‘Danzanravjaa is my hero!’: the transformation of tradition in contemporary Mongolian poetry
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This is quite possibly the first literary critical paper to be written in English on contemporary Mongolian poetry. As such, it would seem fitting that the title used here reflects the words of the poet Ayurzana. That he, a member of Ulaanbaatar’s young, cool intelligentsia, should see the 19th century poet-monk Danzanravjaa as his hero provides us with a powerful socio-cultural platform from which to observe how these young poets work in a modern idiom while remaining aware of their Mongolian heritage.

C-A Ayurzana (1970)

Standing in the silence of night, my mind stupefied,  
Who was it flashed across my dulled sight?  
This vision was as intense through the darkness,  
A path of sadness hanging in the air.  
I stumbled along a lighted path,  
Seeking what remained in my memory.  
A rose garden nearby, and  
I fell into the past.  
And suddenly I returned.  
That perfume!  
I’d fallen for it utterly, had picked it, breathed it in.  
O, what flower was it?  
Was this truly someone’s love  
Floating around me? Or a shooting star?  
Or else, in the silence of night,  
Was it a shining usage floating past?  

There, a thousand suns burning in my heart,  
The words of the Buddhas in the infinite sky  
Flew like a crane, leading the flock into spring.  
Some suns fade from existence.  
Some words vanish from the world.  
And some tumble into my eyes as snow,  
And strike the earth.  
Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,  
Have gripped my mind.  
I sensed their new buds, autumn’s evening  
Perfume, from a thousand years away.  
the sound of rain falling on the felt roof  
the sound of rain striking the felt roof  
the sound of sound striking the felt roof  
repeating without repeating...  

the sound of rain falling on the felt roof  
the sound of rain striking the felt roof  
the sound of sound striking the felt roof  
repeating without repeating...

[translated by Simon Wickham-Smith]

Simon Wickham-Smith

I have written here previously on the life and work of the 18th Noyon Khutgts Danzanravjaa. Danzanravjaa’s education provided him with a vast corpus of religious and literary material from which he could draw, and it is the use he made of this tradition which characterises his poetic output. Structurally, his technique makes frequent use of the head-and-tail form, in which each line of a stanza begins with the same letter and ends with the same word. What is contextually most interesting here is that this is clearly a technique based upon orality: repetition through the stanzas serves as an aide memoire. Over time, however, the metalinguistic aspects of orthographic and aural structure have been subsumed into the form of the genre and the genre itself has become integral to the literature.

In terms of subject matter, too, Danzanravjaa begins from the traditional topoi of Mongolian poetry – nature, the seasons, the nomadic life – and interweaves them with practical advice based on Buddhist wisdom to produce what in many ways is a radical and unusual corpus. In fact, it was precisely the accessibility of his lyric to the nomadic stock from which he came that so set him apart from the religious establishment. Perhaps, then, it is a striking conceit to frame Danzanravjaa as the precursor to the work of today’s young Mongolian poets. But he is just a frame. The new voices of Mongolian poetry live in a society where national pride and tradition are being deliberately focussed on the future and out into the wider world. Young poets are discovering a way to combine the Mongolian poetic tradition with a Western sensibility and are thus creating what might tentatively be designated a new strand of world literature.

The nomadic life: dreams and visions

A cursory glance through the pages of Mongolian poetry will reveal that, as is the case with Mongolian culture as a whole, the experience of dreams and visions is central to the poetic aesthetic. Indeed, the repetition founded in orality is a kind of enchantment, the creation of a dream state through alliteration and echo. In fact, it is more a memory than a dream, but a memory caught in the clasp of melancholy, which characterises much of this poetry. Take, for instance, Ölzittögs’s poem ‘In your absence’. For me, the overwhelming loss expressed in this poem is a temporary loss, and this emphasises the feeling that her lover (presumably) is going to return. But this is a poem about vision, and Ölzittögs’s vision holds a powerful image to which she can open only in the darkness: ‘In the dark, in the dark alone, you appear / Where the whole world, time and existence, grow dim’.

Ayurzana, who has claimed, Danzanravjaa is my hero!, deals with a similar theme in his poem ‘Standing in the silence of night’. It is interesting to compare the work of these two poets, as the ideas within their poems seem to relate closely to one another. The relation between the work of Ayurzana and Ölzittögs is further enhanced by the information that they are married to each other. Whilst I do not want to presume any creative similarity from this information, it would seem pointless to ignore the obvious emotional input given the nature of both of their poetries. Here, for instance, we have another poem concerned with the physical senses – of smell rather than vision – but Ayurzana’s approach is more narrative. His narrative, in fact, seems to range from a kind of wakeful dream (in which he is caught unawares by a presence, a scent) through memory (again catalysed by scent – ‘A rose garden nearby, and / I fell into the past’) to a feeling of disassociation in the final verse that, in some ways, resolves the poem into an eternal mystery.

