

Historical Evolution and Cultural Identity of Ethnic Musical Instruments in Mongolia: The Case of Horse Head Fiddle (HHF) in the Gorlos Region

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Abstract: Objective: To examine the cultural heritage and evolution of the Horse Head Fiddle (now referred to as HHF) in the Mongolian Gorlos region of China, focusing on its historical significance and distinctive role within Mongolian folk traditions. Methods: Researchers used a combination of literature review, fieldwork, and expert interviews to investigate the traditional and contemporary contexts of HHF in Jilin Province, China. Results: Findings indicate that the HHF has undergone significant transformations in both form and function, transitioning from 'Person to Instrument' and 'Court to Folk to Stage' in its evolution. These changes reflect a broader professional composition, performance, and public dissemination development. Conclusion: The HHF holds a crucial place in the cultural identity of the Gorlos Mongolian region, requiring dedicated conservation efforts to maintain its unique heritage amid modernization. Public Significance Statement. This study underscores the importance of preserving the Horse Head Fiddle (HHF) as a cultural symbol and heritage in the Gorlos Mongolian community. Its evolution from a courtly to a folk instrument illustrates the dynamic nature of cultural traditions and the importance of safeguarding them for future generations.

Keywords: Gorlos, Horse Head Fiddle (HHF), Chor, Evolution, Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mongolian HHF boasts a rich history and is a crucial symbol of Mongolian musical heritage. Its design, the materials used in its crafting, its

distinct sound and tone, the style of music it produces, and the way it is played all showcase the unique cultural identity of the Mongolian people. These elements vividly reflect the traditional nomadic way of life that has shaped Mongolian society. Historically, the traditional HHF is known by various names across Mongolian regions. The Horqin region in eastern Mongolia is called Chor. The Chahar and Xilingol regions of central Mongolia are called Hihil. The western Mongolian region of Altay is called Yekele. The HHF is equipped with two strings, which are designated as the inner and outer strings. Double strings can simultaneously play the high and low parts of a piece of music. A two-part harmony that forms a sustained bass is the musical feature of Chor music. Therefore, the HHF is also known as a bow-stringed Chor musical instrument. With the formation and advancement of modern China, traditional HHF music seems irrelevant in spiritual practices, namely its association with religion. However, the instrument and tunes remain a cultural legacy that has survived. Cultural shifts during the 1960s and 1970s somewhat limited the development of the traditional HHF. Mongolian folk artists implemented numerous reforms to align the instrument with evolving cultural demands. These modifications have transformed the HHF into a contemporary musical instrument. Since the 1990s, the Gorlos region has been manifesting the efforts of cultural preservation and restoration of the HHF music until 2008; at that time, Gorlos HHF music was added to the national register of representative intangible cultural heritage works (No. II-35). Since then, the HHF has been comprehensively 'rescued' and sustained its cultural presence and importance throughout Gorlos. The Gorlos region has introduced several conservation and publicity measures to popularize HHF music on a large scale. Fu and Du reported that "the number of people playing together on HHF in the region has broken the Guinness World Record three times(Fu & Du, 2019)." For a detailed explanation, see the CCTV video. However, along with the spread of modern HHF, the skills of the traditional HHF in the Gorlos region have been left uninherited. The survival of old traditional HHF artists is likely to be threatened, and the original ancient tunes are completely disappearing. Brimberg proposed that in the process of cultural development(Brimberg, 1997), one cannot negate the original origins of a culture with a later culture, nor can one negate later changes with an original form. Similarly, researchers of the HHF have also recognized this issue after reforming the instrument. Thus, they have combined tradition and modernity to give the HHF a new trend of development. As one of the characteristics of China's culture, HHF should be well preserved.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of the HHF can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty period. The traditional HHF is mentioned in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a Mongolian manuscript completed in 1240. Wu, a Mongolian music theorist, observed that the traditional HHF was developed during the Yuan Dynasty(Wu, 1998). It was originally called Chor and was mainly used to accompany performances of the heroic epic "Suppressing the Demon Manguus". Over time, it evolved into an instrument capable of solo performances. After the 13th century, the Chor became a specialized instrument in the royal court, mainly used for court performances and sacrificial rites. Wu observed that during the Ming and Qing dynasties(Wu, 1981), the HHF began to gain popularity among the masses and merged with the grassland pastoral songs. The traditional HHF, with its long history, is a folk art of the Mongolian people that encompasses singing, music, storytelling, prayer, sacrifice, exorcism, and worship. Following the formation of the People's Republic of China, the traditional HHF gradually shed its feudal connotations and evolved into a professional instrument for modern stage performances through the continuous exploration of several generations. Bortelutu summarized in his research that the HHF not only underwent a transformation in the materials used but also incorporated playing techniques from Mongolian HHF and the violin(Bortelutu, 2019), leading to the modern HHF. Music composition flourished with diverse forms, including solos, ensembles, accompaniments, concertos, and large-scale HHF symphonies. Following the triumphant declaration of the HHF music of the Gorlos region as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008, an increasing number of scholars have published related articles. Academic research on the HHF mainly focuses on the following four areas.

2.1 The Ontology of the HHF

Mongolian scholar Sukhbalu from the Gorlos District was one of the pioneers in researching the origins of the HHF. He suggested that the plucked instrument known as Hobus(Sukhbalu, 1983), developed by northern nomadic tribes, served as its precursor. Wu found evidence in Yuan Dynasty literature that a musician named "Zhang Chorqi" mentioned in Wang Yun's "A Chronicle of the Central Halli" indicates the existence of the traditional HHF during the Yuan Dynasty(Wu, 1998). Ke provided a comprehensive review of earlier research and expanded on Sukhbalu's findings, proposing that the Hobus from the Tang Dynasty was a distant ancestor of the HHF (Ke, 2001). He further argued that the bowed-string

Hobus from the Song Dynasty directly preceded it. The HHF began to develop among Mongolian tribes during the Yuan period and saw unprecedented growth during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This view is widely accepted by scholars both in China and abroad.

