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A Study on the Historical Development and Migration Influence of Barga Short-Tune Folk Songs

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Abstract: This study focuses on the Barga short-tune folk songs of the Hulunbuir region in Inner Mongolia, systematically tracing their historical development and examining the influence of tribal migration and social change on both the content and social functions of these songs. The research reveals that Barga short-tune folk songs are characterized by regular rhythms, distinct beats, and simple, easily singable melodies. Their thematic scope has evolved over historical periods, expanding from hunting life to grassland pastoralism, warfare, and significant social events. The lyrics vividly reflect the lifestyles, emotional experiences, and cultural psychology of the Barga people. This study primarily employs a combination of literature review and lyrical text analysis to systematically classify and compare folk songs across different historical periods, revealing their core functions and cultural value within Barga society. The research not only enriches the historical understanding of Barga folk songs but also provides new perspectives for interdisciplinary studies in ethnomusicology and ethnic history, while offering practical implications for the preservation and cultural transmission of folk songs.

Keywords: Barga; Short-tune folk songs; Historical development; Migration; Socio-cultural context.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The Barga are among the oldest nomadic groups in Mongolian history, with their name derived from their ancestor, Barga Daibater. Historically, the Barga Mongols experienced multiple cycles of aggregation and dispersal. Through these migratory movements, they settled across regions to the east and south of Lake Baikal. By the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty, one segment of the Barga population grazed in the expansive Butaha region east of the Greater Khingan Mountains, while another became subordinate tribes of the Khalkha Mongols (present-day Mongolia). Throughout this long historical process, the social life, economic structure, and cultural traditions of the Barga underwent continuous transformation. Folk songs, as a vital component of the Barga's daily life and spiritual culture, developed along unique trajectories in tandem with these societal changes.

Barga short-tune folk songs represent an essential manifestation of this ethnic cultural heritage. The term "short-tune" refers to songs characterized by concise melodies, regular rhythms, and structured forms. For the Barga people, short-tune folk songs are interwoven with daily life, inseparable and naturally generated. Many compositions are improvisational, inspired by immediate surroundings, drawing content from daily life and the natural environment, while expressing both individual emotions and collective consciousness. In contrast to long-tune folk songs, short-tune songs are lyric-centered, allowing spontaneous composition, and they do not employ elaborate ornamental vocal techniques. Instead, their artistic expression is shaped by performance context, content, and functional purpose, reflecting the accumulated life experiences and traditional cultural knowledge of the Barga people over generations.

1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to systematically trace the developmental trajectory of Barga short-tune folk songs and to explore the influence of tribal migration and social change on their content and form. It seeks to reveal the social functions and historical value of these songs as carriers of ethnic culture. Through a detailed analysis of song content, the research provides a deeper understanding of Barga social structure, lifestyle, and cultural psychology, offering a novel interdisciplinary perspective for studies in ethnomusicology and ethnic history. Furthermore, this research contributes to the documentation and preservation of Barga short-tune folk songs as an intangible cultural heritage, promoting the transmission of ethnic culture and the construction of social identity.

1.3. Current Research Status

Existing studies on Barga folk songs have primarily focused on the collection, compilation, and description of their musical characteristics. For instance, scholars such as Aribuden have documented the number and thematic types of Barga short-tune songs through folk song anthologies, while Ulanje has provided an overview of the history of Mongolian music. However, systematic research on the development of these songs in relation to tribal migration and socio-historical changes remains limited. In particular, analyses that link historical periods with the themes and social functions of folk songs are still insufficient. As a result, the value of Barga short-tune folk songs as carriers of historical and cultural heritage has yet to be fully realized.

1.4. Research Methods and Innovations

This study primarily employs literature analysis and historical data compilation to examine the development of Barga short-tune folk songs. The research divides the songs into historical periods and, through detailed lyrical content analysis, explores the influence of migration and social change on the themes, subjects, and functions of these songs. The innovations of this study are threefold:

1). It closely integrates historical migration patterns with the content of folk songs, systematically delineating three

historical stages in the development of Barga folk songs;

2). It emphasizes the social functions and cultural-psychological significance of the songs, rather than focusing solely on melody or musical form;

3). It provides an interdisciplinary perspective by combining approaches from ethnomusicology and ethnic history, offering a theoretical basis for both the preservation and scholarly study of Barga folk songs.