What strikes me in particular when comparing the work of these two poets is the ways in which they address the physical senses. The ideas within their poems seem to relate closely to one another. The relation between the work of Ayurzana and Ölzittögs is further enhanced by the information that they are married to each other. Whilst I do not want to presume any creative similarity from this information, it would seem pointless to ignore the obvious emotional input given the nature of both of their poetries. Here, for instance, we have another poem concerned with the physical senses – of smell rather than vision – but Ayurzana’s approach is more narrative. His narrative, in fact, seems to range from a kind of wakeful dream (in which he is caught unawares by a presence, a scent) through memory (again catalysed by scent – ‘A rose garden nearby, and / I fell into the past’) to a feeling of disassociation in the final verse that, in some ways, resolves the poem into an eternal mystery.

What strikes me in particular when comparing the work of these two poets is the ways in which they address the physical world. Nature and our relationship with it have been central to Mongolian poetry for centuries: for instance, this relationship is one of Danzanravjaa’s central themes and the medium

G-a Ayurzana (1970)

Standing in the silence of night, my mind stupefied,  
Who was it flashed across my dulled sight?  
This vision was as intense through the darkness,  
A path of sadness hanging in the air.  
I stumbled along a lighted path,  
Seeking what remained in my memory.  
A rose garden nearby, and  
I fell into the past.  
And suddenly I returned.  
That perfume!  
I’d fallen for it utterly, had picked it, breathed it in.  
O, what flower was it?  
Was this truly someone’s love  
Floating around me? Or a shooting star?  
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Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,  
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I sensed their new buds, autumn’s evening  
Perfume, from a thousand years away.  
the sound of rain falling on the felt roof  
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repeating without repeating...  

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repeating without repeating...

[translated by Simon Wickham-Smith]

Ts Bavuu Dorj (1971)

A very big, white elephant

A very big, white elephant  
Has passed through the world.  
He’s left with the calmness  
Of the mighty ocean.  
He’s left, uprooting  
The serenity of the earth.  
He’s left, shaking  
Dew from the topmost leaves.  
He’s returned, disturbing the sun gods.  
He’s left, commandeering  
Golden temples, shining with blood.  
He’s left, waking  
Grey peaks under snow  
He’s left, shutting the eyes of the mighty.  
He’s returned, shaking East and West.  
A very big, white elephant  
Has passed through the world.  
A very big, white elephant...
through which he frequently chooses to express his understanding of Buddhist teachings. But the turning of the seasons is so commonplace a focus for both contemporary and premodern literature that it would be extraordinary not to find it in the works of even the youngest and most urban(e) of writers.

So whereas Ayurzana chooses to express nature through a dream of concrete (or at least explicit) images (the silence of night, a lighted track, a rose garden) and evokes scent, that most fragile of senses, to express his sudden emotion, Ölziitögs uses the visible solidity of phenomena (an apple, a hat, butterflies, a cloud) to express something that is absent from her and yet felt absolutely.

Accepting pain and sadness

The complex interweaving of images in and between these two poems can be extrapolated to the work of other poets. The signature poem of Enkhboldbaatar, one of the founders of the poetry collective UB Boys, expresses a sense of desperation and confinement relative to the feelings evoked by Ayurzana and Ölziitögs. ‘I sit in a darkened room’, Enkhboldbaatar writes in his poem ‘The Set (Absolute Value)’ extending the idea of confinement into another of the standard themes of Mongolian literature, the idea of facing the world, with all its difficulties, in a direct and self-aware way. Of course, this theme is also central to Buddhist literature, but there is perhaps a harsher – or at least a stronger – tendency in Mongolian literature (and arguably in Mongolian society as a whole) to accept pain and sadness, which can be seen in part as a manifestation of Danzanravjaa’s influence. For Danzanravjaa was scathing in his criticism of people who refused to acknowledge the truth that was right in front of them, with all its problems and cruelties: when we look at Enkhboldbaatar’s poem, then, we should take into account not only his personal experience but also the historical feeling expressed by poets such as Danzanravjaa.6

The stifling quality of this poem closes around us even as we read; we are forced to feel the poet’s misery and futility. The entire collection, with references to flowers, the sound of the church bells, the snow, shining in the darkness, the lit candle melting down, the stars above; the entire cosmos takes on a central role.

