

The Present State of the Mongolian Epic and Some Topics for Future Research

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In the March 1993 issue of the bulletin Folklore Fellows Network Lauri Honko raised the question: "What is an epic?" As a small contribution of my own I shall confine myself here to the question of what we know about the *recent* state of the Mongolian epic (Bawden 1980). Had it not been for the intensive and praiseworthy collection of the first Mongolian epic by Russian and Finnish scholars during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the present century, we might not have reached the present stage in this branch of literary research. Through their recording projects, these scholars demonstrated the existence and dominance of the Mongolian epic.¹

Considering that practically all Mongolian literary productions believed to belong to the category of epic have been transmitted orally, the number of epics recorded in writing or on tape is rather large. All the texts have been preserved in writing either by researchers or, as is very often the case, by Mongol scribes. The classical case here is Burdukova and his scribe (1966). This method implied a certain "dictation" by the singer himself in which the text lost some of the spontaneity of its immediate presentation. A. B. Lord and Milman Parry have already made some reservations about these shortcomings. The use by Mongol scholars of a hurriedly written "shorthand Mongol" served the preservation of the spontaneous diction of the singer far better; this is evident in the notes made by, for instance, P. Horloo of the *Ĵula aldar qan* or by Ĵ. RinčindorĴi, of which I will give some samples. The use of recording machines has

¹ Nekljudov 1984; Vladimircov 1923; Poppe 1955; Ramstedt 1973.

substantially affected the qualities of the preserved texts; certainly all experienced fieldworkers agree with this premise.

Yet every performance of the same epic by the same singer has to be regarded as a new creation, because no singer will ever repeat his epic verbatim. Have we therefore the right to consider a mixture of the most beautiful and best-worded passages by various singers as the real epic (Heissig 1991b)?

The initial collection of Mongolian epics in the first part of the twentieth century was devoted to the West Mongolian epic of the Altai region, to the Khalkha territory and to the Calmuck versions of *Janggar*. Since the middle of this century not only the Khalkha-Mongols but the Mongols of Inner Mongolia and Sinkiang have likewise been very active, yielding a greater number of recorded epics. The officially sponsored actions in China to collect all possible versions of the *Geser* cycle and the *Janggar* deserve special mention for their achievements in obtaining many orally transmitted versions of these epics (Bormanshinov 1981; Heissig 1987). Oral versions of *Geser* have so far been published from the Inner Mongolian districts of Bagharin, Ulaandzab, and Dzarut as well as from Sinkiang, in addition to eleven volumes of written versions (Čuburil 1986-91). Likewise, 61 chapters of oral *Dzangar* versions have been published in Sinkiang together with 99 variants (*Ĵingyar* 1982-87/88).

It will suffice to state here that about 350 Mongolian epics have been recorded in one form or another, of which roughly a third have been published. They were all transmitted by persons aged between 50 and 75, either professional singers or simply persons who remembered the texts. In the younger age-groups knowledge, the ability to perform, and interests are declining. In other words, living Mongolian epics can still be found but it is high time they were collected. A precise picture of the relation between recorded and published texts is difficult to obtain: there are sound reasons to believe that quite a few scholars and collectors among the Mongols still have unpublished materials in their possession that have not yet been considered in scientific research. Thus stocktaking should be one of the next topics of international scientific cooperation.²

Approximately one-third of these epics have been used to gain a comprehensive picture of the structural characteristics of the Mongolian epic: for their analyses Nekljudov (1984) used 174 titles and Heissig (1988)

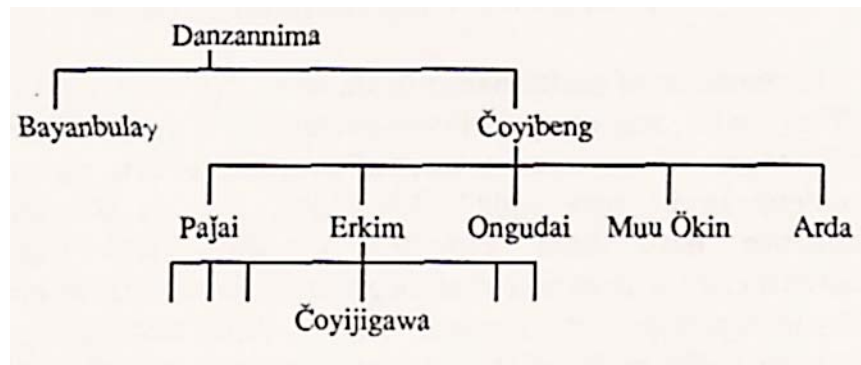
² Almost one hundred Mongolian epics have been translated.

about 187 titles. Many of these smaller epics elaborate the structure, subjects, and expressions of the older and more voluminous epics, transposing these items onto various other new protagonists. In this way they repeat the form of the previous Mongolian epic (Heissig 1979b).

