

# A Preliminary Study on the Classification of Barga Folk Songs

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## Abstract

**Barga folk songs are an important component of Mongolian musical culture and hold a unique position in ethnic heritage and social life. Long songs feature broad melodies and are often used in rituals and emotional expression, while short songs are characterized by concise structures and lively rhythms, closely connected to daily labor and practical life. The repertoire is rich in themes, including praise songs, banquet songs, songs of longing, love songs, wedding songs, military songs, and lullabies, reflecting the lifestyle and cultural values of the Barga community. This study systematically classifies Barga folk songs based on musical form and thematic content, establishing a basic classification framework. The results provide a reference for the organization, digital preservation, and contemporary transmission of folk songs, and contribute to the academic study of Mongolian musical culture.**

## Keywords

**Barga folk songs, ethnic culture, melody, thematic analysis, oral tradition, nomadic life.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

The Barga tribe is an important branch of the Mongolian ethnic group, and its folk song culture embodies centuries of nomadic life, interactions with the natural environment, and social mentality. In Barga society, folk songs serve not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a system of cognition, reflecting the tribe's lifestyle, customs, aesthetic values, and worldview through melody, rhythm, and lyrics. Folk songs play a significant role in daily labor, ritual ceremonies, wedding practices, and social interactions, vividly representing Barga cultural identity and social structure.

Moreover, the thematic content of Barga folk songs is highly diverse, encompassing praise songs, banquet songs, songs of longing, love songs, wedding songs, military songs, and lullabies. This diversity not only illustrates the multicultural landscape of the tribe but also provides valuable perspectives for studying the Barga people's ethos, values, and aesthetic system. This study aims to systematically analyze the musical forms and thematic content of Barga folk songs, to classify and summarize them scientifically, reveal their deeper cultural significance, and provide a theoretical foundation for their preservation, transmission, and contemporary innovation.

### 1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to systematically clarify the classification system of Barga folk songs, reveal their cultural connotations, and provide theoretical support for their contemporary transmission and innovation. Addressing the current scholarly focus on individual song collection or isolated thematic descriptions and the lack of systematic classification, this research categorizes Barga folk songs along the dimensions of thematic content, musical form, and functional use, establishing a standardized framework for study.

From an academic perspective, the proposed classification system fills a gap in Barga folk song research and can serve as a reference for the categorization and analysis of Mongolian and

other ethnic minority folk songs. Culturally, it facilitates the organization, documentation, and digital preservation of folk songs, reflecting the lifestyle and national spirit of the Barga people while strengthening cultural identity. In terms of social application, this framework can support ethnic music education, community cultural activities, tourism promotion, and innovative performance of folk songs, enhancing their contemporary visibility and influence, and promoting sustainable development and modern innovation.

### **1.3. Current Research Status**

In recent years, research on Mongolian folk songs has deepened, but it has largely focused on melody structure, rhythmic features, singing techniques, and the collection of individual songs. Scholars both domestically and internationally have attempted to classify ethnic minority folk songs, yet most approaches rely on a single dimension, such as melody length, rhythm type, or functional use, lacking a comprehensive and systematic classification for Barga folk songs. Moreover, existing studies provide limited analysis of the role of folk songs in social life, ritual activities, and cultural identity, particularly the integration of long and short songs across multiple dimensions of content, function, and technique. Research on modern dissemination and innovative applications is also scarce, limiting the practical guidance of folk songs in education, preservation, and contemporary performance. Therefore, developing a multidimensional classification system for Barga folk songs can fill this scholarly gap and provide important references for the protection of ethnic culture and its contemporary transmission.

### **1.4. Research Methods and Innovations**

This study collects Barga folk song materials through literature review, fieldwork, and interviews, analyzing their performance styles, functions, and cultural practices to establish a practical and operable classification system. The research focuses on systematically categorizing folk songs based on musical forms and thematic content, providing a reference for organization, teaching, digital preservation, and contemporary performance.

## **2. Classification System of Barga Folk Songs**

### **2.1. Classification by Musical Form**

In the Barga region, folk songs are traditionally classified into long songs and short songs. Long songs are the main representative form of Mongolian folk music in Barga and the broader Hulunbuir area, characterized by extended vocal techniques, rich melodic ornamentation, and expansive musical imagery. In contrast, short songs are brief in length, rhythmically concise, and feature more narrative lyrics, and are commonly performed in rituals, banquets, and everyday social interactions.

#### **2.1.1. Long Songs**

Long songs are lyrical folk songs characterized by extended rhythm, broad breath, large-scale structure, wide vocal range, elaborate ornamentation, and concise lyrics.