External influences: haiku and the Buddha

The literature of neighbouring cultures has been a constant influence on Mongolian poetry. I have already mentioned the nomadic literatures of Central Asia, but of course the Buddhist poetry of Tibet and China has also exercised a powerful effect. Although Danzanravjaa never actually visited Tibet, the general monastic and specific Buddhist education that he received shows throughout his oeuvre: there are direct references to the poems of the 6th Dalai Lama, with whom he is often compared, and also less obvious references to the glau and gluas traditions of both secular and religious Tibetan poetry.7

But in the contemporary world, Mongolian poetry has been influenced by cultures further abroad. Erdenetsogt’s Mongolian haiku series uses the traditional Japanese form in a loose way: rather than presenting an image followed by a short concluding idea (in the sense preferred by Basho), Erdenetsogt often presents a single image over the three lines. So these are not haikuas per se, but rather an adapted form, namely, Mongolian haiku: this recalls the way in which the premodern traditions of nature poetry and Buddhist poetry have been given a more modern voice.

As with traditional Japanese haiku, Erdenetsogt’s Mongolian haiku mirror nature: the examples printed here are representative of the entire collection, with references to flowers, the sky and the weather, the seasons, the stars and the moon.

SORROW

I have come crawling to you,
Through arrogance and sudden drops in temperature,
Through the colours of the world and
Through the suppression of dreams.
I want to love you
With the kind of sweet affection
That can dwell only in a human being.
In my heart I mourn one thing,
That I’ve not been able to love another.
I regret I’m not a swallow on the wild steppe,
That I cannot soar to meet another.
I want to love you, to
Open the eyes of cross-legged Buddhas.
I’ve such a magic storm –
I want to make a lily in the snow glance up.
I’ve such a shining wind…
I want to love you… But
In the hazy smile of this moment
I can’t come close to you.
In this cold glow of arrogance,
I cannot come to you.
I wanted only to love you…

MUSIC

Times of loud noise inside the ger
Of the fire’s smell…
The lion protects our heritage in the moonlight.
Father’s dreams underfoot,
Mother’s fingers on her rosary,
Of the fire’s smell…

L ÖLZIITÖGS (1972)

Looking at mountains, I feel I am a mountain.
Looking at mist and haze, I feel I am a cloud.
After the rain has fallen, I feel that I am grass, and
When sparrows start to sing, I remember I am morning.
I am not a human, that’s for sure.
When stars flare up, I feel I am the darkness
When girls shed their clothes, I remember I am spring.
When I smell the desire of everybody in this world,
I realise how my quiet heart is a fish’s.
I am not a human, that’s for sure.
Under the colourful sky, an immense EMPTINESS
Starting from today I am only…

A SECRET WHISPERED TO GOD

What do you like, God asked me in a whisper.
The sound of the church bells,
The lit candle melting down,
The snow, shining in the darkness,
And my Bombubule’s smile.

What don’t you like, God asked me in a whisper.
The sound of the church bells,
The lit candle melting down,
The snow, shining in the darkness,
And my son’s smile.
Barely able to see through righteous anger.
Like a sword, like a sharp knife, and
If we fight, then death will be acceptable.
And there we die. But we must fight and,
Oh yes, we are always slaves,
And, helpless, collapses to its knees.
But its hook will trick us,
We may oppose the fury of our fate,
Else desire and trust will gnaw themselves,
My heart tortures my brain,
We have looked up to the sun,
To be an ordinary and downtrodden servant.
No, no, our fate has always been
In forgiveness, that all of us are sinned against by life.
Be aware that you can barely see through rancour, and
Don’t be too frail when you’re in love.
Live not in song but in tears, and
…”

I sit in a darkened room,
Thinking about this and that.
The dull moon peers in through the window,
Like a woman’s eyes, gazing.
The clouds move awehile,
Plunging me into darkness.
My sight is far away now.
I feel freedom in the darkness.
From behind the clouds, the moon reappears.
Again, the room closes its walls around me.
I cannot see beyond the walls,
And close my eyes in desperation.
I leave behind the freedom of the dark,
And sit amid my grief and sadness.

