

Mongolian Oral Epic Poetry: An Overview

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Background

Mongolian *tuuli*, or epic poetry, the most important genre in Mongolian literary history, is a vast tradition of orally composed works. Accompanied by musical instruments such as the *tobshur* and the *choor*, *tuuli* relates these nomadic peoples' glorious past: their ideal heroes—the bravest hunters and herdsmen—and their ideal world—rich pastures, open steppes, decorated yurts and palaces, beautiful maidens, and swift horses. The heroes keep and guard these riches, perform deeds in defense of their holdings, and, more importantly, acquire new herds and new nomadic territories.

The scholarship on Mongolian epic can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ We have, for instance, some early German and Russian versions gathered from among the Volga Kalmyks. Around the beginning of this century, researchers such as G. Ramstedt, C. Zhamcarano, and B. Vladimirtsov reached many Mongolian regions and recorded a number of valuable epics (Niekeliuduofu 1991:1, 25). At that time scholars believed that there were three epic regions in the Mongolian world. As Vladimirtsov points out (1983-84:11):

At the present time in the Mongolian world, as far as we know, there are three areas, three regions, where the heroic epic cycles live or still exist, where professional singers of tales are found, . . . distinguished one from the other by many individual features. The bearers of these three types and forms of the Mongolian epic are the following Mongolian tribes: the Buriats both of the Irkutsk *gouvernement* and the Trans-Baikal district, the Volga Kalmyks (Oirats), together with those who in the second half of the 18th century nomadized out of Russia and now live in Dzungaria and on the T'ien-Shan, and finally, the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, together with some Mongolized Turkic tribes. In each of these regions populated by one of these tribes, we find the heroic epic, organically mature, having its own

¹ See further Bergmann 1804-05.

definite history and being preserved or living at present in one or another characteristic form.

Vladimirtsov goes on to note that “there still exist areas, Mongolian tribes about which our information in this regard is quite insufficient, and we can say almost nothing as to the position of the heroic epic there” (11-12).

Apparently little was known at that time about epic centers and the epic tradition in China, but scholarship on Mongolian epic poetry has developed considerably.² The work of accumulating, publishing, and studying the epic tradition has been carried out for more than forty years, with a pause from the second half of the sixties through the seventies due to the Cultural Revolution. New discoveries have been reported in regions that were never before studied. In what follows, I would like first to describe the spread of Mongolian epic in China, and then discuss a few aspects of the Mongolian epic tradition that differ from other epic traditions.

According to reliable statistics (see Būrinbeki and Boyanhesig 1988:1), seventy different epic poems have been published in the Mongolian language in China. The two most famous epics—the *Jianggar* and the *Geser*—are not included in these statistics. These two traditions boast a number of different versions; for example, we have ten versions in thirteen volumes of the Mongolian *Geser*: *Ordos Geser*, *Oirat Geser*, *Zaya-in Geser*, *Usutu Zuu-in Geser*, *Ling Geser*, *Nomchi Hatun Geser*, *Beijing Modon Bar Geser*, *Long Fu Si Geser*, *Pajai Geser Un Tooji*, and *Abay Geser Hūbegün*. And more than seventy “cantos,” exceeding two hundred thousand lines, have been collected of the *Jianggar*, not including variations. These epics were found in Mongolian areas in China—Bargu, Buriat, Jaruud, Horchin, Chahar, Ordos, and Ulaganchab—as well as in regions with Mongolian inhabitants, such as Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, and Liaoning. The majority of all these epics and epic cycles were published in Mongolian, Todo, and Chinese over the past twenty years.