2.2 The Development of the HHF as a Musical Instrument

In the Gorlos District, part of the Horchin grassland, the traditional HHF, known as Chor, was prevalent during the Ming and Qing dynasties. BorteLutu and HassBatar believed that the Chor began to transform with the changing art of heroic epic storytelling from the middle and late Qing Dynasty (Bortelutu, 2012). In his analysis of the HHF's structure, Zhang observed that, during the early 20th century, the design of its soundbox transitioned from a pear shape to a ladder shape (Zhang, 2023) although the soundboard continued to be made of leather. With the cultural changes in modern China, the pitch and tuning issues of the traditional HHF became prominent. Li examined the post-revolutionary reforms of the HHF, noting that the initial structural modification was made by Sang Dureng in 1962 (Li, 2011), who replaced the soundboard with a fixed-tone drum membrane. This design was subsequently altered three times over 30 years by his disciple, Qi Baoligao, culminating in the modern HHF. Bortelutu mentioned in his research that the traditional HHF had various head shapes (Bortelutu, 2019), including dragon, crocodile, bird, and sheep heads, but Qi Baoligao not only reformed the soundbox but also standardized the head shape to that of a horse.

2.3 Research on the HHF Performers and Playing Techniques

Xue classified the post-revolutionary HHF performers into five generations, who collectively transformed the art of the HHF from folk culture to modern national art (Xue, 2022). Bulinbayar summarized three standard tunings and five playing methods for the HHF from practical research (Bulinbayar, 2011). Bulin pointed out that the Mongolian pastoral songs and HHF music share structural features; although one is vocal and the other instrumental (Bulin, 2013), their melodic modes and aesthetic essence are the same, differing only in lyrics. These scholars studied the schools of HHF artists, playing methods, and aesthetics, but few have systematically researched the traditional and modern HHF.

2.4 Exploration of Safeguarding and Passing Down the Traditions of the HHF

With social and cultural changes, folk artists were invited into music

groups and professional schools after the founding of New China, marking a historic step of the traditional HHF from folk to stage. Bortelutu described the development of the HHF as a reformative-creative model, adapting through constant innovation to modern performance needs (Bortelutu, 2019). Qilemuge researched HHF VR technology, which is popular among the youth (Qilemuge, 2019). Some scholars have also explored the application of the HHF in primary education to inherit traditional culture. In recent years, several traditional musicians and ethnomusicologists have recognized that the modern version of the HHF does not fully capture the essence of the traditional instrument, particularly regarding its musical style and substance. In terms of protecting HHF music, scholars have expressed four main viewpoints: First, while innovating and reforming the HHF, the protection of cultural origins must be ensured. Second, the promotion of HHF education in schools and the establishment of HHF majors in higher education institutions. Third, enriching the content of modern national music by integrating diverse global musical elements with the HHF. Fourth, coordinating various social resources to develop HHF-related culture. However, the aforementioned studies fail to encompass the historical evolution and cultural identity of the Gorlos region HHF discussed in this study.

3. THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN, EVOLUTION, AND PROTECTION OF HHF

3.1 Historical Evolution from Hobus to Traditional HHF (Chor)

3.1.1 Historical Evolution

Shandan observed that HHF's transition from the plucked instrument, Hobus, to the drawn string instrument, Sinagan Huur(Shandan, 2018), to the traditional HHF (Chor) is a transformation that has taken place over many dynasties. The ancient book "The Golden Historical Compendium" records an ancient hunting song describing the Mongolian clan tribes collectively sacrificing, feasting, singing, and dancing after a hunt, using Hobus to accompany the song. The Hobus here is a plucked instrument co-created by the ancient nomadic people of the north, and it is the ancestor of the HHF. In the Tang Dynasty, the "Hulei," a two-stringed plucked instrument, appeared. In the Song Dynasty, a two-stringed bow-wound instrument appeared, which the Mongols called "Sinagan Huur". Sinagan here means spoon in Mongolian, and Huur, in Mongolian, refers to musical instruments in general. In ancient China, the nomadic people of the north were often referred to as hu people; their music was called Hu

music, and their instruments were called Huqin. In the Yuan History - Rituals and Music, Zhi records: "The Huqin shape as Hobus, curling the neck and dragon's head. Two strings, played with a bow rubbed. The strings of the bow are strung with a horse's tail." This is the "two-stringed instrument that the Mongols love to play" mentioned in Marco Polo's Travels. During the Yuan Dynasty, the three strings appeared. During the Ming Dynasty, the huqin was further developed as a stringed instrument, but the plucked-stringed instrument Hobus was still prevalent. During the Qing Dynasty, the traditional HHF (Chor) appeared. The modern HHF emerged after the founding of the country in the midst of cultural changes. The whole evolution process, as shown in Figure 1, is based on Shandan's study (Shan 22-28).