… (EMPHATIKOS)

Live not in song but in tears, and
Don’t be too frail when you’re in love.
Be aware that you can barely see through rancour, and
In forgiveness, that all of us are sinned against by life.
No, no, our fate has always been
To be an ordinary and downtrodden servant.
We have looked up to the sun,
We have had no history up to now.
My right hand tightly envelops my left,
My heart tortures my brain,
Else desire and trust will gnaw themselves,
And my dear body will be mutilated.
We may oppose the fury of our fate,
But its hook will trick us.
As the roe deer is struck down by the hunter’s arrow,
And, helpless, collapses to its knees.
Oh yes, we are always slaves.
We are born into the hands of destiny,
And there we die. But we must fight and,
If we fight, then death will be acceptable.
So live not in song, but in tears.
Live to endure, to struggle, and to struggle once again,
Like a sword, like a mountain cliff,
And barely able to see through righteous anger.
But, at the end, one thing:
In this struggle, you will never be victorious.
You will never win. And that’s because
There’s nothing good in anything.

Seasons, horses, the moon… all these images are central to
the Mongolian aesthetic sensibility and, taken together, the
entire collection of poems present this traditional aesthetic
in a modern form.

The principal structural difference within these poems is
between a form more in keeping with the Japanese model
(‘mirages canté’ / along the mountain cliffs / the sun still
burns unattended) and the single-image of Erdeneotsogt’s crea-
tion (‘waterflees, swimming / like fish in a pool / under
a grass-green moon’). In my opinion, these haiku indicate one
especially significant feature of contemporary poetry in Mon-
golia: the interest and enthusiasm of poets for experimenta-
tion with basic forms.

Buddha in a gulag of form
But while Erdeneotsogt’s haiku exemplifies the general tenden-
cy among young poets toward experimentation with common
forms, almost none of them attempt to radically experiment
with form itself. This is probably owing to the interplay of aes-
thetic conservatism in Mongolian culture and the fear of nov-
elty and boundary-breaking that characterized Soviet culture
after its initial radicalisation during the 1920s. Thus there is
no evidence of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry (a movement in
experimental poetry), no abstraction, no fragmentation, no
visual poetry.

I have been able to find only one poem, Enkhboldbaatar’s
‘A Set (Absolute Values)’, that pushes in any way against the
enveloped form. It is a simple, line-by-line exposition of a
series of numbers, letters and symbols. What appears to be a
random list has, however, been infiltrated by additional punc-
tuation and irrelevant letters, and the feeling evoked as the
description continues is one of hopeless surreality. Given the
arrow that ends the sequence, which ‘indicates the beginning’,
this hopeless surreality is set to continue ad nauseam.

In many ways, this abstract and apparently experimental
poem repeats the feeling of the Enkhboldbaatar poem dis-
cussed above. Both poems emphasise a sense of futility, of
 Language over meaning: the sound of thoughts conveyed
However, we can no longer characterise Buddhist thought as
inherent to the Mongolian psyche. Seventy years of MPRP
domination reduced explicit Buddhist practice to a mini-
mum, although domestic and international efforts are trying
to revive it. A more coherent understanding of Buddhism’s
place in the contemporary literary scene can be found in the
work of Bavuudorj. On a superficial level, there are copious
references to Buddhism throughout his work; on a deeper
level, however, it is the atmosphere created by his language
in which Bavuudorj’s approach to spirituality is revealed.
This atmosphere relates perhaps to a kind of animated aes-
thetic, as though the ‘real’ world were somehow crossed with
a cartoon. The imagery thus becomes somewhat distorted
and simpler, though in places it is considerably more potent
and vivid.

A very Big White Elephant’, for instance, refers to the ‘pre-
cious elephant’, which represents the strength of an enlight-
ened mind, one of the Buddha’s seven royal attributes. So
when this is a poem about a marauding elephant, it is also a
poem about the nature of reality, and expresses the influence of Buddhism
upon Mongolian culture.

This combination is at work in Erdeneotsogt’s poem ‘Sketch’.
Neither the image seen, nor the melody heard, can be record-
based, and the poem remains frustrated. But the disconnect here
is metaphysical; it brings to mind the inability to remember an
entirety, how Buddhism shows the fleeting quality of experi-
ence and, thereby, shows the poet the immediacy of his experi-
ence and thus of his mind. So the poem is also imbued with a
feeling of acceptance, that this is how the world, the universe,
is. This is in itself a realisation of wisdom, an acceptance
of the nature of reality, and expresses the influence of Buddhism
upon Mongolian culture.
Contemporary Mongolian poetry has suffered from being reared during the cultural isolation of the Soviet era, but it is nonetheless a vibrant force among Central Asian poets. The work of these five young writers not only addresses the common themes of nomadic literatures but also the Buddhist tradition with which Mongolians are now starting to reconnect. In this way, then, these poets are closely following the tradition of Danzanravjaa, expressing their ideas of love and separation, of spirituality, of the natural world — in a straight-forward manner and with direct language. Furthermore, the almost total lack of formal experimentation bespeaks an almost total lack of formal experimentation.