Within China, scholars in this field gradually reached a consensus that there were three areas of China where Mongolian epics flourished: two of

² There is no space here for an exhaustive review of the scholarship. In short, several relevant research institutions have been founded; quite a number of the influential epics were published in Mongolian, Chinese, and Oirat; and there has been a group of scholars researching Mongolian epic in China. One example must suffice: “The Geser Office,” a special institution with several scholars in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, focuses on collecting, printing, and studying the Mongolian epic *Geser*. It is worth mentioning that they are scheduled to publish 23 different versions in 34 volumes of this epic; 10 versions in 13 volumes have already appeared.

them, Bargu and Horchin, are in northeastern Inner Mongolia and one, Oirat, is in Xinjiang. A few epics were found outside of these specific regions—in Bayannuur and Chahar, for example—but after careful analysis we have concluded that these do not represent an independent epic tradition but belong instead to one of the three epic centers.

Epic Centers

An epic center is an area characterized by a strong epic tradition in which a group of epics is linked together by common historical, geographical, and tribal features that differentiate it from other such groups.

The Bargu Epic Center

The Bargu people, a tribe with a long history among the Mongols, inhabit the three Bargu Banners (counties) of Hölön Boir Aimak in northeastern Inner Mongolia. Nearly twenty epic poems have been gathered in this relatively small region. Several epics recorded from other Mongolian areas such as Ulaganchab and Ordos are also related to this center. The representative epics include *Gurban Nasutai Gunagan Ulagan Bagatur*, *Altan Galagu Hüüi*, *Aburaltu Khan*, *Bayan Bolod Ebügen*, *Ajig Teneg Bagatur*, *Sireetü Mergen*, *Batu Uljei Bagatur*, and *Silin Galjuu Bagatur*.

First and foremost, the Bargu epic retains the ancient themes of the hunter and the herdsman's primitive ideas and desires—for instance, the fighting between families and clans or the marriage of a hero, which in some cases is achieved by bride-capture. As for the size of the epic, we know that none of the epics in this center exceeds two thousand lines, with only ten to twenty motifs in each work, a length regarded as quite short within the overall Mongolian epic tradition. Typical characters include a main hero, who is always a hunter or herdsman, and sometimes one or two comrades. The hero's opponent is a monster, usually the many-headed *manggus*.³ A semi-poetic, semi-narrative form is the major feature of the Bargu epics. This form signals a degeneration of the oral art. In addition, there is no report of any professional epic singers found among the Bargu people. The performers are amateurs—common herdsmen and their wives.

³ See the section below on the *manggus*.



All these phenomena indicate that epic development and epic creativity ceased long ago. Performances recently witnessed by the author are a kind of echo of this tradition's glorious past, when there existed a large number of talented singers. The Bargu epics have in some respects maintained the original form of the early stages of epic poetry, but the Bargu people have in effect lost their tradition of epic singing; it even seems that the ability to play accompanying musical instruments during a performance has been lost. In spite of such losses, Bargu performers have tried to keep oral performance in its original form in order to preserve these living fossils of folk art.

The Oirat Epic Center

As an independent tradition, the Oirat epics have spread among the "Four Oirats" and the Chahar people in Xinjiang. It has been reported that these epics were also found among the Mongol tribes who inhabited Qinghai and Gansu. Around the end of the last and the beginning of this century, a few performances were collected in Xinjiang and Qinghai and printed in Russian (see Niekeliuduofu 1991:1-4). The majority, however, have been found over the last twenty years. The most influential is

undoubtedly the *Jianggar* cycle.⁴ As mentioned above, we now have several Mongolian versions of this epic, including the so-called “Raw Material Printings,” a Todo version, and two Chinese translations. In addition, twenty other epics have been gathered by scholars such as Rinchindorji, Badma, and Jamso (Rinchindorji 1987:23-25). Because of these modern discoveries, the great Russian Mongolist Boris Vladimirtsov’s conclusion that the Oirats have only a single poem has to be revised.

