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New Representations of the 'Golden Lineage'

The Mongolian Folk Rock of Altan Urag

Over the past two decades, since the democratic revolution of 1990, Mongolia has experienced rapid development, driven primarily by foreign investment in large mines like Oyu Tolgoi and Tavan Tolgoi. In particular, the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, has changed dramatically: new apartment blocks seem to sprout from the ground almost sporadically; outdated and inadequate roads are constantly jammed full of Land Cruisers; and new shops, stores, and restaurants can be found everywhere. But it is not only the physical face of Mongolia that is changing: a Mongolian-socialist culture and worldview has given way to a Mongolian-global culture as "global culture" from America, Germany, Korea, Japan, Russia and China increasingly penetrates Mongolia's political borders. Even in the more remote areas of Mongolia, like the northernmost aimag, or province, of Huvsgul, traditional pastoral lifestyles are changing due to increased exposure to global culture.¹ This rapid physical and social change combined with the democratic freedom for self-expression has prompted Mongolians to recreate their identities as individuals and as a nation.

One way they have done this is to create a strong sense of national identity that is deeply rooted in Mongolian history and culture, including the conquests of Chinggis Khan in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the semi-nomadic and pastoral lifestyle still practiced by about a third of the Mongolian population, and musical traditions such as hoomii (throat singing or overtone singing), urtyn duu (long song), and those of the morin khuur (horse-head fiddle). Indeed, the significance of Mongolian musical traditions in constructing a national Mongolian identity is evidenced by the presence of such state ensembles as the National Folk and Dance Ensemble and the National Morin Khuur Ensemble, by the substantial collection of Mongolian traditional music records for sale in stores like Hi-Fi Records in Ulaanbaatar, and in the use of hoomii, long song, and morin khuur in various television advertisements and programs.

More interesting however, and more prominent, is the integration of elements of traditional Mongolian music into Western musi-

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cal styles and forms, like pop music. Mongolian pop music videos are broadcast on several television stations devoted to music in homes and restaurants throughout Ulaanbaatar and the countryside, and these Mongolian pop songs often feature melodies and lyrics taken directly from traditional Mongolian bogino duu, or short songs (in contrast to long songs, which have a very different style and structure). This integration of traditional Mongolian musical elements into Western musical forms and styles, which ethnomusicologist Carole Pegg describes as “hybrid Mongol-Western music,”² is not limited to pop musical genres, but also occurs in rock music genres. Bands such as Hurd and Kharanga, which began in the 1990s, first introduced the Western heavy metal and hard rock styles to Mongolia and gained significant popularity.

There are varying degrees of Mongol-ness and Western-ness in “hybrid Mongol-Western” music, however. Bands like Hurd and Kharanga, as well as many contemporary rock outfits like The Lemons and Fire, adopt a straightforward rock instrumentation, sound, and style, but incorporate traditional Mongolian melodies and lyrical themes. Some groups, however, like Khusugtun and Altan Orgil, use traditional Mongolian instruments like the morin khuur, the traditional singing styles of hoomii and long song, and even adorn traditional Mongolian dress during performances. Such instrumentation, sound, and appearance make their music seem more immediately Mongolian, and the Western-ness of the music is apparent in more subtle elements like harmony and musical structure. The result is a musical style that is in some respects traditionally Mongolian and yet distinctly modern, and which deliberately evokes images of a perceived Mongolian traditional heritage.

Perhaps no such hybrid Mongol-Western band is more well-known, more commercially successful, or more influential than the self-proclaimed “Mongolian folk rock” band Altan Urag. Altan Urag, which loosely translates to “Golden Lineage” in reference to the royal ancestral line of Chinggis Khan, is unique among the aforementioned bands for the innovative ways that they blend Western rock sounds and imagery with traditional Mongolian sounds and imagery with the intention of not merely being traditional, but of deliberately recasting tradition. Their masterful mixture of old and new has resulted in the production of seven studio albums, several music videos, participation in two full-length films, participation in several international music festivals, and

appearances on national Mongolian television. They claim, justifiably, to be “one of the pioneers” of the Mongolian folk rock genre into which bands like Khusugtun and Altan Orgil arguably fall.³ Their success and popularity means that they have a prominent role in shaping a modern, post-socialist national Mongolian identity within contemporary Mongolian-global culture, one that looks to Mongolia’s perceived ancient traditions and heritage. This paper will therefore investigate the ways in which Altan Urag combines elements of both traditional Mongolian and Western music and culture in order to recast and recreate Mongolian tradition through sound and image.