This agrees with the conclusions drawn by Vladimircov from his research on the West Mongolian (Oirat) epic, that the Mongol singer of tales learns by heart from his teacher and predecessor “primarily” the plot, names, and characteristics of the persons in addition to a certain stock of poetic expressions, for example the so-called “formula.” That the “creative exponents of the epic,” the singers, learn their trade from their predecessors is further testified to by many personal interviews with singers who mention not only the names, age, and origin of their personal teachers, but also those of the teachers and predecessors of their teachers. Thus a certain North Mongolian singer from the Altai region claimed for some works in his repertoire a genealogy of many generations: the rhapsode Jilker (1858-1935) named himself as the twelfth singer in a long line of rhapsodes, transmitting ten epics to his nephew Öljei Bujan, who lived and sang from 1893 to 1967. One of these epics, *Ĵula aldar qan*, was recorded in Öljei Bujan’s version in 1957, ten years before Bujan’s death, by Professor Horloo of Ulan Bator, later transcribed by him in 1991, and translated by Koppe in 1992. A second version was also recorded (Coloo 1984).

I have to admit that a genealogy of 12 to 13 predecessors is rather rare, but the importance of such information in obtaining fixed data for the age of plots and poetic formulas cannot be stressed enough. Many of these interviews with singers contained information about the age when the young people start learning from their teachers: this happens mostly between the ages of ten and twenty. Applied to Jilker’s eleven remembered predecessors, it takes these epics back nearly two hundred years if we count the lifespan of each of the predecessors as 35 years. Such a reconstruction is feasible because the available biographies and life data of more than 200 singers show that most of them died at an advanced age, between 70 and 80. Many of the plots and motifs are undoubtedly much older, but the above calculations at least lead to one fixed point.

We find some support for these calculations in the vertical and horizontal oral transmission of narrative plots and poetic formulas in some of the epics of such recent East Mongolian singers as Čoyijigawa (born 1933) and the famous singer and poet Paĵai (1902-62) (see further Kara 1970). Paĵai was one of four pupils of the rhapsode Čoyibeng (1858-1928),



(Sampilnorbu and Wang hsin 1990)

while Čoyijigawa is the personal pupil of Erkim, a pupil of Čoyibeng in the second generation. Čoyibeng himself was the pupil of a certain Danzannima (1836-89), a lineage that makes the present-day Čoyijigawa via Erkim a third generation (cf. the above table), thus explaining the similarities of expression found with Paĵai as well as with Čoyijigawa. Fully 34 singers in the three generations after Čoyibeng referred to him as one of their sources and exemplars.

All of these correspondences illustrate the transportation of oral formulas over a certain span of time, testifying to a continued orality. This is the situation for the majority of Mongolian epics. We have, however, also to admit the existence of some manuscripts of parts of the West Mongolian *Janggar* epic, as well as of “Qan qaranguı” (Burdukova 1966; Heissig 1991b), from which some rhapsodes learned their texts in the past century. Considering the state of literacy of the Mongolian population until the late nineteenth century, as well as the great number of illiterate Mongolian singers who came mostly from uneducated pastoral families, the influence of written texts on the transmission of Mongolian epics seems to be rather small. It is therefore not feasible to assume for the Mongolian heroic epics an intermediate written popularization of formerly oral texts, such as has been documented for English ballads since the sixteenth century via printed and cheaply sold broadsheets, which finally enabled wider oral performance of the ballads (Finnegan 1977).

All Mongolian epics have in common the use of alliterating rhymes, with the meaning of the first four-line segment being repeated in a second four-line segment of varying alliteration. Further proof of the age-old dominance of alliterative rhyming within the corpus of the Mongolian epic can be seen in the recurrent citation of rhymed parts from the epic within the prose of the Mongolian heroic fairytales, which repeat the plots and the names of heroes in the epic in prosimetrical form. Since we already find prosimetrical narrations, the alternating use of prose and rhymed poetry, in the first part of the *Secret History of the Mongols* in the thirteenth century, we must assume that the Mongols had some familiarity with this form at that early period. With Chinese storytellers the use of the prosimetrum was in fact known much earlier. Rhymed poetry occurs among the Mongols in all forms of ritual and official expression like shaman songs, incantations and prayers, laudations, and formal addresses as well as didactical sayings. Rhymed laudations are paralleled as early as in the cenotaphs of the Central Asiatic Turkic rulers. The epic, stemming from such occasions, was bound to adopt that form of expression.