The Oirat epic has its own characteristics. First of all, we can recognize the same primitive motifs and elements that are found in the Bargu epic tradition: for instance, the pursuit and marriage by capture, fighting between families and clans, and expeditions to carry out revenge. However, we can also find later historical layers, such as Buddhist worldviews, and new relations between the khan and his heroes and people. These features reflect the actual social structure in the Dzungar Kingdom. Indeed, even the battles in the Oirat epics are different from those in the Bargu tradition; alongside personal fighting, clan revenge, and the like, a completely new type of contest may be found, the battle between kingdoms.

At any rate, the Oirat epic is a rather well developed tradition, both historically and poetically. The majority exceed two thousand lines, including the *Jianggar* cycle. There are a great many characters involved in the stories—a large group of heroes, each with a distinct personality and playing a different role in the khan’s court. The Oirat stories also have complicated plots. They are molded into formulas or “common passages,” such as the fixed ornament and epithet, regular motif series, and other features. It is quite natural that some similarities exist between Oirat and their Turkic neighbors’ epics. For example, the main hero of most Oirat epics is a khan, and it is common for the old hero to be defeated and his descendants to continue fighting against the enemy. A similar such epic can also be found among the Turkic traditions.

In this center there is a long tradition of well trained and skillful professional singers. They are called *tuulchi* or *Jianggarchi*, meaning epic singer or *Jianggar* singer. We have found that five counties are famous for their *Jianggarchi*: Hobokser, Wenquan, Nilek, Hejing, and Heshuo. According to some legends among Oirat singers, Tur Bayar, a very talented *Jianggarchi* who lived in the seventeenth century, could sing seventy chapters (or cantos) of the *Jianggar*; he therefore received the title *dalan tobchi*, which means “seventy-chapter pouch” (Rinchindorji 1987:24).

⁴ Some scholars do not think that the *Jianggar* is a single epic, but rather a group of epics, because the cycle is really a series of poems. These poems are independent of each other and are mutually connected only by the fact that Jianggar Khan appears in all of them.

The Horchin Epic Center

Horchin represents a particular kind of regional culture among the Mongolian tribes. Located in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, close to the agricultural region, it has slowly changed its way of life from nomadic herding to farming. For hundreds of years it has thus been a semi-agricultural, semi-animal husbandry region. Horchin possesses its own dialect and strong shamanistic traditions as compared to other areas. It is also the birthplace and core of the *bensen üliger*, or “text story,”⁵ an influential folk art that uses Chinese historical fictions and legends as raw material to produce Mongolian verse tales and is well known for its folk songs, which usually tell a tragic tale about a hero’s revolt or a sad love story.

One can easily distinguish Horchin epics from others on the basis of their many unique features. For example, the main hero is sometimes an emperor, and thus does not personally participate in the fighting; instead, he sends other heroes as champions to fight for him. The hero’s opponent is, just as in other traditions, the *manggus*, but in Horchin epics the *manggus* is more powerful and dangerous than those found in the other two epic centers. Another distinguishing feature of Horchin epic is that each *manggus* has its own name. In other traditions, it always has many heads, but no name. The heroes, on the other hand, are correspondingly quite weak and dull. In this tradition, they cannot defeat the opponent, but must rely on Moomai Manggus, a surrendered *manggus*, to overcome the enemy. This is a novel feature when set against the background of the whole Mongolian epic tradition.

Another distinguishing feature is that marriage, one of the two basic themes of Mongolian epics, has been neglected by Horchin singers. It is difficult for them to understand that their hero should perform heroic deeds and conduct dangerous exploits in order to obtain a wife. They even see this as a shameful thing. In their epics, the beautiful maiden must come to marry the hero on her own initiative. Indeed, women’s chastity and virginity are held in high esteem. The hero’s wife must do all she can to protect her chastity if she is captured by the *manggus*, and she always manages to keep herself pure until rescued.

⁵ In which the usually illiterate singer holds a text in hand to symbolize that the performance is not fictional but historically true to its sources.