There are problems in discussing “traditional” Mongolian music that we must first address before beginning an analysis of Altan Urag’s music. Generally, when we speak of traditional Mongolian music, we are referring to pre-socialist period musical practices. The socialist period, from 1921 – 1990, is generally regarded now as a period of foreign ideological rule and of suppression of Mongolian cultural expression in favor of Russian and Western cultural expression.⁴ Therefore, “real” Mongolian traditions are those which were practiced before this period of ideological rule and socialization.

Unfortunately, the historical connection between the pre-socialist period and the post-socialist period is extremely tenuous, at least with regard to traditional musical practices. Current “traditional” morin khuur repertoire has almost no documented connection to the pre-socialist period, as melodies were not really written down until during the socialist period using Western musical notation.⁵ Morin khuur performance practice, training, and even the instrument itself have been thoroughly modernized and Westernized during the socialist period by state cultural institutions, leaving few traces of performance practice or sound from the pre-socialist period.⁶ The morin khuur was not alone; other Mongolian instruments and singing styles faced similar reclassification, restructuring, and standardization of performance practices.⁷ Thus in many ways what is now called traditional folk music in Mongolia is really the heavily Westernized product of 70 years of socialization and standardization aimed at modernization.

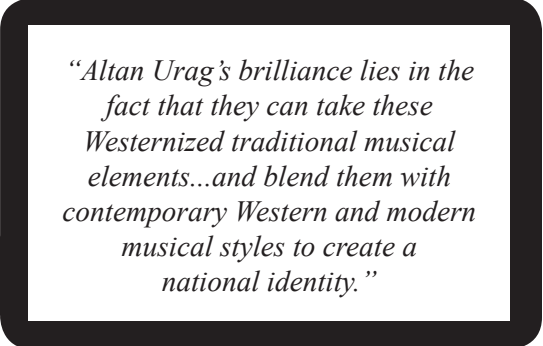
This is significant because it is this kind of traditional Mongolian music that is taught still in the Mongolian Music and Dance College, where Altan Urag was trained. Thus Altan Urag’s traditional music

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is in no way pure or authentic, in the sense of being totally pre-socialist. Indeed, these facts about Mongolian traditional music call into question the distinction between traditional and modern/Western that we have used thus far in this paper. It would seem that the “‘traditional’ elements of Mongolian music are themselves a mixture of all kind of influences, from pre-socialist to socialist to post-socialist.”⁸

Nevertheless, even if the line between traditional and Western is blurred or altogether nonexistent, the fact remains that Mongolians continue to practice these “traditional” musical forms with an eye to the past. This past is not necessarily authentic; but then again that is not the point. The real goal in performing “traditional” music is to evoke images of a perceived past with practices that are tied, however loosely, to that past. In this way one can say that the relevant sense of tradition here is as something imagined or created by a process that “utilizes selection and invention of materials.”⁹

Altan Urag has been “selecting” elements of this socialized tradition, created initially to support a national socialist identity, and appropriating them for the creation of a national Mongolian identity. That Altan Urag connects Mongolian traditional music to ideas of nationality and Mongolian-ness is undeniable — see song titles like “Mother Mongolia,” “Great Mongolia,” “Temuujin,” and “Blue Mark.” In their music, Altan Urag appropriates elements of socialized traditional Mongolian music in order to point to a romanticized history and identity that is distinctly non-socialist and distinctly Mongolian. However, they do not attempt to be “purely” traditional or to create a national identity that excludes other nations or influence. Altan Urag’s brilliance lies in the



“Altan Urag’s brilliance lies in the fact that they can take these Westernized traditional musical elements...and blend them with contemporary Western and modern musical styles to create a national identity.”

fact that they can take these Westernized traditional musical elements, acknowledging their Westernization as a distinct part of Mongolia’s own history, and blend them with contemporary Western and modern musi-

cal styles to create a national identity that looks to the nation's proud past and places it in the context of a changing and globalizing Mongolia. This is much like Marsh's idea of "cosmopolitan nationalism" in his discussion of late-socialist period musicians who, though concerned for the nation's modernization and integration into the international arena, sought to retain a national identity that would distinguish it from other cosmopolitan nations.¹⁰ This then is how we should understand Altan Urag's innovative fusion of traditional and Western musical elements: as the creation of a national Mongolian identity that is rooted in its own past and yet also embraces exchange and interaction in an increasingly connected world — as new representations of the "Golden Lineage" for a new Mongolia.