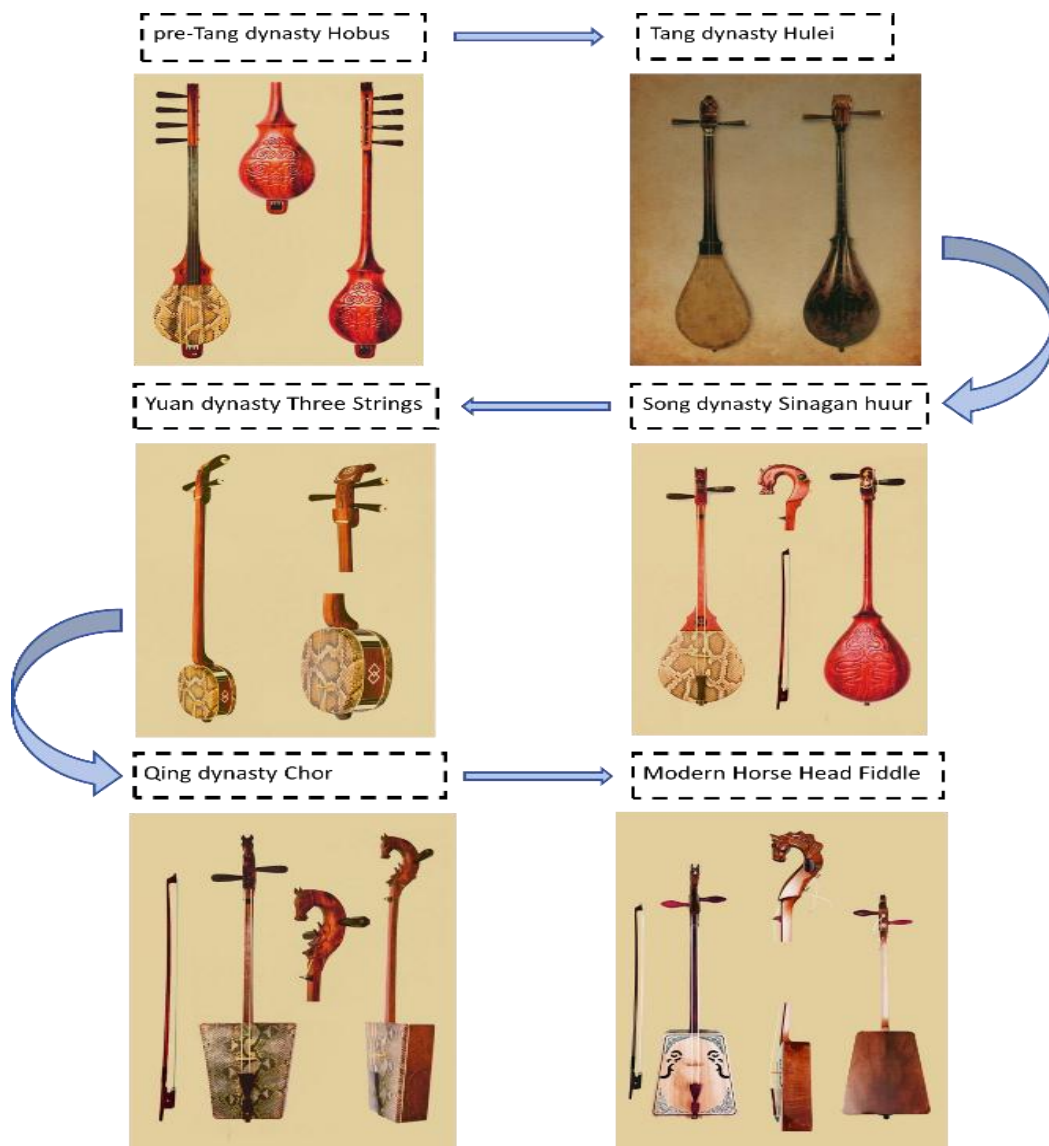


Figure 1: Historical Evolution of the HHF. Composite Image of Photographs From Shandan's Book, Edited and Adapted by the Author (2024)(Shandan, 2018). Images Sourced from Pages 22, 24, 26, 27, and 28. Used with Permission.

The Mongolian people have imbued the HHF with their distinctive national identity. According to the Jilin Province Cultural Relics Annals Editorial Committee (JPCRAEC 135), a legend tells of a herdsman named Suhe, whose cherished Little White Horse was killed by the king. In his grief, Suhe carved a HHF from wood, shaping it in the likeness of his horse, with the horse's head serving as the neck and its tail as the strings. Suhe would play the instrument whenever he longed for his lost horse. This legend, uncovered during the collection of cultural heritage in the Gorlos region, not only offers insight into feudal society but also explains the origin of the HHF's design. Moreover, it highlights the deep emotional connection the ancient Mongols had with the instrument and their cultural association with horses.

3.1.2 Origin of the HHF's Name

The HHF is known in Mongolia as Morin Khuur. And now people around the world call it the HHF. How did the name HHF originate? There are three statements: The first explanation is that it got its name from its horse's head. When the HHF was widely spread to other regions, people from other ethnic groups called it the HHF based on their understanding of the Mongolian horse culture and seeing a horse's head carved on the head of the instrument. Ke summarizes in research ethnomusicologists see this as a phenomenon of cultural identity (Ke, 2001). The second explanation is that its name comes from a deviation in the understanding of different languages. The HHF is referred to as Morin Khuur in all literature written in the Mongolian language. Zhang explains the word Morin means horse in Mongolian, and the word Khuur means musical instrument (Zhang, 2023), which together means horse musical instrument. In the past, in the Mongolian region, it did not matter whether the instrument had a horse's head or not; the core connotation was that it had to be made from a horse's tail to make the strings and bow strings. Outside of the Mongol region, when the name of this instrument was translated into Chinese, the nomenclature of the material used to make it was ignored, and the word horse was directly replaced with the word horse head. The Mongolian word Horse musical instrument became the Chinese word HHF. The third explanation is that its name comes from the creative naming of foreign scholars. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Torii family visited the Kalaqin region of Inner Mongolia and wrote several articles about their expeditions in Inner Mongolia. HHF" was first recorded in Torii Junzi's 1907 book, "Mongolia from the Point of View of Local Customs," and she took photographs of the instrument. In Figure 2. "On

the 19th of May, we set out early in the morning. The weather was so fine that I felt hot even when I changed into my summer clothes in the felt-shingled wagon. On the way, we stopped for lunch at a village called Bayan Keri. At the owner's house, I saw a very rare musical instrument, which is called Morlin Tolugai Khuur in Mongolian, and I call it HHF”.