Barga Mongolian long songs exhibit distinctive features in melody, rhythm, and vocal style. Melodically, they often begin with prolonged high notes, extend skeletal tones with ornamental decoration, and employ wide descending turns to enhance expressiveness, creating a high-pitched yet flexible musical texture. Rhythmically, they are free and expansive, influenced by the pronunciation patterns of the Mongolian language and the musicalization of poetic forms, following principles such as “tight then loose, slow then fast, head-heavy and foot-light, dense lows and sparse highs.”

The vocal style is bright, upright, and elastic, centering on the integrated use of chest voice, ornamented voice, and gliding techniques. The chest voice emphasizes projection and

penetration; ornamented voice creates delicate inflections between structural notes; and gliding enhances melodic agility and spatial perception. The combination of these techniques allows Barga long songs to convey both the vastness of the steppe and intricate ornamentation, resulting in a unique timbre, melodic line, and expressive style.

### **2.1.2. Short Songs**

In contrast to long songs, short songs are characterized by concise rhythm, compact structure, relatively abundant lyrics, moderate vocal range, and strong narrative qualities, falling within the category of short folk songs.

Melodically, Barga short songs are smooth and flowing, primarily progressing by seconds and thirds within an approximate one-octave range. They are often ornamented with anticipation, suspension, and decorative notes, giving the melody agility and subtlety while evoking a gentle imagery of the steppe. Rhythmically, they are clear and rhythmic, closely tied to nomadic life, emphasizing the natural alignment of pulse and linguistic stress. Triple meter is commonly employed, imparting a light, swaying, dance-like quality.

A notable feature of short songs is “same tune, different lyrics,” where a single melody is set to multiple texts to meet diverse expressive needs in rituals, hunting, and communal activities, reflecting a high degree of openness and improvisation. This stable-melody, variable-lyrics performance mode allows Barga short songs to retain the general characteristics of Mongolian short songs while exhibiting regional features, integrating the rhythm of steppe life, linguistic patterns, and cultural practices to form a flexible, expansive, collective, and expressive musical style.

The classification of musical forms among the Barga Mongols is fundamentally consistent with other Mongolian folk song classification systems.

## **2.2. Classification by Thematic Content**

The thematic content of Barga folk songs is diverse and abundant, encompassing a wide range of types. These include praise songs, banquet songs, songs of longing, love songs, wedding songs, military songs, and lullabies, among others. Such diversity vividly reflects the rich and varied life of the Barga people as well as their long-standing and profound cultural heritage.

### **2.2.1. Praise Songs**

Among the Barga people, songs sung to praise one’s homeland, honor heroes, or admire horses are collectively referred to as “praise songs.” The Barga have a strong affinity for celebrating their homeland and the vast grasslands, and they often express longing and imagination for a better future. Consequently, themes that glorify sacred aspects of nature have also become an important subject of Barga praise songs. In daily life, various ceremonial activities are preserved in the Barga community, and it is customary to sing a praise song during any ritual. These songs serve as expressions of blessings and congratulations, symbolizing the collective will and good wishes of a tribe or community.

### **2.2.2. Banquet Songs**

Among the Barga people, songs sung at banquets serve to convey blessings, foster emotional closeness, and strengthen friendships. Traditional Barga banquet songs often praise the beauty of the homeland, celebrate friendship, honor heroes, and express gratitude toward parents. The lyrics frequently incorporate aphorisms, moral precepts, and proverbs, reflecting profound life philosophies and cultural traditions. As Mr. Ulanjie observes, “Mongolians attach great importance to drinking songs, not merely for enjoyment and entertainment, but because they recognize the unique educational function of these songs. They consider them essential for cultivating sentiment, promoting morality, improving personal character, and educating young people, serving as a ‘textbook’ for life lessons.”

### 2.2.3. Songs of Longing for Home

Songs of longing for home are a genre of folk songs sung by those who are far from their homeland, expressing feelings of nostalgia for family and loved ones. Throughout the Barga people's history of migrations, each generational relocation has left deeply ingrained memories. Living a nomadic life on vast, sparsely populated lands, Barga individuals often leave their homeland for reasons such as migration, marriage, or military service. These experiences have inspired the creation of numerous songs, evoking remembrance of one's birthplace and closeness to family and community.

### 2.2.4. Love Songs

Love is an essential aspect of human life, and love songs occupy a prominent position in Barga folk songs, representing a major thematic category. During long periods of nomadic life and labor, young men and women in the Barga community fell in love and subsequently created and performed numerous love songs to express their pure affection and romantic emotions. The content of these songs ranges from longing for a beloved, praising virtuous women, to expressing the sorrow of unrequited or failed love. Melodically, Barga love songs are simple yet graceful, with sincere emotions and a distinctly romantic character.