Present-day research in Mongolian epics has to consider six generic variations. Two of them—apparently the oldest (A and B below)—are induced by what V. Propp (1975) termed “situations of want.”

A) *The courting epic*: the hero on his way to the bride has to show his prowess in various initiation-like tests culminating in the fight with a many-headed monster, the Mangus. The Mangus is a symbol for all adverse forces.

B) *The epic of recovery of lost possessions*: the hero has to fight to regain his people, wife, and chattels, all of which monsters have stolen during his absence, and to subdue the monsters.

C) *Mythicized epic*: the descent of a hero of supernatural origin and his fight for peace and order on earth. The prototype is Geser Khan.

D) *The power-delegating epic*: heroes surrounding the ruler in an Arthurian-like circle are delegated by the ruler to fight threatening enemies and aggressors. The prototype is the Janggar cycle.

E) *Composite ritualized epic*: a combination of heroic and religious motifs, sung to ward off the monster as an impersonation of threatening war, plagues, and natural catastrophes. The prototype is *Mangus-i darugsan üliger* (*Stories of the suppression of the monster*; see Nima 1992; Heissig 1992a).

F) *The book-based epic (Bensen üiliger)*: Mongolian transformations of subjects and motifs from Chinese heroic novels into a new form of minstrel songs combining prose and rhymed poetry. They are dominant and still very much alive in East Mongolia. Research has begun just recently after B. Rinčen (1961) and D. Cerensodnom (1967) proved their existence. More than 150 professional and amateur singers in the East Mongolian provinces of China still transmit these book-epics in an individually varying form.

Translations of Mongolian epics in categories A to E already exist in English, French, German, and Russian, but not enough to secure a comprehensive picture of the Mongolian epic. Additional translations with the necessary annotations as well as more popular editions should be one of the next topics for future research. In selecting texts for translation, the existence of a number of varying recordings must be taken into account. In the archive of folklore texts at the Mongol Academy of Sciences in Ulan Bator, R. Narantuya (1988) counted 273 different versions of 72 epics. Some small epics in this collection like *Buĭin dawa qan* or *Gunan ulaan baatar* have only four variants, while more popular texts like *Again ulaan baatar* feature 28 variants. The *Janggar* versions recorded in North Mongolia alone amount to 12 textual variants. Scholars will have to find a way of making all variants available for research; composite editions pasting together all the beautiful passages from various versions should not be condoned. Proper edition leads to comparative work, implicating an analysis of the structure of the epic and its narrative motifs.

In analyzing Mongolian epic one has to be aware that it is the literary documentation of a highly mobile society, this mobility being due to centuries of warfare, nomadic and seminomadic pastoral farming of livestock, and intensive caravan trade. The latter had a particularly strong influence on the transport not only of goods but also of ideas and narrative motifs. Most of the caravans employed one helper who was able to tell tales and epics during the evenings. These facts bring the Mongolian epic within the scope of Unesco's Silk Roads Project.

The transformation of traditional formulaic phraseology as well as the individual expressions of the singers has not yet been studied enough. Comparative analysis of various versions of one epic by different singers, juxtaposing the performance texts vertically line after line, will bring to light the creative variability and the stability of oral tradition.

There exists, as far as I know, no catalogue of Mongolian narrative motifs. Only a beginning has been attempted in analyzing the motifs of 54 epics from Khalkha, West Mongolia, and East Mongolia. This initiative has already brought out some territorial differences, following my initial proposal for a “structural motif typology” (1981). Two scholars from Inner Mongolia, Professors Būrinbeki and Buyankesig (1988), further investigated 51 epic texts from Barga, Qorcin, Ordos, Buyannoor, Kukunoor, and Sinkiang, using the proposed method. These tests showed the adaptability of the method to all epics of types A-E. For type F, the structural pattern of the Bensen *ūliger* proved different because of its Chinese literary prototypes (Riftin 1987). Continued comparison of Mongol epics and Bensen *ūliger* did, however, show a common structure for the meeting of heroes with the enemy, the forms of provocation, and the start of fighting (Riftin 1985).