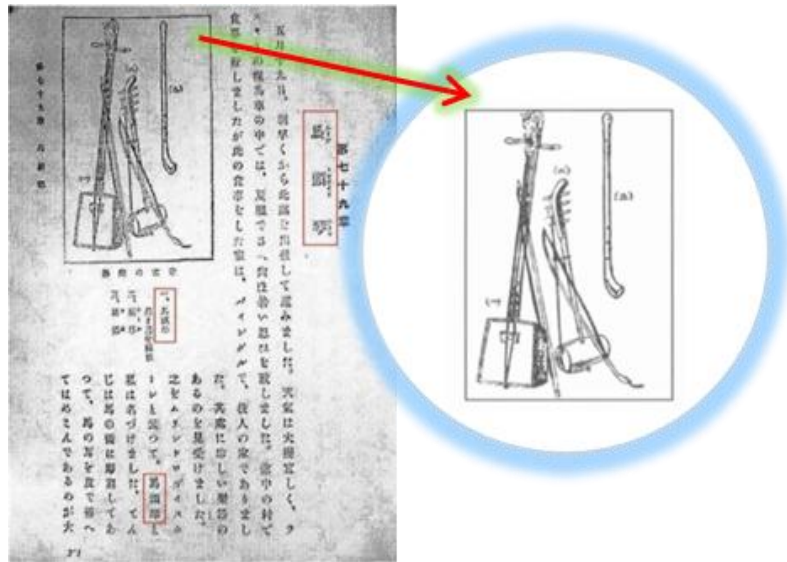


Figure 2: Mongolian Musical Instrument HHF. A Page from Torii's 1907 Book, *Mongolia from the Point Of View Of Local Customs*, Published in Japan, Records The HHF on Page 371. The Book is Written in Japanese, but the Words HHF are Clearly Written in Chinese.

3.1.3 HHF Performance Styles and Cultural Changes

The traditional HHF (Chor) was popularized in the Horqin grasslands during the Yuan Dynasty and became one of the main instruments played in court music. Gorlos was once one of the ten flags (counties) of Horqin. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, Zhang Qingbao, the most famous folk artist in Gorlos, was a Chorqi. Chorqi is the Mongolian pronunciation. It refers to a class of people, the Qinshu artists, who accompany their music with Chor. The Danish explorer and scholar of Mongolian studies, Haslund, mentions that on his third trip into the grassland, he passed through the Gorlos region (Haslund, 2019), one of the ten Horqin flags (counties). He collected an ancient Chor at the Royal Palace of Halamodu in Gorlos and photographed the instrument's owner, Zhang Qingbao. The sound box of this instrument is narrow at the bottom and broad at the top; the top of the stem is not decorated with a horse head, and the soundbox is covered with leather. This traditional HHF (Chor) is now kept in the Royal Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. Figure 3 is Zhang Qingbao playing Chor.



Figure 3: Zhang Qingbao is Playing Chor. (Haslund 232) Original Work Published 1935

With the traditional HHF, people often play on grass, so the player sits cross-legged and plays. The sound box is inverted trapezoidal, which makes it easy to insert between the legs, but there are also spoon-shaped ones with an unfixed shape. The head of the instrument's stem is either diameter or carved. The strings and bowstring are made of horsetail. It has an inner bass string with a fixed string of G and an outer treble string of c (the grouping of pitches in music). It is often used as the accompaniment of the court band or the accompaniment of the heroic epic, and the music style is simple and low. The HHF has reformed with the cultural changes of modern society. To emphasize the grassland symbol, the headstock is uniformly carved with a horse's head. The sound box was changed from an inverted trapezoid to a positive trapezoid to accommodate seated artists playing on stage. The strings were replaced with nylon, and the bowstring is still made of horsetail. The modern HHF has an inner soprano string set at g and an outer bass string set at c¹ (the grouping of pitches in music). With the establishment of literary groups, the HHF was gradually staged and professionalized. Literary artists are constantly creating new solo and concerto works to suit the needs of the stage. Figure 4 shows the performance of the Ulanmuqi Literary Team in the 1980s, with a total of eight instruments in the picture (Wang, 1980). In the front row is the Mongolian folk instrument Sihu, and in the back row, left to right, are Hobus, Violoncello, HHF (leather), Accordion, Flute, Sihu, and Sanxian. The HHF of this period was in the process of reform, playing adapted or newly composed works, gradually playing in ensemble with Western instruments, and the sound box was reformed into a positive trapezoidal shape.



Figure 4: Open-Air Performances by the Ulanmuqi Literary Team in the 1980s. Photograph from the Private Collection of Wang Jinsi, Taken in 1980. Used with Permission, 2024.

The reform of the HHHF was a proactive reform adapted to the cultural needs of the community. The form of HHHF stage performances and the shape of the instrument during the transitional period can be seen in the pictures of the Ulanmuqi Literary Team's performances. Barkin argues that what really marked the birth of the modern HHHF was the fixing of the form and the internationalization of playing techniques (43-48)(Barkin, 2012). Table 1 shows a comparison between the traditional HHHF and the modern HHHF.