Before discussing the music of Altan Urag, then, a brief history and profile of the band will prove helpful. Altan Urag was formed in 2002 by seven recent graduates of the Mongolian Music and Dance College. These founding members have been and continue to be the lineup of Altan Urag. They are B. Erdenebat, band leader and yochin player (Mongolian hammered dulcimer); B. Burentugs, morin khuur player and hoomii singer; B. Bolortungalag, drummer and percussionist; M. Chimedtogtokh, throat singer and bishguur player (Mongolian horn, similar to an oboe in sound); H. Erdenetsetseg, long song and short song singer; Ts. Gangaa, ikh khuur player (great fiddle, like a bass morin khuur); and P. Oyunbileg, morin khuur player and throat singer. From the beginning, Altan Urag was the livelihood and sole career for all of its members. This contrasts other bands like Khusugtun or Arga Bileg, whose members are all typically also members of either the National Song and Dance Ensemble or the State Morin Khuur Ensemble.

For two years, Altan Urag performed a more straightforwardly "traditional" repertoire. In 2004, the band independently recorded and released its first album *Foal's Been Born*. This album, deemed the "official beginning" of Altan Urag by band leader B. Erdenebat (a.k.a. "Erka"), marked the band's first experiments with the new genre of "Mongolian folk rock."¹¹ Two years later, Altan Urag was able to sign a contract with the local record label Sonor Records, the largest and most experienced label in Ulaanbaatar. Under this new contract they recorded and produced *Made in Altan Urag*, which has since become their most popular and well-known album. Altan Urag pushed its new genre of

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“folk rock” on *Made in Altan Urag* with bold and energetic tracks like “Mother Mongolia” and “Blue Mark,” which would eventually become crowd favorites and live performance staples. The time around *Made in Altan Urag* marks a significant point in the band’s development of its sound and image. Just before the recording of this album, Altan Urag acquired two new and original morin khuurs: instead of horse heads, these new black fiddles were adorned with the head of the Alien monster from the famous Western sci-fi horror movie “Alien.” Additionally, the band modified one of their morin khuurs and the yochin so as to become “electric” instruments, capable of producing a distorted sound similar to an electric guitar, the instrument so emblematic of the rock music style.

At the end of 2007, Altan Urag signed a contract with Khan Bank, Mongolia’s largest banking corporation, worth approximately 500 million MNT (very roughly 400 thousand USD). This sponsorship provided Altan Urag the means to afford a private rehearsal space, funds for recording and producing new albums, and the equivalent of a year’s salary for each band member to allow them to continue to focus exclusively on writing and performing music. From 2008 through 2010, Altan Urag independently recorded and produced no less than five albums — *Blood*, *Hypnotism*, *Once Upon a Time in Mongolia*, *Mongol*, and *Nation* — and continued to perform both locally and at international music festivals in Japan, China, and even the United States.¹²

Driving all of this production and live performance is Altan Urag’s goal, as stated on their official website, to “promote Mongolian culture to the world and to introduce traditional music to the young people of their country.” The band also has the desire to create “something new,” to make music that has not been heard before.¹³ To accomplish both of these goals, Altan Urag sought to blend the traditional Mongolian music that they were all taught in college with the Western musical style of hard rock that they, and the younger generation of urban Mongolians, were familiar with. With this in mind, we will now begin our analysis of Altan Urag’s music and presentation in various media, examining in detail how traditional Mongolian and Western elements are mixed in the contemporary Mongolian socio-historical context.

The following are transcribed excerpts from two songs from the album *Made in Altan Urag*: “Blue Mark” and “Mother Mongolia.” These songs were chosen because they are highly representative of Al-

tan Urag’s “folk rock” style and because they are two of Altan Urag’s most popular songs. Altan Urag plays these two songs at every one of its local performances, and they are even featured in the movies “Mongol” and “Khadak” respectively. The transcriptions are taken from the album versions of these songs (there are slight variations in live performance). These transcriptions are simplified abstractions and do not account for every sonic detail, but are sufficient for the present purposes of this paper.

Let us first consider the song “Blue Mark.” Before delving into melodic details, we can note from the outset that this song is performed on traditional instruments (*morin khuur*, *ikh khuur*, *yochin*, *bishguur*) without the use of any electronic distortion. The sound may then be described as being very traditional, except for the use of the rock drum set. This is a big exception, of course; for any listener familiar with Western rock, pop, or jazz (which certainly includes younger urban Mongolians), the sound of the drum set will immediately evoke associations with these genres. Thus, in terms of instrumentation and sound, we can already see a combination of “folk” with “rock.”

