

## The Hu Metal, Medievalism, and the Mongols

Jacqueline Jung, Yale University

As I write, a four-person metal band from Ulaanbataar called The Hu is sweeping through the United States, playing to sold-out crowds at indoor and outdoor shows throughout the country. The level of enthusiasm they've garnered here and abroad since their formation in 2016 is astonishing in light of the fact that they sing exclusively in Mongolian, and testifies to the sheer power, originality, and energy of their music. This comes in part from the galloping rhythms of their songs, which make head-banging and fist-pumping gestures unavoidable, and from the superhuman effects of their throat-singing, which allows each of the three main singers to put forth multiple voices at various pitches, of which one is always exceptionally deep and guttural.

They're calling this The Hun Tour in reference to the ancient central Asian empire that flourished between the third century BCE and the fourth century CE, and laid the groundwork for the development of the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan (ca. 1158-1227) and his successors starting in the thirteenth century. It's the latter world - the powerhouse culture that emerged seemingly all at once from the steppes of Central Asia to take over long-established states from south Asia to the Far East and to push against the eastern frontier of Europe, becoming, by the mid-thirteenth-century, the largest single empire in world history - that the group evokes most concertedly in their lyrics, musical style, and self-presentation. The origins of throat-singing, and of the traditional instruments they play (electrified in their live performances) - the *morin khuur* (a two-stringed bowed instrument that can yield high-pitched, wailing sounds, known as the horsehead fiddle for its decorated neck), the *tovshuur* (a kind of long-necked lute) the *tsuur* (a wooden, end-blown flute) - lie deep in antiquity; they were already ancient by the time Marco Polo visited the Khan's court in the late thirteenth century.

The Hu's members were all trained in traditional instrumental and vocal techniques at the Mongolian State Music and Dance Conservatory in Ulaanbataar, and brought them to bear on the Western hard rock and metal styles that became accessible in Mongolia only in the 1990s. The band's lyrics often come directly from the medieval past, such as war-songs honoring Genghis Khan, and while they often evoke the fierce military prowess with which the Mongols have become synonymous in metal and motorcycle culture, they also tap into the ecological orientation of the Mongols, their deeply knowledgeable and respectful symbiotic relationship with the land and animals. They also make reference to the ingenious cultural inventions that made the vast Mongol

Empire cohere, such as the *gereg*, a kind of diplomatic passport. In a less direct way, The Hu's live performance style - which brings the laser-sharp tightness, cohesion, and technical virtuosity of the four key members and their backup musicians into juxtaposition with their wild, flamboyant head and body, which make their epically long hair and revolving topknots into hypnotic visual components of the performance - echoes the self-presentation of the Mongol warriors described in medieval texts; their aggressive displays of unchecked movement and seemingly chaotic, frenetic violence as they rampaged through the countryside was designed to instill maximum fear - so that their reputation would cause neighboring habitations to evacuate in advance - even as the warriors were acting as part of a tightly orchestrated administrative campaign and were intensively trained since childhood to make equestrian warfare seem easy. My paper will bring together evidence of the visual, material, and textual culture of the medieval Mongols with observations of The Hu's music, videos, and self-presentation in interviews and live performances to consider how this band is creatively adapting the past to forge a new form of metal.