

Central Asian Throat Singing in the Digital Age

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the musical tradition of Central Asian throat singing and its existence in the digital sphere, identifying a number of issues with its treatment online at the hands of cultural outsiders. Due to the overarching technological divide which predominantly enables digital communication in the developed West, as well as the particularly rural and isolated nature of many indigenous Central Asian communities, throat singing is vulnerable to being stolen or co-opted by non-indigenous users on partially anonymized platforms like YouTube and Spotify. As a result, the majority of native Central Asian musicians lack commercial success and any form of popular recognition even when their music may accumulate millions of views online. Many non-Central Asian internet users also demonstrate a tendency to engage with throat singing in a way which reflects harmful and neo-Orientalist modes of thought. This paper will examine these issues by first analyzing the historical context of Central Asian throat singing, both indigenously and in Western representation, then considering a number of more recent attempts to modernize the genre, including examples of indigenous Central Asian artists who have garnered commercial and popular success in the West. Finally, we will examine a variety of case studies from the internet which exemplify the often harmful, reductive, and decontextualized nature of Western engagement with Central Asian throat singing online.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asian throat singing, often referred to as *khoomei*, is a musical tradition which involves manipulation of the vocal cords to create biphonic melodies, meaning two pitches of different frequencies sung simultaneously. Given the inherent relationship between musical traditions and the construction and expression of human identities, Central Asian throat singing can be understood as a manifestation of the shared cultural histories and lived experiences of its practitioners from the steppes of Mongolia, Tuva, and elsewhere. Many indigenous throat singers come from pastoral nomadic communities in rural, geographically isolated areas, and thus the tradition has historically been passed down through communal mentorship and localized practice. The interaction of Central Asian throat singing with forces of globalization, modernization, and Westernization has been a

long and difficult process, involving centuries' worth of oppression and cultural colonialism, as well as forms of appropriation and misinterpretation. External treatment of Central Asian throat singing from the West has historically exhibited a tendency to neglect the music's original cultural context, an especially pertinent issue given the inextricable relationship between the tradition itself and the cultural, political, and environmental contexts which have shaped it.

In the age of the internet, these trends have continued in more insidious and nuanced ways, with digital transmission having greatly expanded and altered the capabilities of the average Western consumer. On the whole, Western engagement with non-Western indigenous music has been fundamentally changed with the onset of digital technology, allowing internet users to access videos, audio files, and databases of unfamiliar music from around the world at an unprecedented

rate. Unfortunately, the dynamic between Western consumers, artists, and scholars engaging with musical traditions from outside the West has been historically problematic, and remnants of Orientalist thought and behavior continue to persist in many forms of modern digital interaction. This paper will follow such interactions through the recorded history of Central Asian throat singing, beginning by highlighting the intimate relationship between the vocalization style and the surrounding natural environments of its practitioners, as well as its role in constructing and representing indigenous cultural and political identities. We will then explore the dynamics of interaction between Central Asian throat singing and the West, from the early days of Russian colonization to modern presentations of the tradition on the global stage. Finally, various case studies of non-Central Asian users interacting with throat singing performances online will serve as evidence of harmful neo-Orientalist engagement in the modern day, demonstrating the need for more equitable and culturally conscious structures of digital distribution and reception.

CONTEXTUALIZING CENTRAL ASIAN THROAT SINGING

Firstly, it may be useful to distinguish specifically where throat singing is distributed within Central Asia. Its tribal origins are usually considered to pertain to the ethnocultural Turko-Mongol group centered in and around the Altai-Sayan region, a geographic area around the border of Russia and Mongolia named for the Altai and Sayan mountain ranges. Though these mountains also stretch partially into China, Kazakhstan, and other parts of southern Siberia, the Central Asian throat singing tradition has remained primarily localized within Mongolia and the Russian republic of Tuva, as well as some parts of neighboring Russian republics like Altai and

Khakassia (Pegg 2015; Pegg 2024). Only a few sparse enclaves of Central Asian throat singing persist in more geographically removed places like Bashkortostan, Buryatia, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as areas of northern and central Tibet (Pegg 2015; Chao, Zhao, and Liu 2022). Throat singing exists outside of Central Asia only in a very small number of isolated cultural instances, most notably the Inuit of Northern Canada and the Xhosa of South Africa. These styles are similar in some respects, but developed independently and sometimes serve different sociocultural functions; for instance, Inuit singers tend to place more emphasis on throat song as an element of communal ritual (Smithsonian n.d.; Tran 1997). For the purposes of this paper, we will consider Central Asian throat singing through a musico-cultural lens as a regionally specific tradition particular to the life-histories and constructed identities of indigenous Tuvans and Mongolians, among other nearby minority groups.