2. Historical Period Analysis of Folk Songs

2.1. Forest Hunting Period

The ancestors of the Barga people spent long periods in the Barga Jin River basin to the east of Lake Baikal, creating short-tune folk songs that vividly reflected the characteristics of forest hunting. The style of short-tune songs during the forest hunting period is rustic and simple, featuring concise melodies, brisk rhythms, and compact structures, with a straightforward and unadorned character. During this period, the primary themes of short-tune songs were hunting songs and shamanic ritual music. Although these primitive short-tune songs underwent numerous transformations over the long course of transmission and through various stages of social development, traces of their original musical style remain discernible.

举例：小白兔

For example, in the song “Little White Rabbit”, the migratory activities of Barga ancestors were particularly notable. Their gaze shifted from the clear waters and skies of Lake Baikal toward the vast expanses of the Greater Khingan Mountains to the east. This process marked the gradual transition into a new lifestyle of grassland pastoralism. During this extended migratory journey, the ancestors began to adapt to the open grassland environment and to enjoy its abundant natural resources. Nevertheless, they could not entirely shed the deep-seated cultural heritage of the forest hunting period. At this time, hunting remained central to their subsistence, and the music culture inherited from the forest hunting era continued to shine vividly in their daily lives.

The Barga ancestors of this period experienced the opportunities presented by the grasslands while simultaneously preserving the essence of their traditional culture. Even as they embraced the nomadic lifestyle, the simplicity and natural connection characteristic of their forest hunting heritage continued to illuminate their lives.

2.2. Grassland Pastoral Period

By the late 9th century CE, the clan-based tribal era had developed into the feudal pastoral period. Around the turn of the 12th to 13th centuries, Genghis Khan unified the Mongolian tribes and established the Mongol Empire. During this period, the Barga Mongols experienced a transition from primitive hunting-based subsistence to pastoral livestock production, gradually evolving from a hunting society into a fully pastoral nomadic society. With this transformation, the development of musical art also entered a new stage, moving from the forest hunting musical culture to the grassland pastoral musical culture.

举例：迁徙

For example, in the song “Migration”, the relationship between the Barga people and nature was no longer confrontational. Instead, it was characterized by mutual dependence with the horses, cattle, and sheep of the grasslands, reflecting hopes for favorable weather and thriving livestock. Short-tune folk songs of this period no longer carried the austere and heroic tones of hunting songs; rather, they featured cheerful and melodious expressions. These songs are distinguished by their well-structured form, robust tonal qualities, and clear, powerful rhythms.

2.3. Semi-Agricultural and Semi-Pastoral Period

The semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral period represents the most active and “realistic” stage in the development of Barga short-tune folk songs. During this period, the social structure underwent profound changes: wars were frequent, conscription intensified, land policies shifted, banditry increased, and migration became more widespread. In addition, natural disasters and political turmoil compounded these challenges, placing the social psyche of the Barga region under sustained tension. The rhythms of pastoral life were disrupted by war and migration, and traditional livestock practices faced significant challenges. In this historical context, short-tune folk songs—due to their concise structure, creative flexibility, and rapid dissemination—became the most immediate and accessible medium for ordinary herders to express emotions and record historical events.

举例：可怜的士兵

For example, in the song “Poor Soldiers”, the short-tune folk songs of this period exhibit distinctive characteristics such as realism, protest, narrative quality, and singability. Thematically, these songs can generally be categorized into three types: short-tune songs about war, those reflecting migration and flight, and those depicting labor and daily life. These works are not only significant in a musicological sense but also serve as important historical documents for studying social change and folk narratives in the Barga region.

3. The Influence of Migration on the Content and Function of Barga Short-Tune Folk Songs

The Barga tribes have historically experienced multiple migrations, moving from the forest hunting regions east of Lake Baikal to the Greater Khingan Mountains and the Hulunbuir grasslands, and later to the semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral marginal areas. These migratory movements not only transformed the tribes’ economic life and social structure but also profoundly influenced the content and social functions of their folk songs. By examining the themes and functions of Barga short-tune folk songs across different historical periods, it becomes evident that migration played a significant role in shaping the evolution of these songs.