Buddhist elements are also found in these epics. The Buddhist worldview has entered into the poetry and influenced many formulaic descriptions, such as the opening motif, an explanation of how the sun, moon, and stars formed under the power of the Buddha. The hero of a Horchin epic may burn incense and present a *hadag*⁶ to his steed. Sometimes the hero's weapon is a Buddhist instrument of some sort. One should also note that some plots apparently were borrowed from Chinese legends that were disseminated in the Horchin region over a long period of time.

Horchin epics are connected with some other oral genres, such as *bensen üliger* and *holboo* ("folk ode"). The narrative skills native to these verse tales and folk odes have been used in epic singing. It also appears that Horchin singers work more freely within the traditional practice, following their own inspirations and composing their work creatively. They even use other epics as raw material for such composition; for example, in the Horchin epic *Asar Chagan Haiching*, sung by Chuluu and Nasuntemur, characters and plots are borrowed from the popular epic *Silin Galjuu Bagatur*.

Structure and Theme

Mongolian epic poetry as a whole has its own basic structure and themes. According to the German Mongolist Walther Heissig, there are more than three hundred motifs, which we can further classify into a series of fifteen motifs: time, the hero's birth, the hero's locality, the hero himself, the steed's personality and capability, expedition, the sworn brother and aide, threats, the enemy, fighting against the enemy, the hero's stratagem, courtship, matrimony, wedding, and the return to homeland. A considerable number of motifs with close mutual connections form a motif series. For instance, under the second series, "the hero's birth," we have (1) given birth by parents in the usual manner, (2) born from a stone, (3) forming by himself, (4) assigned to be born by a deity, (5) parents described, (5.1) old couple who do not have a child, and (5.2) couple that begs for a child.⁷

Thus Mongolian epics tell the story of a hero, his uncommon birth, his fertile fields and uncountable livestock, his courtship and marriage to a

⁶ A silk scarf customarily used in Buddhist rituals.

⁷ See further Bürinbeki 1997:32-33; Bürinbeki and Boyanhesig 1988:987-1021.

maiden with beautiful cheeks, and his heroic battle against an opponent— usually the many-headed *mangus* or, in some cases, an entire enemy kingdom. With the assistance of a heroic companion and his horse the hero defends his property successfully against all attackers. The heroes differ from epic to epic in various traditions, but we can conclude in the end that all Mongolian epics follow two basic patterns: fighting and courtship. In other words, one cannot find a Mongolian epic with a theme other than these two basic types. Therefore, the main focus of the audience is not, say, how the poem will end but how the story will develop.

Constituent units of Mongolian epics can be distinguished on different levels, namely theme, subtheme, and motif, which we believe to be the smallest formative unit. According to this classification, we may group the epics into two patterns. Epics with one unifying theme are single-round epics, and those with two or more themes are multi-round epics. The multi-round epics can in turn be divided into two types by their structure: the series type and the parallel type. Below is a summary of a single-round epic, *Aguula Khan*, collected by G. J. Ramstedt (quoted from Poppe 1979:106):

In a fine earlier time there lived the ruler of the northeastern continent, Agula Khan. His wife once had an ominous dream and woke up her husband, who paid no attention to her alarm. Having lain down again to sleep, his wife saw in a dream that the fifteen-headed yellow Mangus An Dulai was moving to war on them. She again woke the khan and he, after use of divination, was convinced her dream was true. The khan equipped himself for the trip and went out towards the Mangus. After meeting him and exchanging such questions as who he was and where he was going, he engaged in a duel with him and slew him, after which he trampled the Mangus's wife, the size of a spider, to death, gathered up the Mangus's possessions, returned home, and lived peacefully and happily.