### 2.2.5. Wedding Songs

"The traditional wedding ceremonies of the Barga people have established a strict sequence, including proposal, acceptance of the groom, engagement banquet, bride's farewell banquet, sisters' games banquet, groom's games banquet, wedding banquet, and homecoming banquet" (Hastuya, Research on Barga Customs, Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House, 2009, p.13). Barga wedding songs are mostly performed in the long song form and follow a central thematic line: the parents' teachings to their daughter and the daughter's expressions of gratitude toward her parents. Overall, the lyrics are primarily didactic. When the daughter becomes a daughter-in-law, the parents remind her to respect her elders when visiting her husband's family.

### 2.2.6. Hunting Songs

Hunting songs are created and performed by Barga hunters during their hunting activities. In the early period, the Barga people lived for extended periods in the forested areas along the shores of Lake Baikal, sustaining themselves through hunting. Even after migrating to the Hulunbuir grasslands, the practice of hunting remained an integral part of their lifestyle. Consequently, Barga folk customs and cultural traditions are deeply imbued with traces of hunting life.

### 2.2.7. Religious Songs

Religious songs are collectively performed during folk religious activities or sacrificial ceremonies to praise Tibetan Buddhism and the He Shamanic tradition. In folk music, religious songs differ from Buddhist chanting or the sacred melodies used in shamanic rituals, and the two should not be conflated. The Barga tribe has long adhered to religious practices and shares borders with the Solon and Daur peoples, who also follow Shamanism. Through interethnic interactions, a Shamanic cultural sphere developed in Northeast China, extending northward to the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. Even today, Shamanism continues to be practiced among the people, with a large number of adherents and a strong social foundation.

### 2.2.8. Military Songs

Due to its geographical location, Barga has historically been a center of warriors and battle, creating a proud history of collective defense of the homeland and resistance against invaders. Barga men frequently went on military campaigns, fighting on various fronts. In this context, military songs emerged, expressing longing for the homeland, yearning for family, and aspirations for a peaceful life. The lyrics often convey the heroic spirit before battle, attachment

to land and loved ones, and bravery in combat. Through repeated performance and transmission, these songs reinforce collective memory and national spirit, possessing strong imaginative and emotional appeal. Consequently, military songs constitute an important component of Barga folk music, vividly reflecting masculinity and heroic character.

### **2.2.9. Lullabies**

Barga women gently rock their children to sleep indoors while singing soothing lullabies. The melodies are soft, smooth, and pleasant to the ear, performed in a gentle, flowing manner. Lullabies have a distinctive rhythm, conveying a mother's deep love and affection, creating a sense of calm and security for the child.

Like other Mongolian women, Barga women are diligent, courageous, intelligent, and compassionate. Lullabies serve as a tender emotional signal from a devoted mother, using music to provide comfort and relaxation to her child. When the child experiences this maternal care, their mind becomes calm, allowing them to quickly drift into a peaceful, dreamlike state.

## **2.3. Classification by Functional Use**

Barga folk songs can also be categorized according to their functional roles in social life, reflecting the practical and symbolic purposes they serve within the community. Broadly, they can be divided into three main categories: ceremonial, recreational, and educational.

### **2.3.1. Ceremonial Songs**

Ceremonial songs are performed in the context of significant social and religious events, including rituals, weddings, and festivals. These songs often adopt the long song form, which, with its expansive melodies and extended vocal techniques, is particularly suited to solemn occasions and collective celebrations. Ceremonial songs serve multiple purposes: they mark important milestones in life, communicate cultural values, strengthen social cohesion, and convey spiritual or religious sentiments.

In weddings, ceremonial songs express parental guidance, blessings, and filial gratitude, highlighting the moral and social responsibilities of the bride and groom within the family and community. The lyrics often contain didactic elements, teaching young people about proper conduct, respect for elders, and the continuity of family traditions. Similarly, religious and ritual songs are performed to honor deities, spirits, or natural forces, and are closely tied to the cyclical rhythms of agricultural, pastoral, or festival calendars. These songs not only function as offerings or prayers but also reinforce communal identity, collective memory, and a sense of spiritual continuity.

Furthermore, ceremonial songs are deeply intertwined with local customs and performance practices. The use of ornamentation, prolonged tones, and dynamic variations in long songs enhances the ceremonial atmosphere and conveys emotions ranging from reverence and solemnity to joy and communal pride. In this way, ceremonial songs act as both aesthetic and functional artifacts of Barga culture, preserving historical knowledge, social norms, and spiritual beliefs while providing participants with an emotionally resonant experience.