3.1. Historical Evolution of Folk Song Themes

3.1.1. Forest Hunting Period

During the forest hunting stage of primitive Barga society, the content of folk songs was intricately intertwined with the community’s subsistence practices, cosmological beliefs, and socio-cultural norms. Folk songs of this period primarily reflected hunting activities, illustrating not only the practical aspects of procuring food but also celebrating the valor, skill, and strategic intelligence of hunters. Such songs functioned as both mnemonic devices and pedagogical tools, facilitating the transmission of crucial survival techniques across generations, including tracking, ambushing, and understanding the behavior of various animal species.

The economic foundation of the tribe during this period was based on hunting and gathering, which dictated both the thematic focus and performative contexts of these songs. Observations of natural landscapes—forests, rivers, and seasonal cycles—were meticulously encoded in the lyrics, revealing a profound ecological awareness and an empirical understanding of the environment. These songs often contained ritualistic elements, including invocations to natural deities, prayers for successful hunts, and expressions of gratitude toward the spirits believed to govern the natural world. This intertwining of pragmatic knowledge and spiritual practice underscores the integrative role of folk music in mediating between human needs and environmental realities.

Melodically, Barga songs from this period tended to be concise, repetitive, and highly narrative, optimized for oral transmission within small, mobile communities. Their structure facilitated memorability and communal participation, serving as a mechanism for reinforcing social cohesion and collective identity. From an anthropological perspective, these folk songs constitute an invaluable archive of early human cognitive strategies, environmental adaptation, and cultural expression, offering insights into how primitive societies codified experience and knowledge through performative arts.

3.1.2. Grassland Pastoral Period

With the advent of animal husbandry and the gradual establishment of a pastoral nomadic lifestyle, the thematic scope of Barga folk songs underwent a significant transformation, reflecting both economic changes and evolving social structures. During the grassland pastoral period, folk songs increasingly focused on pastoral production processes, heroic exploits, and inter-tribal conflicts, serving as both historical records and instruments of social education. Songs documented daily pastoral activities such as herding, milking, seasonal migration, and the management of livestock, thereby functioning as practical guides and repositories of communal knowledge crucial to the survival and prosperity of nomadic communities.

Beyond their utilitarian function, these songs celebrated the valor and martial prowess of tribal warriors, emphasizing themes of honor, courage, and loyalty to the tribe. Such content reflects the heightened importance of hierarchical social roles, collective responsibility, and intergenerational transmission of cultural values in pastoral societies. In this context, folk songs became a medium through which communal identity was reinforced, societal norms were communicated, and individual contributions to the tribe were valorized.

Musically, the melodies and rhythms of grassland pastoral songs evolved to become more dynamic and performative, often accompanying horseback dances, seasonal festivals, or ritual ceremonies. The integration of music with movement and communal performance illustrates the inseparable relationship between cultural expression, production activities, and daily life in nomadic pastoral settings. From an ethnomusicological perspective, these songs exemplify how musical forms adapt to and reflect changes in economic practices, social organization, and environmental contexts, providing a rich lens through which to study the interplay of culture, economy, and identity in historical pastoral societies.

3.1.3. Semi-Agricultural and Semi-Pastoral Period

During the semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral stage, the thematic scope of Barga folk songs expanded significantly, reflecting the complex socio-economic transformations, periods of social turmoil, wartime experiences, migratory lifestyles, and cross-regional cultural interactions characteristic of this era. Unlike earlier periods, where songs primarily centered on subsistence and heroic exploits, folk songs during this stage increasingly served as repositories of collective memory, documenting historical events, migratory patterns, and inter-ethnic contacts. In this context, the content of songs encompassed resilience in adversity, intelligence and strategic acumen in conflict, courage in the face of uncertainty, and a profound attachment to ancestral lands, thereby reflecting both survival wisdom and the consolidation of cultural identity in dynamic social environments.

The performative dimensions of these songs also became more varied and sophisticated. While oral transmission remained central, the emergence of staged performances, ceremonial enactments, and regional adaptations demonstrated not only the diversification of expressive forms but also the integration of multiple cultural influences brought about by migration and trade. Such developments indicate the responsiveness of folk music to socio-political and economic changes, illustrating how musical expression can act as a living archive of communal experience and identity.

From an anthropological and ethnomusicological perspective, the evolution of Barga folk songs during this semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral period reveals several key dynamics: first, the correlation between socio-economic transformations and thematic diversification; second, the role of folk songs in preserving historical memory and transmitting ethnic values; and third, the mechanisms through which musical culture adapts to environmental, social, and inter-cultural pressures while maintaining continuity with traditional practices. Collectively, these songs provide a holistic lens for understanding the intersection of historical consciousness, social cognition, and spiritual values, embodying a resilient and adaptive cultural heritage that bridges past experiences with ongoing community identity formation.