Figure 1. Map of the Altai-Sayan region, with larger text indicating higher concentrations of throat singing practitioners in modern-day Russia (Bashkortostan, Gorno-Altai, Khakassia, and Tuva)



Source: Cosi and Tosato (2003)

In his early survey of Tuvan folk music, Aksenov (1973) provided a simple definition of Central Asian throat singing as “the simultaneous performance by one singer of a held pitch in the lower register and a melody (composed of overtones) in the higher register” (12). Though this

baseline understanding of throat singing has remained largely unchanged, subsequent studies have elaborated more substantively on the bio-technical aspects of its performance, such as Bergevin et al. (2020) which analyzes the necessity of specialized vocal tract morphing and “precise biomechanical motor control” in overtone throat singing (10), or Lindestad et al. (2001) which studied the particulars of vocal cord vibration and airflow manipulation. In music, an overtone can be understood simply as any frequency higher than the fundamental frequency (the lowest pitch) of a given note, and though overtones are sometimes identified synonymously with harmonics (whole number multiples of the fundamental frequency which harmonize with the undertone, such as a perfect fifth), Biscontini (2025) notes that throat singing often involves deliberate diversion from this basic harmonic series for added inflection and vocal variance through imperfection.

The technical aspects of throat singing are far from its only aspect worthy of study. Much of the existing scholarship surrounding Central Asian throat singing in particular has to do with its relation to the physical environment of the steppes themselves, a crucial element of its performance and cultural significance. The vast and largely undeveloped natural landscapes of Tuva, Mongolia, and surrounding areas have a unique accompanying soundscape, described by Levin & Edgerton (1999) as “silence [dissolving] into a subtle symphony of buzzing, bleating, burbling, cheeping, whistling,” and so on (80). Throat singing is one of many ways that indigenous Central Asian musicians blend the human and the natural through reminiscent soundscapes which evoke the world around them; as ethnomusicologist Carole Pegg puts it, the entire musical landscape of the Altai-Sayan region “combines drones and partials with horse rhythms and paces, the clinking of tackle during riding, and the hunting lures and calls of wild animals,

evoking those vertical and horizontal topographies, movement between them, and the body-places of spirit-owners of land and place” (2024, 6). As Levin and Süzükei (2010) observe, mimicry of nature and animals also occurs frequently even in Tuvan cultural traditions which are not inherently musical; shamanic rituals, for instance, often involve “appealing to animal spirits through imitation of their sounds,” and some locals believe shamanic whistling techniques were the direct precursor to more evolved forms of throat singing like the high-pitched *sygyt* style (126-130). Today, throat singing has certainly become an integral part of many Central Asian shamans’ interaction with the spirit world and with nature, but also pervades a variety of more secular everyday activities such as festivals, banquets, contests, ceremonies, ancestral rites, and so on (Pegg 2024, 294-295; Jian 2025).

Beyond its relationship with nature and spirituality, throat singing has also historically played a major part in the construction of native Central Asian identities and representations of their shared cultural histories. In Mongolia, for instance, ethnic national identity is often viewed by natives as less significant than spatially situated “locality identities” – according to ethnomusicologist Sunmin Yoon, “singers often mention both their name and ethnic group when asked, but mainly they describe the topography of the places where they were born, and ecological markers that distinguish those places—the dunes, steppes, or valleys, which are part of the ‘root’ (*üundes*) from which they come” (Sneath 2010, 260; Yoon 2022, 88). This ties back to the integral relationship between Central Asian musical traditions like *khoomei* and the physical, natural environments which these traditions auditorily resemble, a relationship which is bolstered by the apparent tendency to construct one’s personal identity around one’s physical locale. Similarly, Öberg (2008) describes “an intentionality of

cultural flow” in the practice and concept of throat singing, bringing together disparate groups and tethering communities to particular “geo-cultural [contexts]” (42-44). Curtet (2022) further corroborates the idea that throat singing has become a crucial element of representing and maintaining “local cultural heritage” for indigenous communities throughout this entire sub-region of Central Asia, despite the imposition of arbitrary “colonial borders” separating areas like Khakassia, Altai, Tuva, and Mongolia as well as their differing political trajectories at the state level (217, 221). Communal practitioners of Central Asian throat singing evidently attach themselves to not only the practice itself, but the *idea* of the tradition and its function as a mechanism of indigenous identity construction, thereby asserting native sovereignty, validity, and cultural history at the local scale.