### **2.3.2. Recreational Songs**

Recreational songs are primarily performed for leisure, entertainment, and social interaction, encompassing casual singing, friendly exchanges, and performances at social gatherings such as banquets. These songs play an essential role in the daily life of the Barga people, providing enjoyment, emotional release, and a means of fostering social cohesion. Banquet songs, in particular, serve multiple functions: they create a lively and festive atmosphere, encourage playful competition or improvisation among participants, and reinforce interpersonal relationships and community bonds.

Beyond banquets, certain songs performed in specific contexts—such as hunting songs and military songs—also possess recreational and morale-boosting functions. Hunting songs, often

sung during expeditions or communal hunting activities, help coordinate group efforts, maintain rhythm in physical labor, and strengthen the collective spirit. Military songs, though rooted in the experiences of battle and mobilization, are also performed informally, allowing participants to share stories, commemorate heroic deeds, and express solidarity and courage. Recreational songs are characterized by their adaptability, rhythmic variety, and melodic simplicity, which facilitate communal participation and improvisation. They often reflect the daily experiences, challenges, and aspirations of the community, creating a space for emotional expression and cultural continuity. By integrating entertainment with subtle educational or moral content, recreational songs maintain a balance between enjoyment and cultural reinforcement, illustrating the multifunctional role of music in sustaining social and emotional life among the Barga people.

### 2.3.3. Educational Songs

Educational songs serve as an important medium for transmitting historical knowledge, cultural values, and moral precepts within the Barga community. Through narrative storytelling, didactic lyrics, and allegorical content, these songs impart life lessons, ethical guidance, and collective memory to younger generations. Love songs, lullabies, and praise songs, beyond their aesthetic and emotional functions, often carry implicit teachings on social norms, filial piety, and communal ideals. Love songs subtly convey principles of loyalty, respect, and proper conduct in romantic relationships, while lullabies, in addition to soothing infants, embed familial values and ethical expectations, fostering early emotional and social development. Praise songs celebrate heroes, ancestors, and achievements in nature and culture, reinforcing courage, responsibility, and a sense of collective identity. Furthermore, educational songs preserve historical narratives of migration, social organization, and significant events, functioning as an oral repository of knowledge. By integrating moral and social lessons into memorable melodies and engaging narratives, these songs make cultural learning accessible, emotionally resonant, and enduring. Consequently, educational songs exemplify the multifunctional role of Barga folk music, sustaining cultural continuity, social cohesion, and intergenerational transmission of wisdom, ensuring that the values and experiences of the Barga people are passed on to future generations.

This functional classification highlights the multifaceted role of Barga folk songs in daily life, demonstrating how they simultaneously serve aesthetic, social, and pedagogical purposes. Understanding these functions provides a comprehensive perspective on the significance of folk music in Barga culture, and lays a foundation for its preservation, teaching, and modern reinterpretation.

## 3. Summary

Barga folk songs constitute an important component of Mongolian musical culture, developing around two fundamental musical forms: long songs and short songs, which respectively reflect spiritual and aesthetic elevation and the rhythms of daily life. Long songs are characterized by expansive melodies, rich ornamentation, and broad musical imagery, and are often performed in rituals, celebrations, and emotional expression, showcasing ethnic spirit and aesthetic pursuit. In contrast, short songs feature compact structures, lively rhythms, and narrative lyrics closely tied to daily labor, social interaction, and practical life, reflecting functionality and the cadence of everyday existence.

In terms of thematic content, Barga folk songs encompass a wide range of types, including praise songs, banquet songs, love songs, songs of longing for home, wedding songs, military songs, religious songs, and lullabies. These songs not only document the tribe's lifestyle, social customs, and spiritual aspirations but also express emotional attachment to homeland, family, heroes, and nature, fully reflecting the diversity and profound cultural heritage of the Barga

people. The performance styles, functional use, and thematic content of these folk songs are closely integrated with social life, endowing them not only with artistic value but also with educational, preservational, and practical significance.

Through systematic analysis and classification based on musical form and thematic content, a scientific and operable research framework can be established, providing theoretical guidance for the organization, digital preservation, teaching, and contemporary reinterpretation of Barga folk songs. This study not only fills the academic gap in the systematic classification of Barga folk songs but also offers a referential model for the categorization, analysis, and transmission of Mongolian and other ethnic minority folk songs. Overall, Barga folk songs, as a unique heritage of Mongolian music, embody history and culture while providing invaluable resources for future academic research and cultural innovation.

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