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THE HISTORICAL TRADITIONS OF ANCIENT MONGOLIAN MILITARY MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary times, there has been a notable shift in the role and development patterns of military music. Presently, military music holds significance not only in ceremonial functions but also in the day-to-day operations of military units and organizations, soldier training, and fostering national patriotism. This evolution highlights the transformation of military music into a multifaceted tool that encompasses culture, education, and propaganda.

On the global stage, the role of military music has also evolved, with an emphasis on ceremonial activities and integration into modern army culture prevailing. However, this ceremonial culture and musical tradition are not unfamiliar to Mongolians. Throughout history, the use of military music and the involvement of musicians in Mongolian military ceremonies have held a special place, dating back to ancient times.

This study explores the historical development and importance of military music in ancient Mongolian military rituals, from the Hunnic era (3rd century BC) to the Great Mongol Empire.

It shows that military music played a vital role beyond just ceremonial purposes it was a crucial tool for military communication, psychological warfare, and uniting armed forces and civilian populations. Using archaeological findings, historical records, and comparative analysis, the research traces the evolution of military musical practices across successive nomadic empires such as the Huns, Xianbi, Turkic peoples, and Khitans. Key discoveries highlight the sophisticated use of wind, string, and percussion instruments in military settings, the formation of formal musical groups like the Hunnic “Tug Bag,” and the significance of certain instruments as symbols of state power, like the “Khashiraa Ikht Khatan Red Trumpet” in the Great Mongol Empire. The study establishes a clear link between ancient traditions and contemporary Mongolian military ceremonies, particularly in the incorporation of traditional instruments in flag ceremonies and official events. This research enhances our understanding of how military music evolved as a crucial element of nomadic state structure, military ethos, and national identity construction in ancient Mongolia.

KEYWORDS

Military Ceremonies, Military Music, Music History, Historical Traditions, Documentation, Mongolian Military Culture, Nomadic Empires, Ceremonial Instruments

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Introduction

The Military Terminology Dictionary defines a “*military ceremony*” as a formal event held within a military unit or organization to commemorate holidays or daily activities. It involves military personnel saluting each other, forming a guard of honor, wearing uniform numbers, raising the state flag, singing the national anthem, performing military salutes, hoisting the Great White and Fierce Black Military Emblems, providing entertainment, raising the battle flag, conducting ceremonial firings, participating in festive marches, and undergoing parade inspections.¹ The purpose of a military ceremony is to showcase Mongolia’s independence and sovereignty, foster unity between the military and the people, and highlight the divine destiny, upright spirit, firm existence, and eternal glory of the Mongolian military. This tradition continues to hold deep significance and honor in present times.

The term “Military ceremony” is defined as follows: “A soldier refers to individuals with military ranks, including veterans (former soldiers). It can also refer to a specific unit, type, or specialized professional soldier within the armed forces.”² In a narrower sense, it can denote a conscript or contract military serviceman within the military organization of many countries.”

On the other hand, the term “Ritual” is described in the Mongolian language dictionary as “the act of performing a ceremony or showing respect according to a set ritual.”³

In his monograph “Mongolian military music traditions in the modern era,” Sh. Tsogtgerel, the first doctor of military music, defined “Military music” as artistic works and orchestral compositions intended for training military personnel in military operations, imparting aesthetic education, and fostering military-patriotic values in all individuals. Essentially, military music is structured to deliver military education to the Armed Forces, readying them for military parades, ceremonies, and significant state events, as well as for issuing commands and guiding troops.⁴

Military music has long been a powerful influence on the psychology of soldiers, uniting military forces in both wartime and peacetime. It plays a crucial role in military ceremonies, bolstering national patriotism among troops. Military ceremonies are an essential component of implementing the policies and goals of armed forces worldwide, with military music serving as a key element. Many countries incorporate military music into their military, war, and ceremonial activities, but Mongolians have utilized military music in their military life and ceremonies since ancient times.

Researchers have gathered information about the role of military musicians in ancient military ceremonies, particularly during the peak of the Huns in the pre-Common Era.

Fact-1. Evidence suggests that the Huns, ancestors of the Mongols, utilized a variety of musical instruments including wind, string, and percussion instruments. For instance, in 100 BC, two military leaders of the Han Dynasty of China, Li-Lin and Su-U, were captured and imprisoned by the Huns. Li-Lin, responsible for military affairs, was stationed at the confluence of the Yenisei and Abakan rivers, while Su-U tended to goats near Lake Baikal. Correspondence between the two leaders revealed their appreciation for the musical elements of the Huns, with Li-Lin mentioning the sound of trumpets and horses' neighing, and Su-U expressing warmth upon hearing the Hun's trumpets in the countryside at night.⁵

This indicates that the Huns incorporated military music into their daily routines, as described in Li-Lin's letter⁶ mentioning the sound of trumpets and horses at night. This music may have served various purposes such as signaling rituals, ceremonies, religious practices, or the start and end of activities like sleep or rest.