We can further explore this by examining the melodic, rhythmic, and structural characteristics of “Blue Mark.” The following figure is the *yochin* part for the chorus, which also introduces the song:



After one iteration of this figure introduces the song, the chorus melody is introduced on the *bishguur*:



This melody coincides with the *yochin* figure above in terms of length — each is repeated twice in order to form one 8-bar phrase grouping. This melodic line is introduced on the *bishguur*, but on subsequent performances of the chorus the line is sung instead with the *bishguur* accompanying at the end of the song.

From these two figures we can see that the chorus is set in the key of F minor. However, notice that while the *yochin* part has a steady presence of the note F, creating a strong grounding in the tonic

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(the “home” note or first note in the F minor scale), the chorus melody strongly emphasizes C, the dominant (the fifth note of the F minor scale). Thus there is a steady sense of the open fifth (F – C) in the chorus which is most noticeable in the final bar of the figures above, where the melody ends on C and the yochin plays the notes F and C. The open fifth is a prominent interval in rock music, and its presence here is part of this song’s rock sound.

As well, we can see that only six of the seven notes of the F minor scale are used in these figures, namely [F, Ab, Bb, C, Db, Eb]. This collection of pitches can be viewed as a possible F pentatonic scale, [F, Ab, Bb, C, Eb] with the addition of the pitch Db, the minor sixth in the F minor scale. This possible F pentatonic scale, [F, Ab, Bb, C, Eb] is suggested in the chorus melody by the steady presence of C, the dominant, in combination with the strong motion towards and around C by notes in this pentatonic scale — motions which are strongly reminiscent of the melodic phrasing in many traditional Mongolian short songs (which always use pentatonic scales). The additional pitch, Db, can be seen as a passing note in the descent from Eb to C, but its close proximity to C (one half-step away) and placement in the melody are very reminiscent of its use in Western melodic phrasing. Thus we can see hints of the combination of traditional and Western in the melodic phrasing and choice of pitch collection as well.

Let us now briefly examine the verse melody of “Blue Mark”:



Notice here that this figure, as I have transcribed it, is repeated six times. This does not add up to one 8-bar phrase grouping, but instead 12 bars, or 1.5 8-bar phrase groupings. This shall be remarked upon shortly.

This verse melody is sung by P. Oyunbileg (a.k.a. “Oyunaa”) in a style of hoomii and is also played by the yochin and the morin khuur. There is a strong, almost overwhelming, presence of C in this melody, even more so than in the chorus melody. In fact, there is only one F in this entire two-bar figure. In the verse sections then the F minor tonality is seriously challenged, with C sounding more like an alternative tonic. The surrounding pitches of Bb and Db which embellish and emphasize the C, enhance this tonal ambiguity. Additionally, the use of pitches a

whole step below and a half step above the perceived tonic is a common melodic structure in “harder” styles of rock, especially metal. This association is reinforced by Oyunaa’s hoomii vocal style, which is like a declamatory growl, similar in sound to the growling vocal style found in death metal. This vocal style is still, of course, a type of traditional hoomii.

Though these melodic elements are all present in the song, the greatest elements of the rock style are found in its rhythm and structure. The following is a structural outline of “Blue Mark,” with type of section, primary instrumentation, duration in terms of number of 8-bar phrase groups (abbreviated as “pgs”), and temporal location in the track:

Section Type	Instrumentation	PG Length	Time
Intro [Chorus]	yochim, bishguur	2.0 pgs	0:00 – 0:30
Verse 1	hoomii verse x3	1.5 pgs	0:30 – 0:52
Chorus	singing x1	1.0 pg	0:52 – 1:06
Verse 2	hoomii verse x3	1.5 pgs	1:06 – 1:28
Chorus	singing x1	1.0 pg	1:28 – 1:42
Break	instr. break	1.0 pg	1:42 – 1:56
Solo [Chorus]	bishguur	2.0 pgs	1:56 – 2:25
Verse 3	hoomii verse x3	1.5 pgs	2:25 – 2:46
Chorus	singing, bishguur	2.0 pgs	2:46 – end

As we can see, the track can be divided into two main musical sections of verse and chorus. The terms “verse” and “chorus” were chosen because these sections function as verses and choruses in typical rock-pop fashion: during the verses Oyunaa sings all of the lyrics of the song, while chorus sections follow verse sections with a catchy melody. There is even a break section, with rhythmic and melodic material not found elsewhere in the song, which leads directly into a solo section where the bishguur improvises a melodic line over the chorus melody in the yochin and morin khuur, much like a standard guitar solo section in rock music. Furthermore, these sections are divided into phrase groups 8 bars in length, a typical phrase grouping length in rock, pop, and blues. The exceptions are the verse sections, which are instead 12 bars in length (or 1.5 phrase groups). This is a common phrase group length in blues

