



VISUAL

Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

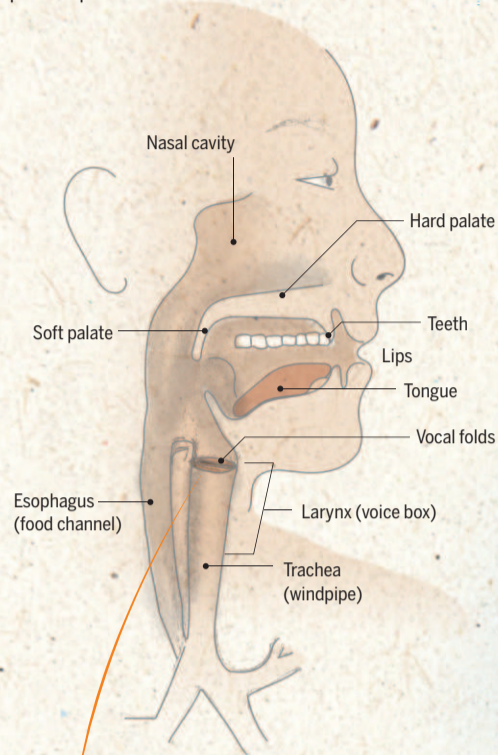
VOCAL ART RESONATES WITH GLOBAL AUDIENCE TOO

KHOOMEI: SOUNDS OF HARMONY

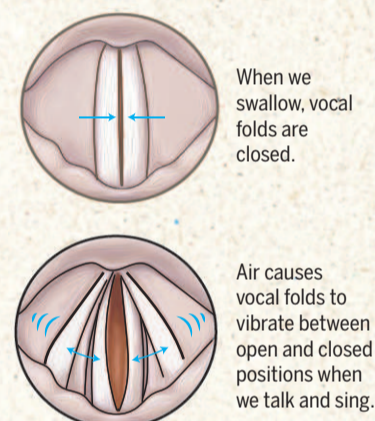


TALKING ABOUT ANATOMY

Speaking or singing involves various parts of our body to produce sound. We inhale O₂ and exhale CO₂. When we exhale, we can modulate sounds using the vocal cords, the oral cavity and its parts to produce different sounds.



Vocal folds (Top view)



The bubbling sound of the low tone in khoomei is produced in the trachea, using the vocal cords vibrating as the base sound.

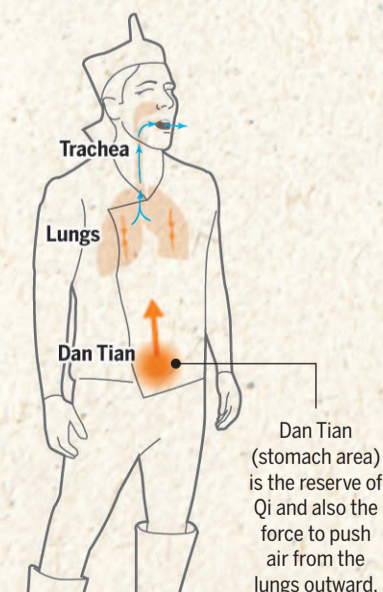
The MRI finding

This image is based on the Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) footage. It shows what happens inside our body. It is possible to see

- (1) the vocal cords making the bubbling sound of the low tone. At the same time, (2) the tongue is blocking the sound to produce the overtone. Before leaving the mouth, (3) the sound is modulated by the shape of the lips.