MODERNIZATION PROJECTS AND THE DYNAMICS OF WESTERN INTERACTION

Westward Russian expansion into the steppes of Central Asia was a lengthy process spanning multiple centuries. Contact with indigenous Tuvan communities likely began around the mid-19th century, while direct Russian interference in Mongolia was a factor as early as the 1600s (München-Helfen 1992). This expansion led to some of the earliest Western accounts of throat singing, such as 19th-century ethnographer Sergei Rybakov who characterized the vocal traditions of Bashkortostan as “forest wildness,” or so-called “Bashkir specialist” L. Lebedinskii who called the vocal timbres, breath-holding techniques, and overtone manipulation of local throat singers “unnatural for a human being” (Rybakov 1897, 271; Aksenov 1973, 12; Sagadeeva and Rakhimov 2018; Mukhametzyanova-Duggal 2021; Lebedinskii 1948, 50-51; Beahrs 2014, 37). Early Western depictions of Central Asian throat singing as primitive, wild, unnatural, and exotic coincide with contemporary

attitudes in the social sciences which tended towards oppressive cultural colonialism; late-19th century anthropologists like Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan had recently established their sweeping theories of cultural evolutionism which placed non-Western societies at the bottom of an arbitrary hierarchy of civilizational sophistication and cultural value, paving the way for mass degradation of indigenous culture throughout the European art world and spheres of academia.²

At the same time, the prevalent “noble savage” myth perpetuated a view of indigenous non-Western cultures having value only through their simplicity and closeness to man’s natural state of being, a form of Oriental infantilization which helped to rationalize colonial subjugation. From a musicological standpoint, the fetishization of some perceived rudimentary simplicity among non-Western cultures led to European performers and composers constructing warped, idealized images of foreign cultures through the incorporation of certain stereotypically Oriental elements. This form of artistic appropriation began occurring en masse around the turn of the 20th century, catalyzed particularly by contemporary political dynamics between the French, British, and Ottomans in the Mediterranean theatre, which in turn led to a general growing interest in the cultural output of the exotic Orient (Burt 2013). This interest was, of course, consistently reductive and demeaning, often serving as a mere conduit for the European imperial imagination which degraded the sophistication of non-Western art while simultaneously idealizing it in the vein of exotic, savage nobility (Wei 2025; Ruskin 1873). Edward Said’s seminal text *Orientalism* (1979) further outlines the power dynamics at play in these cultural interactions; intellectual elites of the European art world, he says, used highly stereotypical and reductive depictions of cultures from the Orient to reaffirm colonial legitimacy and

European imperial identity as constructed in opposition to the primitive Other.

As the century progressed, throat singing in Mongolia began experiencing more widespread institutionalization than its counterparts from southern Russia. Mongolian anthropologist Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon attributes this primarily to political forces, especially the rocky transition toward independence beginning around the 1920s and the establishment of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), a nationalist regime which used hereditary music as an essential component of its efforts to stage a "socialist cultural revolution" (Tsetsentsolmon 2015, 122-123; Tsetsentsolmon 2014, 423; Shirendev and Sanjdorj 1969). The MPRP, which maintained a "monopoly on power" until around 1990 and consistently pursued policies in imitation of the USSR, issued a resolution advocating for the reclamation of ancient Mongolian musical traditions in an attempt to "[reflect] Lenin's vision in which each nation had its own music that could be systematically collected" (Dewdney et al. 2024; Rossabi 2005, 5; Tsetsentsolmon 2015, 123). This led to the systemic tokenization and iconization of certain forms of traditional music under the category of "musical folklore," including the *morin khuur* (horsehead fiddle) and *khoomei* which became emblematic of a nationalized, politically commodified form of Mongolian identity (Tsetsentsolmon 2015, 122). As noted by Curtet (2020), the nationalization of throat singing in the 20th century went hand in hand with its "spectacularization," beginning in the mid-1950s as it transitioned from almost exclusively rural performance to having a major presence on the stage and in concert halls, eventually leading to the standardized distribution of *khoomei* recordings and even its incorporation into Mongolian education curricula.

At the same time, a reactionary and reclamatory form of populist musical nationalism

emerged beginning in the 1970s with discourse surrounding authenticity in the context of folk art, staged as an "intervention into the teleological hierarchy that socialist rhetoric espoused for all music: a transition away from the folk, through the national, and arriving at the classical" (Colwell 2019, 38). The perceived nature of *khoomei* as ancient, original, and fundamentally indigenous allowed throat singers to become crucial in developing a sense of authentic traditional Mongolian music in the 1970s and '80s, in direct contrast to the commodified musical identity established as a political mechanism by state actors like the MPRP. Such processes were not exactly mirrored in Tuva or other Russian republics, where throat singing remained mostly uninstitutionalized in more populated urban areas and did not enter the mainstream until the late 1980s and '90s. Curiously enough, many sources argue that the increased Western interest in Tuvan folk culture around the turn of the 21st century was due in large part to famed American physicist Richard Feynman's late-in-life fascination with Tuva based on the republic's unique, triangular postage stamp (Leighton 1991; Alash n.d.; Woo 2013). Though chiefly attributed to Mongolia in terms of national origin, *khoomei* has been part of UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2009, and its gradual rise to prominence as both a subject of Western cultural attention and a representation of indigenous Central Asian heritage has led to a number of music initiatives attempting to fuse the 'ancient' with the modern beginning around the 1990s.