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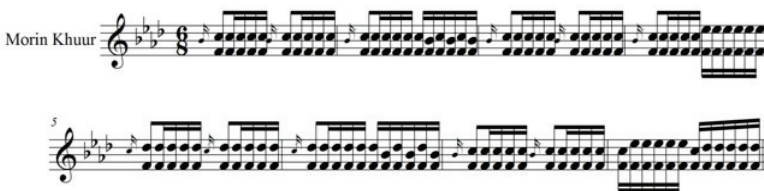
as well (“Twelve-bar blues”), but its mix with 8-bar phrase groupings is unusual. It is also interesting to note that during these verse sections, 8-bar structures are marked in the music with a crash cymbal hit in the drum set and the entrance of some minor electronic, ambient sound effects.

Finally, perhaps the most sonically obvious characteristic of rock music present in “Blue Mark” is the steady and driving rhythmic pulse. This can be seen in the yochin chorus figure, which consists entirely of steady eighth notes. It is most apparent in the drums, however (not transcribed). Throughout the song, except for the Break section, the drums provide a steady beat in 4/4 time, with a bass kick on beats 1 and 3 and snare hits on 2 and 4 of each measure. This pattern is often called a “backbeat,” and is a staple of rock music. As soon as the drums give four beats on the hi-hat to introduce the song and subsequently launch into the backbeat pattern, any listener at all familiar with Western rock and pop musical styles is likely to identify this song as a kind of rock song.

Let us now just briefly examine excerpts from the song “Mother Mongolia,” which Erka claimed was one of the band’s favorite songs to play because it contains “many different rhythmic and melodic styles.”¹⁴ The following is the main yochin part throughout the song:



As in “Blue Mark,” we see a definite key of F minor and an 8-bar phrase grouping. After one repetition of this figure, one morin khuur enters playing the following:



As in “Blue Mark,” there is a strong pulse in this song as the morin khuur duplicates the yochin’s driving rhythmic pattern. Furthermore, the morin khuur here plays many open fifths, just as a guitar would play many open fifths in rock music. The morin khuur here also suggests a harmonic structure, creating a movement from the minor tonic (F minor) in bars 1 – 4 to the minor subdominant (Bb minor) in bars 5 – 6 and then back to tonic in bars 7 – 8. This harmonic structure is confirmed when the solo morin khuur enters after another 8-bar phrase playing the following:



The Bb at the beginning of the fifth bar confirms the harmonic movement to Bb minor, and the C at the beginning of the seventh bar the move back to F minor. This harmonic structure is something we did not see so clearly in “Blue Mark,” and is a distinctly Western musical element. Also, notice that the morin khuur’s solo melody strongly emphasizes the pitch of C with frequent ascending motions from Bb below and with descending motions from Db above — just as in the chorus melody of “Blue Mark.” This melody also contains the same characteristics of traditional pentatonic pitch collections and Western minor sixth emphasis that was discussed regarding “Blue Mark.”

While “Mother Mongolia” and “Blue Mark” have many melodic and rhythmic similarities, there are interesting differences in terms of overall structure. The following is a structural outline of “Mother Mongolia”:

Section Type	Instrumentation	PG Length	Time
Intro	yochin, morin khuur	2.0 pgs	0:00 – 0:46
Melody 1a	solo morin khuur	2.0 pgs	0:46 – 1:09
Melody 1b	solo mk + bishguur	2.0 pgs	1:09 – 1:31
Break	yochin, long song	free time	1:31 – 2:28
Bridge [2a]	hoomii	2.0 pgs	2:28 – 2:51
Melody 2b	bishguur	2.0 pgs	2:51 – end

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Unlike “Blue Mark,” “Mother Mongolia” cannot be said to have a verse-chorus structure, as there is no strophic text or lyrics. Instead, I have labeled the sections by what type of melody is present. Sections “Melody 1a” and “Melody 1b” have the same melody present, but I have distinguished them by the instruments performing that melody. Sections “Bridge [2a]” and “Melody 2b” contain the same melody, which is different from that of the previous sections (and which is not transcribed). Nevertheless, the 8-bar phrase grouping is still the fundamental structural building block of the song, as can be seen above.