A further analysis of themes and subthemes will give us a more fundamental understanding of these epics. Again, one of the two basic themes is fighting, and it has two subthemes: fighting for revenge and fighting for possessions. As for courtship, the subthemes are marriage by capture, marriage through competition, and marriage arranged by parents. Let us represent each theme and subtheme by a symbol, as A, B, A1, B1, and so forth:

A Matrimony

- A1 marriage by capture
- A2 marriage through competition
- A3 marriage arranged by parents

B Fighting

- B1 fighting for revenge
- B2 fighting for possessions

The series type of multi-round epics combine rounds in patterns such as A+B, A+B+B, B+B, and so on.⁸ Thus Hangin concludes (1989:8) that

[a]n analysis of the structure of a typical long epic reveals that it consists of several rounds or “cantos.” Generally, there is an introduction, followed by the opening round. It portrays the battle with the mangus or other opponent, and defeat of the hero. The second round might be the suit of the hero for the Heavenly Daughter, in which he must win in the Manly Games. The third round might be the reanimation of the hero who has been laid low in the first round, or his victory over the mangus-monster, his return to his wife and family, and so on.

Parallel stories, like the Oirat *Jiנגgar*, often differ. On one hand, the cantos are independent from one another, and are connected only by the fact that *Jiנגgar* Khan appears in all the poems. The *bagatur*-heroes all serve *Jiנגgar* Khan and also appear in all the poems. Nevertheless, one cannot discover the proper sequence of events among these cantos. On the other hand, there are a number of reasons to define each of them as a single poem. For one thing, each canto includes a brief introduction of the central hero, *Jiנגgar* Khan, and the other heroes. Each canto also has the same story-pattern: a large feast appears in both the opening and closing of the canto to surround the story in a ring-frame, as if the story never had a beginning or an ending. In other words, these cantos describe the same group of heroes with a conventional scheme and narrative style. As Vladimirtsov puts it (1983-84:17-18), the *Jiנגgar*

has far more internal similarity of action than the separate song-poems; they are linked not only by internal connection (by one and the same khan); each of them is a natural continuation, a development of the preceding: contradictions almost never arise; the singer performing any given song calls others to mind, and sketches them on a distant background. A real *Jiנגgarchi* is one who knows and clearly presents the whole poem, this entire cycle, and at the same time can perform for the listeners any song of

⁸ See further Bürinbeki and Boyanhesig 1988:987-1021; Rinchindorji 1989.

the *Jiנגgar* cycle in such a way that it is fully understood and produces a complete impression. Finally, the *Jiנגgar* cycle differs from the Russian *byliny* cycle further by the fact that Khan Jiנגgar is an actual hero, a major functioning figure of the poem; true, he turns up in some songs in the background, yielding place to this or that knight, but all the same is a functioning hero everywhere. Last, the songs are chapters of the *Jiנגgar* cycle which were delimited beforehand and made into a cycle by a definite quantity of knights close to Jiנגgar, the heroes of the individual songs.⁹

Certain features of Mongolian epic have their roots in real-world practices and customs. The plot of marriage by capture (A1) in Mongolian epic poetry is undoubtedly the echo of an actual custom that existed in the clan society of this nomadic world. Exogamy (interclan matrimony) persisted for many years; the same is true of battles for revenge. There is reason to believe that motifs such as these have their origin in ancient times. As a special kind of vehicle, the oral epic has recorded certain historical practices, and exogamy is one example. The hero's quest for a wife from among other distant clans reflects the earliest form of marriage.

Marriage through competition (A2), to take yet another example, became more common in later periods, and stems from developing tribal alliances. The most important thing for the patriarch or chieftain of a tribe to consider was how to become more powerful, and marriage functioned as a bond to achieve tribal union. There are passages in some epics in which the hero's father-in-law leads his clan and all their property to join the hero's clan. The competition involved is always the "Three Manly Games": archery, wrestling, and horseracing. These contests were thought to be the best way to choose the bravest and strongest herdsman or hunter from among the gathered competitors (Poppe 1979:119-20; Rinchindorji 1989:18). These games still survive as the most common form of organized competition among the Mongols.