The recurring nature of the trumpets, as indicated by the phrase “it will ring at night,” suggests a regular occurrence, possibly every night. Su-Yu's letter further emphasizes the constant presence of the Hun's trumpets, indicating a daily, perhaps nightly, practice. Despite living in different locations near the Yenisei River and the sea, both generals noted the consistent presence of the Huns' trumpets in their surroundings. This suggests that these ceremonial activities were a common practice across regions and territories.

¹ Badam, D., Bazarsuren, J., Bekhtulga, S., Gangaanyam, S., Gantulga, N., Dashzeveg, Ts., Dondog, B., Ulziibat, G., Palamdorj, Sh., Purevjav, O., Sodnomtsog, D., Khuu-Ukhna, A., Shagdar, B., & Erdenebat, B. (2014). *Explanatory dictionary of military terms*. Ulaanbaatar. p.351

² Ibid.p.365

³ <https://www.mongoltoli.mn>

⁴ Tsogtgerel, Sh. (2011). *Mongolian military music traditions, modern times*. Ulaanbaatar. p.16.

⁵ Tsogtgerel, Sh. (2011). *Mongolian military music traditions, modern times*. Ulaanbaatar. p.26.

⁶ Li Ling. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved November 13, 2025, from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/李陵>

Additionally, the statement that the sound of the trumpet would “melt the heart” is another significant detail that highlights the impact of the Hunnic military trumpets on human psychology during military operations at that time.

Fact-2. In his article “Military music of the Huns,” Timur Vural, Ph.D., an Associate Professor at the Conservatory of Turkish Music at Nigde University of the National University of Arts, mentioned that the Huns' military music ensemble, known as “Tug Bag,” played a significant role in accompanying military ceremonies and parades during wartime. The ensemble utilized a variety of musical instruments including flutes (Irag), trumpets (Borgui), drums, kettledrums (Kuvruk), and cymbals (Cen).

It is likely that the Huns referred to their military musicians as “Tug Bag” because it signified a group that accompanied the flag. These musicians would demonstrate their strength by playing trumpets and drums.¹ Throughout history, the Mongols have revered their “Tug and Emblem” during ceremonial and military events, always including military musicians. This tradition is evident in the artwork of Persian artists between the 13th and 15th centuries.



Fig. 1. Huns military banner. /National Museum of Taiwan in XI century

It is evident that during wars, battles, and military ceremonies, they utilized portable and loud musical instruments that were impressive and easy to carry. Specifically, instruments like drums, cymbals, kettledrums, and shishreg fall under the percussion or shirin aimag category, producing powerful and vibrant sounds.

Fact-3. In the 1st-3rd centuries CE, following the Huns, the Xianbi people in Mongolia were enthusiastic about music, organizing dance festivals and maintaining an ensemble of 80 different musical instruments in their palace. They also established regulations regarding the songs and music to be performed at state ceremonies, soldier departures and arrivals, hunting expeditions, and within the palace.²

The Xianbei people, as described in this document, not only created a musical ensemble with various instruments but also established specific rules and regulations for it. They involved musicians in state and military ceremonies, including military events like sending off and welcoming soldiers to battle. Interestingly,

¹ Vural, T. (2016). *Military music in the Hun period*. Türklük Bilimi Araştırmaları, .p.3.

² History of the Mongolian People's Republic. Volume 1]. (1996).p.108.

they had special rules for the songs and music played during these ceremonies, similar to modern military ceremonies. For instance, the 142nd Unit of the Armed Forces, known as the "Exemplary Wind Orchestra," participates in ceremonies like honoring the "Campbell Flag" and sending off or welcoming military teams for peacekeeping missions. This mirrors the Xianbei people's traditions of farewell and welcome ceremonies for soldiers returning from war.

Fact-4. In 2011, scientists from the Institute of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the Center for Turkic-Altai Studies of the L.N. Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan, signed an agreement to collaborate on the study of historical and cultural monuments of ancient nomads in Mongolia.

As part of this agreement, Professor S. Kharzhaubay, researcher H. Zhantegin, Professor A. Ochir, and Doctor L. Erdenebold from the Center for Turkic-Altai Studies conducted excavations in the Red Wall's

Shoroon Bumbagar, where they unearthed approximately 550 artifacts, including unique items related to military music. A clay figurine of a soldier on horseback, wearing a hooded cloak with open hems turned outwards and playing a wind instrument with many holes in his hand, was discovered.

The total dimensions of the figurine are 25 cm in height, 26 cm in length, **Figure2. Shoroon Bumbagar artifact from the 6th century** and 11.8 cm in width.