The exception to this is the Break section. While this section has the same driving pulse as the rest of the song, there is no sense of overall phrase structure as the drums drop out. Instead, the structure becomes “free” as Erka enters singing in a long song style. Though this free-time section conflicts with the phrase-group structure of the rest of the song, it accommodates the long song performance, as long song is traditionally performed in free time without any strong sense of rhythm, much less structure.¹⁵ Thus in the middle of a song which follows a fairly conventional rock song structure based on 8-bar phrase groupings is a temporal expression of traditional long song performance, a structural combination of traditional and Western musical elements.

The previous songs were chosen as examples of Altan Urag’s “folk rock” style. This style defines the band: they label themselves as a folk rock band on their albums and on their website, and for live performances they play their folk rock repertoire. However, since the release of *Made in Altan Urag*, Altan Urag has experimented with other musical genres on subsequent albums, combining traditional Mongolian music with various modern styles. We will now briefly discuss two of these albums.

In 2008, Altan Urag recorded two albums; one of which, entitled *Blood*, continues in the vein of “folk rock” established in *Made in Altan Urag*. The other album, *Hypnotism*, is very different: subtitled as “Contemporary Album,” it is a bold and venturesome exploration of contemporary classical music styles and elements. Some tracks like “Unsteady” and “The Foreign Khan” come directly from their first album *Foal’s Been Born*, while others like “Drumming” are new and original. The songs on *Hypnotism* can all be described as being very experimental and perhaps as more “abstract” in that they eschew the conventional

song forms and structures of their folk rock style. Instrumentation on these tracks often goes beyond the band's typical seven-piece setup, including full orchestration, as in "The Foreign Khan," or extensive use of percussion not normally associated with rock or classical music, as in "Drumming." Some songs make use of extended playing techniques and bizarre sounds, as in "Unsteady."

Perhaps the most interesting song with regards to our present purposes is "Kherulen River." This song is performed by H. Erdenetsetseg (a.k.a. "Erka") as an unaccompanied long song with additional reverb effect in the recording. In a sense, this could be called very traditional: Mongolians nomads would often sing long songs unaccompanied while simply going about their daily routine and carrying out mundane tasks.¹⁶ However, given the context of this song as an audio recording on a CD subtitled "Contemporary Album" and preceded by an intro track consisting of 64 seconds of silence, and the deliberate digital alteration of the sound, the listener hears "Kherulen River" not so much as a traditional song but as a contemporary work of high art. Or rather, the listener hears "Kherulen River," as well as the rest of the album, as a traditional art form being abstracted and elevated to the arena of reflective high art. Thus *Hypnotism* both mixes elements of traditional music with modern music and encourages a new perspective on traditional music.

The album *Nation*, recorded in 2010, is subtitled "Folk Album." Whereas *Hypnotism* explicitly sought to combine the traditional with the modern, *Nation* is much more outwardly traditional, albeit in a very classicized sense of "traditional." This is evident in tracks like "Kherulen River" and "Farewell" which feature long song and short song accompanied by morin khuur, respectively — a traditional performance arrangement.¹⁷

Interestingly, this album also features the song "Kherulen River." Or rather, *Nation* features an alternate version of this song, for it is arranged and performed differently in order to fit the album's stated "folk" aesthetic. Whereas *Hypnotism*'s version of "Kherulen River" featured unaccompanied and digitally augmented long song, *Nation*'s version features "raw" long song accompanied by solo morin khuur. Altan Urag does this with other songs as well, featuring multiple songs in different versions on several albums, each version corresponding to the particular album's overall aesthetic. In doing this, Altan Urag encour-


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ages the listener to pay attention not merely to the song, but also to focus explicitly on the difference in style, sound, and aesthetic that each album strives toward.

It would be uncharitable to Altan Urag's artistic intentions to simply view *Nation* as a record of strictly traditional music. *Nation* contains several tracks, like "The Light" and "Mirage of Far Land," which are distinctly modern in style and composition, even using some extended techniques on the yochin. More subtle elements of deliberate modernity can be found in other songs as well, such as in the harmonies of the accompanying morin khuurs in "Farewell." *Nation* as an album, then, is perhaps more outwardly traditional than other albums, but this is only because it seeks to combine elements of traditional music with elements of modern music in a traditional musical medium, a goal that is line with the band's stated goal of encouraging appreciation of traditional Mongolian music by younger urban Mongolians.