THE ORIGIN OF THE STRENGTH OF SINGING



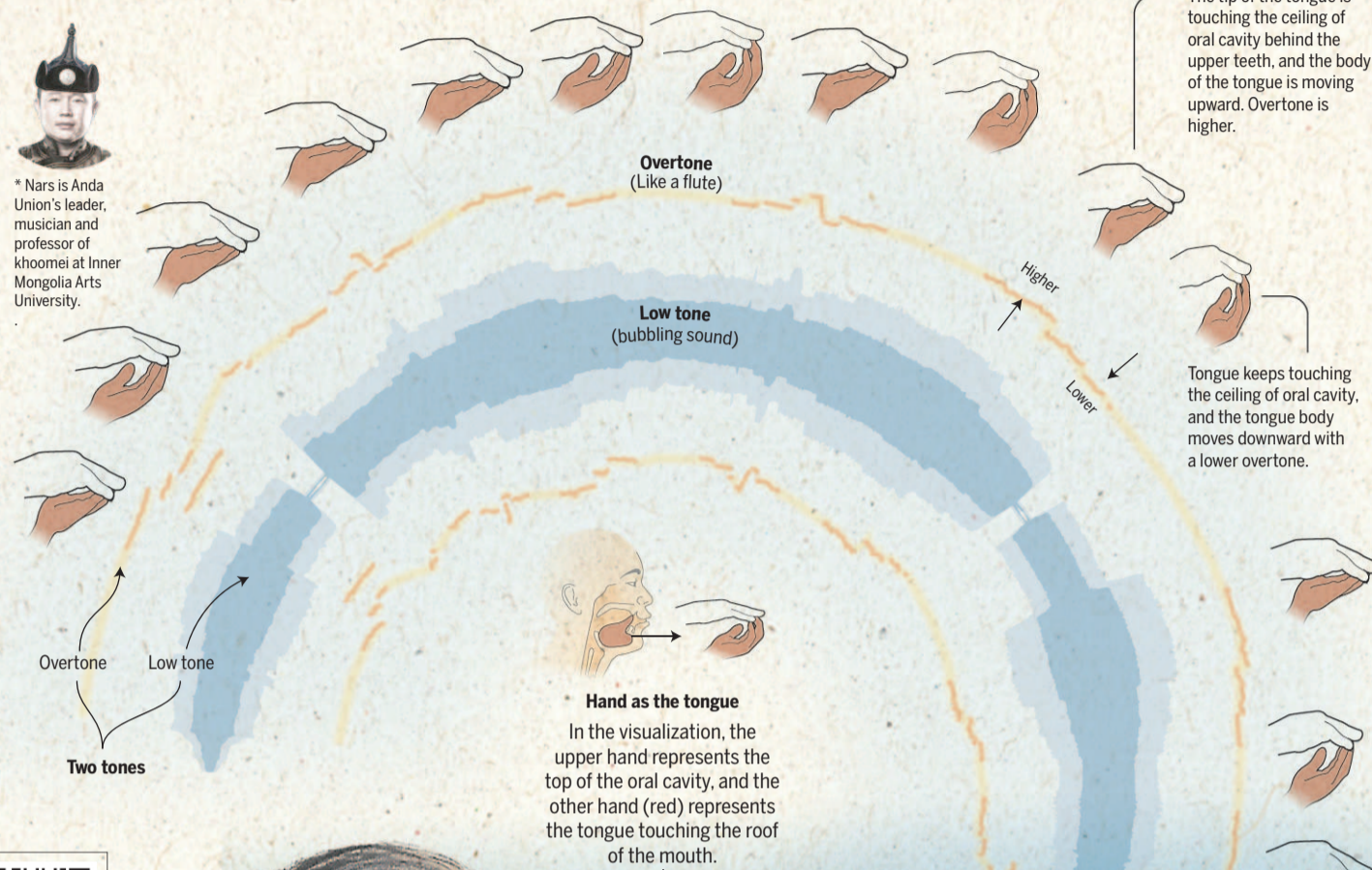
By pressing the abdominal area, known as Dan Tian, the air is expelled from the lungs outward and our mouth modulates the sound after passing through the trachea.

VISUALIZING KHOOMEI TWO TONES

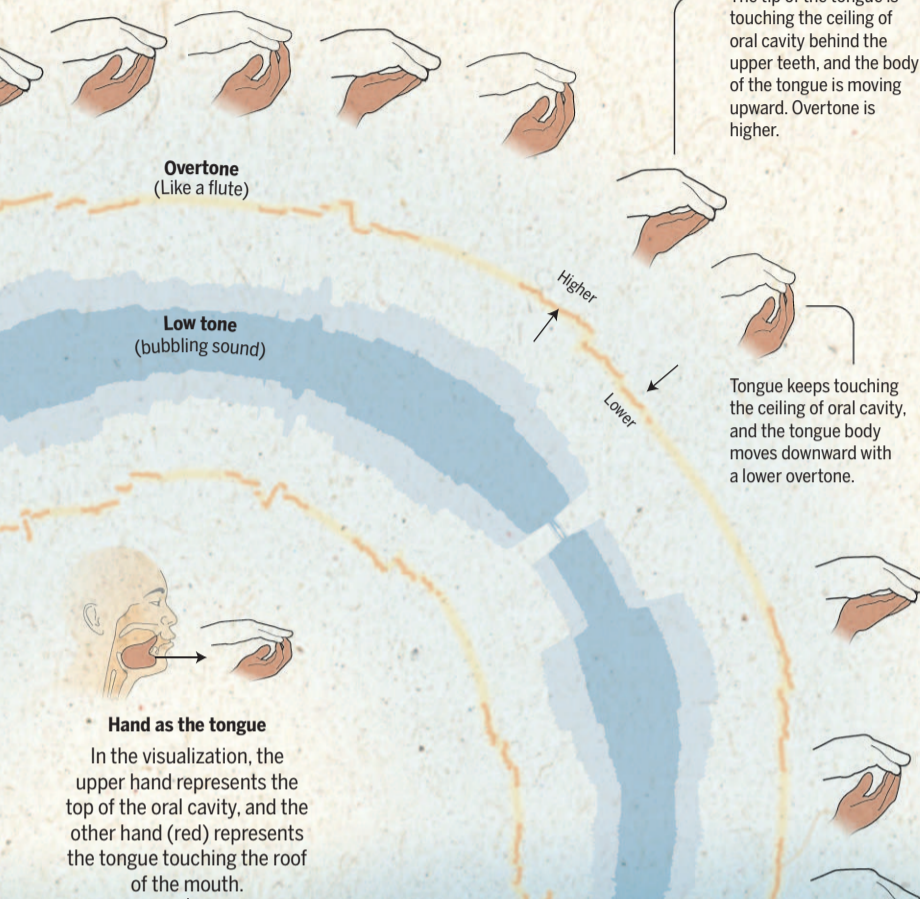
For this story, we created a visualization of the sound of a 50-second singing excerpt. Professor Nars* showed us with his hands the movement of the tongue during the singing.