The soldier on horseback depicted in the figurine has an oval, elongated face with narrow eyebrows, large eyes, and a low nose. He sports a flowing beard on his lips, chin, and cheeks. The legs are separated from the body of the horse, and the trousers are painted dark gray while the boots are black. A narrow belt is tied around the outside of the cloak. The horse has a low saddle with a bridle, and the bridle is slightly separated from the body of the horse, and painted accordingly.¹ This indicates that the practice of military musicians participating in ceremonial occasions persisted into the 6th–7th centuries, or the Turkic era, as shown by a clay figurine of a mounted soldier playing a wind instrument discovered in the tomb of



the "Red Wall Earthen Dome".

Fact-5. Historical sources indicate that the Khitans, a powerful group during the 8th–11th centuries CE, incorporated music into their state and military ceremonies.

They utilized instruments like the Khasyn Khesar Bishgaur, Pi-pa, and Battle Tambourine, and had dedicated groups of musicians and singers known as the "Bishgaurian Onan". This musical tradition predates the establishment of the Great Mongol Empire by 400–500 years. The Mongols, who succeeded the Khitans, also embraced music, employing instruments like the "Khasyn Khesar Bishgaur", "Pi-pa", and "Bayldaayan Tambourine". They too had an official overseeing musicians, known as the "Bishgaurian Onan", indicating a continued emphasis on musical activities in ceremonial events. The Khitans' musical instruments, such as the Khesar Bishgaurian Onan, were carried forward and widely used during the Great Mongol Empire.

¹ Ochir, A., Erdenebold, L., Kharzhaubay, S., & Zhantegin, H. (2013). *Excavation of ancient nomadic burial mounds*. Ulaanbaatar.p.103.

Fact-6: During the 13th century, the “Khashiraa Ikht Khatan Red Trumpet” was a commonly used musical instrument in wars and military ceremonies.¹ According to Dr. Sh. Tsogtgerel, this trumpet, which is housed with Genghis Khan’s fierce black coat of arms in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, is still utilized for ceremonial purposes.²



It is described as having a powerful and majestic sound, comparable to that of a thousand dragons in the sky, causing enemies to fall upon hearing it. The Khatan Red Trumpet has been a symbol of **Figure3. Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region** great respect since the 13th century and was ranked second among the nine symbols of the state.³

The modern Mongolian Armed Forces have developed a trumpet similar to this musical instrument and still use it in ceremonies to honor the “Black Flag of All Military Forces.” The trumpet is now housed in the “Black Flag House”⁴ alongside the black flag of all military forces, located outside the Ministry of Defense. In response to public input and with the approval of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and the President of Mongolia, the Ministry of Defense recreated the Black Flag in 1992, designating it as the highest flag and emblem for all Mongolian troops. This is why the trumpet continues to be a vital instrument in traditional flag-raising and entertainment ceremonies in Mongolia.



Figure4. /Mongolia/ These ceremonies help protect the homeland, promote patriotism, develop military skills, knowledge, and bravery, and nurture a strong sense of national pride.

Conclusions

The study's findings indicate that the historical traditions of state and military ceremonies among the ancient Mongols played a significant role in the development of military and social culture, as well as the establishment of political institutions. From the Hunnic era onwards, military music served not only as a means of communication but also as a unifying element for both the military and the populace, symbolizing national unity.

The study highlights how ancient nomadic states like the Hunnic, Xianbi, Turkic, and Khitan incorporated music into their military ceremonies, with the structure, function, and use of musical instruments reflecting the level of state organization and military culture of the time. Examples such as the Hunnic “Tug Bag,” the Xianbi musical ensemble, the Turkic cavalry’s use of brass instruments, and the Khitan “Lord of the Bishguur” demonstrate that military music was not just an art form but also a representation of

state power and ceremonial hierarchy.

During the Great Mongol Empire, the tradition of military music was further developed, with the “Kashkhiraa Ikht Khatan Red Trumpet” being honored among the nine state symbols. This demonstrates the significance of military music reaching the level of state symbols. This tradition continues in the ceremonial activities of the modern Armed Forces, where traditional musical instruments like trumpets and flutes are used in events such as the “Black Flag of All Military Forces” and entertainment ceremonies, showcasing the historical continuity of the tradition.

¹ Tsogtgerel, Sh. (2011). *Mongolian military music traditions, modern times*. Ulaanbaatar. p.27.

² Ibid.p.32.

³ Nyambuu, H. (1992). *Honoring the highest blue Mongolian state law*. Undurkhaan.p.74.

⁴ In 2006, the 'Black Sulde Palace' was newly constructed for the purpose of preserving the black sulde of all the armed forces.

The use of ancient military music has evolved into a blend of nomadic culture, state ceremonies, military discipline, patriotism, and belief in the spirit of the emblem. The current Mongolian military music tradition is deeply rooted in this historical foundation.

The study of ancient Mongolian military music traditions uncovers a complex and long-lasting cultural custom that goes beyond simple artistic representation. The results show that from the time of the Huns (3rd century BC) to the height of the Great Mongol Empire (13th-14th centuries), military music played a crucial role in state structure, military order, and national unity.

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