Having discussed these albums with regard to auditory elements, let us now consider the visual elements of these albums' packaging. We will begin with *Made in Altan Urag*, the album that marks a major point in Altan Urag's history as a band, when it consolidated its image and sound as a folk rock band. As mentioned earlier, just before this album's production Altan Urag acquired two new, custom morin khuurs that boasted the head of the monster Alien of Western sci-fi – horror lore in place of a horse's head. A close-up image of the "monster-headed fiddle," to use the term of Professor B. Tsetsentsolmon from the Mongolian National University, and its Alien head makes up the cover for *Made*

in Altan Urag. It is a



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bold statement of the band's artistic intent; the monster-headed fiddle is a symbol of the deliberate blending of Mongolian tradition with modern, global popular culture.¹⁸ Further-

more, the frightening and grotesque nature of the Alien head and the black color of the instrument evoke associations with a dark, aggressive

style of rock or metal. Thus the morin khuur, a traditional Mongolian folk instrument, is transformed into a new folk rock instrument, and its image on the cover of *Made in Altan Urag* proclaims the album's aggressive folk rock sound. More importantly, as Altan Urag's breakout, definitive album, it encapsulates the band's overall artistic goals.

Subsequent albums each have individual stylistic goals, and these are reflected in the albums' respective covers. *Hypnotism*, the "Contemporary Album," instead features black and white stripes with images of each band member's eyes staggered in the white stripes. In contrast to *Blood*, this cover is not aggressive or dark but rather abstract, challenging, and even piercingly reflective as the eyes stare straight at the viewer. Here there are no images or depictions of tradition. This denial of traditional images and emphasis on the abstract fits the ideas of modernity in music and thus represents the "contemporary" nature of the album. *Once Upon a Time* features a picture of the band members, dressed casually, holding up and looking up through the circular wooden structure that forms the structural centerpiece of a Mongolian ger, or felt tent home. This is a particularly interesting image, as the band members are all dressed casually in modern fashion, clearly of the modern and urbanized age in Mongolia. Nonetheless, they look up through the central structure of a ger, symbolizing the constant looking to the past through tradition. *Nation* does not feature the band members or any human beings at all on its cover. Instead, it features only writing in the traditional Mongol Script in red ink on a brown, parchment-like surface. The use of Mongol Script very strongly conveys the sense of nationality that is so present in this album's "folk" music.

Overall, by producing albums with clearly stated stylistic mediums and goals, Altan Urag demonstrates both its high level of musicianship and its dedication to being innovative, exploring different combinations of traditional Mongolian musical elements with various modern musical elements. It also demonstrates the versatility of Mongolian traditional instruments and playing styles, another of the band's goals.¹⁹ Furthermore, the combination of traditional with modern that results from this versatility and innovation is captured visually in the album covers and overall packaging.

Having considered Altan Urag's discography, let us now briefly consider their live performances. Regarding song choice, Altan Urag

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usually plays songs in the folk rock style, the repertoire coming from the albums *Made in Altan Urag* and *Blood*. Altan Urag likely stays within the folk rock repertoire in live performance at local venues (which are often local restaurants and pubs) simply because it is easier to perform live (as it does not require any additional orchestral instruments or unconventional percussion), because it is more exciting for live performance, and most importantly because it is the identity that Altan Urag has built over the years. It is the most accessible, most exciting, and most well-received mixture of traditional and modern popular music.

In performances, the members of Altan Urag often wear the same dress consisting of black tunics with silver embroidery in a common pattern in traditional Mongolian dress and blue jeans (occasionally the drummer will simply wear a black Altan Urag t-shirt). This dress is interesting, for it is not actually Mongolian traditional dress. Instead, its silver embroidery patterns evoke images of traditional dress while it is actually modern with a color scheme that evokes images of darkness associated with rock and metal. Thus Altan Urag's costume, while modern through and through, evokes images of traditional dress, creating a new picture of tradition and encouraging the audience to hear the music the same way that they see the dress.

The instrumentation has already been addressed, but the physical arrangement of the musicians on stage is also noteworthy. Whereas bands like Khusugtun, who describe themselves as a more traditionally focused band on their website, tend to sit ordered in a straight line, Altan Urag arranges themselves much more like a conventional rock band with the drums at center and backstage, the *ikh khuur* (bass) and *bish-guur* next to the drums, the two *morin khuurs* (guitars) front stage on each side, and the *yochin* (lead singer) front stage and center. The *morin khuurs* arrangement is much like that of rhythm guitar and lead guitar in a rock band, as one *morin khuur* sometimes uses electric distortion for leads and solos (lead guitar) while the other remains undistorted and often plays more accompaniment-style parts (rhythm guitar).