THROAT SINGERS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

It would perhaps be appropriate to an analysis of cross-cultural throat singing initiatives with the case of Kongar ool-Ondar, a master of the art of Central Asian throat singing who is widely credited with bringing the tradition to the international

stage from the '90s onward. He toured with the Tuvan state ensemble beginning in 1990 and won an international throat singing contest two years later, garnering him global attention and leading to a highly successful career in which he collaborated with prolific artists like Ry Cooder and Willie Nelson, appeared regularly on Western television and radio shows, featured in an Oscar-nominated documentary, and even carried the torch at the 1996 Olympics (Woo 2013; NPR 2013; Fox 2013). His status as a public figure and his technical skill led the Tuvan state to award him the official title "People's Throat Singer of Tuva," and he spent a considerable amount of time in his homeland as an educator in traditional Tuvan culture and music, even opening a school in the capital of Kyzyl shortly before his death (Salchak 2013). In tandem with the late '90s intrigue spurred on by Richard Feynman, Kongar ool-Ondar helped revitalize and widely publicize Central Asian throat singing at the turn of the century, bringing it to prominence in the Western gaze as one of the most unique and culturally significant musical practices from the region.

One of the more significant groups which began their musicianship around this pivotal time period was the Alash Ensemble, formed in 1999 at the Kyzyl Arts College. They have experienced popular success internationally since the early 2000s, particularly in the United States, where they played for the Library of Congress and the D.C. Russian embassy as well as a variety of more standard venues across the country. One of the more notable aspects of Alash's popularity is their digital presence, which includes a very active Facebook page with over 10,000 followers as well as their website, a fairly extensive database of information on the band themselves and the Central Asian throat singing tradition as a whole. The latter point is perhaps the more interesting one; several sub-sections of the website are devoted not just to promotional materials for Alash

but for information about throat singing in general, including a detailed explanation of how the technique functions in the human throat, the musical definition of overtones, the different sub-varieties of throat singing complete with audible examples, and even an entirely separate directory for traditional Central Asian instruments like the horse-head fiddle and jaw harp. As an authentic, indigenously authored database of information on Central Asian traditional music and culture, the Alash Ensemble website can be considered a counterweight against trends of misrepresentation and appropriation of Central Asian music at the hands of Western cultural outsiders. Notably, Alash also markets themselves as adhering closely to ideals of cultural authenticity like those articulated by Colwell; their biography page, taglined with the phrase "New-Old Tuvan Music," claims "they have borrowed new ideas that mesh well with the sound and feel of traditional Tuvan music, but they have never sacrificed the integrity of their own heritage in an effort to make their music more hip" (Alash n.d.). The emphasis on authentic native-driven musical fusion which bridges the gap between new and old, West and non-West, modern and traditional, and so on has been a recurring theme among many Central Asian musicians' public personas. Walking this line helps maintain continued relevance on a global scale while avoiding over-modernization or a total departure from tradition, allowing performers to retain a sense of cultural legitimacy and prevent the alienation of native Central Asian listeners.

This ethos of semi-integration has been adopted by other successful Tuvan folk acts like Huun-Huur Tu, whose main sound consists of traditional instruments and throat singing but has also incorporated guitars and electronic instruments. Huun-Huur Tu have previously collaborated with major Western artists like Frank Zappa, and have performed extensively throughout

Europe and the United States, experiencing great commercial and popular success while still remaining deeply connected to their cultural roots. Consider the following excerpt from Theodore Levin's first-person account of traveling with the band on tour:

Tolya shrugged. "In the old days, herders used to sit by a stream in the evening and throat-sing," he said matter-of-factly. "The stream itself showed them how to sing. Listen." Tolya began again, trying several different initial pitches before finding one that satisfied him. Starting with a long drone note, he introduced rhythmic articulations with movements of his lips and tongue, shaping the drone into a pulsating, roiling tone that propelled itself forward with seemingly effortless ease. A piercing overtone melody rose out of the thick texture of the fundamental pitch, and the gyrating rhythm of the overtones interlocked with rhythms created by the swiftly flowing water. Tolya sang a couple of breaths of melody at a time, pausing between breaths to listen to the river, like a jazz musician momentarily dropping out to listen to a fellow band member take a solo. "People would pay big money in the States to hear throat-singing like that," I joked. Tolya looked serious. "No one ever did this kind of singing for money," he replied. "It's not concert music. It's something I do for my own pleasure, and as an offering to spirits." (Levin and Süzükei 2010, 27)