* Nars is Anda Union's leader, musician and professor of khoomei at Inner Mongolia Arts University.



Ancient throat singing tradition thrives amid cultural shifts, **Chen Nan** and **Yuan Hui** report



Hand as the tongue
In the visualization, the upper hand represents the top of the oral cavity, and the other hand (red) represents the tongue touching the roof of the mouth.

Overtone is flowing. It's a tone above the fundamental tone. So it's related to things more flowing, like clouds in the sky.

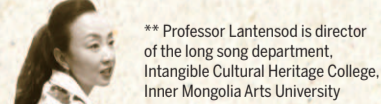
The **low tone** is a constant tone from throat almost plain. It is related to things relatively static, like mountains and grasslands.

Tongue blocks the airflow to produce the overtone.

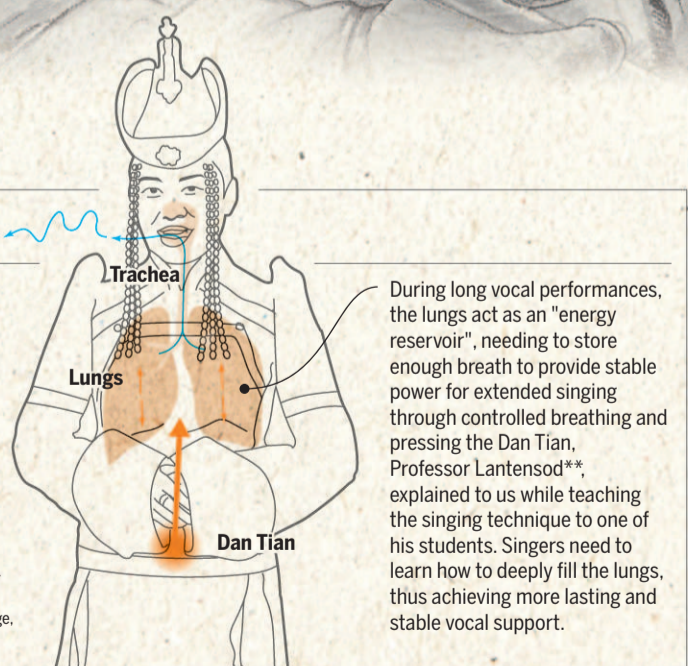
Lungs
From the lungs to the mouth, the air passes through the lungs, bronchi, trachea, larynx, pharynx, and finally to the mouth. The larynx is the breathing passage and vocal organ that vibrates through the vocal folds to produce sound and regulate the flow of air.

LONG SONG

Inner Mongolia long song is an important form of traditional music of the Mongolian ethnic group, renowned for its melodious, expansive, and broad melodies along with its unique singing style. Its rhythm is free, the vocal range is wide, and the melodies have significant fluctuations, often utilizing a wealth of ornamental notes and glissandos.



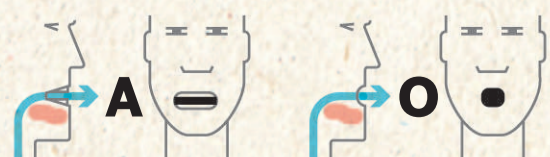
** Professor Lantensod is director of the long song department, Intangible Cultural Heritage College, Inner Mongolia Arts University



During long vocal performances, the lungs act as an "energy reservoir", needing to store enough breath to provide stable power for extended singing through controlled breathing and pressing the Dan Tian, Professor Lantensod** explained to us while teaching the singing technique to one of his students. Singers need to learn how to deeply fill the lungs, thus achieving more lasting and stable vocal support.

