The Call of Chaoer

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Abstract: Chaoer is a traditional Mongolian bowed string instrument. But with the changes in society, it is fading out of the life of the people. And the plaintive, simple and powerful melody is in danger of disappearing with the chaoer. Chaoer and its music has now become one of the most important issues in Mongolian folk music. What is restricting its development and leading to its decline and threatening to bring about its extinction? This paper will lay out the reasons for its decline in the hope that we can achieve the goal of protecting and passing along the heritage of this traditional Mongolian bowed string instrument.

Key words: chaoer; bowed string instrument; Mongolian people; cultural protection

I . The definition of chaoer

"Chaoer" is a Mongolian term meaning "two or more than two voices sounding at the same time". The definition of chaoer has both broad and narrow meanings. In its broad sense, the term refers to multi-part and sustained bass instruments as well as throat singing.

Throat singing has two forms: “horin chaoer” throat singing, also called “hoomei,” is performed by one person; and “chao lin duo,” also called “chaoer chorus,” is one person singing, accompanied by many people with sustained bass. Horin choer and chao lin duo are “vocal chaoer” forms.

Instrumental chaoer has three forms, which include the use of wind instruments, plucked chaoer instruments and bowstring chaoer instruments. Wind music chaoer is called “maodun chaoer” (from the Mongolian term for wood) or is also called “hujia.” Plucked chaoer music is popular in the Altai Mountain area, in the Tuerhute area, and among the Kalmyk Mongols, for example. Bowstring chaoer, also called “wuta shun chaoer” is mainly represented in the Horqin region [surrounding Tongliao] where people always call it simply “chaoer.” In this narrow sense, the word refers to the Horqin bowstring chaoer.

In the 1940s, the Horqin bowstring chaoer (here referred to simply as “chaoer”) began to decline to the point that its further existence was endangered. Very few people were able to play the instrument. Beginning around 1990, some steps were taken towards preservation. The repertoire and performance techniques of the chaoer master Selaxi were collected. [1] Some people believe that the chaoer was the ancestor of the new Mongolian
We are familiar with morin khuur as one of the best known examples of the Mongolian stringed instruments. However, the chaoer has been gradually forgotten. In the *Annals for Chinese Minority Music* published in 1986, the chaoer was given the following definition: “Chaoer, a Mongolian bowed instrument, also known as sinagan chaoer (meaning instrument with a trapezoidal sound box) was popular in the Xing'an area, the Zhelimu area (Tongliao), and in Zhaowuda in the eastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region as well as the northwest, including the areas of Bayannur, Alashan, etc. Chaoer was used in earlier times by solo performers who played and sang. It was the main musical accompaniment for the stories of heroes, for folk tales and for long narrative poems, which were performed by folk artists.” In addition to this source’s description of the chaoer’s shape, there were other shapes for the body of the instruments, such as equilateral hexagons, polygons, etc. However, more recently, the sound boxes have been mainly inverted trapezoids. A brief description of the morphology and structure of the chaoer shows the main common characteristics of morin khuur and chaoer; they are bowed string instruments with bows and strings made of horsehair. Perhaps for this reason, people regard the morin khuur as "the evolutionary product" of the chaoer, and this perception thus dilutes the focus on the uniqueness of the chaoer.

Chaoer’s tone is bleak, dynamic, deep, rich and full of soft characteristics, and this has a unique ability to reach the emotions of the listeners. We should not accept as inevitable that such an ancient and spiritual musical instrument will disappear in our time. So we must undertake measures to preserve it and save it from extinction.

II. The reasons for the decline of chaoer

People may wonder how the chaoer can be at the edge of extinction. It has been loved by the Mongolian people and was an integral part of their lives. Then why does it find itself in this decline today? If we look at the problems and compare the situation of the chaoer in different periods, we can find the following main reasons for the decline:

1. Transformation of production and lifestyle.

Originally, the Mongolian people lived a nomadic life following the richness of the grasslands; wherever the grass was best, that would be their next residence. The chaoer acted as a "seasoning" in their daily life at that time. Most of them were good at singing and dancing. In their grand weddings, sacrifices and other large ceremonies, chaoer musicians would be invited to play the Mongolian folk songs. Likewise, when smallpox,
measles and other pestilences spread on the grasslands, Mongolian nomads would invite "mang gu si" artists to play the chaoer and sing the epics about how ancient heroes defeated monsters. (In the Mongolian language, “mang gu si” referred originally to a kind of devil, but then came to refer to those who were able to tell stories of the “mang gu si.”) It was said that the voice of the chaoer could scare away evil spirits and protect children. Played by pastoral people grazing their herds, chaoer was the product of the grasslands and the nomadic life. But now, people depend on different natural resources and adopt different lifestyles. They adopt the corresponding modes to develop and to create music [2].

With the changing times, the Horqin grasslands have repeatedly suffered desertification other changes. As a result, the nomadic lifestyle has been replaced by farming and only partial nomadism, and the aesthetic ideas of the people have changed. Chaoer, the traditional instrument, with its raspy, deep and desolate tone and its nomadic folk musicians no longer reaches the same level of appreciation among the people. Gradually, its supreme position has been replaced by the morin khuur with its brighter tone. In this way, during the 40 years before the 1990s, it almost completely disappeared. It would be tragic if this important member of the array of traditional Mongolian musical instruments were allowed to disappear.

2. The influence of outside or foreign cultures.

So-called foreign culture refers to a culture beyond the local Mongolian nationality culture. Nationality culture is formed within specific historical periods with the specific characteristics of an ethnic culture. As the traditional Mongolian artistic culture has collided with outside cultural influences, its heritage has also been modified by those influences. Instruments and traditions from Western and other outside cultures have styles and sounds which are quite different from the chaoer. The chaoer has unique performance techniques and its musical sounds and melodies encompass not only Mongolian history and culture, but can also reflect aesthetic ideas of the Mongolian nationality and its ethnic musical style.

3. Incorrect understanding of innovation.

At the mention of "innovation", many people will think of giving up or changing former things to make way for new things. In fact, innovation can also mean taking a new perspective and broadening horizons to absorb outside culture and influences while also carrying forward the spirit of the national culture. Ethnic Mongolian culture is advancing with the times and is constantly innovating, but ethnic musical instruments and artistry should also be part of the effort to preserve the heritage of the nationality and its important cultural connotations. Chaoer should also be preserved in order to help preserve the ethnic cultural traditions of Mongolian music.
III. Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, protection and promotion of the cultural heritage represented by the chaoer is still very weak. More attention needs to be paid by scholars and artists to developing and protecting the heritage of the chaoer. After long neglect, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region began to pay attention. The Region’s government opened a training class and invited Prof. Bu Lin to teach and to recruit students, providing a good platform for focus on the chaoer heritage. The author of this article also learned from this effort. But efforts to preserve this heritage should not slacken. The author hopes that more people will be encouraged to participate in and to lend their support to the effort to appreciate this heritage.

Note and bibliography

[1] Selaxi (1887-1968), master of the chaoer, who was born in the Horqin region, Tongliao city, Inner Mongolia, made tremendous contributions to the cultural heritage of the chaoer.