Concerts at local venues are well-attended and well-received by the audience. Endings of songs are always greeted with appreciative applause, with especially loud applause and cheering coming from tables containing greater numbers of empty liter-sized beer glasses. Audiences seem to especially enjoy drum solos, electric *morin khuur* solos, and

increases in tempo — all standard fan-favorites of rock music.

More importantly, though, the audience seems to especially appreciate the more traditional qualities of Altan Urag's music. Whenever the long song singer, Erka, is present and they perform the new folk rock arrangement of "Farewell," there are especially loud and enthusiastic responses. One astute Mongolian audience member I spoke to observed that whenever Altan Urag played "more traditional" songs that were not "so rock," the audience generally appreciated it more. In some sense this seemed plausible; however another Mongolian attending a show at Ikh Mongol said to me that he loved listening to Altan Urag perform "Blue Mark," one of their more aggressive-sounding rock songs, because it made him "feel proud to be Mongolian" — so much so that he would get pumped and "just want to yell 'Fuck you!'" This conversation, as well as others and observations of the crowds led me to the conclusion that Altan Urag's music is popular and well-received neither strictly because of its traditional elements nor because of its rock elements, but precisely because it blends the two so that the traditional and the modern, the old and the new, complement each other in a way that is meaningful and accessible to many contemporary Mongolians.

In addition to their albums and live performances, Altan Urag utilizes other media including movies, music videos, and the internet. As previously mentioned, Altan Urag was involved in the production of the movies "Khadak," directed by Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth, and "Mongol," directed by Sergei Bodrov. In "Khadak," Altan Urag actually makes an appearance in the film as a band of outlaws. They perform the song "Mother Mongolia" and then play minor roles as bandits assisting in the reclamation of state-seized meat. The entire film is a magical-realist film that focuses on the rapid social change that Mongolia is currently experiencing. Altan Urag's musical and especially physical presence in this movie then places their music and their identity as a band in this context of social change, reinforcing and affirming their place as connectors of the traditional with the modern.

Altan Urag has said that they greatly enjoy working in the medium of film, because each endeavor is a major artistic production.²⁰ This is evident in their many music videos produced to date. They have produced approximately ten music videos, mostly of songs from *Made in Altan Urag* and *Blood*.

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One of the most interesting videos is for the song “Abroad” from *Made in Altan Urag*. Musically this song features hoomii, hand drums, and guitar work by collaborating artist Andrew Colwell in 15/8 meter and in a very dark, modal chord progression. The resulting sound is very dark and intentionally exotic, coinciding with the title “Abroad.” The video features the band, plus Andrew Colwell (a non-Mongolian), playing music while circling an ovoo, a traditional Mongolian religious structure, and paying respect to it. The band is dressed in their black performance robes, while Andrew is dressed in a typical Western fashion. Thus, there are multiple levels of interaction between the traditional and the modern — between the ovoo and Altan Urag, modern Mongolians who pay tribute to the past in a modernized musical medium, and between Altan Urag and Andrew, a Western foreigner playing a Western instrument who is nonetheless integrated into the music and the overall scene. It is worth noting also that Andrew does not circle the ovoo or perform any sort of ritual regarding the ovoo. Instead, his connection is to the band, again placing Altan Urag and their music in the role of a link or communicator between past and present. As Andrew himself puts it: “My interpretation is that they are all about synthesizing the new with the old, the past with the present, the local with the foreign. Collaborating with me, my presence in the video, engaging the ovoo respectfully with a ‘hybrid’ song is all part of this message and aesthetic.”²¹

In conclusion, Altan Urag successfully blends traditional music with rock and other Western/modern musical styles in order to share Mongolian culture with the world and in order to inspire new urban generations of Mongolians to appreciate traditional Mongolian music. This blending occurs on audial and visual levels and in many different mediums: in album music and packaging, in live performance, movies, music videos, and online. The traditional elements are never strictly distinguishable from the non-traditional, because tradition is not a static object — it is constantly reimagined and recreated. By creating their unique style of Mongolian folk rock, Altan Urag has used both traditional and rock elements to point to a national identity rooted in a perceived past which also openly embraces interaction with other nations and cultures in the context of a modern, globalized world. In blending old with new and local with foreign they create new representations of the past that are meaningful and accessible in the present.

*“The Mongolian nation of this time
Inherited this motherland.
Blessed with having
The sun, rising in the morning
Born the Mongolian fate, eternal
Inheriting the custom and tradition.”*
- “Blue Mark”