Table 1: Traditional HHHF vs Modern HHHF

Items	Tradition Vs. Modernity	
Name	Chor	HHF
Panel Material	leather	lumber
Size	unfixed	fixed
Head Carving	no carvings or dragon heads, lion heads, skulls, people, etc.	horse
String Material	horsetail	nylon
Instrument Case	inverted trapezium majority	positive trapezoidal majority
Timbre	low and rustic	clear and bright
Vibration Speed	slow	fast
Feature	humming, narrating	melodious and vast
Cultural Attribute	traditional grassland village culture	modern grassland nomadic culture
Voice Relationship	dual voice, bass sustained	monophonic, dual Voice, comprehensive
Method of Playing	overtone method	modern string-playing method
Era of Production	more distant, Yuan Dynasty and later	more recently, after the founding of the Republic

3.2 Gorlos Region HHF Heritage Protection

The HHF of the Gorlos region has been handed down from ancient times to the present day, mainly by the artists and the people. The whole process can be broadly summarized into four processes, namely the ancient heroic epics of the town's demons, the feudal court bands, stage performances, and modern social culture activities. Throughout these four stages, there has been an interdependent relationship of cultural performance and inheritance between the artist and the people, as shown in Figure 5.

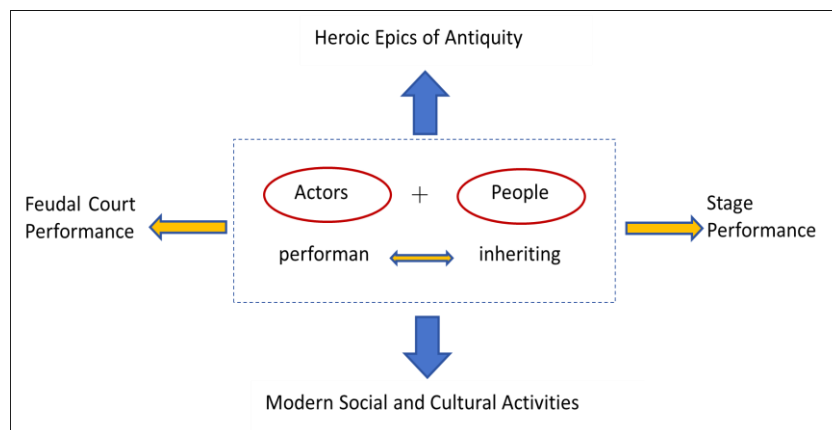


Figure 5: Four Stages of HHF Inheritance in the Gorlos Region Created by the author, 2024.

Folk art cannot be passed on without the folk artists who transmit the culture and the people who identify with it; the ancient epic heroes were very much needed for pastoral life. Epic poetry not only has the function of narrative entertainment but also has the function of eliminating disasters and difficulties for the herdsman as well as their flocks and herds of cattle. The HHF served not only the nobility in the feudal court bands but also played at major celebrations and folk gatherings, which was a sign of the people's identification with their national culture. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, HHF music gradually came to the stage, and the music and performance forms changed with the cultural needs of the people. After the widespread promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 21st century, HHF music became the social culture of Gorlos and, at the same time, took on the attributes of the city's symbols.

3.2.1 HHF Inheritor

According to Aristidou et al.'s study (Aristidou et al., 2015), intangible cultural heritage fundamentally belongs to the public: "The public is the bearer and inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage." The study also

emphasizes the importance of broad participation, noting that "in addition to the participation of local governments and local elites, public participation is indispensable" (Han and Zhang 168). This viewpoint underscores the critical role of communities in safeguarding traditions and is further illustrated by the Jilin Provincial Department of Culture's efforts in 1956 to establish the Grassland Cultural Centre and the Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe in the Gorlos region. By involving both local elites and the general public, these initiatives were instrumental in preserving and revitalizing Mongolian ethnic folk music, demonstrating how public participation directly influences the protection of cultural heritage. Local elites serve as essential intermediaries, acting as a bridge between the government and the public. They leverage their cultural authority to convey government policies and directives to the community (Wijesundara & Sugimoto, 2018). Table 2 presents the representative inheritors at various levels within the Gorlos region.

Table 2: Situation of HHF Inheritors in Gorlos (Data from Gorlos Intangible Culture Protection Center, 2023)

Representative Inheritors	National Level	Provincial Level	Municipal Level	County-Level
Chor (3 person)	——	——	1 person	2 persons
HHF (9 person)	——	2 persons	2 persons	5 persons
HHF Making (2 person)	——	1 person	——	1 person
Government Funding Standard (RMB)/Person/Year	20000	5000	5000	0

According to the Intangible Culture Protection Center, director of the Gorlos Intangible Heritage Center, Gorlos is recognized as the home of the HHF by the Chinese Orchestral Music Association. (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum, 2011) The HHF music and the HHF production skills program have been recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage. Every year, governments at all levels evaluate and assess representative inheritors. Gorlos' HHF is played in unison, and the number has broken the Guinness

World Record three times, closely tied to local government involvement, local elites' dedication, and the public's active engagement. Table 3 shows the teaching transmission of the inheritors.

