantly shaped by the performer's proficiency, artistic expression, psychological state, emotions, instrument tuning, and the performance context—all of which contribute to variations in melody."<sup>25</sup> This observation applies not only to the oral nature of melodies but also to the diversity in instrumental techniques—within a unified traditional framework, each artist interprets, practices, and enriches tradition through their unique individual approach. This individual creativity is what enables the Geser tradition to continue and flourish.

### IV. Conclusion

This paper examines the instrumental accompaniment tradition in Mongolian Geser performances from an interdisciplinary perspective of oral poetics and ethnomusicology. By mapping the typology of instruments, analyzing their multifaceted functions in performance, and comparing regional and performer-specific variations, the study reveals the profound cultural significance of musical instruments within the epic tradition. Instruments serve not merely as narrative accompaniment, but as integral components of the oral tradition, deeply engaged in evoking memory, generating meaning, and constructing performance contexts.

The study indicates that instrumental practices in Mongolian Geser performances exhibit a diverse pattern centered on the *chör* and *sihu*, supplemented by other instruments and a cappella forms. These two instruments have coexisted and evolved throughout history, each possessing representative lineages of performers and collectively forming the sonic foundation of the Geser performance tradition. Functionally, instrumental accompaniment serves multiple roles: as a mnemonic device, the melodies provide performers with a stable rhythmic framework, linking formulas and themes into a continuous narrative flow. As a form of meaning generation, the instruments form a "paralanguage" system running parallel to the lyrics, conveying emotions and setting the atmosphere through non-semantic means. As a medium for contextual construction, the presence and sound of instruments demarcate the boundary between the mundane and the sacred, conferring ritualistic solemnity upon the performance through opening ceremonies. Thus, the diversity of instrumentation found in regional traditions and performance styles demonstrates the living, dynamic nature of the Geser narrative tradition.

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