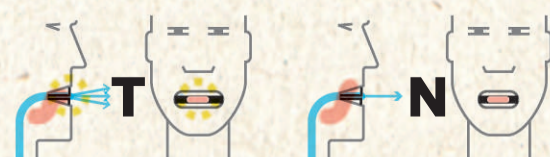
UNDERSTANDING HOW WE PRODUCE SOUND WITH EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

VOWELS



When we pronounce vowels like A or O in English, the airflow is free from your lungs, vocal cords open shortly and the sound is made with the shape of your mouth, teeth and lips.

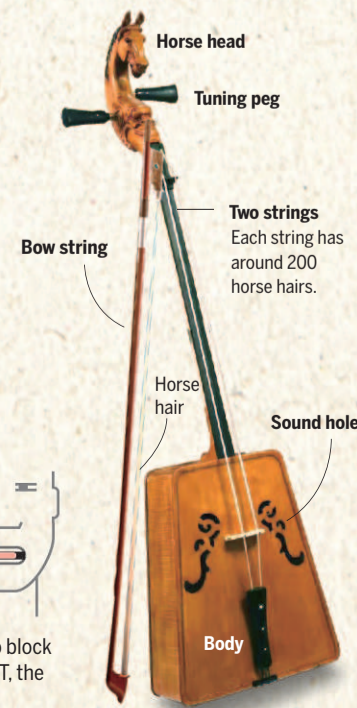
CONSONANTS



Consonant requires the use of tongue, teeth, mouth or lips to block the airflow and produce the specific sound. Saying the letter T, the tongue stops the airflow and lets the sound escape quickly.

HORSE-HEAD FIDDLE

The horse-head fiddle (aka matouqin) is a Mongolian instrument with the top of the pole carved into the shape of a horse head. The instrument has a long history and was quite popular with the Mongolian people during the early period of the 13th century.



Khoomei, also known as throat singing, is an ancient vocal tradition which allows singers to produce the sounds of multiple notes simultaneously in their throats, creating a mesmerizing, harmonic sound that echoes the natural world — from the howling wind to the rumbling river.

The khoomei tradition is found in China, Mongolia and Russia. In China, it is practiced mostly by ethnic Mongolians in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region and the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. In Russia, it is followed by the same people in the Tuva region in southern Siberia.

Khoomei has been passed down through generations of Mongolian nomads and is closely tied to their spiritual and cultural practices. Its ability to mimic the sounds of nature reflects a profound connection to the land, encapsulating the vastness and beauty of the steppes.

In 2009, khoomei was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, solidifying its significance as a vital part of the world's cultural heritage. This acknowledgment not only honors its cultural importance but also raises awareness of the ongoing need to preserve the ancient art form. The recognition has fueled efforts to ensure it continues to thrive, particularly in the face of modernization and global cultural shifts.

One of khoomei's remarkable qualities is its ability to transcend generations. While it has traditionally been performed by senior masters, the art form has increasingly captured the interest of younger generations.

The appearance of khoomei in popular reality shows and movies has helped raise its profile among a wider audience. The hit animated movie *Ne Zha 2*, for example, features the distinctive sound, especially during mythical moments, such as the appearance of the Tianyuan Ding (a magical Taoist cauldron). Sung by Halamuji, a young Mongolian artist, it contributes significantly to the atmosphere.

Young artists, such as those incorporating modern elements like jazz and electronic music, are helping khoomei evolve while preserving its authenticity. These innovations have expanded the reach of khoomei, attracting a diverse audience, including those with no direct ties to its origins. The rise of social media has played a pivotal role in this, with young performers using platforms to share their performances, making khoomei more accessible and appealing to a global audience.

One of the young artists is 35-year-old Hiimorit. Born and raised in the Xilin Gol League in Inner Mongolia, Hiimorit was introduced to music by his father, a singer. Since graduating from the Mongolian National University of Education with a doctorate in khoomei and horse-head fiddle in 2022, he has been teaching both traditions at the Minzu University of China.

Tanghis Khoo, 27, born in Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, first discovered khoomei while watching TV when he was five years old. He traveled to the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar after graduating from high school, to study at the Mongolian National University of Arts and Culture. One of his teachers is Od Sur-en, a revered figure in the world of khoomei. Now in his 70s, Sur-en has mentored over 1,000 students since 1993.

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