Table 3: Inheritance of the Gorlos HHF by its inheritors (Data from Gorlos Intangible Culture Protection Center, 2023)

Name	Gender	Category	Birth	Inheritance	Level	Number of pupils	Note
Bao Guang	Male	Chor	1983	His father, Zhao Jinbao	municipal	30	
Bamburr	Male	Chor	1986	His teacher, Pauline	county	—	Members of the group Hohhotulu
Salinghan	Female	Chor	1999	His teacher, Huqrizheg	county	—	Numerous solo concerts
Zhao Jinbao	Male	HHF	1962	Horqin genres	provincial	More than 1,000	President, Chinese HHF Society
Bao Garidi	Male	HHF	1966	His brother, Zhao Jinbao	provincial	More than 1,000	Director of the Grassland Cultural Centre
Huqirihege	Male	HHF	1985	Horqin genres	municipal	More than 1,000	
Yu Zhe	Male	HHF	1987	Horqin genres	municipal	More than 100	Teacher at Gorlos Mongolian Primary School
Bai-Ozhigal	Male	HHF	1982	Horqin genres	municipal	More than 100	
Yang-Ozhigal	Male	HHF	1987	His teacher, Chenbayar	county	nearly 100	
Bainbattu	Male	HHF	1965	Horqin genres	county	More than 3,000	Vice-Principal, Mongolian Central Primary School, Chaganhua Township
Bai Yanfeng	Male	HHF	1985	Horqin genres	county	nearly 100	HHF Teacher, Mongolian Kindergarten
Bao Liping	Male	HHF	1988	His father, Bao Garidi	county	More than 500	

3.2.2 The Social Functions of HHF Culture

(China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum) in 2008, HHF music from Gorlos was included in the second batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, a recognition closely linked to the long-term cultural adherence of folk artists in the Gorlos region. In the 1990s, the education, training, and performance of HHF art in the Gorlos area were already thriving. On December 24, 1997, the Jilin branch of the China HHF Society was established here. This marked the formation of an organization dedicated to Gorlos's HHF. In 2006, Gorlos was

designated the "Home of the Chinese HHF " by the Chinese Society of Ethnic Orchestra, as illustrated in Figure 6. This image depicts the formal ceremony held by the Gorlos government to celebrate the designation of "Hometown of the HHF." The photograph captures government officials and cultural leaders engaging in the plaque presentation, highlighting the unique cultural significance of the HHF in the region. In addition, Figure 7 shows a scan of the documentation of the home of the Goros HHF. In 2007, the local government established the HHF Museum within the Chagan Lake Reserve to protect HHF music, as seen in Figure 8. That same year, an HHF orchestra was formed, comprising 50 members, significantly enhancing the professional level of HHF performances.



Figure 6: President Park Dongsheng of the Chinese Orchestral Music Society presents the "HHF Hometown" plaque. Photograph taken in 2006. Source: Gorlos HHF Museum. Used with permission, 2024.



Figure 7: HHF Nomination Document. Photograph taken in 2006. Source: Gorlos HHF Museum. Used with permission, 2024.



Figure 8. HHF Museum. Photograph taken by the author, 2023.

In the construction of the Gorlos culture, the art of HHF has evolved from its stage functionality to serve a broader social function. The government has developed and implemented a comprehensive social and cultural development strategy for the county, elevating the art of the HHF to a brand culture strategy. In 2006, a performance of 1,199 HHFs playing "The Music of Gorlos" set a Guinness World Record, as shown in Figure 9 (Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association, 2006, used with permission, 2024). In 2008, the government organized a performance of 2,008 HHFs playing "The Eternal Olympic Flame," setting another Guinness World Record, as depicted in Figure 10 (Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association, 2008, used with permission, 2024). In 2019, a performance of 2,019 HHFs playing "I Love You, China" refreshed the Guinness World Record, as illustrated in Figure 11 (Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association, 2019, used with permission, 2024).



Figure 9: Performance of 1,199 HHFs playing "The Music of Gorlos" in 2006. Source: Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association. Used with permission, 2024.



Figure 10: Performance of 2,008 HHFs playing "The Eternal Olympic Flame" in 2008. Source: Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association. Used with permission, 2024.



Figure 11: Performance of 2,019 HHF's playing "I Love You, China" in 2019.

Source: Songyuan Cultural Heritage Protection Association. Used with permission, 2024.

3.3 The Evolutionary Characteristics of the HHF

This study examines the HHF music in the Gorlos region to observe the entire development process of HHF music, identifying two evolutionary characteristics:

3.3.1 The Transition from "Person to Instrument"

The HHF has transformed from its origins in narrative music to a modern performance instrument. Bortelutu explains in the study, traditionally, the HHF was an integral part of the heroic epics of Horqin, with the art of storytelling through music considered a sacred profession (Bortelutu, 2012), preserved within families and adhering to ancient precepts such as "transmitting to sons, not daughters" and "teaching to one's offspring, not to disciples" (347). Xue investigated that artists were cautioned against allowing instrumental performance to dominate over singing (Xue, 2022), emphasizing that instrumentation should serve vocal expression (62-66). Concentrating excessively on playing techniques, pitch, and timbre, to the detriment of singing, was warned against, as it could lead to becoming a mute artist skilled only in playing the instrument. These studies show that during the traditional HHF period, the performer was an important vehicle. However, recent changes in ideology, social systems, and societal structures, among other socio-cultural factors, have indirectly led to the disintegration of the original belief systems. This collapse of traditional belief systems caused artists who sang heroic epics to lose their once-respected pride and means of livelihood, quickly fading from public view. Li points out that after the establishment of New China, the form of HHF solo performances gradually emerged, initially appearing as short interludes between the "main programs" on stage (Li, 2011), serving as supplementary entertainment rather than the mainstream attraction (23).