Here, band member Anatoli "Tolya" Kuular rejects modern Western commercialism in favor of a more spiritually and ancestrally grounded outlook on musical performance, cementing the idea that even though Huun Huur-Tu may

experiment with non-traditional adaptations of form, they retain an intensely sacred and culturally authentic belief system as performers. His words recall the findings from Pegg, Levin, Yoon, and others referenced earlier in this paper: practitioners of Central Asian throat singing have a deeply instilled relationship with the physical landscape from which the tradition was born, and in many cases this relationship appears to be inextricable, no matter how far from home their music may spread.

While Huun-Huur Tu mostly incorporates Western instrumentation as merely supplemental to the primary traditional instruments and throat singing, there are some notable instances of Central Asian bands which have more deliberately and extensively attempted to fuse throat singing with Western-derived genres. Easily the most prominent example is The Hu, a group of Mongolian metal musicians who play electrically amplified versions of traditional Central Asian instruments. Instead of the 'growling' vocals typical in many forms of Western metal, The Hu incorporate low-register throat singing and rhythmic chanting. Their performances are quite unusual; a 2022 video of their song "Wolf Totem" at Coachella shows several of the members sporting black armor-like robes and decoratively embellished native string instruments in a variety of garish neon colors, attempting to gesture toward indigenous performativity in a way which almost seems to reflect Westernized caricatures of 'tribal' Mongolian culture while simultaneously buying into the stylings of a stereotypical Euro-American metal outfit (complete with a standard rock drum kit in the background, a far cry from the evocative percussion of most traditional Central Asian music). Despite this somewhat exaggerated rock posturing, the band's musical philosophy still appears to be reflective of a desire to manifest authentic indigenous traditions: stemming from the burgeoning Western-influenced music scene in

Ulaanbaatar, The Hu described wanting to sharply diverge from “local pop and rock groups who simply imitated western sounds,” and refer to their throat singing specifically as closely connected to Central Asian nature through its imitation of water and wind (Farber 2019). This specification is interesting, and seems to imply that even when other elements of traditional Central Asian music like stringed instruments or percussion may be materially altered or entirely replaced by a desire to modernize, throat singing remains unmistakably and unchangeably connected to the modes of indigenous identity construction particular to the physical environments of the steppe.

ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

Undoubtedly, the digital age has irreversibly altered the ways in which modern audiences engage with music, art, and media in general. Thanks to digital content-sharing platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Discord, and an unfathomable number of forum websites dedicated to any niche interest imaginable, media accessibility in general is at an all-time high. As far as music is concerned, streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music as well as long-form content platforms like YouTube have all become the dominant form of engagement for modern audiences, leaving physical media distribution largely by the wayside (IFPI 2023). Yet the nature of digital distribution often disproportionately favors Western frameworks of musical engagement and platforms Western creators much more consistently in comparison to traditional non-Western musicians, a concern exacerbated by the global technological divide which manifests in a disproportionately low amount of non-Western internet users engaging with digital music in the first place (United Nations 2023). These considerations exist in tandem with generally problematic attitudes towards non-Western music among Western internet users who are disconnected from the cultural context of

a given musical tradition and may engage with music superficially or inauthentically.

As far as the actual transmission of music online, Cross (2023) argues for a distinction to be made between the Western “presentational” model of music-making and the non-Western “participatory” model; the former necessitates separation between performer and audience, while the latter blurs these lines and often incorporates a broader range of human experiences and sensations during the performative process itself. The internet, he says, unduly prioritizes the Western presentational model due to the inherently isolating nature of digital reception – one cannot physically, actively participate in a musical experience with its performers when watching or listening through a screen. Thus, though Andresek (2018) suggests a video-sharing platform like YouTube theoretically allows for an “unlimited publishing house” model of unrestricted audience participation through its lack of barriers for uploading and engaging with content, in practicality its function is very different (136). This is further exacerbated by the algorithmic recommendation system on YouTube which suffers from “strong internal homogeneity” (i.e. viewers are rarely exposed to any content which is significantly dissimilar from that which they have already viewed) and frequently platforms videos which have already received some amount of traction, making it difficult for the average fledgling creator to garner attention without external promotion (Airoldi, Beraldo, and Gandini 2016, 1). This means indigenous non-Western musicians seeking to self-promote and organically upload their music to a video sharing platform like YouTube may encounter a myriad of difficulties which are not immediately apparent, leading to a notable lack of user engagement in comparison with large label-driven music channels.

