

# The Study of Ecological Consciousness in the Folk Songs of the Chahar Mongols

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**Abstract:** *The folk songs of the Chahar Mongols not only embody a rich historical heritage and ethnic characteristics but also reflect the close interaction between humans and the natural environment. The lyrics of Chahar folk songs are meticulously structured and vividly expressive, often employing metaphor and allegory with a strong lyrical quality. They frequently use imagery of the sun and moon, wind and rain, clouds and mountains, flowers and plants, domestic animals, and wild animals, demonstrating profound ecological awareness and humanistic concern. This paper studies representative works of Chahar Mongolian folk songs such as "Cool Hangai Mountain," "Little Yellow Horse," and "Four Seasons" from an ecological consciousness perspective. It delves into their diverse ecological discourse construction and their significant role in the cultural construction of northern China.*

**Keywords:** *Mongolian folk songs; harmony between humans and nature; ecological consciousness; ecological themes; northern China culture*

## Introduction

The Xilin Gol region of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is renowned for its brilliant history and civilization created by northern nomadic peoples. Cultural forms such as Mongolian long-tune folk songs, throat singing, Mongolian wrestling, and traditional costumes are well-known both domestically and internationally. Many of these, like the Chaor and Mongolian long-tune folk songs, are listed as national intangible cultural heritage. Deeply exploring the long-tune folk songs of the Chahar Mongols is beneficial for the ecological civilization construction in Inner Mongolia and even China. The ecological wisdom and concepts contained in Chahar long-tune folk songs align closely with the core concepts of ecological civilization construction. By excavating and inheriting this wisdom, people can deepen their understanding and recognition of ecological civilization construction.

## 1 Overview of Chahar Folk Songs

Mongolian folk songs are the foundation of Mongolian music culture. They are rich in content, including songs about love and marriage, praise for the grasslands, horses, mountains, and rivers, as well as works honoring heroes of the grasslands. Mongolian long-tune folk songs are widely popular and represent the traditional music of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. They exhibit distinct nomadic and regional cultural characteristics and are a significant display of the Mongolian nation's productive, living, and spiritual traits, often hailed as the "living fossil of grassland music." The melodies of

Mongolian long-tune folk songs are long and soothing, with expansive artistic conception. Representative works include Chahar folk songs such as "Riding Horse," "Little Yellow Horse," and "Vast Grasslands."<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2005, the Mongolian long-tune folk songs jointly declared by China and Mongolia were listed by UNESCO as part of the third batch of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." On May 20, 2006, the Mongolian long-tune folk songs declared by Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region were approved by the State Council to be included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists. On June 7, 2008, Mongolian folk songs were approved by the State Council to be included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists.

Chahar folk songs originated in the Yuan Dynasty and gradually transitioned from court music to folk music, developing into a genre with distinct Chahar regional characteristics. Chahar folk songs are mainly distributed in Zhengxiangbai Banner, Zhenglan Banner, Xianghuang Banner, and Taibus Banner in Xilin Gol League, as well as parts of Ulanqab and Hulunbuir. These songs are rich in language, complete in structure, bold and lyrical in expression, and melodious, showcasing distinct local features and artistic charm. The singing forms include both long-tune and short-tune, as well as Chaor and Huar (love songs). Chahar folk songs are categorized into seven types: wedding songs, folk songs, humorous songs, love songs, religious songs, court songs, and military songs. The lyrics are meticulously structured and vividly expressive, often using metaphors related to the life and environment of the Mongolian people, such as the sun and moon, wind and rain, clouds and mountains, flowers and plants, domestic animals, and wild animals, with a particular fondness for comparing things to horses. The lyrics use both alliteration and end rhyme. Representative works include "Little Grey Horse," "Bulagen Taohai," "Baga Abu Zhila," "The Eight Banners of Chahar," and "The Yellow Piebald Horse with Black Mane."

## **2 Discourse Analysis Theory**

Discourse analysis examines the use of language in various forms of communication, such as spoken and written, visual, or multimodal texts. It focuses on how language constructs social meanings and relationships and how it reflects and influences power dynamics, ideologies, and cultural norms.

In 1952, American linguist Z. Harris published an article in the journal "Linguistics," stating that "language does not occur in isolated words or sentences, but in coherent discourse," thus emphasizing the need for linguistics to analyze discourse. Harris named this approach "discourse analysis." Discourse is heavily context-dependent, covering political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, making it far beyond the reach of a single linguistic discipline. In 1985, Dutch linguist Van Dijk expanded the scope of discourse analysis to actual communicative behaviors such as storytelling, trading, and classroom teacher-student dialogues. He published the "Handbook of Discourse Analysis," which broke the boundaries of linguistics and integrated ideas and methods from semiotics, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and communication studies to decode the rich contexts behind established discourses—contexts ranging from the psychological states of interlocutors to social and historical backgrounds. The discourse analysis theory mentioned above forms the theoretical foundation for this paper, which investigates the ecological construction within the texts of Chahar folk songs. Discourse analysis helps us understand how language is used to construct social relationships and cultural norms.<sup>[2]</sup>

This study's corpus includes 105 Chahar Durbert Mongolian folk songs. Three major ecological factors—"mountains and rivers theme," "flora and fauna theme," and "celestial and climatic theme"—

were selected for discourse analysis. Representative songs were chosen as case studies to observe the ecological cognition, ecological awareness, social norms, and environmental cognition present in Chahar Mongolian folk songs.