Subsequently, accompaniments with the dulcimer, accordion, or piano were introduced. From this time on, folk artists of Gorlos, unsatisfied with this simplistic format, began experimenting with medleys of folk songs that shared similar modal structures and musical styles, incorporating more instrumental language into their performances. These efforts laid the groundwork for the creation of HHF solo compositions. By the late 1980s, ensemble performances of the HHF started to gain prominence on performance stages, with the visual impact of multiple players often becoming the highlight of shows. The turn of the century, marked by increasing international exchanges, saw the concept of polyphony introduced to the HHF, endowing it with characteristics of multiple voice parts. These creations led to the emergence of HHF ensembles and concertos. The HHF transformed from a narrative tool to a sophisticated musical instrument through cultural development and exchange.

3.3.2 The 'Transition from "Court to Folk to Stage"

In the early Qing Dynasty, Halamodu town in the Gorlos region was the political, economic, and cultural hub, with the royal court hosting musicians and performers and making banquets a primary venue for transmitting and disseminating traditional HHF music. Zhang (2009) researched these banquets, often lasting three days and nights, and featured a unique system where any HHF player who performed a piece incorrectly was "punished" according to banquet protocols. The "punishment" involved staying in place and drinking three large bowls of mare's milk in one go before performing the song again (Zhang 88). Young musicians quickly matured into competent players through these rigorous and somewhat coercive ceremonial practices. Following the decline of the royal court's band, its members transitioned from the court to the folk realm. They were highly skilled and held in great esteem among the populace. During festive or significant occasions, village elders would enthusiastically send for these artists, arranging transportation to bring them to the village, where they would perform their artistry for the celebratory gatherings of the pastoral community, either through musical performances or narrating traditional stories accompanied by the HHF. According to Yiliqi, the director of the former Gorlos Intangible Cultural Heritage Center, the village was predominantly Mongolian during his childhood, and Mongolian was the language spoken. Possession of a Chor (traditional HHF) was highly respected in a household. This prestigious instrument, associated with royal and noble status, was uncommon among ordinary families. Thus,

Chor artists held a high status in the early days of liberation. During the Spring Festival or other significant holidays, or even when an elder was celebrating their 80th birthday, families would invite a Chor artist to their home, offering a feast as hospitality, followed by the artist performing. Regardless of which family invited the artist, the entire village would gather to listen to the stories, which could continue for five to seven days and sometimes up to two weeks or more, as shown in Figure 12.



Figure 12: Traditional HHF Artists Performing for Herdsmen. Photograph Taken by Fu Shan in 2019. Used with Permission, 2024.

After the establishment of New China, the living environment of most folk artists transitioned to the stage. The structure of musical instruments also underwent multiple reforms to meet the demands of stage performances, leading to the emergence of HHF solo, ensemble, orchestral, and concerto pieces. The performance styles of the HHF became increasingly diverse, enriching the musical forms and compositions. This instrument completed its transformation from the royal courts to the folk realm and finally to the stage, marking a significant evolution in its role and presentation in cultural expressions, as shown in Figure 13.



Figure 13: Gorlos HHF Ensemble Performs at Changchun Guanghua University. Photograph taken by the author in 2023.

4. HHF IN THE NEW DEVELOPMENT TREND AND CULTURAL VALUE

4.1 The New Development Trend

4.1.1 HHF Music Innovation

The traditional HHF is gaining more and more attention; the Gorlos people have adapted the ancient heroic epics into a stage program, making the old heroic epics and Chor to the stage in a new light. Chao, as provincial inheritor Chao Lumeng, also in the personal short video platform, continues to update their adaptation of the work, and the number of followers has exceeded 100,000 people(Chao, 2022). Shandan summarised in the study that the director of the Grassland Culture Centre(Shandan, 2018), Bao Garidi, has developed a unique method of playing the HHF in the Gorlos region through much practice based on the three methods of string setting and the five methods of playing the HHF (1).

Zhao Jinbao, head of the HHF Orchestra of the National Song and Dance Troupe, has combined traditional HHF styles to create many modern HHF musical compositions celebrating Gorlos. One of them, "Joyful Ranch", has also been selected for inclusion in music textbooks for primary and secondary school students (Shandan 65). Young musicians in the Gorlos region are currently exploring effective ways to apply VR and digital music technology to HHF music composition.

4.1.2 HHF Development Adheres to the Origin Plus Diversity

This study investigated the fact that the Gorlos region has set up various social combinations such as the Ulaanmuqi Literary Team, Hohhotulu Combination, Al Combination, HHF Orchestra, etc. The HHF is used as a banner to vigorously carry on the national culture. Based on the traditional performance method of HHF, the HHF and the national band are used as a vehicle. Appropriate use of Western compositional techniques is made, thus demonstrating the artistic pursuit and concept of "harmony and difference" in the diversified world music cultures. In the combination of HHF and Mongolian bands, the HHF is the foundation of national culture and has become a powerful symbol of national musical exchange and cultural identity. The HHF has been explored in a wider space and has formed a diversified development trend after forming a combination with Mongolian music bands.