In some cases, random anonymous users who are unaffiliated with native performers may also

upload said performers' music to a site like YouTube without proper attribution, leading to a disconnect between artist-as-creator and uploader-as-creator. Indigenous non-Western musicians, who have been subjected to centuries' worth of direct artistic appropriation and denial of agency, are now seeing these trends continue in cyberspace, perhaps at the hands of average well-meaning internet users who are merely seeking to publicize a performance they found compelling. Further, regulatory protections for intellectual property violations are often flimsy and difficult to enforce, especially when technological accessibility divides preclude non-Western musicians from awareness of such violations in the first place (Rafianti, Ramlib, and Permatac 2019). These issues are compounded by what seems to be a generally problematic attitude surrounding digital music consumption among modern listeners. Music, especially that which is unfamiliar to the consumer, is decontextualized due to its ease of access and often surface-level presentation, leading to shallow and repetitive modes of engagement akin to "zapping between television channels" (Kroier 2019, 140; Fabbri 2007). This is especially pertinent when considering the already problematic dynamic between Western consumers uncritically engaging with non-Western traditional music, often lacking cultural context and a holistic understanding of said music's cultural background and social purpose due to the frequently alienating, anonymized, and decontextualized nature of digital consumption.

As Lecklitner (2020) and Micić (2023) note, Central Asian throat singing has broken into the Western mainstream in recent years largely because of digital transmission, especially on video sharing websites like YouTube. Due to YouTube's wide and diverse user base, it is impossible to conclude definitively why throat singing has risen in popularity through its algorithm, but a quick

search will yield countless videos of Tuvan and Mongolian throat singers which have amassed dozens of millions of views. Notably, many of the descriptions and comment sections of these videos are written primarily in English, meaning the English-speaking West has played a particularly major role in the digital reception and consumption of the Central Asian throat singing tradition. And even more importantly, the most popular of these videos tend to exhibit the aforementioned issues of lacking credit and proper artistic agency, stemming largely from YouTube's capacity for anonymity and its homogeneous algorithm. Two of the highest viewed throat singing videos on the entire platform (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) are generically titled "Tuvan Throat Singing" and have been uploaded by faceless user channels whose other videos are entirely unrelated; one features mostly snowboarding clips and the other (inactive for twelve years at the time of writing) has uploaded a few movie scenes and videos of Croatian martial arts. These are undoubtedly not the indigenous Tuvan singers themselves, and the throat singing clips they have posted contain uninformative descriptions with no attempt to even identify the musicians, much less provide anywhere for viewers to learn more about their music or even the cultural tradition of throat singing in general.

Figure 2. Video with 16 million views titled "Tuvan Throat Singing"



Source: YouTube, uploaded by user "Mr. Happy," accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx8hrhBZI98>.

Figure 3. Video with 4.3 million views titled “Tuvan Throat Singing”

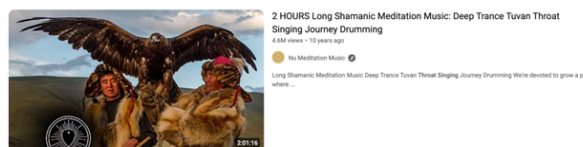


Source: YouTube, uploaded by user “FNscarH,” accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTCI5hedcVA>.

Another issue with digital video distribution of Central Asian throat singing, as demonstrated by Fig. 4, is a form of modern Orientalism in which creators genericize and commodify the tradition. Here, throat singing has been reduced to a Westernized portrait of Central Asian civilization, with the aforementioned characteristics of proximity to nature, primitivity, and a perceived form of naive spirituality having pervaded everything from the video’s caricatural thumbnail image to its nearly incomprehensible keyword-vomit title and description. And as one might expect, there is no form of artist recognition anywhere to be found in this video; despite its colossal 2 hour runtime, none of the singers are ever named, and it is unclear how “Nu Meditation Music” even accessed any of the throat singing clips mashed together here – likely ripped from some other compilation or original source with no regard for attribution. One can easily find dozens of videos just like this on YouTube, attracting hundreds of thousands of viewers by marketing themselves as generically “trance-like” and meditative without credit or even a description of the music’s original cultural context. Even music streaming platforms like Spotify have expectedly fallen victim to the plague of generic, whitewashed throat singing uploads from faceless “artists” without proper attribution (see Fig. 5). Indigenous singers almost certainly never see any streaming revenue from these uploads, and on the whole this