But at the root of these poems there remains the visionary, dreamlike quality, a thread stretching back through the history of Mongolian literature. This quality is frequently expressed more in the language than in the meaning; it is the way in which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. This quality is frequently expressed more in the language than in the meaning; it is the way in which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. This quality is frequently expressed more in the language than in the meaning; it is the way in which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Elizabeth Myhr in helping me to organise my thoughts regarding the relationship between Mongolian and Western poetic forms.

2. I have been unable to find any criticism, in fact, on contemporary Mongolian poetry in any Western language. I would be happy to hear from anyone who has information on previous studies.


4. This is of course not only the case in Mongolian: it is noteworthy how many people still feel that poetry has to exhibit rhyme and rhythm in order to be poetry.

5. There is no space here to look beyond the confines of contemporary Mongolian poetry, but the anthologies mentioned in the bibliography, one compiled and translated by Charles Bawden and another by myself and Tsog Shagdarsüren, will provide the reader with sufficient comparative evidence.

6. This group was founded in 1983 by Enkhboldbaatar, Dashmukh, and Nyan-Öchör and is at the forefront of the small but influential Ulaanbaatar literary scene. The group’s English motto sums them up perfectly: ‘We are new, but we don’t want to be old’.

7. I should also mention here another strand of poetry prevalent in the 20th century, namely, the underground, anti-communist samurai tradition. This had its own feeling of desperation and misery and humour but, again, is beyond the scope of this essay.

8. Glu and gheks are short verses, used by both religious and secular poets, to express specific and immediate ideas, in a way quite similar to Japanese haiku. Generally consisting of two couplets, these styles were used by poets such as the 6th Dalai Lama, Drukpa Kunley, and Milarepa and exist in the present day in the form of reporter, work or political songs.

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Translator of Mongolian and Tibetan literature

T Erdensotsog (1971)

Skeht

When I thought about the World
An unusual portrait revived
As I took my brush to paint it
Things were without shape...

When I thought about the Universe
A multi-coloured melody picked up
As I took my pen to write it down
Whispers were with no words and a colourless ink...

Verse upon an Offering Scarf

1. A poet’s verse,
Whispered to autumn birds, is the teaching of God,
is the song of coming back,
is the fate of being left behind.

2. A poet’s song,
Offered to the winter moon, is a burning love,
is the wisdom of struggle,
is an echo from the mountains watching over us.

3. A poet’s feelings,
Carressing a spring flower, the tears of beauty,
are an unbidden sadness,
are a credulous desire.

4. A poet’s character,
Brimming over the summer skies, is a flash of stars,
is the sound of the universe,
is the garden of space.

5. A poet’s verse,
Offered to humanity, is a song of freedom,
is the wind moving a pennant,
is a point to lean upon, a body to wear away.

6. A poet’s words,
Famous throughout Mongolia, are the laws of the state,
are a decree of the state
are an oath to the state.

7. A poet’s song,
A glimmering of the universe.
A poet is a magnificent flash of light.
A poet is the whip of the sky.
A poet is the messenger of God.

From Mongolian Haiku

I dreamed
a smile long gone
next to my pillow, the moon

images center
along the mountain cliff
the sun still burns untamed

waterweeds, swimming
like fish in a pool
under a grass-green moon

a string of birds
and clouds leave flowers
with eyes of tears

as spring days
long for rain,
my thoughts find no rest

In your Absence

In my eyes there are butterflies, a felt hat, mirror and a candle.
In my eyes there are women, an apple, trees and a bird.
In my eyes there are clocks, a key, cloud and the sky.
In my eyes there is everything, except for you.

Even the wings of the butterfly and the nice felt hat cause me sadness.
Because you are not here, the sun is not yellow and the tree is not green.
If I can’t see you and I can’t hear you,
I don’t need ears and eyes, I don’t need anything.

In the dark, in the dark alone, you appear.
There, where the whole world, time and existence, grow dim.
I will close my eyes, therefore.
Oh, this burdening light, this burdening sun...