These inaugural steps do not cover the great number of motifs in the Mongolian epic. The next necessary steps towards a catalogue of Mongol narrative motifs must include more monographs on single motifs: Mongolian and European scholars have already begun to work along that line by publishing very interesting material. Some of these studies promise to reveal the historical reality behind the symbolic codification of the motifs. Thus, the influences of old narrative themes have been studied (Yondon 1989). Various monographic papers by Inner Mongolian scholars on motifs of the Mongolian epic demand special notice. They deal with the initiatory formulae of the epic (Buyankesig and Badma 1986), its plot (Rinčindorji 1986), the early periods of the world (Bayar 1988), miraculous pregnancy (Aradinkūū 1993) and birth of the hero (Meng-ĵin Boo 1992), home and palace (Buyankesig 1988), camp and settlement (Učiraltu 1989), features of the hero (Tegūsbayar 1992), calling the horse (Ĵirγal 1991), the horse image (Būrinbeki and Buyankesig 1992), magical transformations (Kūrelša 1991), characteristics of the monster (Buyanbatu 1987/1988; Mōngkeĵayaγa 1988), the one-eyed monster (Kūrelša 1991), death of the monster (Buyankesig 1989), and death and magical revival of the hero (Kūrelša 1988).

More attention should also be paid to the biographies of the singers of tales and their teachers, because a better knowledge of this topic would help to discern influences and contamination from adjacent countries like Tibet and the Central Asiatic countries with Turkic populations. The influences of the Turkic epic are still not sufficiently realized (Reichl 1992). The

recent pilot study by Anatoly Kičikov (1992), identifying motifs from the Turkic epic in Calmuck versions of the Janggar epic, is just a beginning.

Research on structures and motifs in Mongolian epics has so far shown that certain motifs and heroic plots are not limited to Mongolian territory. They not only spill over into neighboring ethnic groups and their narrations, but are also paralleled in the epics and narrations of more distant nationalities of Eurasia and Northern Asia. Let us take three examples:

a) With a different title, the same topic is told not only by the Bargha-Mongols in Heilungchiang but also by the neighboring Evenki.

b) The battle with the bride, such a famous motif in Chinese and Mongolian chivalric tales, is also found in the epics of Turkic groups right up to Anatolia (Reichl 1992).

c) Not only the witchlike Kundry in the medieval European Parzival stories rides a bluish-grey mule; the same holds true of the Mongolian witchlike wives and daughters of the dangerous monster, the mule being depreciated for being a hybrid breed.

In not a few biographies of singers, wandering Buddhist monks appear in the role of transporting previously unknown literary plots, motifs, and myths from one territory to another.³ I mention as an example of such a phenomenon the case of a wandering monk who happened to be the uncle of a singer. The monk traveled largely in West Mongolian territory in Sinkiang, the Kukunoor region, and Tibet. When he returned in 1941 to the home of his parents in East Mongolia, he taught his eleven-year-old nephew Janggar stories. The boy later became a singer who now performs the Janggar epic, formerly unknown in East Inner Mongolia. A few singers of Janggar in Sinkiang also claim to have learned their epics from traveling monks.

It seems to be clear that a territory like Mongolia, situated among all possible influences from all the Silk Roads, tracks, and extensions, must be a mine of motifs, myths, literary plots, and transformations. Under the present circumstances, however, there is not much time left to record the great volume of oral literature still to be found there, before the impact of modern technical civilization makes these basic memories obsolete. We

³ A laudable initiative in this respect is the edition of 250 biographies of singers born between 1836 and 1958 in East Inner Mongolia, published in Chinese (Sampilnorbu and Wang hsin 1990).

must discuss ways of preserving the remnants of oral tradition before it is too late.

The first urgent research task is therefore to establish intensive cooperation in creating a “Motif catalogue of the Mongolian epic.” The first step towards this goal is to encourage monographic studies of single motifs. The second task, closely related to the catalogue, is to collect and record those epics still extant in Mongolia and in the Inner Mongolian districts of China. Although many of them are no longer transmitted by professional singers, but only remembered by a younger generation and repeated according to hearsay, the epics must not be allowed to fade out unrecorded. To secure this oral and semiliterary material for coming generations as well as to enable scholars to work on an international basis, the third task must be the creation of an archive of epic oral tradition under the guidance of an international body.

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