It is well to keep in mind that although the epics include historical elements, their main function is far from recording history. We should rather think of them as a reservoir of historical echoes. In the following section I would like to introduce the figures common in the Mongolian epic tradition. I will emphasize the elements that differ from other epic traditions.

⁹ As far as we know, it is quite possible that a *Jiנגgarchi* knows only and can sing only a few cantos of the whole *Jiנגgar* cycle. There is an old saying among these singers that there used to be seventy-two cantos of *Jiנגgar*; nobody could present all of them. See further Rinchindorji 1987.

The Hero

The most important figure is of course the hero. Some scholars argue that Chinggis Khan, as the “chief and leader of the ‘Steppe Aristocracy’ of nomadic feudalism” (Poppe 1979:7), has been the main hero of all the Mongolian epics.¹⁰ As Poppe points out, the legendary information about Chinggis Khan became so interwoven with genuine historical fact that Mongolian chroniclers soon ceased to distinguish between the two. Legends about him and his exploits occupy a leading position in the written epic literature of the Mongols. Interestingly enough, Chinggis Khan appears in these works not only as a hero, the leader of mighty warriors, but also as a wise teacher. Moreover, the epic works about him have, in distinction to other types, no local character. This is understandable, since these works to a large degree go back to the period when a unified Mongolia existed and feature Chinggis Khan, the emperor of a considerable part of the Mongol people, as their chief hero.

But this position can be challenged. In fact, one of the most characteristic features of Mongolian epic poetry is its complete neglect of any authentic historical events and personalities. There certainly were national heroes and great military campaigns suitable for heroic epic treatment, but we cannot find any evidence of historical fact in such works. In some epics that might have been composed in earlier periods, the hero is apparently the representative of the Mongol people’s ideal hero—an outstanding hunter or herdsman. Being strong and brave is his fundamental nature. In some later epics the hero takes on the identity of a feudal lord. Even here, one could not find any evidence to support the hypothesis that there were real correspondences between the hero in epic and the historical figure Chinggis Khan. The Mongolian epic composers even go so far as to carefully avoid using geographical names in their works. The “hero’s locality” is one of the fifteen motif series, and Mongolian singers have indeed developed many formulas describing the open steppe, the lofty mountains, the clear rivers, and so on, but no one has any idea of where or during what period the story took place.¹¹ No Mongolian epic specifies for

¹⁰ See for example Qi Mu Dao Ji and Zhao Yongxian 1981.

¹¹ Some local geographical names occasionally appear in the details of some stories, as scholars have pointed out, but as a whole, Mongolian epic is generally set in a fictional place in a “fine earlier time.” See Jams0 1988.

itself a certain historical period; rather, the story takes place in a “fine earlier time” — that is, an indefinite time.

The *Manggus*

Now let us consider the hero’s adversary. As stated above, the mythical monster *manggus* quite often steps into the role of the hero’s opponent. This monster always has many heads—fifteen, twenty-five, or even as many as ninety-five. The initiative always belongs to the creature since the goal of his attack is to seize treasure, livestock, and beautiful maidens.

It is interesting that, from the Horchin people in eastern Mongolia to the Oirat people around the Tien Shan Mountain and the Kalmyk people on the Volga River, the *manggus* seems to exist everywhere, dependably emerging as the chief villain in all crimes. Some scholars therefore argue that it stands for certain natural forces that the Mongol people could not control, while others believe that the *manggus* is representative of the feudal lord (!). But the matter may not be so simple. As a villain the creature must of course be vested with negative force, but we should remember that Mongolian epics do not belong to any one historical period or social class, and thus neither does the *manggus*.

The word *manggus* itself emerges rather early, appearing in the most important document of Mongolian history, *The Secret History of the Mongols*,¹² compiled during the first half of the thirteenth century. According to Nicholas Poppe, “the word *manggus* is attested in the meaning of ‘great serpent’” (1979:134).