### **3 Ecological Themes in Chahar Folk Songs**

#### ***3.1 Songs with Themes of Mountains and Rivers***

Chahar folk songs use rhetorical devices such as parallelism to describe the existing environment, the topography and geography of nature, weather, and flora and fauna, constructing a three-dimensional picture of nature that showcases the Mongolian people's environmental cognition model. Songs named after geographical features include "Cool Hangai Mountains": "The cool Hangai mountains have clear streams flowing; beloved friends gather together, raising glasses to drink together." This song first describes the macro environment where the story takes place—the cool Hangai, a lush area with mountains and water and pleasant air, and then specifies the time—summer. This provides complete spatial and temporal information. One can imagine a gentle and warm season, where distant guests and enthusiastic hosts gather, raising glasses of fine wine and leisurely strolling on the green grasslands. The constructed ecological scene is: in the rich and beautiful Hangai grasslands, streams gurgle, the sound of flowing water intertwines with the gentle breeze, creating a sense of tranquility and harmony; dense forests stand quietly at the foot of the mountains, birds sing cheerfully on the treetops, conveying peace and comfort. This is a pastoral landscape that evokes a sense of tranquility and comfort, deeply immersing people in the beautiful environment.

#### ***3.2 Songs with Themes of Flora and Fauna***

The oral literature of the Mongolian people has long included themes of flora and fauna, with many works in this category. In heroic epics, the steeds and horses of heroes are often depicted as their close friends and loyal companions. Among the corpus analyzed, songs with animal themes make up the majority, including famous songs like "Little Yellow Horse," "Yellow Piebald Horse with Black Mane," "Long-necked Green Horse," "Knowledgeable Little Yellow Horse," "Playful Little Yellow Horse," "Swift Galloping Horse," and "Beautiful Black Horse." The lyrics of "Little Yellow Horse" describe: "The little yellow horse bounces, making it impossible for me to sit still. Your gentle nature will always stay in my heart." This highlights a characteristic of Mongolian folk songs, where animals like horses, camels, and cattle take on roles similar to those of humans. In "Little Yellow Horse," the ancestors describe the little yellow horse as the essential means of transportation for seeing the girl they long for, emphasizing the importance of the steed by describing, praising, and admiring it. This song is named after the horse, "Little Yellow Horse," despite featuring the horse, its owner, and the girl he longs for. This naming practice reflects the Mongolian tradition of artistic creation. Alan Stibbe considers such creation a form of ecological linguistics' "humanistic concern" and "animal welfare."

#### ***3.3 Songs with Celestial and Climatic Themes***

It is well known that climate is closely related to people's daily lives. For example, those living in tropical regions wear light clothing year-round, while those in polar regions wear thick cotton or fur clothing throughout the year. Climate also significantly impacts human production activities, particularly pastoral production. Pasture growth requires specific temperatures and moisture levels, with varying

temperature and precipitation conditions in different regions leading to the traditional Mongolian nomadic practice of "following the water and grass" and distinct terms for spring, summer, autumn, and winter pastures. The Chahar folk songs describe and mention celestial bodies, seasons, weather, temperature, and precipitation, forming a significant aspect of climatic cognition. Songs named after climatic themes include "Four Seasons," "The Moon on the Fifteenth," and "Early Spring in March." In "Four Seasons," the lyrics describe the cycle of seasons on the Mongolian plateau: "Ah, when the warm sun and gentle breeze of spring arrive, waterbirds float in the middle of the lake, but do not forget the eternal cycle of the four seasons; ah, when the brilliant sunlight of summer comes, flowers of various colors bloom magnificently, waterbirds swim leisurely in the rivers, but do not forget the cold winds of winter; ah, the autumn breeze brings a touch of coolness, the withered leaves rustle in the wind, waterbirds frolic and dance on the lake's surface, but do not forget the cold winter weather; ah, when winter arrives, snowflakes drift in the Taiga forest, the wind grows even more piercing, mountains and rivers don silver garments." This song vividly portrays the four seasons of the Mongolian plateau, creating a vibrant picture and an ecological cognition using elements such as seasons, flora, lakes, temperature, wind, and precipitation. The song's text comprises a dialogue between a person and waterbirds, with the person standing by the lake, advising and expressing longing for their elderly parents to the birds swimming in the lake. The setting of the conversation is the gently rippling lake surface. The content of "Early Spring in March" is similar to "Four Seasons."<sup>[3]</sup>

#### **4 Ecological Humanistic Concerns in Chahar Folk Songs**

Ecological linguistics is an interdisciplinary field that combines linguistic theory with ecological theory, delving into the intricate relationships between language and the ecological environment. From the perspective of ecological linguistics, humanistic concerns extend beyond humanity to encompass the entire ecosystem and all its members, including celestial climates, natural landscapes, flora, and fauna. Ecological linguistics emphasizes ecological welfare and the harmonious coexistence and joint development of all entities within nature.