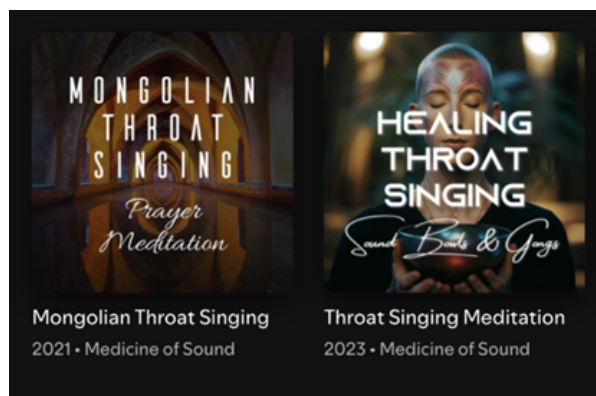
decontextualized and reductive form of digital transmission only serves to heighten the issues of inauthentic user engagement as throat singing (and by extension, all of Central Asian culture) is turned into a commodity for the uncritical Western consumer.

Figure 4. Video with 4.6 million views titled “2 HOURS Long Shamanic Meditation Music: Deep Trance Tuvan Throat Singing Journey Drumming”



Source: YouTube, uploaded by user “Nu Meditation Music,” accessed November 28, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbj3ihvYEso>.

Figure 5. Two albums on Spotify titled “Mongolian Throat Singing” and “Throat Singing Meditation,” uploaded by artist “Medicine of Sound”



Source: Spotify, uploaded by artist “Medicine of Sound,” accessed November 29, 2025, <https://open.spotify.com/artist/780ihrsBN6BtspZxqp2PEt>.

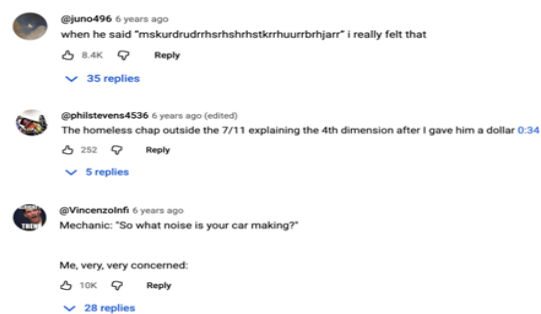
Distributors of Central Asian music are not the sole proponents of its oppression, however; the lens of scrutiny must be similarly applied to Western consumers, who – as mentioned earlier in

the arguments of Kroier, Fabbri, and Cross – are already faced with barriers to educated and ethical engagement with unfamiliar musical traditions due to the decontextualized and alienating nature of digital transmission itself. Fig. 6 shows comments left by English-speaking users on the Tuvan throat singing video from Fig. 2, in which they compare the vocal tradition to a gibberish string of letters, the ramblings of a mentally unwell homeless man, and the sound made by a malfunctioning car. These comments acquired a combined total of almost 19,000 likes at the time of writing, and they are a mere drop in the ocean compared to the thousands of other comments on this video alone engaging with Central Asian throat singing in bad faith. Though it is certainly not uncommon for anonymous internet users to make derogatory or reductive comments in jest, especially on social media platforms which reward such humor with “likes” and attention, in the context of Westerners interacting with unfamiliar musical traditions it seems to tread the line of outright mockery. This trend of harmful digital engagement is not entirely distinct in spirit from the more direct forms of oppression facilitated through colonial European musicology in the past, with users explicitly comparing a technically proficient throat singer to an inhuman object or the incoherent spiel of a degraded member of the underclass, thereby reaffirming the perceived exotic unsophistication of the music.

Fig. 7 sees a different issue, akin to the primitivist appropriation of Western-constructed aesthetics of indigeneity and the outright fetishization of proximity to nature (“raw and wild”). Even in the case of Western cultural outsiders expressing appreciation for throat singing, we still see instances of misrepresentation which perpetuate centuries-old stereotypes of reductionist, Orientalist thought. These gaps in ethical interpretation could theoretically be countered by a broader wealth of information

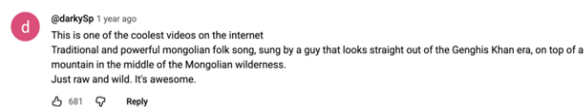
surrounding Central Asian throat singing aimed toward Western audiences; this could entail something as simple as proper artist attribution, or something more detailed like more readily available education surrounding the history of throat singing as a sacred cultural tradition which has, like the overwhelming majority of indigenous non-Western musical traditions, historically suffered from oppression and misrecognition at the hands of colonial forces. Unfortunately, this is generally not the case in the current state of the internet. The shallow yet commonly perpetuated perceptions of Central Asian throat singing as either a laughingstock or a primitivist caricature create a cycle of misrepresentation and misinterpretation in which the tradition is not treated with significant depth or care, instead rendered a construction of neo-Orientalist engagement with unfamiliar arts and cultures, thereby relegated to the realm of the unsophisticated Other.