The image of the *manggus* is connected with the Mongolian peoples’ archaic religion—shamanism, which spread widely and lasted long as a dominant worldview. According to its tenets, the world can be divided into two sides—white and black, west and east, good and evil, and so on. Thus there are ninety-nine *tegri*, or heavenly deities, divided between east and west. The thirty-three eastern deities are evil, while their western counterparts stand in the opposite camp. This worldview is reminiscent of the structure of Mongolian epic poetry, in which the characters are clearly grouped into two opposite sides, one aligned with the hero and the other

¹² This document is regarded by Mongolists as one of the most significant historical records of the early Mongolian peoples. It was compiled by nomadic Mongolian historians.

with the *manggus*. Conflicts exist everywhere between the two sides, as the following selective list illustrates:

hero	<i>versus</i>	<i>manggus</i>
beautiful maidens	<i>versus</i>	ugly female relative
swift steed	<i>versus</i>	sluggish donkey
towering palace	<i>versus</i>	gloomy cave
tasty food	<i>versus</i>	human corpse
rich steppe	<i>versus</i>	deserted land
domestic animals	<i>versus</i>	ominous animals
deity as patron	<i>versus</i>	devil as patron

Obviously such binary opposition is a conventional principle of structuring the epic that reveals the Mongolian people's archaic outlook on nature, society, and the spiritual world.¹³

The Horse

In Mongolian epic poetry the horse plays a tremendously important role. From the frequency of the horse motif in this tradition, one could easily get the impression that horses are as important as their masters. We have not yet found any epic in this nomadic tradition that is without a steed and the assistance it provides. After all, how could it be possible that a steppe hero should set out on an expedition to pursue a maiden or fight a multi-headed *manggus* without his horse?

A number of characteristics illustrate this importance. The frequent motif of the simultaneous birth of the hero and his horse reveals the notion that there is a predestined correlation between them. An exceptional hero must possess an extraordinary steed. In some cases, the horse is born prior to its master's birth, thus heralding the hero's coming into the world.

Horses possess not only supernatural strength and speed, but also wisdom and magical power. Poppe points out that the horse usually acts as faithful comrade and counselor to the hero and plays a crucial role in the events of the epic: "For the Khalkha-Mongolian epics, and not only for them but also for Oirat and Buriat-Mongolian epic works, very characteristic is the circumstance that the horse in them assumes the role of advisor to the hero, foreseeing events and forewarning his master" (1979:128). The hero regularly turns to his steed as a friend, companion,

¹³ See further Bürinbeki 1997:87-138.

and comrade equal to himself. In fact, we frequently find the theme of the hero who does not listen to his horse's advice, and in such cases it invariably turns out that the horse was right. Moreover, in some epics, the horse plays a decisive part in the story. For instance, the hero Bomerdeni sometimes cannot defeat his opponent; he must turn to his horse, bow three times, and beg for help three times; only then does he gain his horse's necessary advice. In another case, the hero Silin Galjuu fights unsuccessfully for three years against the *manggus*'s thirty copper boys until his horse tells his master the way to kill his enemy. For that matter, the horse's role is not always in battle, but sometimes in the hero's courtship. For instance, the horse may transform itself into a bee or a mosquito and secretly help its master to win the games in competition for the bride.

Our conclusion, then, is that the horse has a threefold nature: it is an animal with the shape and function of a horse; it is the hero's companion and friend, vested with human speech and wisdom; and it is also a deity who can foresee events and forewarn of danger. Toward these ends it can transform itself into various shapes and help the hero to achieve final success. It is therefore not surprising that, because the horse plays such an important role in Mongolian life, it assumes a divine nature in Mongolian epics.

Mongolian epic is not a historical record, but represents a kind of historical spirit. Thus, the *manggus* represents everything of a negative nature rather than a particular historical villain or a particular social evil. The hero is not a historical hero per se, but rather the embodiment of the dreams, ideals, and aspirations of the Mongolian nation.

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