Chahar folk songs often use imagery of the sun and moon, wind and rain, clouds and mountains, flowers and trees, domesticated animals, and wildlife in their lyrics, demonstrating profound humanistic concerns. Particularly noteworthy is the use of themes centered around horses and camels or narrators, which reflects an ancient creative approach marked by strong humanistic concerns for animals. This approach is reminiscent of the natural imagery in Chinese Song poetry and Japanese haiku. Ecologically, the natural scenes depicted in Song poetry are often filled with vitality and harmony. Poets capture the diversity and beauty of nature through detailed descriptions of mountains, water, birds, and plants, expressing awe and closeness to nature. Humanistically, Song poetry exhibits deep insight into and concern for human conditions, exploring themes like life, love, and friendship, reflecting the poets' profound understanding of human nature.

For example, Ouyang Xiu's Song poem "Gathering Mulberries after the Blossoms" writes:

“After the blossoms fade, West Lake is lovely,  
The remnants of fallen flowers scattered around.  
Fluffy willow catkins fly gently,  
And the sun sets by the balustrade in the wind.”

This poem portrays the beauty of late spring in West Lake, capturing its tranquil elegance with a few delicate strokes, and reflecting the leisurely feelings of the wanderer amid the beauty of nature. Similarly, Japanese haiku, a unique poetic form, often uses "kigo" (season words) to denote the season or time when a story or event occurs. Due to the frequent appearance of the twenty-four solar terms, unique seasonal activities in Japan, and customs related to agriculture and fishing in haiku, they carry a deep ecological awareness and consciousness, akin to Mongolian folk songs or Song poetry.<sup>[4]</sup>

For instance, Basho's haiku:

"Spring, slightly altered,  
Moon and plum blossoms,  
Fragrance fills the air,  
Plum blossoms on the cliff where sea urchins are gathered."

The first haiku signifies the arrival of spring with the color of the moon and blooming plum blossoms, while the second praises the pervasive fragrance of plum blossoms.

Although Chahar folk songs, Song poetry, and Japanese haiku originate from different cultural and regional backgrounds, they resonate with a timeless echo in their ecological depictions. This resonance is not only evident in their use and portrayal of natural elements but also in their profound insights into nature, life, and human emotions conveyed through poetic forms. Chahar folk songs show a cross-temporal resonance with renowned global art forms and literary works in ecological humanistic concerns, enriching poetic expressions and deepening the understanding and appreciation of ecological humanistic concerns.

## 5 Conclusion

Firstly, the emergence of Chahar folk songs reflects the interaction between humans and the environment. The natural environment, such as grasslands and mountains, where these folk songs were born, not only helps create specific atmospheres and emotions but also establishes a unique symbiotic relationship between the songs and the natural environment. Therefore, the singing techniques of folk songs are often influenced by the natural environment, such as the long tunes, the "Nogula" (an undulating vocal technique), the rise and fall of the voice, and the rhythm, all closely related to the vast grasslands and meandering rivers.

Secondly, discourse analysis of Chahar folk songs reveals the rich ecological wisdom and humanistic concerns embedded in their lyrics and melodies. For example, the frequent appearance of natural elements like mountains, water, grass, trees, and animals in the lyrics symbolizes the harmonious coexistence between local people and their natural environment. These elements not only enhance the artistic expressiveness of the songs but also convey a sense of reverence and gratitude towards nature.

Lastly, ecological civilization represents a new stage in the development of human civilization, emphasizing harmonious coexistence and sustainable development among humans, nature, and society. In Inner Mongolia, the construction and protection of ecological civilization are crucial for achieving the region's five major tasks, promoting economic development, and ensuring the well-being of its people. Inner Mongolia boasts extensive natural resources, including grasslands, forests, and wetlands, and their rational utilization and protection are vital components of ecological civilization construction.<sup>[5]</sup>

In summary, Chahar folk songs, through their unique artistic form and profound cultural connotations, showcase the charm and vitality of northern border culture. They provide a favorable ecological environment and material foundation for the inheritance and development of northern border culture, further advancing the in-depth construction of ecological civilization. This richly diverse cultural ecological landscape in Inner Mongolia injects powerful cultural momentum into the region's sustainable development.<sup>[6]</sup>

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