3.2. Evolution of the Social Functions of Folk Songs

3.2.1. Recording History and Migration Experiences

During periods of migration, Barga folk songs served as vital carriers of tribal history and migratory experiences. The lyrics vividly depict daily life events, wartime experiences, and migratory routes, reflecting not only the subsistence strategies and social transformations of the tribe but also preserving collective memory of geographical changes, natural environments, and significant historical events.Through oral transmission, these folk songs functioned as a means of disseminating historical information, providing subsequent generations with vivid materials to understand the history and cultural context of the Barga people.

3.2.2. Maintaining Tribal Identity and Cultural Memory

During periods of migration and social mobility, Barga folk songs played a crucial role in reinforcing ethnic identity and transmitting shared cultural memory. Through collective singing and festive performances, these songs not only allowed tribe members to share common historical experiences but also strengthened social cohesion and cultural recognition. Particularly in contexts of cross-regional migration or multi-ethnic contact, folk songs became an important means of maintaining internal tribal unity and

conveying core values.

3.2.3. Expressing Emotions, Education, and Moral Instruction

Barga folk songs did not merely record external events; they also carried personal emotional expression, encompassing joy, sorrow, love, and attachment to one's homeland. Moreover, these songs served educational functions, transmitting practical life knowledge, reinforcing social norms, and instilling moral values through narrative and allegory. For example, songs often praised bravery, loyalty, intelligence, or diligence, guiding the behavior and value orientation of younger generations. This educational and moral function made folk songs a vital medium for cultural continuity and the transmission of communal spirit.

In summary, the social functions of Barga folk songs evolved in tandem with migration and changes in modes of production. Their role extended beyond mere entertainment and emotional expression to encompass historical documentation, the construction of cultural identity, and the reinforcement of social norms, demonstrating the profound influence of folk songs on the social life of the Barga people across different historical periods. (Table.1)

Table 1. The Barga folk songs

Historical Period	Folk Song Themes	Social Functions	Influence of Migration
Forest Hunting Period	Hunting activities, nature worship, daily life experiences	Transmission of survival skills, recording collective experiences, cultural identity preservation	Migration facilitated adaptation to new environments while preserving original forest hunting cultural elements
Grassland Pastoral Period	Pastoral production, heroic deeds, tribal warfare	Reinforcement of heroism, social role awareness, collective cohesion; integration with communal celebrations and dances	Migration enabled settlement on open grasslands, fostering interdependence with livestock and shaping new pastoral cultural expressions
Semi-Agricultural and Semi-Pastoral Period	Social upheaval, war experiences, migration life, cross-regional cultural exchange	Reinforcement of heroism, social role awareness, collective cohesion; integration with communal celebrations and dances	Migration intensified social interactions, disrupted traditional livelihoods, and created conditions for folk songs to record history and adapt to new cultural contexts

4. Conclusion

Barga short-tune folk songs have undergone multiple transformations and evolutions throughout history, with their development closely intertwined with tribal migration and social change. During the forest hunting period, the songs primarily focused on hunting, daily life, and nature worship, reflecting the culture of primitive hunting and the survival experiences of the tribe, while simultaneously educating younger generations, expressing emotions, and reinforcing tribal identity.

In the grassland pastoral period, the thematic scope expanded to include pastoral production, heroic figures, and stories of warfare. Folk songs not only documented migratory and pastoral experiences but also strengthened cultural memory and social cohesion, serving as vehicles for historical recollection, emotional expression, and moral instruction.

During the semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral period (modern times), the themes further diversified to encompass warfare, social upheaval, and cross-regional migration experiences. These songs reflected historical events, the attitudes and emotional experiences of the people, while also preserving history, maintaining ethnic identity, and transmitting moral norms. They became a vital embodiment of ethnic spirit.

Overall, the thematic evolution of Barga folk songs progressed from hunting to pastoralism, warfare, and social events. Their social functions expanded from simple records of daily life to carrying cultural memory, reinforcing social identity, and providing moral and educational guidance. This evolution mirrors the historical transformations of Barga society and demonstrates the resilience, cohesion, and cultural vitality of the Barga people. As such, these folk songs provide invaluable historical and cultural materials for research in ethnomusicology and ethnic history.

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