4.1.3 Emphasis on the Protection and Development of the Source of the HHF

The HHF is not a product of a single period. According to the evidence, there are at least ten or more titles of HHF extant among the tribes in the grassland. Regarding their historical and ethnic relations, this study will not talk about them one by one. In short, they are all indispensable parts of the HHF cultural inheritance chain. The survival of the traditional HHF (Chor) is greatly beneficial to the protection and inheritance of the HHF music culture, which can make the HHF music culture more holistic, comprehensive, and multi-layered and achieve sustainable development. This HHF music source culture has become a "vulnerable group" in the Mongolian region. The Gorlos region is now beginning to focus on and protect it. The government has incorporated the heroic epic music, which represents the traditional HHF, along with the modern HHF music into the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

4.2 Cultural Value

4.2.1 Historic Value

The HHF is one of the most representative ethnic instruments in nomadic culture. The history of the HHF also accompanies the history of the Mongolian nation. Its value lies in its musical importance and its role as a symbol of Mongolian culture, tradition, and identity. Zhang (2017) states that early HHF music was full of religious, mythological, and blessing colors (39). However, with the change of the years, the HHF gradually lost its original function of religious worship of the gods. Most of it is now in the public eye through culture and art. HHF musical compositions are constantly being updated. Sukhbaru (2007) has argued by ethnomusicologists that Gorlos is where the HHF originated and that the legend of the HHF here is, at its most epic-mythological (44). Gorlos' historical changes are also linked to the changes in the history and culture of the Mongolian people, constituting the genealogy of the HHF's inheritance, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Gorlos HHF Lineage Table

Pedigree	Name	Location
1st Generation	Sangay Rinchin	Anglet Village, Chaganhua town
2nd Generation	Dobson Sangha	Halamodu Town
3rd Generation	Li Zhanquan	—
4th Generation	He Xige	Chaganhua town
5th Generation	Bao Xiangwen	Gorlos county
6th Generation	Zhao Jinbao, Bao gari di	Gorlos county
7th Generation	Bao Liping, Srikulen	Gorlos county

4.2.2 Aesthetic Value

Mongolians have a special relationship with their steeds both in life and in production. The image of the steed varies greatly in Mongolian proverbs, folk songs, raps, heroic epics, narrative poems, and folk tales. Gorlos grassland artists in the Naadam event, singing the traditional "Horse Praise," can be praised for dozens of minutes in a row without repetition of words and phrases. The HHF is a musical instrument that expresses, in a telling way, the musical characteristics of open-mindedness, roughness, deepness, and euphemism. Its temperament is twisted with the strong national character and accurately expresses the Mongolian emotions of combustibility, beauty, goodness, and truthfulness. The HHF has entered the world's music hall with its unique playing skills, rich national style, and beautiful sound. It has a pure, mellow tone that is exceptionally close to the human voice. That is to say, it can express the peaceful life on the prairie with blue sky and white clouds, wind, and sunshine; it can also express the rich and delicate thoughts and feelings of the herders; it can also express the heroism of the Mongolian people's valor and bravery, and the heroic spirit of the iron riders rushing to the sky; and it can also express the grand scenes of ten thousand horses galloping and magnificent waves and waves. Its music and culture provide high aesthetic value to the Mongolian people.

4.2.3 Human Value

The Mongolian people have a deep-rooted respect for nature and compassion for the weak. In the vast grasslands, there have always been situations like this going on and on; the female camel died in the process of giving birth. Leaving the bawling baby camel, snuggled up to the dead mother, looking lonely. The herdsman had no choice but to bring in another female camel that had just finished giving birth several days earlier so that the female camel could adopt the poor little camel to have milk to eat. Nevertheless, the camel had no pity for the lonely camel baby, and as soon as the little one came close to her, she kicked the camel baby, who was not related to her, aside. Whenever this happens, the herdsman plays the HHF and sings the old and sad "Song of Persuasion for lactation" to persuade the female camel to adopt the motherless baby camel. The HHF music has a mournful, long, and repetitive sound, a loose rhythm, and a mournful, reserved narration that tears the eyes. Thus, the herdsman played until, by some miracle, the instrument's sound moved the female camel. Leaving behind tears of pity that flowed like beads from the female camel's eyes, this female camel adopted the poor little camel. From these circumstances, HHF music can evoke

humanity beyond other bowed string instruments. Not only humans can feel it, but many animals in nature are capable of this bleak, sad, tonal effect. This is mysterious Mongolian music, and it is amazing how the deep sound of the instrument can move living beings. This is where the charm of the HHF's spiritual value lies.

4.2.4 Social Value

HHF has a high social status as a cultural symbol of the Mongolian nation. In the Golos region, HHF is used in major events and is popular in people's public entertainment. For several years, the communities of Nahoya and Alatan have been offering free HHF lessons in the Gorlos region. From 2015 to the present, the HHF community has mobilized corporate sponsorships and purchased millions of RMB of equipment. More than 20 inheritors are hired to teach in the community every weekend, covering up to 150 students at a time. Community activities have become people's daily entertainment. HHF, that is, it can enhance the cultural confidence and identity of a region or nation and also provide colorful content and forms for mass cultural activities. HHF can often be seen in collective activities such as the Naadam Assembly, Halamodu Pear Blossom Festival, Northern Intangible Cultural Summer Festival, Mongolian Mass Spring Festival, etc. It attracts more people to participate in it and enhances social cohesion. This is the social value of HHF.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper draws upon the author's extensive literature review and incorporates findings from a conservation survey of the HHF in the Gorlos region of northeastern China's Mongolian. It presents reflections and suggestions regarding analyzing its origins, inheritance status, creative trends, and cultural significance. Research on preserving the traditional HHF remains limited, highlighting the need for increased scholarly attention. The paper calls for more experts and researchers to study and conserve both traditional and modern forms of the HHF, with a particular emphasis on the original art form and the development of effective preservation strategies. For thousands of years, the artistic value of the HHF has existed in more than just musical melodies. Ancient and mysterious shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, nomadic culture, and the Central Plains culture have successfully developed this instrument and left the wisdom of the ancestors. By investigating and researching the HHF in the Gorlos region, this paper hopes that more

people will learn and pay attention to this ancient musical instrument and that the intangible cultural heritage of the Mongolian HHF will be better inherited.

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