Figure 6. Three user comments on the video “Tuvan Throat Singing,” referenced in Fig. 2



Source: YouTube, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx8hrhBZI98>.

Figure 7. A comment by user “darkySp” on a video of Mongolian throat singer Baatzorig Vaanchig



Source: YouTube, accessed November 18, 2025.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_5yt5IX38I.

CONCLUSION

To understand some theoretical solutions to the oppression, appropriation, and cultural colonialism against Central Asian throat singing which continues in the modern day through the internet, or at least some potential pathways to minimizing the harms against indigenous Central Asian performers, we must simultaneously examine the role of Western listeners and the role of distributors in shaping cross-cultural interactions. Deschênes (2010), drawing on Born and Hesmondalgh (2000), says that both consumption and performance of music has much to do with the construction and manifestation of one's identity and place in a given social group, and further that a Westerner attempting to authentically and fully learn or integrate foreign cultural music must undergo a process of "partial de-identification followed by one of partial re-identification, more than simply a re-negotiation" (Deschênes 2010, 75). Here, he speaks to the idea that one can virtually never engage to the fullest and most authentic extent with foreign cultural art unless one relinquishes the dominant cultural signifiers of Western artistry and audience engagement which stand in the way of true cross-cultural understanding.

We may again consider Cross' (2023) thesis on how the nature of digital transmission makes it impossible to entirely deconstruct the systemic bias towards predominantly Western presentational modes of performance online, but this does not mean there is no hope for digital music as a force for cultural equality and preservation. Przybylski (2021), studying the 2020 indigenous Tkaronito music festival in Canada, argues that despite the accessibility barriers to online transmission and the socioeconomic opportunity gaps which often preclude lower-income indigenous communities from

engaging with digital media, the nature of the internet can actually have a positive impact on native music accessibility as well. Livestreams of music performances and their corresponding preserved recordings serve as an "[extension] of a performance's reach past a single moment in time," offering the possibility to transcend challenges like differing time zones, lack of provisions for physically disabled audience members, geographic venue distance, and notably the class-based sociocultural inaccessibility posed by "formal arts venues" hosting indigenous performers (15). This means that indigenous music may be able to reach significantly wider audiences through digital transmission and preservation, which is likely a net positive considering the inequitably stratified dynamics of music consumption in the modern day that cause many non-Western musicians to struggle with audience engagement and retention.

For Central Asian musicians, the first crucial issue in this equation is one of agency. Increased digital distribution of performance recordings would be meaningless if said distribution continued to occur predominantly at the hands of Western actors with minimal indigenous input. For an example of this process occurring positively in another part of the world, we may turn to Neuenfeldt and Oien (2000) who, drawing on Frith (1996), argue for the self-authorized distribution of indigenous music recordings as the most optimal method of realizing the identity-constructive power of music in a given social context. The "mutability" and "ease of dissemination" of music allowed Australian aboriginal musicians to establish a counter-hegemonic presence in local cultural circles in the early 2000s, and reified their collective "entitlement to [their] land" through agential narrativization and ease of broadcasting (Neuenfeldt and Oien 2000, 32). This was

accomplished through extensive collaboration with local indigenous rights organizations, radio stations, labels, and broadcasting groups such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Music Association (CAAMA). Mackinlay and Barney (2017) find similar trends among progressive circles in Australia, pointing to national organizations like the Musicological Society of Australia which has worked toward reconciliation with native communities as reparative justice for cultural colonialism, with local ethnomusicologists providing resources and opportunities to assist with the preservation and revitalization of indigenous cultural traditions (Ibid; Campbell 2012). Here we see the crucial element of native agency being lifted to the forefront of these reconciliatory efforts – white Australian ethnomusicologists are not leading the cultural charge or attempting to exert ownership over the dictation of indigenous narratives, but are rather using the tools at their disposal to allow native communities to write and preserve their own musico-cultural legacies.

Finally, another crucial aspect of progressive cross-cultural interaction is information access, a major component of ethical engagement which is almost entirely lacking in the anonymized, decontextualized digital uploads referenced previously. This is why a source like the Alash Ensemble website, with its extensive database of information about native Central Asian music, is so important; the information is disseminated authentically by native performers who are proximate to the tradition's cultural source, yet still conveyed in a manner which is easily accessible and understandable to English-speaking cultural outsiders. Taken in tandem, these dimensions provide a framework for more equitable and progressive treatment of Central Asian throat singing in the digital landscape: a shift in mindset among Western audiences, perpetuated by more agential methods of

transmission, distribution, and preservation for native performers, as well as better artist attribution and education surrounding the cultural context of the music itself. Such measures may be considered a necessary counterbalance to the perpetuation of misinformed, oppressive, and harmful Western narratives surrounding Central Asian throat singing in the modern day.

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